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THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD & PRAYER

Introduction

The relationship between the LORD and His people comes into existence and is maintained by the Word of God. In speaking the LORD shows that He is the living God. His Word shows His power. He speaks and it is (Gen 1). For this reason Israel was forbidden to make images (Deut.4:15-16). Israel has to live from the Word of God (Deut. 8:3). This applies to the church of the N.T. as well. The church is a visible proof of the power of God's, and is known by her obedience to the Word. It has the task to administer the Word of grace (Acts 6). The preaching is the central part of the worship service. God comes into our lives in speaking to us. This is why in John 1 the Lord Jesus is called the Word. Since both the preaching and the public prayers are under the supervision of the elders we will deal with both in this chapter.

1. Scripture

1.1. Old Testament

The O.T. shows in many ways that our God is a God who speaks. Many times we read "Thus says the LORD". In Deut. 4 the LORD makes exactly the point that Israel at Mount Sinai saw no form but heard a voice. The LORD comes to His people in and with His Word.

Deut 4:11-12

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.

Deut 8:2-3

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Deut 18:18

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.

1 Sam 3:21

The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

Isa 40:9

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

Isa 52:7

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

Ezek 3:17

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

The LORD shows His people the power of His Word.

Isa 55:10-11

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Ezek 37:4-7

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.

Ezek 37:9-10

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet-- a vast army.

1.2. New Testament

The Lord Jesus Christ is called the Word.

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

His Word has power too.

Mat 7:28

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, [29] because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Mat 8:13

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

Mark 4:39-41

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

As He is about to ascend into heaven He entrusts the proclamation of this Word to His apostles

Matt 28:19-20

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Luke 24:46-47

He told them, "this is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem

The apostles knew that they had to preach this Word.

Acts 11:14

He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

Rom 1:16

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

1Thes 1:4-5

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

1Thes 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

We come across the expression "the ministry of the Word of God," for example in Acts 6:2. The Word of God has to be administered, preached.

Acts 8:30-31

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?"

Preaching is the task of office bearers.

Rom 10:14-17

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

2 Cor 5:20

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

1Thes 2:4

On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

2 Tim 4:2

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-- with great patience and careful instruction.

It brings about faith.

1 Pet 1:23-25

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

2. Confessions, Church Order, Forms and Prayer

In the Reformation the churches came to understand again the significance of the preaching. Whereas Rome placed the emphasis on the sacrament, as the means to give grace, the Reformed churches confessed that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Over against the Anabaptists, who maintained that the Holy Spirit does this without the use of means, the Reformed churches confessed that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use the preaching of the Word to work this faith in our hearts. This does not mean that we want to restrict the Holy Spirit in His work. It is rather the other way around, the Holy Spirit expects us to submit to the order which He has established. We should not be wiser than the Lord. This is why in the Reformed confessions the preaching receives a prominent position as the primary means of grace.

2.1. Belgic Confession

The preaching of the gospel is one of the marks of the church.

Art. 29

The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel.

It is the task of the government to see to it that the preaching can go on.

Art. 36

Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the Church and its ministry in order that *the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism mentions the preaching in connection with the work of the Holy Spirit, the Keys of God's Kingdom, the Second and the Fourth Commandment.

Q/A 65

Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.

Q/A 84.

How is the kingdom of heaven open and closed by the preaching of the gospel? According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest upon them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

Q/A 98

But may images not be tolerated in the churches as "books for the laity"? No, for we should not be wiser than God. He wants His people to be taught not by means of dumb images but by the living preaching of His Word.

Q/A 103

What does God require in the fourth commandment? First, That the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

2.3. Canons of Dort

In the Canons of Dort the Churches confess that believing in a decree of election does not do away with the need to preach the gospel. It is through the preaching that God brings about His decree of election. It is also by the preaching that He preserves His people.

Chapter 1, Article 3

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He wills and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?

Chapter 2, Article 5

The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

Chapter 3/4, Article 6

What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and new dispensation.

Chapter 3/4, Article 8

But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.

Chapter 3/4, Article 11

God carries out His good pleasure in the elect and works in them true conversion in the following manner. He takes care that the gospel is preached to them, and powerfully enlightens their minds by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. By the efficacious working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works.

Chapter 3/4, Article 17

The almighty working of God whereby He brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which He according to His infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise His power. So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or cancels the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, reverently instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre and the more directly His works proceed. To God alone, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen.

Chapter 5, Article 14

As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments.

2.4. Church Order, Forms and Prayers

The Church Order shows that the preaching of the gospel is the task of the minister, but under supervision of the elders.

Art. 15

No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of the consistory of that church.

Art. 16

The specific duties of the office of minister of the Word are: thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of the Lord;

Art. 22

Finally, it is their duty to assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

Art. 27

To ward off false doctrines ... the ministers ... shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word and in Christian teaching and family visiting.

Art. 52

The Consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day. the consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.

The Form for Ordination for Ministers is in agreement with this.

Duties of the Minister

First, he must declare the whole counsel of God to His congregation,

Charge to the Minister

Preach the pure doctrine, so that by your preaching and teaching the congregation may be kept in obedience to the Word of God.

Charge to the congregation

Take heed to receive the Word of God, which you shall hear from him, and accept his words, spoken according to the Holy Scriptures, not as the word of man but as what it really is, the Word of God.

Prayer

Enlighten his mind that he may understand the Scriptures, and open his mouth that he may proclaim the mysteries of the gospel with boldness.

The Prayers in the Book of Praise reflect this as well.

Prayer 1.

Open now the mouth of Thy servant, and fill it with Thy wisdom and knowledge, that he may boldly proclaim Thy Word in all its purity. prepare our hearts to receive it, to understand it, and to preserve it.

Prayer 2.

As it pleases Thee that we should pray for all mankind, we beseech Thee, bless the propagation of Thy holy gospel, that it may be proclaimed and received universally. May the whole world be filled with knowledge of Thee. Enlighten the ignorant, strengthen the weak. may everyone by word and deed magnify Thy holy name. To this end send faithful servants into Thy harvest and equip them to discharge diligently the duties of their office. Destroy, we pray Thee, all false teachers, fierce wolves and hirelings who seek their own honour and profit rather than the honour of thy holy name and the salvation of men.

Prayer 3.

May it please Thee to make us understand Thy holy Word in accordance with Thy divine will, so that we may learn to put our trust in Thee alone and not in any creature. May our old nature with all its evil desires be put to death day by day and may we present ourselves a living sacrifice to Thee, to the honour of Thy Name and the benefit of our neighbour.

See also the Prayers 4, 5 and 6.

3. Goal

Since the preaching is the means by which the Lord opens and closes His kingdom and He uses the preaching to work and strengthen faith in our hearts, the goal of the preaching is to proclaim faithfully the whole counsel of God. In this way the true religion is preserved to God's glory and our comfort. Using the Church Order and the Form for Ordination we can work this out in the following manner:

It is the task of the **minister** to:

- Thoroughly and sincerely proclaim to the congregation the whole counsel of God;
- Faithfully administer the word of grace to the congregation of the Lord;
- Shepherd the congregation (includes encouragement, exhortations, admonitions and instructions);
- Please God and not men.

It is the task of the **overseers** to:

- Call the congregation together for worship;
- Make sure that God's Word is faithfully preached;
- Make sure that the minister thoroughly and sincerely proclaims the whole counsel of God;
- Assist the minister with good counsel and advice;
- Exhort the congregation to live from the Word of grace;
- Call a minister in case of a vacancy.

It is the task of the **congregation** to:

- Receive the Word thankfully and joyfully as the Word of God;
- Obey the Word;
- Make sure that the preaching remain faithful;
- Maintain the ministry of the gospel (Theological College, financial obligations, mission).

4. The Minister

The minister is called to administer the Word twice on the Lord's Day and whenever the congregation is called together for worship. In the preaching he has to be faithful to the Word of God. The preaching must be in agreement with the doctrine of God's Word, as summarized in the confession. In selecting his texts he has to keep in mind that the whole counsel of God be proclaimed, the congregation be built up in the faith and God's people be called to repent and believe. The sermon has to explain the text and apply the message of the text to the congregation. In the faithful preaching the Lord Himself is speaking to His people. The sermon may not become a discourse nor a lecture, but has to remain an address. The God of the covenant addresses the people of the covenant.

The text choice is the freedom of the minister. The input of the council is part of the assistance they are to give to the minister. In choosing the text the minister has to keep in mind that he has to proclaim the whole counsel of God. There should be a good balance between Old Testament and New Testament texts, between texts that encourage and texts that warn, between historical, poetical and prophetic passages from the Bible.

It can be necessary to address in the sermons certain matters in the congregation, e.g. in situations of distress, sorrow, disobedience, or wrong ideas. This could determine the choice of text. It can also be that rather than dealing with certain concerns right away, it is better to deal with them some months later. Preaching in series is a good way to let the congregation see the riches of God's revelation. It forces the minister to stick to his text and prevents preaching on hobby horses. It can be helpful to make the congregation aware of the preaching schedule.

In the afternoon the minister as a rule proclaims the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. This custom is typically Reformed and has been practised for many centuries already. The strength of the custom is that the congregation on a regular basis is reminded of her confession. It also helps the minister in proclaiming the whole counsel of God. The Catechism is broader than the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort. It covers more topics. The sermons can refer to the other confessions, but the Catechism is to be used as the basis for a sermon. Regular Catechism preaching will also strengthen the Catechism teaching and the other way around.

With regard to the catechism preaching the question has been asked whether the minister should use a Bible text and so explain what we confess, or whether he can use the answer of the Catechism as his "text." It is not necessary to make a choice either way. It is very well possible to combine the two approaches. Especially because the minister will have to go through the Catechism more than once. Some variation will not hurt. At the same time, the question we mentioned is helpful, for it reminds us of two things. Firstly, the preaching should make clear that the catechism summarizes the doctrine of God's Word. Secondly that the minister may use the sermon to show the riches and depth of our confession. Preaching from the catechism must also be preaching of the good news.

In his preaching the minister must keep in mind the needs and situation of the members of the congregation. The members have to be able to work with the preaching. At the same time the minister must be careful not to cater to the likes and dislikes of the people. No one like criticism, not a minister either. There is always the temptation to say or not say things because of the listeners. The preacher must be faithful to the Word, and dare to warn or admonish, but not in such a way that he and the congregation become opponents. His task is to reach the hearts of the hearers.

The minister in preparing for the preaching has to study the Word of God. In addition, he needs to continue to study the areas and aspects of his ministry. See 1 - 7 Study/Education.

5. The Overseers

The consistory calls the congregation together for worship twice every Lord's Day. They have to make sure the members attend faithfully. In case of irregular attendance a visit must be made, and if the absence is not legitimate, admonitions have to follow. Not only attendance, also behavior in church may need the attention of the elders. The elders also have to ascertain how the congregation works with the preaching.

With regard to the preaching the overseers have the task to supervise the preaching to make sure that no false doctrine or heresies are proclaimed. They also have to help the minister with good counsel and advice. It is important that the overseers evaluate the preaching on a regular basis. It is better to do this when there are no difficulties or complaints, than to wait till it becomes difficult to resolve the differences. Regular input and constructive criticism by the elders is important. It is indeed the task of the minister to preach the gospel and he has been trained for this task, but this does not mean that he has no need for help and advice. The purpose of the regular evaluation is therefore not to voice criticism on a particular sermon. That should be done separately and can be done at any meeting. Nor is the purpose to unduly elevate the minister. To be sure, when the Word of God reaches God's people and God's people receive this Word with thankfulness, then there is cause for thankfulness. If this is the case then this ought to be mentioned in the proper manner as well. The purpose of sermon evaluation is to help the minister in preparing the sermons, so that the Word reaches the people of God. Each minister has his weak points and his strong points. This evaluation is meant to help him use his talents to the best of his ability, with the aim of building up the congregation. This sermon evaluation stresses to all involved that the preaching of the gospel is not the sole possession of the minister, but in entrusting the Word to his servants, the Lord has given it to the whole congregation. The evaluation focusses on three elements: the Word that is proclaimed, the congregation which hears the Word, and the format in which the minister brings it.

The Word that has to be preached is the promise of the LORD. This promise comes to the people with the command to repent and believe. It is not correct to distinguish within the sermon between promise and demand. All preaching is preaching of the promise. The warning to accept it and live from it is part and parcel of that Word. "For grace is conferred through admonitions,..." C.o.D. III/IV, 17. Each sermon must be based on the text that was chosen. Each text has its own flavour. Some sermons will place greater emphasis on the promissary character of God's Word. The congregation is reminded of its riches in Christ, and its freedom to make these riches their own. Other sermons will stress the call to repent and believe. The members congregation have to be confronted with the question how they now live as God's people. In evaluating the preaching the overseers have to see whether over all the whole counsel of God is preached. To say that the preaching is faithful not exactly the same as to say that the whole counsel of God is being proclaimed. To be sure the two are very closely related. With regard to the first the criterion is: does the sermon go against Scripture and Confession. The second deals more with the question, whether all aspects of God's revelation receive proper attention. The minister can be within the bounds of the Confession and yet be very one-sided. In leaving things out, the minister can also hinder the upbuilding of the congregation. Here the counsel and advice of the overseers is very important.

When it comes to the congregation, the evaluation must deal with the question whether the Word reaches the members and whether they can work with it. How is the Word received by the congregation? This is not done to please people. The gospel can also go against our inclinations and feelings. After all the Word is a two-edged sword. At the same time we believe that the Word of God is a power unto salvation. We must do our utmost to make sure the Word comes across. If this is not the case we have to look at whether this is so due of the way the minister brings it, or because the people have a difficulty understanding it. Whether it is a matter of not being able to, or not being willing to hear.

Overseers must be careful when concluding that members are not willing to hear. A disagreement can easily develop in a question of authority. Office bearers can hide behind this. Ministers must even be more

careful in this regard. They can feel personally attacked when criticized. It can develop into a power struggle. We must keep in mind that the members are in a disadvantage, because they do not have the authority that the office bearers have. It is even more detrimental when the minister attacks from the pulpit those who criticized him.

In the evaluation the format of the sermon must receive attention as well. The format is not what makes the Word acceptable or not. But the format can be a helpful tool, or it can also be a hindrance. Keeping in mind that we all have our limitations and characteristics we nevertheless must evaluate whether all that can be done is being done for the Word to reach the people.

6. The Congregation

The congregation has to receive the Word of God and work with it. This is not easy to gauge. In the home visits the elders have a good opportunity to see how the congregation works with the preaching of the Word. (See 1 - 1 The Home visit) This is to make sure that the Word reaches God's people. Also here it is not a particular sermon, but the over all picture. And if there are difficulties is this due to the sermon or the listener. The aim is to help each other in living from the Word. Confessing the clarity of Scripture also implies that members can have criticisms that are valid.

How should members of the congregation go about voicing criticism or concerns about a particular sermon? The sermon is a public matter, therefore if a member believes that something was said that was wrong he or she can go directly to the consistory. It is not necessary to first go to the minister, since the rule of Matthew 18 does not apply. On the one hand it can be helpful for members to first go and speak to the minister. In this way misunderstandings can be taken away, or further clarification can be given. On the other hand it also good to keep the option open that the members can go directly to the consistory, otherwise a minister could intimidate or even obstruct the proper course of action.

Part of maintaining the ministry of the gospel is that the congregation maintains a church building and contributes regularly so that the preaching can go on. There is a financial aspect to all of this as well. Without the proper support the preaching could not go on either. It is important that the congregation is reminded of the close connection between the two. Our love for the Lord and His Word comes out in contributing according to the measure in which the Lord has blessed us.

7. Sermon Discussion

Here follows an outline for sermon evaluation. This is not to be used as a checklist. Nor is this to be used for just one sermon. The evaluation wants to deal with the overall picture. These pointers and questions are only suggestions to stimulate a productive discussion. Not every point applies to every text and sermon. These pointers are to be used with discretion, to help the regular sermon evaluation.

7.1. The Text

- How does the sermon deal with the text?
 - is the sermon based on the text?
 - is the text used as a window into a larger picture of the work of God throughout the ages?
 - is the text used to air personal ideas?
 - is the explanation of the text too technical?
 - is the explanation of the text too speculative?

- How does the sermon/exegesis deal with the context? Is sufficient attention given to:
 - the immediate context, the vss/chapters before?
 - the context of the book/letter?
 - the context of the Bible?

- Is the whole of God's Word kept in mind in the sermon?
 - does the O.T. background come in the picture in N.T. texts?
 - does the N.T. fulfilment come in the picture in O.T. texts?
- Does the sermon mention the work of the holy Trinity?
 - is there attention for the work of the Father (creation)?
 - is there attention for the work of the Son (redemption)?
 - is there attention for the work of the Holy Spirit (sanctification)?
- What is the relationship between the sermon and the confession?
 - is the sermon confessionally sound?
 - in explaining the text does the confession play a role?
 - is the text used to show the Biblical foundation of the confession
- Is the sermon covenantal?
 - does it proclaim the promise, and obligation without separating them?
 - does it mention the sanction?
 - does it also show the unity of the covenant?
- Is the doctrine of election properly explained and applied?
- With regard to days of commemoration, do the sermons pay sufficient attention to these highlights?
- Is there a proper choice of texts?
 - does the minister follow a certain pattern?
 - does he preach sermon series?
 - is there enough variation: O.T. and N.T., historical, poetic, prophetic, gospel etc.

7.2. The Congregation

- How is the congregation addressed?
 - are they shown the promises?
 - are they reminded of their obligation?
 - are they reminded of the warning?
 - is there a proper balance?
- Are all members addressed?
 - are certain sections of the congregation overlooked?
 - are certain sections of the congregation receiving too much attention?
 - are those in special circumstances addressed?
- How do the sermons come across?
 - is there feedback from the congregation?
 - is the minister open to feedback?
 - do the members work with the sermons? (home visits)
- Is there a good use of the sacraments?
 - is baptism referred to?
 - is Lord's Supper brought into the picture?
- How is the application?
 - does it address the members in their lives?
 - does it flow from the text?

- does it deal with today's issues?
- can the members work with the application?

- Do the sermons give proper spiritual leadership?
 - does this leadership come from the Word of God?
 - is the minister addressing misconceptions or heresies in a proper manner?

7.3. The Format

- Is the sermon understandable?
 - is the language clear?
 - are the theme and points helpful?
 - is the set up logical?
 - is the language dignified?

- Do the children understand the sermon?

- Is there integration of the work of the elders/deacons and the sermon?
 - are concerns/suggestions mentioned by the overseers followed up?
 - can you work with the sermons on your visits?

- Is the preaching pastoral?
 - does it encourage?
 - does it comfort?

- Do the sermons reflect study on the side of the minister?

- Do the sermons show that the minister is a servant?

- Does the liturgy blend in with the preaching?

7.4. The Catechism Sermon

Many of the above mentioned points apply here as well. Some more specific questions are:

- Is there regular preaching from the Catechism?
- Do the sermons explain the only comfort in life and death?
- Is the doctrine of the church explained to the congregation?
- Do the sermons show the scriptural background of the confession?
- Do the sermons show respect and love for the confession of the church?
- Does it come out that this is the confession of the church?
- Is there enough variation each time the minister goes through the Catechism?

8. Ministry of Intercession

The relationship between the LORD and His people comes into existence and is maintained by the Word. Once this relationship is established God's people may and must answer, also in words. In answer to God's Word we may now direct our words to Him. That is what prayer is all about, to come to the LORD on the basis of His own Word. In this section we will deal with public prayer in the worship services. The public prayer does not do away with the need of private prayer, nor the other way around. In public prayer the congregation as a whole comes before God to give Him thanks and praise, to ask Him for His blessing, and to intercede.

8.1. Scripture

The O.T. uses the expression "to call upon the Name of the LORD." This expression includes more than prayer, but prayer is certainly part of it. The first time we meet it is in Gen. 4 : 26 "At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD." While the seed of Cain seeks its strength in itself, the seed of the woman calls upon the LORD for help. We also read in the book of Genesis of the many altars which were build by the patriarchs. They called upon the LORD. During the sojourning through the wilderness we read about times when Moses had to pray to the LORD on behalf of His people. We also learn from these histories how powerful such a prayer is. The best example of public prayer during the O.T. is the prayer in the temple by the priest. The sacrifice of incense symbolized the prayers of the people. We also meet several other examples, the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron.6), the prayer of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19) at the time Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrians, and the prayer of Daniel in exile (Dan.9). Finally, we find many examples of prayers in the Book of Psalms (44, 60, 66, 72).

The Lord Jesus Christ, our only High Priest, continually intercedes for us before the Father. This is the benefit of His ascension. In John 17 we have a beautiful example of His prayer for His Church. Prayer was also an essential part of the church after Pentecost. Acts 2 : 42 says that the Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. When the first persecution is felt the church again prays, and "after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken." (Acts 4:31) The letters of the N.T. mention prayer as well.

1 Tim. 2 : 1-2

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

1 Tim.2: 8

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.

In Revelation 6 : 10 we read that the souls under the alter cry with a loud voice. The end the Bible speaks about the prayer of the Bride, that is the Church, Come Lord Jesus.

8.2. The Confessions

The Confessions speak about prayer in general, but very little about public prayer. The Heidelberg Catechism deals with prayer under the Third Commandment. Although it does not mention the public prayer as such, yet it is part of hallowing the name of the LORD. The explanation of the Fourth Commandment does mention the public calling upon the Name of the Lord. The calling upon the Name of the Lord is seen as an integral part of the worship service. Certainly also the explanation of the Lord's Payer is of importance for the prayer in the church. The Belgic Confession mentions prayer in Article 26 that speaks about Christ's intercession. Our prayers are possible because Christ intercedes for us. It does not mention public prayers in this article. We do find a reference to public prayer in Art. 36 which deals with the civil government. "We ought to pray for them, that God may direct them in all their ways and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." Another reference to prayer we find in Art. 31 which deals with the officers of the church. They have to be chosen to office by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order.

8.3. Church Order and Liturgical Prayers

The Church Order deals with public prayer in several articles.

- Art. 3 The election to office shall take place ..., after preceding prayers, ...
- Art. 16 The specific duties of the minister of the Word are: ... publicly to call upon the Name of God in behalf of the whole congregation;
- Art. 34 The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with calling upon the Name of the Lord.
- Art. 54 In time of war, general calamities, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches, a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the churches appointed for that purpose by general synod.

We find several examples of public prayers in our Book of Praise. These prayers have a long history. (See VanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, p.142-171). In the church of Rome prayer has become more and more a standard ritual. Over against this the Reformed churches stressed that prayer is the expression of thankfulness. At the same time they did not want to leave it to the spur of the moment what we say in prayer, but wanted to instruct God's people that indeed it is very important how and what we bring before the Lord in prayer. These Form prayers are an important part of our heritage. We should use them. They can be used as they are, they can also function as teaching models.

Besides these Liturgical Prayers we also have several prayers in our Liturgical Forms that are to be used in public worship.

8.4. Goal

As church we must call publicly upon the Name of the Lord to:

- praise Him
- confess our sins
- ask for His grace and blessing
- lay our needs before Him
- pray for the needs of the world and those in high positions

8.5. Practice

It is clear that public prayer forms an important part in the life and the worship of the congregation. As people of the Lord we may call upon the Lord. This requires respect from the one who leads in prayer. The way in which we pray must reflect our love and respect toward the Lord. This public prayer also requires preparation. This prevents repetition, omissions or sloppiness. All the points mentioned under the goals must be addressed in prayer. When it comes to specifics in prayer we note that there are certain matters that should not be forgotten, e.g. the confession of sin or the blessing over the preaching. However, there are also needs which should be mentioned on a regular basis but do not need to be mentioned each and every Lord's Day, such as e.g. the government, the schools, the handicapped.

Because the prayer on behalf of the congregation has a public character, the council as a whole has responsibility in this regard. The leader of the worship service speaks also in these prayers on behalf of the whole congregation. Public prayer is something in which the whole counsel is involved. It should evaluate the prayers just as well as the sermons. In evaluating the public prayers the following points can be looked at:

- Does the prayer show love and respect for the Lord?
- Does the praise of God's Name receive sufficient attention?
- Is the confession of sin done properly?
- Are the needs of the congregation properly brought before the Lord?
- Are other needs mentioned as well?
- Is there is proper balance?
- Do special situations receive sufficient attention?

If there are special situations the overseers should let the one who leads in public prayer know, preferably before the Sunday. It is also important that before the worship service the council review which special situations will be mentioned.

What and who should or should not be mentioned in prayer? It is not always easy to give a clear set of rules for this. What makes it even more difficult is that some members do not inform the elders of certain situations and do not expect to be mentioned in prayer, while others do not request prayer and yet expect to be mentioned. There are also those who rather not be mentioned at all. Some sensitivity and discretion needs to be exercised. Prayer should not make people uncomfortable nor be a means to advertize one's problems. It should also be kept in mind that although at times it is good to mention names, the congregation should realize that all members are included in the public prayer. Does the fact that a name is used make any difference, or would the prayer any less powerful? No. Members do well to make prayer request well in advance, if possible. The council will have to judge whether this request can be granted. It will be helpful if there are some agreed upon guidelines in this regard. Consistency is important, without becoming rigid. In all this we must keep in mind the tremendous riches of being allowed to call upon the Lord to lay our needs before Him, as well as the fear and respect we must have for His awesome holiness.

Days of Prayer are not proclaimed very often. The Church Order says that such a day is to be proclaimed in time of war, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches. General Synod has appointed the churches of Burlington-Waterdown and Edmonton -Providence to proclaim such a day. How is such a day of prayer to be observed? There are no clear guidelines. The custom is that after the prayer after the morning sermon pays special attention to it. Every year there is a the Prayer for Crops and Labour as well as the Prayer of Thanksgiving. The question with regard to days of prayer, applies here as well. How do we observe this? Does the prayer itself receive sufficient attention? These matter may need further reflection.

9. Literature

The following books are listed for further study. Much material of this chapter was taken from these sources.

- K.Deddens, Where Everything Points to Him, Inheritance Publications, 1993
- C.Trimp, De Gemeente en Haar Liturgie, Van den Berg -Kampen, 1983
- G.VanDooren, The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy, Premier Printing, 1992 (3rd printing)
- W.W.J.Van Oene, With Common Consent, Premier Printing, 1990,
- G.vanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, Inheritance Publications, 1995
- C.Trimp, A resounding Gospel, printed in Diaconia

10. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this chapter, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. For evaluation see part 7 and 8.5.
3. Are there any concerns with regard to the preaching or the prayers? What are these concerns? Why are they a concern? What plan of action could be taken to address this?