

CHAPTER TWO

THE OPENING

In the light of the solemn character of our meeting the LORD the opening or beginning of the service is of the greatest importance. It “sets the tune” for all that follows. This opening is not only a vatum and a blessing, plus a Psalm. While this takes place, we who attend the church of God must have prepared ourselves so that we are in the proper frame of mind. This cannot be stressed too strongly. In the previously mentioned book, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, Dr. Rayburn needs more than 130 pages to make clear, from the Scriptures, what it means, and must mean for us, that we meet the LORD. And He meets us; He, the God of all the earth; He to Whom the seraphim constantly sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD God Almighty” (Isaiah 6).

The Reformation cleansed the church buildings of all superstition, from images, these “books of the laity,” because God wants His Christians taught by the living preaching of His Word, Lord’s Day 35.

The popular iconoclasm, however, went a bit farther. The simpler, the barer the church building, the better. It became a meeting place of the congregation, where people went to hear a sermon. As we experienced after the Liberation, 1944, we could have wonderful church services in barns, school rooms, even storerooms. The building as such is not that important, although one could write articles on biblical architecture.

But even the most ornate building would be an empty shell, if the congregation that fills it is not itself filled with the deepest reverence and at the same time joyful expectancy: “we have drawn near to the heavenly Jerusalem.” The LORD descends in our midst. Only when *that* is our attitude, do we receive the full benefit and blessing from the “opening.”

THREE AND THREE

Traditionally we have three elements or parts in the opening of the service: the vatum, the blessing or salutation, and the first Psalm or Hymn, expressing the “Come, let us worship and bow down before this God of great renown” of Psalm 95. There are, however, three more elements which we will consider.

THE FIRST THREE

The service starts with a (B) element, coming from the congregation, on whose behalf the minister speaks the words of Psalm 124: “Our help is in the Name of the LORD Who made heaven and earth.” We call that the “*vatum*” for lack of a better word.

This is quite a statement! First, we call upon the LORD, Yahweh,

the God of the Patriarchs, the God Who revealed His Name to Moses at the burning bush. He is the God Who adopted us and our children in His gracious covenant. This already establishes the meeting-together as a covenantal event. Although there may (hopefully) be visitors whom we call "outsiders," they do not change the character of the meeting: the covenant people has gathered with their Covenant God.

Then, we confess Him as the Creator; that is the first Article of the Apostles' Creed; and when you read Lord's Days 9 and 10 of the Catechism, you realize again what that means. He, Who created all things and still upholds them, is for His Son Jesus' sake our God and Father Who takes care of us more than any earthly father ever can, Psalm 103.

Finally, we call Him our Help: we put our lives into His hand. "Blessed is he who has the God of Jacob for his help" (Psalm 146:5). We declare that our "help" is in His NAME: we are open to His *revelation*.

This "votum" is spoken by the minister on our behalf. There can be no objection against saying these words together. It would impress upon us that these words are not just a traditional formula which means little more than when a chairman opens the meeting with his gavel. It is much more! The reason that the "votum" is spoken by the minister may have to be sought in the fact that this element of our liturgy stems from the so-called *Latin Mass*. When the clergy became more and more central, the priest had to perform all sorts of ceremonies before he could start his real work. One of these ceremonies was the confession of his personal sins and a prayer for forgiveness and cleansing. This prayer, then, began with the words, "Our help is in the name of the LORD," while one of the assistants responded by saying, "Who made heaven and earth." This is the origin of the traditional beginning of our services. Since the Reformation these words do not apply to the "clergy" any longer, but to the whole congregation.

The above is a near-literal quote from G. van Rongen, *Liturgy of God's Covenant*, p.11. The "Call to Worship," of which we have to say more in the coming pages, is of older, pre-Romanist origin. As a matter of fact it stems from the Early Christian church.

Then comes the *salutation*, an (A) element, coming from the LORD as His answer to our confession expressed in the votum. Although we do not suggest it, in order to express the difference between votum and salutation, the minister could, during the votum, turn his back to the congregation, lift up his face and on behalf of the people behind him address God. Then, turning around, he faces the congregation and blesses them from the LORD. "Two-way traffic!"

The service is also closed with a blessing, usually called the benediction. This is the LORD's "farewell" at the moment we go back home, crowned with His blessing which will accompany the true believers all through the week.

The opening blessing is meant for the worship service itself. In the company of the Triune God we are assured of the grace and the love of God. We may count on that during the whole service, because it is a blessing, not a (pious) wish. It is a statement, a divine statement. That's why we favour "Grace *is* upon you. . . ," and, likewise in the closing benediction, "the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with you all."

Dr. Rayburn warns against "monotony." He fears that, when we always hear the same words, their meaning will escape us in the end. Although there is such a danger, we would not favour giving the minister the right to use different words every Lord's Day. In our churches two different wordings are used, from I Corinthians 1:3 and Revelation 1:4, 5. We would, however, like to plead for some more variety. The Bible undoubtedly contains more blessing-formulas than just these two. Paul opened his letters every time in a different way. One may also think of Peter, who starts his first letter with the words, "May grace and peace be multiplied to you. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Still, we favour the ones we use regularly, because they remind us of our adoption in the covenant, "baptized into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." One needs only to read the first page of the Form for Baptism to realize what this blessing means.

It would take too much space even to paraphrase these blessings. They are loaded with promises; they contain all that we need for this life and for the life eternal. The blessing should always be a *literal* quotation from the Bible. The LORD speaks. No minister should try to emulate Him by adding all kinds of pious frills.

It stands to reason – this as a final remark – that the congregation should *not* close their eyes during the votum and blessing. A confession (votum) is said with open eyes, and we should see the uplifted hands of the minister, reminding us of our Lord and Saviour, Who ascended while lifting up His hands, by which He blessed the pillars of the church, the apostles.

The third element is the *first Psalm*. This Psalm (or Hymn) need not be selected by the minister with a view to his text. It may be related to the sermon, but, in any case, it must be a song of praise, expressing the all surpassing glory of our God. The Psalm book contains a great number. The new Hymn section opens, on purpose, with six hymns under the heading, "We praise Thee, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"; as it also closes with "All glory be to Thee, Most High." Bulletin and Psalm board render it unnecessary to announce this Psalm, let alone to hear it being read by the minister.

Right after the blessing we sing glory to God. Our song pierces the clouds and becomes one with that of the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy!" Our singing will please the LORD only when we can say with Paul: "I will

sing with the spirit, but I will sing with the mind also" (I Corinthians 14:15). Put your mind to it, and know what you are singing!

THE SECOND THREE

There are three more elements that should be mentioned here, namely, the prayer in the consistory room, the silent prayer when the consistory has entered, and the so-called "Call to Worship."

It is a bit risky to say something negative about number one and two. Prayer is an intimate matter. Be silent! We take that risk, for the simple reason that, though these two prayers are still in use in some of our churches, they are in our opinion not what the LORD expects from us.

The prayer in the consistory room by the "shaker"(. . .), i.e., the elder who leads the minister to the pulpit, stems, according to most "experts," from times of persecution, when all too often the service was cruelly interrupted and dispersed by the enemies. The purpose was then to ask the LORD that this might not happen. I myself have again felt that need during World War II when bombs sometimes fell close by or when people, spying for the Germans, hoped to hear something that might put the minister into the concentration camp (as happened in several cases). But, in normal circumstances, is it necessary? I assume that every elder has prayed for his minister at home already, privately and with the family. Add the closing prayer at consistory meetings.

One's opinion on this matter is related to what one thinks of the consistory gathering separately, before the service. Our churches may, in this respect, be an exception. Why do the elders and deacons not join the congregation right away? It is also related to one's opinion of the necessity (or not) of that shaking of hands by the elder whose turn it is. I have heard as an explanation that, in doing so, the elder, on behalf of the consistory, gives the minister the mandate to preach, while at the end of the service his hand-shaking means that the sermon was alright.

I have never been impressed by this explanation. The mandate to preach was given once for all in the letter of call and the ordination. This does not need to be repeated every Lord's Day, even twice! Nor can that one elder, without having consulted his colleagues, right off the cuff publicly declare: "It was alright; no objections." Imagine, *if* he has objections, what then? Refuse the hand? There are other and better ways for that.

This usage stems from the days after the Reformation, when there were quite a number of itinerant preachers, unknown to the congregation. Before he could ascend the pulpit, the consistory had talked with such a "preacher-on-the-loose" – and then this hand-shaking made sense; it told the congregation, "He is alright." (That's why Church Order and Church Visitation speak about the task of the consistory to see to it that no one enters the pulpit who is not qualified.)

Now that "silent prayer," a few moments (seconds) before the min-

ister starts with the votum. The organ falls silent; everyone bows his/her head, and prays. The remark that it is risky to say something negative about this, is repeated here. Imagine! you feel the need for privately asking the LORD for a blessing, and the consistory would forbid it! Terrible!

Therefore the first remark is, give everyone who wants to pray for himself the opportunity. Let the organ stop some moments before the consistory enters. But, having stressed time and again that the church service is a gathering of the covenant congregation, we believe that from the very moment the service starts, we should approach the LORD together, as the one body of Christ. There is ample opportunity for private prayers at home, and not only on Sunday mornings! We would rather plead for more prayers sent up during the week, when the minister is preparing his sermons. Sunday morning is a little late for that, and. . . he needs those prayers!

Therefore, although not being a promoter of this silent prayer (while respecting everyone who feels the need for it), I suggest that from the very second the "meeting with the LORD" starts, we do all things together! Instead of that silent prayer that can mostly be counted in seconds, we should start the preparation for worshiping the LORD a bit earlier and a bit better. Not to bed too late on Saturday evening; up in time on Sunday morning, have a breakfast together instead of fighting for the use of the bathroom, and a rush to find the "Sunday shoes, tie, etc. . . ." The best preparation is to do what the Catechism adds in Lord's Day 38: "that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the Lord work in me by His Holy Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath."

The last item on the agenda under the sub-heading was "*Call to Worship*." One question that may prepare you for this is: "Did it strike you that in the meeting with the LORD *man*, in the "votum," has the first word?" Is that right? Should not the LORD be the First, as He always was and is and will be?

CALL TO WORSHIP

Rev. van Rongen told us in the previous pages that our "votum" finds its origin in the worship where the priest was the centre. He prayed the words, "Our help is in the Name of the LORD. . ." as a preparation of and for himself. The Reformation abolished this and put the words into the mouth of the congregation.

Those who have the impression that we want to introduce *new* inventions should know that *before* the votum came into use, there was an *older* beginning of the worship service, the so-called "Call to Worship."

The minister calls the congregation to the meeting on behalf of God. "We must always remember that no one is fully ready for the high and holy experience of united corporate worship" (Rayburn, p. 174). "The very best way to call to mind His worth is from His own holy and infallible

Word. Actually the only way we can find out about God's worth is from God Himself" (*Ibid*, p. 175). From ancient days it has been the custom to quote for the Call to Worship words from the Psalms. The Book of Psalms is full of verses containing very specific calls to worship. No part of Scripture is better for this specific purpose. From the large number we only quote:

Psalm 92:1, 2: It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to Thy Name, O Most High; to declare Thy steadfast love in the morning.

Psalm 100:1,2: Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the lands! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into His presence with singing! Know that the LORD is God!

Psalm 113:1, 2: Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the Name of the LORD! Blessed be the Name of the LORD from this time forth and for evermore!

And so on. . . . These are the words in which the LORD welcomes His people and they sing His holy praise.

We do not expect that the churches will immediately restore this ancient opening of the service, whereby the minister could use a great variety, but always taken from the Word of God Himself. Mention of it may, however, serve the purpose that we are deeply impressed by the fact that we have come into the presence of the Most High and that our opening Psalm gives expression to this awareness.