

CHAPTER FOUR

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

The third “block” of liturgical elements in the covenantal, corporate worship service circles around the sermon. One should not expect an elaborate treatment of preaching in this booklet. That is a topic by itself and could easily fill another booklet. Be it only stated that we as Reformed believers still consider the sermon to be the most important part of the service. All other elements must serve to bring out this very heart of our meeting with the LORD in full force. Catechism Lord’s Day 38 mentions this as the first purpose why we attend the church of God diligently. “On-coming” is therefore out! Would we dare to let the LORD talk to empty pews?

One may ask whether we were faithful to the priority of preaching in the previous pages, where so much stress was laid on, first, the opening elements, and second, the public profession of sins.

Our answer is not only that these two parts, as described, need not take all that much time. Our answer is rather that those, who stubbornly cling to what is thought to be the *old* order, but which is in fact of later date, postpone the ministry of the Word unduly. They want the “long prayer” for all the needs of Christendom *before* the sermon. In addition they also put the offertory before the sermon, contrary to the order of Lord’s Day 38. And on top of that they put all this in between the two elements that should not be separated: the public reading of the Scriptures and the preaching.

Without arguing further about these matters (enough was said in previous pages), we now proceed to the *Ministry of the Word*, which consists of these components:

- Brief prayer before the sermon (B)
- Public Reading of the Scriptures (A)
- A Psalm that leads to the text (B)
- Text and Sermon (A)
- The Amen of the Congregation (B).

This order is not “infallible.” Some might prefer to put the “Brief Prayer before the Sermon” between the reading of the Scriptures and the sermon; in other words, right before the sermon. We will discuss the five parts in the order given.

BRIEF PRAYER BEFORE THE SERMON (B)

This prayer should be brief, as brief as the model given in the *Book of Praise*, on page 476. A second example is given on page 481. It is a prayer for the opening of the Scriptures, the opening of the mouth of the

preacher, and the opening of our hearts so that the seed may fall in good soil, well-prepared.

We should be excused for one additional remark. When at *this* (late) moment we pray to the Lord, "Open now the mouth of Thy servant. . . ," we cannot mean that this servant may not have a cold, a sore throat, and is able to read literally a document that could be sent straight to the printer. We like to speak about "preparation" and "delivery" of the sermon. The former means that the preacher has worked hard and prepared himself well, which also means prayerfully. Whatever he takes along to the pulpit – an outline, some notes, or nothing at all – he has all that he has prepared at his fingertips. Now he faces the congregation; he looks into their hearts, their souls, and within this contact he "delivers" the sermon, the message. Only in this way will there be two-way traffic (more on this below). Only then will he need this prayer. I still hear elders pray before the service for "*indachtigmakende genade*"* for the minister: that God in His grace may grant him to remember what he had prepared in his study. He wouldn't need such grace if he had every single word in front of him. A minister who, well-prepared, enters the pulpit for a free delivery, needs this prayer to the full.

PUBLIC READING OF THE SCRIPTURES (A)

In our College library we have several volumes on preaching and "The Fine Art of Christian Worship" that deal extensively with this important part of the service; some call it "the most important part" because in this part the LORD God speaks directly to us in His own words.

Some remarks are in order. The first one is that this expression is taken from *1 Timothy 4:13*: "Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching." The Early Church took this custom over from the synagogue, where in every service the Law was read and then the Prophets. Rev. G. van Rongen, in his *Liturgy of God's Covenant*, pp. 23, 24, says many worthwhile things about this (maybe) oldest part of corporate worship. First he asks: "Why break in on the reading and preaching of God's Word by means of prayer [he must mean here the "long prayer," vDJ and – even worse! – by the offerings and singing?" Then he refers to Luke 4 and Acts 13 to show how this reading of what we now call the Old Testament was immediately followed by preaching. Quoting Paul more accurately, we should speak of "Public Reading of Scripture" (singular), thus stressing that God's Word, now completed with the New Testament, is *one* "scripture," containing the Law, the Prophets, and their fulfillment in Christ. As such it is the *Covenant* Word, containing the Covenant Law, the prophetic preaching to keep the Covenant, and the New Covenant that replaced the Old. Also for this reason careful attention to

* "reminding grace"

the public reading of Scripture fits within the context of Reformed or covenantal worship.

Although this reading of Scripture stems from Old Testament times, we do not propose to do it the same way, i.e., a continuous reading according to a one- or three-year program. The minister selects the passages in harmony with his text and sermon. The rule should be at least two passages, one from the Old, one from the New Testament. In *Van Zijn Schone Dienst*, Rev. van Rongen pleads for a “redemptive-historical” combination of passages, meaning that the New Testament passage shows the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scripture. That’s why we spoke of a “careful selection.” When the text is chosen from the Old Testament, the New Testament passage could be read first, because we deem it of importance that the reading of Scripture concludes with the text. In the P.M. service at least three passages should be chosen which throw light upon the doctrine confessed in Lord’s Day number such-and-such.

Careful selection is not enough. Careful preparation of public reading is also a must. Nothing is worse than hearing the minister stumble over a sentence, put the emphasis in the wrong place, making mistakes. He should read and re-read the passages in his study, maybe aloud. After all, it is God’s own Word that he is going to read solemnly and forcefully to His people! Only then - and all Bibles in the pews are open, of course! – can this part of the liturgy become impressive and a blessing to all who hear it. It will not, if the public reading of Scripture is considered as a necessary “evil”(!), be rushed through in a hurry to come to the sermon.

SINGING (B)

We have put singing of a Psalm or Hymn after the reading of Scripture, for a personal reason. When, years ago, we started with the order of liturgy as proposed in this booklet, we “lost” one occasion for the congregation to sing. We think we should sing much in church. We made up for it by choosing a Psalm (like from Psalm 119, etc.) in which the congregation can express her eagerness to hear the message that now will be brought to them. It underlines the brief prayer before the sermon. Everyone is free to stick exactly to what Rev. van Rongen wrote: no separation of reading and preaching.

TEXT AND SERMON (A) [and (B)!]

The reason for mentioning the text (which was already heard during the reading of Scripture) is that the reading does not always end with the text. And even if it does, a repetition of the text, especially when the reading was followed by singing, is no luxury: everyone should have the words of the text clearly in his mind now that the sermon starts.

It may not be superfluous to point out that a “text” is not a “verse.” Sometimes it is, more often it is a passage. “Text” comes from *textus*,

which means a woven unit, which in its turn is woven into the whole of Scripture, and then must be woven into the sermon.

It is not so easy to give a *definition of a sermon*. The "classic" one is "explication and application of God's Word in the text." It sounds simple enough, but it is not really that simple. Once we tried to formulate a "complete" definition in the College; we already had a whole page full and still realized that such a long definition still did not say everything that should be said. We are not going into that "problem" now. Mentioning it is only an occasion to say that people are wrong when they assert that preaching is a "one-man business" and that in this modern age we should replace it by a *dialogue*, a discussion between the group-leader and the group.

Preaching is not a one-man business! The counterpart of preaching is *hearing*. The Catechism says, Lord's Day 38, "learning." This word stresses the fact that listening to a sermon is a "verb," i.e., a work, and a difficult work at that! The minister should, as we pointed out, strive for a "free delivery" in which there is room for eye-, for heart-contact. Then he will experience a *feedback* from the pew. One who smiles at this, should be careful! Preaching is more than an endeavour of the preacher. The Word is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. No one but the Holy Spirit works faith (as the Catechism teaches repeatedly) by the preaching of the Word; not just by the Word. Thus the church building has been rightly called the workshop of the Holy Spirit. We have asked Him not only to open the mouth of His servant but also to open our hearts. This working of the Spirit establishes the rapport between pulpit and pew. The minister does not "shoot" his sermon against a wall: he speaks to open, responding hearts.

For that reason the "preaching event" can be called an (A) element mixed with a (B) element. It is an activity not only of the minister but also of the congregation. That is not my invention. The Lord Himself says so. "The message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers" (Hebrews 4:2). The KJV has the literal translation: "not being mixed with faith. . . ." That is the reason for speaking of the "preaching event." It is a mixture of the message and faith in the message. In and during the preaching the Covenant God and His people enjoy the most intimate fellowship of the Covenant.

THE AMEN OF THE CONGREGATION (B)

Without this "Amen" the Ministry of the Word is not complete. It has been said previously that we, Reformed preachers, are nearly the only ones who conclude their sermon with "Amen." In several churches the congregation says it in unison. That must be a terrific experience for the preacher! He delivered his sermon with all the energy and power he could utilize, and there, as the sound of many waters, comes back to him the "Amen" of the people to whom he was allowed to address the message of his Sender.

We do not do that. Why not? Previously we quoted some texts, where the Bible clearly tells us, “and all the people said, ‘Amen!’” “Well, if we think this suggestion is shocking or strange, then in any case the Amen should come from the congregation by her Amen-song, preferably right after the Amen of the minister, without announcement or reading of the song. It stands to reason that – again – this Psalm or Hymn should be chosen with the utmost care, so that it indeed is an answer to that specific sermon. If all the people fully engage in this “preaching event,” the beauty of our corporate worship will overwhelm us: God is in our midst!