

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CLIMAX

The conclusion of the covenantal liturgy or “worship” should not be “finished,” “period,” but instead form a climax in which the climax of the sermon is actualized and underlined. The two final elements, closing song (a “B”) and benediction (an “A”) offer full opportunity for this.

CLOSING SONG

The minister selects a Psalm or Hymn in which our worshipping the holy and gracious God is expressed to the full. As already indicated, the contents of this song should be related to the main message of the text. Personally, I often choose a New Testament “Psalm or Hymn or Spiritual Song,” cf. Ephesians 5:15-20 and Colossians 3:12-17. Our praise to God lifts up our hearts to Him. Now we can face life and the world again. This closing song sings of the destruction of Christ’s enemies as well as of His victory and our being “more than conquerors in Him” (Romans 8).

The organist (whose name and function has not been mentioned yet) has prepared us for this final song by the prelude which he played during the offertory.

THE BENEDICTION

The service started with a blessing or salutation which “covers” the whole service. The closing benediction “covers” our whole life till the next Lord’s Day and is no less than the divine assertion and promise that His blessing and peace and grace and fellowship will accompany us through all our days. It is more than a pious wish or a bang with the gavel: the meeting is finished. All the elements of the whole liturgy now come to a head and are summarized in the solemn words of Numbers 6:24-26 and II Corinthians 13:14. It would be an insult to the LORD if we, during this benediction, already prepare to leave, start putting on our coat, or fumble for the cigarette for which our lungs cry. Eyes and ears and hearts and minds should be wide open to “drink in” every single word of it.

In Enschede I had for years a group of deaf-mute people on Saturday afternoons, to bring them the message, to sing and pray with them (don’t ask how!). Some of them did not attend church regularly (“we can’t understand a word”); others were very faithful. One “said” once to me: “I read for myself what is announced on the board, and, if it were only for receiving the benediction, that makes my churchgoing worthwhile!” Some, with good ears and vocal chords, sometimes complain, “I got nothing out of it” (“it” being the whole worship service). What a terrible thing to say!

The LORD sends us away, loaded with His blessing. Unbelievably wonderful. That makes the worship “the greatest show (?) in town.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Some empty spots still have to be filled up, in order to complete our simple elaboration of the glory of divine “worth-ship.”

THE “FRAME” OF THE WORSHIP SERVICES

With “frame” we mean here that, considering the character of corporate worship, our whole life is centred around it. We have already spoken of a fitting *preparation* for attending the church of God. But what happens after the service? If a preacher, who spent all his energy in preaching the divine message, would join the crowd on the parking place, he would be reminded of the warning of our Saviour that we must be on guard that the birds do not pick up the seed that was sown. Seldom would he see little groups, heads together, discussing and sharing what they just received.

This is an evil under the sun. The men of Bereoa, having heard Paul, went home and searched the Scriptures to see whether these things were true; and they were true! Even when a social hour is held, the talk seldom centres around the sermon and the coffee-drinkers seldom centre around the preacher to ask him about his sermon.

Well, then, there is the home. The families return home. What then? Does the father (and mother) ask the children about the sermon, and answer their questions if they have any?

We must train ourselves to “multiply the sermon” by meditation, discussion, and witnessing for the Lord. How many still think of it on Monday? Should not the prayer of that minister of my youth be heard: “Father, grant that Thy children may get through to Saturday on the strength of the bread of life which they received today”?

PROPHESYING FROM THE ORGAN BENCH*

Dr. K. Schilder used these words with reference to the well-known organist *Jan Zwart*. He did not hesitate to speak of the prophetic task of

* One of our organists reacted to (or: against) this reference to K. Schilder's words about the *prophetic* function of the organist in public worship. Prophecy is a matter of words, of transmitting messages; music as such can never be equal to that. Thus this brother saw his function more as that of a *priest* who lifts upon his hands the sacrifice of thanksgiving and the incense for the glory of God. Although I told him already personally that I have no problem with that at all, this remark may be repeated here. I assume that K. Schilder wanted to stress that also the organist has a “message” in public worship, be it then “ein Lied ohne Worte”; a message without words. I wholeheartedly underline the suggestion by this brother that his function as organist comes closer to that of a priest in the old dispensation.

If, then, one would add that the organ (the real organ) is “the *royal* instrument,” one might even construe a combination of the classic “three offices” of prophet, priest and king in the task of the organist

the organist. This does not mean that the organist should have an overriding influence during the service. His task is a humble, a serving one. Yet, it is an important one. He may enhance the whole service by his preludes and postludes and especially by accompanying the congregation. He can also do damage to it, by faulty playing or by pulling out all stops and deafening the eardrums. His choice of music may betray that he has no clue of what is going on. His excuse may be that he is taken for granted most of the time. Never did the minister talk with him. Information on what is to be sung and preached comes at the last moment, so that he cannot prepare himself for it. For correction of such a situation the minister should take the initiative because he is responsible for the course of the service. Consistories should not neglect the organist either, but enable him to improve his art and his music library. Money should, if necessary, also be invested in providing for organists for the future. Talents should be encouraged. The whole congregation will reap the benefits of such wisdom.

SPECIAL OCCASIONS

We did not speak of specific elements which according to Confession and Church Order belong to the worship service. We mention ordination of office-bearers, discipline and excommunication, also re-admission.

As to the place in the order of the liturgy: ordination usually takes place after the sermon, also for the reason that the preacher may deem it fitting to deliver a special sermon, dealing with the special offices in the church. Announcements of discipline and actual excommunication may take place before or after the first prayer, i.e., of public profession of sins. God is acting in those events, and thus they belong within the context of covenantal worship.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Closely related to sub 3 are the announcements. Which ones? And where do we place them? The overall principle should be that we limit the announcements to a minimum. Article 30 of the Church Order may have some bearing on this: "only ecclesiastical matters." Society secretaries sometimes "forget" to send in their information for the bulletin. Educationally speaking, the best way might be to refuse to make up for their neglect by announcement from the pulpit. But. . . Well, such announcements should then be made before the service starts. Not after; that would be too much of an anti-climax. Nearly every church has a weekly bulletin. That is the place for all such information. Even meetings organized by the consistory can be published in the bulletin. People can read, can they not? And if they have but a little interest in church matters, they will do so. Helping the lazy ones makes them only more lazy. But decisive is that such announcements do not belong in the covenantal "back-and-forth" of the liturgy.

With approbation by the congregation of appointed office-bearers, of attestations, and of receiving into the communion of saints it is a different matter. Such announcements might find their proper place before the offertory, except when they concern "guests" to the Holy Supper; that should be done before the communion starts. There is no strict rule; there should be some freedom for a minister to find the proper moment for banns and similar announcements.

As to attestations, incoming and outgoing, I would speak a word for a less formal way of doing things. Why not welcome a newly-arrived family with some Christian words, even ask them to rise so that everyone knows who they are; why not wish a departing family Godspeed to their new home and home-church? Is that not a matter of course within the communion of saints?

MORE PARTICIPATION?

We conclude this section with this question. It was already asked at the start, but the answer was postponed in the hope that the discussion of Reformed liturgy would be the answer. You know the question, the desire; the accusation that our services are too much a "one-man show."

Our answer to such accusation is that each church-goer should intensively participate in every part. In the singing, of course. Sing with heart and mouth! Know what you are singing and rejoice in it. It may happen that the greatest comfort, the strongest edification, will be your share just by having sung certain psalms and hymns. Tears may have filled your eyes; be not ashamed of them! Then, pray with the minister because he prays on behalf of you and for you. And listen, listen, listen! When the bread of life is distributed, you have to chew it, to digest it, to let it become part of you. Hearing the Word in the right manner is not much easier than preaching it! If there is such a participating attitude, no need will be felt for more participation.

The only use for a choir I would see is in supporting congregational singing. From my youth I remember that choirs trained themselves mostly in good Psalm-singing, and you could notice that in church! Now, with several new tunes, a choir could perform some *diakonia* or service here. It would not even be necessary to sit together as a choir in church. Spread throughout the congregation, their support will be noticeable.

I myself (this is personal) see some opportunities for more participation in the second service, where the Catechism is preached. Notwithstanding denial, I maintain that there is a difference between the first and the second sermon. In the first sermon (the expression is, again, from the *Book of Praise!*) the minister can say, "Thus says the LORD. . ." and then announce his theme. In the second sermon he will, of course, also be able to say that, but he will, according to the style of the Catechism,

often introduce his theme by, “*thus we confess* in accordance with the Scriptures”

I do not defend a “more informal” P.M. service, but I do see a possibility that the service be introduced by more singing; by asking the congregation what they would like to sing.

I do *not* see occasion for discussion of the Catechism-teaching in the public service. That can be done during a social hour, as some smaller congregations regularly have it. And, of course, there is always free access to the minister.

Finally, an elder or some other member could be asked to lead in closing prayer. But not all elders are such “leaders” as depicted in *The Elders’ Handbook*, by Berkhoff & De Koster, 1979.

These remarks may blow up some dust. Okay then, let’s not get excited about these personal ideas, but let’s all get excited about the beauty of Reformed liturgy.

To come back to that “free access to the minister,” a wise minister (and do we not readily accept that they all are?) will be happy to hear reactions; to get suggestions, requests, to further elaborate in a future sermon on a doctrinal matter that was not fully understood. He will be thankful for requests and wishes regarding texts, singing, praying. He is “a servant of servants” and he needs all the loving support he can get to better conduct the awe-inspiring covenantal communion with our God and Father, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, in the church of God, in the courts of the LORD of hosts.

INTERMEZZO ON THE SPECIAL CHARACTER OF THE SECOND WORSHIP SERVICE

In a booklet on (Covenantal) liturgy attention needs to be given to the special character of “50% of Reformed Preaching” which – because preaching is the heart and centre of Reformed liturgy – lends a special character to the whole second or P.M. (evening) service.

This special character has been and is being sought in a more “informal” character of the second service; more input by members of the congregation. *Calvinist Contact*, some years ago, pleaded for something different from the “one-man business” of the morning. The stress should be more on fellowship than worship.

Those who have attended an Orthodox or Reformed Presbyterian Church, have noted that the evening service is, indeed, less formal, even in attire. Not only does the minister leave his gown home in the evening, but members who dress up neatly in the morning, now appear in slacks and blue jeans. The choir has no special place in the second service. Members speak up and ask for beloved songs; sometimes a member is asked to lead in prayer, and more things like that.

Without going into pros and cons about any of the mentioned items, we would like to agree with everyone who pleads for a specific character of the “second service.” However, it should not be for reasons derived from the so-called “one-man business” of the morning. What we need is a renewed participation in the beautiful Reformed liturgy. If everyone in attendance has (that first) prepared himself prayerfully at home, and then gives himself totally in singing, praying, listening and “eating the bread of life,” we have an abundance of blessed participation!

All kinds of changes and novelties in the liturgy will not work; they wear off in due time and become “old stuff” again.

Yet, in addition to such prayerful and committed participation on the part of the congregation, the special character of the afternoon- or evening- preaching must be mentioned.

We maintain (over against contradiction) that the character of so-called “Catechism Preaching” differs essentially from “the first sermon” (expression in *Book of Praise*). Together, that “first sermon” and the “Catechism sermon” beautifully express the covenantal character of Reformed liturgy. For that reason we conclude this booklet with a description of this unique kind of preaching according to the Reformed Church Order.