

CHAPTER FIVE

“WORD AND SACRAMENTS”

The Reformed Creeds often use this expression, and always in this order. You will never read “Sacraments and Word.” Although these chapters do not discuss the doctrine as expressed in the various elements of our liturgy but only the liturgical aspect, we may be granted the one remark that the order “Word and Sacraments” is not used to depreciate the Sacraments as being “less important.” This sentiment is not completely absent among us. ‘We can do without the sacraments, but not without the preaching.’ Thus one is wiser than God “Who ordained the sacraments for us, taking account of our weakness and infirmities,” Article 33 of the Belgic Confession.

The basis for this order, “Word and Sacraments,” is simply that the Sacraments are given “to seal unto us His promises.” If that is the case, then one must first hear those promises! It is not uncommon to hear that the preaching is for the *ear*, the sacrament for the *eye* (as well as for the taste c.a.): audible and visible word.

The following liturgical aspects should be mentioned.

First of all, in the sacraments we have – again – a combination of *both* elements of Reformed liturgy: the LORD is acting (A); the congregation is also active (B).

Parents bring their children to baptism; they (again) make profession of their faith and accept the responsibilities for a godly upbringing of their seed. However, not only those particular parents, but the whole congregation is to be active. Baptism is administered for, among other things, “the edification of the church” (Form). Thus everyone should read along with the minister, or at least listen intently to the beautiful Form, and pray along in both prayers. No one should say, not even think, “Again a baptism; the service will last ten more minutes at least. . . .”

Sticking to the proper order, a baptism should come *after* the preaching of God’s promises. In the case of the baptism of an adult that is no problem. To my knowledge that is always (alas, not “often”) done after the sermon. In the case of infant baptism one hears the objection that it may be difficult to keep the baby quiet that long. If you have the baptism at the beginning of the service, mother and baby can always leave if the latter becomes restless, starts crying (baby-crying should not compete with preaching!). Besides that, the mother may not be able to sit that long. Apart from the fact that the original Form speaks of the father only, because in earlier times Article 56 of the Church Order was kept faithfully: “as soon as possible,” i.e., the first Day of the LORD after the birth – apart from that, there is an easy solution. The baby can be kept in the

nursery (where a loud-speaker should enable one to follow the sermon), and brought in when the time for baptism has come.

Having mentioned this, and referring to Article 56 of the Church Order, we could elaborate on the fact that old baptism registers prove that our forefathers brought their babies to baptism the first service after birth. Nowadays, however, nearly all children are born in a hospital, and the staff will not permit a father to take his child out of the nursery for the purpose of baptism and then bring it back. Modern treatment of the mother has made it possible for her to be “up again” much sooner than her sisters in the past. The result is that usually Article 56 of the Church Order can be kept with both parents present at the baptism of their newborn child. Even then, the father presents the child for baptism.

One more item: Should the minister stay with the parents at the font when the faithfulness of our Covenant God is praised in song? Or rather: Should the parents stay there, in front of the congregation, during the singing? Many favour this, to say the least, but to us this is more a matter of emotion than of common sense. The congregation does not “sing to” the child but to the LORD. The parents step forward only for the act of baptism; then they return into the congregation, and all together sing the LORD’s praise.

We conclude with the hope that in the churches the baptismal font may be kept as busy as in former generations!

ADMINISTRATION OF HOLY SUPPER

1. We repeat: also this element belongs to (A) and (B) both. The LORD is the Host; He seals His promises to us. But the congregation is certainly also active. This element has rightly been used as an argument against “child-communion.” In favour of this it has been said that they also receive the first sacrament. We even confess that “both redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, the Author of faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to adults,” Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 74.

Yes, that is fully true; but in baptism God takes the initiative; He is first and the baby is passive (“although our children do not understand these things,” Form for Baptism). In Holy Supper, however, man takes an active part, performs an act of profession, comes and eats and drinks and remembers. Little children cannot yet do that.

The question may be asked whether - although we by far do not follow the example of the ancient church as to the frequency of supper celebrating – too much stress has been and is being laid on the “fringes” of the Lord’s Supper. The question may also be asked: “Whence comes this?” In addition to three weeks of Catechism preaching on the Holy Supper, Lord’s Days 28, 29, 30, we have (or: had) a “preparatory sermon” followed by “the week of preparation.” Then, on the Supper Sunday again

a sermonette plus a long Form and after that (as I remember from my youth) an evening service of “*nabetrachting*”: looking at the Supper in retrospect. This sermon dealt not only with what we had tasted and enjoyed at the supper table, but contained a serious word for those who had not come to the table for all kinds of reasons. It all came close to Pietism, treating the supper as a very extraordinary event for which one had to prepare in a very special way, examining and analyzing himself, whether there were the marks of the true believer, and so forth. If we celebrate the supper six times a year, that would amount to twelve plus three (Catechism sermons), that is at least fifteen Sundays per year, close to one third of the yearly preaching program. On the Supper Sundays, then, no Catechism preaching, in conflict with Article 68 of the Church Order. And far too much attention for what a communicant member might or might not feel in all those weeks. This whole development is far from classic-Reformed, and even farther from the apostolic age.

Because we strongly favour a greater frequency of the Supper, we suggest that all those “fringes,” or most of them, be cut away. This brings us to some more liturgical questions.

Supper-celebration, when taking place at tables in a large congregation, is time-consuming. I myself have for years ministered at eight to eleven tables in a row; the maximum was in Utrecht: thirteen tables. The main problem is not time-consumption (although that is important: there can be no preaching in such a situation), but the repetition (some say, “the vain repetition”) of the words of the institution. Is that right? Our churches form an exception to what is seen all around us: the minister sits in front of the congregation, together with some office-bearers. People stay in their pews, the bread and the wine are brought to them by office-bearers, and then they all eat at the same moment, and drink at the same moment. To those who right away stick up their feathers, I would say: “Do you not know that this has been practiced in several good old Dutch *Gereformeerde* churches for ages, especially in the northern provinces?”

PROS AND CONS

Celebration at tables has as a “pro” that we have to rise, go forward and sit down at the table. That is an act, an act of obedience. Instead of many small cups we drink from a large cup (although there are four such cups going around). That expresses unity (as many grains ground together). The “con” is that, by the four, five, six, or more tables, which become necessary with the size of the congregation, that unity is broken again. As to the other method, common on this continent, but not unknown in Reformed churches of the past and present, here indeed the wine is poured into individual cups. However, try to picture in your mind the strong stress on unity: after the minister has, visible to everyone, broken the bread, while using the words of the institution, all members get a piece of bread,

and, when they hear the words, "Take eat, do this in remembrance of me," they all eat at the *same moment*. Similarly with the wine: all drink together. In a small congregation, where all can sit at one table, that is no problem. But there are not only (very) small congregations. If we would do it the way just described, the whole celebration would not take more than 15 to 20 minutes.

SOME BENEFITS

This method does not take away much from preaching time. That's the first reason why we should favour it. Then it makes a more frequent celebration, e.g., once a month, easier to realize. Further, every good sermon in the style of Catechism, Lord's Day 31 (opening and closing of the kingdom), is a preparatory sermon, and thus we do not need special "preparatory sermons."

Also, we should try to get rid of a "continuation of the supper" in the afternoon or evening service. Often there are only five, seven, nine, or a few more coming to the table, and they get the "remaining morsels"; a piece of the Form, a shortened prayer, and then, of course, bread and wine. It is a bit "individual," maybe "individualistic."

Mind you, when I say we should try to get rid of this, I do not mean that it is not worth the trouble or the time to sit at the table with five or seven brothers, but mostly sisters. I once flew to Aruba and to South America to administer the sacrament to four, to five believers. But I suggest that we do our utmost, by means of baby-sitting and the like, to get *all* communicant members to the morning service (or, for that matter, evening service, if we want to stick to "*avondmaal*," "*Nachtmahl*," "supper"). We would "kill two birds with one stone" by not only realizing the "one wine, one bread" idea, but also by correcting older and younger couples who stay home in the morning ("it is only supper. . .") and show up in the afternoon.

THE FORMS

The consistories have received concepts of two Forms for the Supper. They are shorter than the present one, although nothing essential has been left out. On the contrary, an important element is added that is hard to find in the present Form: "until He comes." Holy Supper is as much a looking forward to Christ's return as a remembrance of what He did for us in the past. The eschatological element should never be lacking: the LORD is at hand! Shortly after the Reformation the followers of the reformers had to be indoctrinated in the scriptural teaching of the sacraments, and to be brain-washed of Romanist superstitions. Therefore such long answers in the Catechism and such long Forms. The desire expressed in past years to shorten some Forms had a double, positive motive: make more room for preaching and make room for more frequent celebration of the Supper. These motives are to be complimented.

“TAKE PART!”

It bears repeating: take full part in everything. Listen intently to the teaching of the Form, which is, in fact, ministry of the Word. Look at the minister when he breaks the bread and pours the wine. Concentrate on your eating and drinking: “as surely as. . . .” And let Synod 1980 adopt the suggestion of the Liturgy Committee (the Faculty of the College) that the congregation together recites the Creed and prays the Lord’s Prayer, as was the intention of the reformers.