

CHAPTER THREE

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS

In the order of corporate worship, given previously, the purpose of the second “block” of elements is to take away all obstacles between the LORD and us. Although we are His covenant people, justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, the Bible makes very clear that every time we enter into His presence, there are again sins that must be taken out of the way. One thinks of the manner in which men like Abraham, David, Isaiah, Paul, etc., approached the throne of mercy: always in deepest reverence and with a declaration of unworthiness.

Notwithstanding the need for confession of sins and forgiveness through His grace, this part of the average worship service has been sorely neglected and nearly disappeared. Men like *Dr. A. Kuypers* have tried in vain to restore this part of worship to its proper place, and thus return to the way it was practiced by the Reformers. We have already pointed to the two prayers in the *Book of Praise*, pp. 635 and 637, which contain a public confession of sins (and are, incorrectly, combined with a brief prayer before the sermon, which will be explained later).

Although we wholeheartedly agree with the Catechism that the Ten Words of the Covenant belong in the third part (of gratitude), in the worship service they have always been combined with the public confession of sins. To this “block” belong four elements, which represent the two way traffic in the covenantal liturgy [(A) being from God; (B) coming from His people]. They are: 1. The Ten Words; 2. Public Confession of Sins;

3. Proclamation of Forgiveness; 4. Song of Praise and Thanksgiving. On each of these we should speak briefly.

THE TEN WORDS

It stands to reason that both versions of the Ten Commandments should be read alternately, Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Our “diligently attending the church of God” (Lord’s Day 38) is in obedience to the fourth commandment, and it is exactly this commandment that has two different versions. Only together do they give the full meaning of the Lord’s Day. Exodus 20 gives a *reason* for keeping the Lord’s Day: His example on the seventh day; Deuteronomy 5 adds as *purpose*: to recall His mighty acts of redemption.

Some minor points should be mentioned. First, pros and cons have been put forward as to whether Exodus 20:1, “And God spoke all these words, saying. . . ” should be read or not. Our conviction that they need not be read is based, first, on the fact that we do not find them in Deuteronomy 5; second, because, apart from the fact that God “*spoke*” these

words the first time from Sinai, He now *speaks* them to us. We are not just reading an old document!

Another point is: Should the Summary, already given by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, and combined by the Saviour in Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 10 be read also? The argument *against* doing so usually is that we then read the Law twice. Unintentionally, this gives the impression of criticizing the Lord Jesus. On various occasions (not only Matthew 22, but also to the Rich Young Man) He deemed it necessary, after having mentioned some of the Ten Words, to convince people of their sins and guilt by adding, "Yes, you say you kept these commandments, but what about loving your neighbour?" It is our conviction that we, for the same purpose, need this reminder badly. That's why the Catechism quotes the summary, Lord's Day 2, in answer to the question, "Whence do you know your misery?" Is it enough that we do not kill our neighbour? No, when God forbids hatred and anger, He commands us to "love our neighbour as ourselves" (Lord's Day 40, Answer 107).

In reading the Ten Words we are nearly alone. Some churches have kept a resemblance of it by having the minister read selections from the New Testament in which one or more of the commandments are paraphrased. Although it is a must to do that in Catechism preaching on Lord's Days 34-44, such a selection never gives the complete covenant law, and already for that reason we should not go in that direction. The whole Law in its negative and positive form, nothing less!

PUBLIC CONFESSION OF SINS

The combination of this public confession of sins with the prayer before the sermon is the result of permitting this important part of corporate worship to fall into disuse. Every minister be advised to use these two prayer forms now and then, especially when the upcoming Synod has adopted the new wording that has been prepared by the Liturgy Committee (the consistories have already received them).

Those who want more participation of the congregation have an opportunity here to recommend that the whole congregation prays these Prayers. We have them in print.

However, we do not recommend that these forms be used every Lord's Day. That might become monotonous and then the hearts are no longer touched. We have attended churches in other countries where a brief prayer of confession is printed in the bulletin every week, so that the whole congregation can pray together with the minister: everyone confesses his/her own sinfulness before the Holy God. This is mentioned as an example of how other Christians try to do justice to this element of worship. The LORD reminded us of His holy will for us; *we* learn to acknowledge our sinfulness and confess it: (A) – then (Bl. *God's* answer is (A):

PROCLAMATION OF FORGIVENESS AND GRACE

Lord's Day 31 rightly stresses that all preaching must be "openly witnessing to believers. . . that their sins are really forgiven. . . and to unbelievers that the wrath of God abides on them." When the congregation, however, in answer to God's holy Law, has confessed her guilt with a contrite spirit, she should already at that moment be firmly assured of God's willingness to forgive the believers, one and all (Lord's Day 31). The minister should use quotations from God's own Word to proclaim this divine grace. That is his mandate and authority: "Whatever you bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven."

Now that the congregation has been assured that by her confession and by God's grace everything is "smooth" again between her and Him and thus the service can proceed on the basis of reconciliation, she cannot but answer [a (B) element] with:

A SONG OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

As with every element of the service, the minister should select the song for this moment with the greatest care. Such a song, Psalm or Hymn, should give expression to our gratitude for the great gift in Christ, to our willingness and desire to obey the commandments of God with greater zeal; and in general it should be the expression of our awareness that we depend totally and completely on the LORD's mercy. "Bless the LORD, O my soul, Who forgives all your iniquity, Who redeems your life from the pit. . . ." (Psalm 103).

With this joy in our hearts we are now looking forward "to learning God's Word" (Lord's Day 38). We may "bathe" in His love!

POSTSCRIPT

It would be wonderful if this part of the service, as described in this section, would again (it is nothing new!) be given its due. We do not say that all this has to be repeated in the second service. These chapters are, in general, speaking about the first service. If this booklet does not become too long, we might conclude with a discussion of the difference between the first and the second service.