

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# LITURGY - A MATTER OF THE CHURCHES IN COMMON

### *“Bound - Yet Free”*

The question may be asked (has been asked! and answered!) whether the decision on the “order of the liturgy” lies with the local consistory, even with the local minister - or whether it falls within the limits of Article 30 of the (old) Reformed *Church Order*. This Article speaks of such matters as belong to “the churches in common” and thus, because of their character, appear on the agenda of a general synod or assembly, even without an overture from the churches.

The answer to this question cannot be given with a simple Yes or No.

First, when the Committee for the Church Book (*Book of Praise*) of the *Canadian Reformed Churches* in its Report to General Synod 1980 submitted two suggestions for the Order of Liturgy, this Synod became the first one in the history of these churches to deal with the matter of “The Order of Public Worship.” Up till now their *Book of Praise* did not contain such an Order and was – in this as well as in other respects – quite unique.

All Dutch “Kerkboeken” that we could lay our hands on have such an *Orde van Eeredienst*, as was adopted and thus prescribed for the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* since Synod Middelburg 1933. In one of the chapters we have discussed and “exposed” the historical background of that 1933 decision. There was in those years no doubt, however, as to whether General Synod should deal with the matter. The Dutch sister churches of the *Canadian Reformed Churches* obviously take the same stand, considering the fact that their Synod 1975 prepared a different Order of Worship to be used next to the one of 1933, or – hopefully – instead of it.

Mention of these historical facts does, indeed, not determine our answer to the question mentioned above.

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We suggest that all the elements that compose the (Reformed) liturgy are matters of and for “the churches in common.” We will see that when we go back into *history*, a bit farther than 1933. According to *G. van Rongen, Van Zijn Schone Dienst*, 1956, pp. 188ff., the oldest Reformed liturgy was written by *William Farel* (the man who forced J. Calvin to stay in Geneva) in 1533 under the name *Maniere et Fasson*. A preparatory booklet had already seen the light in 1524. Other Reformers had done the same.

The Dutch, German, French, Scottish, and English Churches were all very much engaged in composing their liturgy. *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England has had a very "emotional" history. When it finally "settled down" it intended "to keep the mean [middle, vD] between two extremes" but also was declared binding for the Church: "Anyone who refuses to keep this order, loses his office." It may be worthwhile to quote the whole sentence, "It has been the wisdom of the Church of England ever since the first compiling of her public liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes of too much stiffness in refusing and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it." This might come close to the heading of this appendix, taken from Psalm 116, "Bound – yet Free."

Let's return to the thesis that all components of (Reformed) liturgy have been, and are, and must remain "matters which belong to the churches in common." One may ask why the churches since the Reformation were so busily engaged in liturgical matters?

The obvious answer: the Great Reformation was as much a reformation of the liturgy as it was a reformation of the Confession. Rev. G. van Rongen is right when he repeatedly stresses in his book that liturgy is a matter of confession. This fact alone makes it a matter for the churches in common. In the public liturgy the church shows its face to the world. In her liturgy she reveals her "identity," and she is recognized by that liturgical face. This fact already decides on the question whether the whole matter of liturgy and its order should be left to the local church, even the local minister or *liturgist*. Instead of freebooting, the "sisters" in the federation of churches should show the same (or at least a similar) face.

Again: the various components of the Reformed liturgy are matters that belong to the churches in common.

The Reformation cleansed the liturgy, removed Romanist, superstitious and idolatrous elements, and returned to the simplicity and beauty of covenantal liturgy, first of all by stressing the centrality of *the preaching of the Word*.

On this centrality the churches have expressed themselves in their creeds. A mention of Lord's Days 7, 21, 25, 35, and 48 may suffice here. Faith is worked by the preaching of the Gospel; thus the Church is gathered; this preaching is the instrument of the Holy Spirit; God wills His Christians to be taught not by dumb images but by the living preaching of His Word; and finally, Lord's Day 38, the "ground-plan" of our liturgy is given in the four parts, discussed in previous pages, of diligently attending church to learn God's Word, to use the Sacraments, to call publicly on the Name of the LORD and to give Christian alms.

Note that we say all these things in our Reformed Confession, which is the bond between the churches, and thus a matter that all churches have in common.

But we have much more. As to the use of the sacraments, we have, in general synods, agreed in detail, in various Articles of the Church Order, how these sacraments shall be administered, what Forms shall be read, and we have made the reading of these Forms obligatory.

Not only that – the churches have also, in (old) Article 68, Church Order, bound themselves and each other as to what the topic shall be of fifty percent of the sermons: in the afternoon shall be preached “on the Catechism.” There we have thus the “order” between A.M. and P.M. services, and even a definition of what kind of preaching there shall be in the second service.

Equally, our officially-adopted Forms of Prayers (in Reformation times they were simply, together with the other Forms, called “our liturgy”) have officially-adopted names, as was explained in previous pages. These names tell us what kind of prayers they are and where they shall have their place in the worship services: before or after the sermon – again a commonly accepted “order of liturgy.”

The churches have also bound each other and themselves on what shall be sung in the worship services. From the beginning the composition of the *Book of Praise* has been a matter, not of individual, local churches but, according to Article 30, Church Order, a business for the churches in common, i.e., for general synods.

Even the public confession of sins is thus made a matter of general consensus. We agree with G. van Rongen that these Prayer-Forms deserve more attention and use.

The conclusion of the above incomplete list must be that the churches have expressed themselves and taken decisions on practically every element or component of the public worship service. There were incidental agreements on the “order” of those elements: prayers before or after the sermon, at the beginning or towards the end of the service. Also the “order” of first the Word, then the sacraments, cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 25.

This does not yet constitute a complete “order of service.” We haven’t even spoken about beginning and end of the service yet!

Reformed people have a strong feeling for “history.” It will convince them when they hear that one of the first synods, the synod (synod!) of Dordrecht 1574, wanting to clean up an existing confusion as to how the service should start (till now the priest had started it with a confession of his own guilt), declared: “that from now on the service of praying and preaching be opened with a standing formula (‘vaste formule’), i.e., Our help stands in the Name of the LORD Who made heaven and earth” (van Rongen, p. 36).

In the concluding element, the benediction, the Christian church simply follows the example of the Old Testament church when using the words of *Numbers 4:24-26*, as well as of the New Testament church, //

*Corinthians 13:13*. We find this already in an early Dutch liturgy of 1567.

For completeness we may add that the churches in common have also "bound" themselves re: public profession, ordination to the offices, whose place in the order of liturgy is decided by their character: the one before the Holy Supper, the other after the sermon.

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Thus we may say, without fear of much contradiction, that about all *elements* of Reformed liturgy the churches since the Reformation have made decisions, which also regard their place in the *order* of this liturgy.

There may be differences in details, as there was in the *Christian Reformed Church*. "The Synod of 1928 adopted an order of worship which was intended to become ultimately a uniform order of worship in all the Churches," *H.B. Spaan, Christian Reformed Church Government, 1968, 120*. In 1930, however, Synod rescinded this decision because several classes had brought objections against the element of "*absolution*." Since then, according to Spaan, this element was "left to the discretion of each local church."

But difference in detail should not hold the churches, in General Synod, back from striving for unity and uniformity in our liturgy which – as we have seen – is on a level with the uniformity in confession. While these lines were written, Synod 1980 of the Canadian Reformed Churches was still in session, and it was not yet known what came out of the suggestion of the Church Book Committee that Synod express itself on this matter.

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### ***Bound - Yet Free***

For those freedom-loving spirits who "by nature" oppose uniformity, it may be stressed that being bound to a specific order of liturgy does not mean losing your freedom.

There is for the liturgist, the pastor and teacher, first the freedom of text-choice for the "first sermon" and the freedom to build his sermon upon that text the way he sees fit. We do not have a *system of pericopes* nor a strict binding to the *church year* that takes away the freedom of text choice.

The preacher should, we believe, also deliver his sermon with the greatest possible measure of "freedom of delivery."

Further, he is free to choose Psalms and Hymns which he deems fitting. He may make use, now and then, of the Forms for Prayers, but is further completely free, within the limits of God's Word, to decide how he shall pray "today" for "all the needs of Christendom," etc.

Experience of more than forty years tells us that a "strict" order of

worship or liturgy is in no way a strait-jacket for the preacher. On the contrary, only within the frame-work of a truly Reformed liturgy is he really free, because the Son of man has set him free! It is exactly there where there is no binding, where everything is left to what we have called the free-booting of the minister and of the local church with all its experimenting, that one becomes a prisoner of his own fancies and a slave of men.

In addition to all this freedom-within-the-binding, there are still certain opportunities for a minister-liturgist to exercise his Christian freedom.

First there is the "call to worship" which has been discussed in previous pages. We refrain from giving examples, but the Word of God, especially the Book of Psalms, offers a multitude of such calls. During the prayer meeting for Synod 1980 we heard such a "call," although it was heard right before the congregation sang the Creed.

There is also some "freedom" around the Ten Words or Commandments; not only that we have the choice between Exodus 10 and Deuteronomy 5.

There is something else. Again we heard it asserted with the greatest possible assurance that reading the summary after the Ten Words is, in fact, "foolish" because that means simply doing the same thing twice. Some ministers seem to prefer to read the Ten Words as a bolt from the blue sky. No introductory remark, no summary, not even a song afterwards, just so many "Don'ts" and that is that; what comes next?

I wonder whether ever these brethren have continued reading Moses in Deuteronomy. After having given the Ten Words in a new edition, Moses continued in chapter 6 (and we quote):

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. . . , etc.

Would it not be beautiful to keep on reading Moses for a moment, or was he acting "foolishly" when he "said the same twice" by adding the Great Commandment to the Ten Words? I leave the judgment to the reader.

It should be added that no one calls it a luxury to remind the Reformed congregation that the Commandments can be obeyed only by and in love. In Mark 12:29 the Lord quotes Moses literally, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one, and you shall love. . . ," thus putting His stamp of infallibility upon what Moses did when he "continued" after the Ten Words with the Great Commandment, adding another word of Moses from Leviticus 19:18.

More "freedom" should be enjoyed by the preacher if he wants to

add to the “Old Testament” law certain passages of the New Testament, like those of the contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit, Galatians 5:13-18; 19-26; Ephesians 4:17-24; 25-32, and so many more, from Old as well as New Testament: Psalm 32:1, 2, 10; 103:10, 11, 17, 18; Isaiah 1:18-20; John 3:36ff., 15:6, 7; I Peter 2:6-9; I John 1:8-2:2, 3:1-3.

This freedom does *not* extend to the benedictions: adding embellishments to what should be only God’s own literal word of blessing is a bad thing.

Free – Yet Bound!