

CHAPTER SIX

THE MINISTRY OF INTERCESSION

We need not repeat our plea for a return to the order of prayers as established in our *Book of Praise*. Enough has been said about that, we assume.

The official title in the *Book of Praise* is *A Prayer for All the Needs of Christendom, to be Used on the Sabbath after the First Sermon*. This prayer is certainly not the first prayer of the service. We spoke of the prayer of confession of sins, and of the brief prayer before the sermon, just as the *Book of Praise* does. These prayers, however, have a limited purpose and scope. The word "All" in the above title tells us that much more is at stake in what Lord's Day 38 of the Catechism mentions as the third main part of corporate worship: after the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments, "to call publicly on the Name of the LORD."

The LORD has spoken to us. His Word has laid bare not just our personal needs but those of "Christendom." The contents of this prayer in the *Book of Praise* proves that also the intercession for governments, etc., finds a proper place under this heading. This is according to Article 36 of the Confession of Faith; because the magistrates have "to protect the sacred ministry," the church has "to supplicate for them in their prayers." Both Paul and Peter have given clear instructions. "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and for all who are in high positions. . . . This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour" (1 Timothy 2:1-3; cf. also 1 Peter 2:13-17). In other words, the congregation, praying through the mouth of the minister, has to entertain a world-wide attention and interest. If the church does not pray for the world, who else will?

This prayer of intercession, of which we have an example in our *Book of Praise*, contains a long list, too much to mention all items. Following the sermon, it is natural that the minister first refers to the message just proclaimed, and asks the LORD that we may be not only hearers but also doers. But from there on we present "all the needs of Christendom" to the throne of grace. Even then, in order to create a desirable variety in the wording of the prayers of intercession, the minister would do wise to stay within the "climate" of the text. That is not always possible, but the attempt should be made. The contents of our prayers come from the Scriptures; we ask for what has been promised and commanded. To mention only one example; we should not leave it to others to pray for our nation in this time of growing conflict between the federal government and the provinces. Much wisdom is needed to seek the welfare of all above that of some. The Lord, Who commanded us to pray for these causes, has at

the same time promised that He will listen to them. Our prayers are not in vain!

PREPARATION FOR PRAYER

According to the Dutch rhyming of Psalm 32, David prayed “na ernstig overleg,” after having seriously considered by himself what he was going to pray. All prayer needs preparation, if we only keep in mind what praying is: to ask the attention of the Holy One of Israel.

Congregational prayer needs preparation too. It may be that a person, who must be the mouth of many and who brings “all needs” to God’s attention, prepares an outline, a list of things he will have to ask. There is nothing wrong with that. The model in the *Book of Praise* can be of great help, but there are specific needs every time. This does not mean that every time equal attention must be given to every single “need.” This prayer of intercession must not only be up-to-date but may also be selective, although there are certain items, “such as the propagation of the Gospel, that may never be forgotten. This prayer is the “sacrifice of our lips,” an offering of thanksgiving for the privilege that we may approach the mercy-seat.

Some have suggested that this “long prayer” be interrupted now and then by an “Amen,” either by the minister or by the congregation, to express that it really is a collection of many “intercessions.” The four words quoted from Paul are all in the plural – “supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings.” We once heard such a prayer, and it made a deep impression. We only mention this to stress that minister and congregation go through these intercessions from step to step. The minister (in his study) prays God for wisdom that he may be able to pray in such a manner that the congregation can participate from step to step. Only by concentration of all spiritual energy will this long prayer become meaningful.

Some have “clocked” the minister, and woe to him if he exceeded the limit of ten minutes! Shame on such, who believe in a Saviour Who spent whole nights in prayer, and who want to be spiritual posterity of the Early Church, which according to Acts spent its energy in praying.

A secondary benefit of our sacrifice of prayers and intercessions is that it may serve as a teaching model for the membership, specifically for heads of families who have to lead their families in family worship.

One more remark: In special cases, like joy or grief, should the minister mention names in his prayer, also if the person(s) concerned did not request the intercession by the congregation? *Prof. Dr. T. Hoekstra* gave his students the advice *not* to do so, and not only for the reason that the minister might mention the one case and forget the other. If members feel the need for special congregational intercession, they should say so!

This is a good rule, but it should not be an iron rule. There are always

situations, e.g., a serious accident on Saturday that throws the whole family into confusion; everyone knows about it. How could the minister keep silent about it, even if the request was not made!

On the other hand, the congregation should be educated in this matter (as in many others). If they appreciate the value of congregational prayer, the least they can do is ask for it.

PRAYER IN THE SECOND SERVICE

It stands to reason that this long prayer need not be repeated in the second service. The Form models in our *Book of Praise* also give an example of how to pray before and after the Catechism sermon. The stress is then on growth in sound doctrine, especially in our young members. But, after the first day the week lies ahead, with its daily labours, dangers, temptations, etc. It seems to be fitting that the final prayer on the Lord's Day looks ahead and asks for divine guidance.