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THE HOME VISIT

Introduction

Each season the elders and deacons visit the members and families in the congregation. This is part of their task to care for the flock of the Lord. A good shepherd seeks out the sheep and does not wait for the sheep to come to him. Certainly the Good Shepherd did this. He came and sought His sheep. His servants must do likewise. This is not to say that these visits are always easy. At times overseers can have apprehensions about a visit or come away with a disappointed feeling. However, other times the overseer comes away from the visit strengthened by the words of the members. The same can be said about the members and families in the congregation. Some families enjoy the visits and look forward to them, while others find it difficult to open up or had a negative experience in the past. Yet, year after year the visits continue, because it is the Great Shepherd Himself who mandates His servants to watch over the flock which He bought with His blood. Since He mandates us, we must do our utmost to make sure that these visits are conducted in a manner that serves Him and benefits the congregation. In this chapter we will first deal with the visit by the elders and then the diaconal visits.

1. Scripture

The Scriptural basis for the home visit is connected to the teachings of the Bible concerning the congregation and the offices. God's Word teaches us that the congregation belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ. He bought her with His blood. The church is holy, that is, is set apart from this world by the Lord to serve Him.

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| 1 Peter 1:1-2 | Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. |
| 1Peter 2:9-10 | But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. |

Though the church is holy, it is made up of people who are sinners and who daily struggle with sin. In addition, the congregation is confronted with the temptations and attacks of the evil one. This leads to a constant struggle to live as redeemed people of the Lord.

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| 1Peter 1:13-16 | Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." |
| 1Peter 2:11-12 | Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. |

The offices are gifts of the Lord to His congregation by which He guides and keeps the congregation in the redemption He obtained. The Lord uses the office-bearers to help His Bride live as a holy nation in this world, so that He may present her without spot and wrinkle before His Father. The offices therefore are never a purpose in themselves but are given by the Lord to the church so that God's people may live in holiness and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. The home visits have to be understood in this context.

The Bible gives very clear instructions about the task of God's servants within His congregation. Already in the Old Testament the Lord appointed elders to watch over His people. We find a beautiful description in Ezek. 33:7-9

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the Word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die in his sin, but I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked to turn from his ways, and he does not do so; he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

In chapter 34:10-11 the LORD speaks about those who do not do this properly:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says, I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

In the N.T. we read several instructions as well.

Acts 20:28-31	Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.
Hebrews 13:17	Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.
1 Peter 5:2	Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must but because you are willing as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;
Rev 3:2	Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

The purpose of their task is to build up the congregation.

2 Cor 10:8	For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.
Eph 4:11-13	It is he (=Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ
1 Thes 5:11	Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

The apostles gave the example:

Acts 11:23	When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.
Acts 14:22	strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." they said.
1 Thes 2:11-12	For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.
1 Thes 3:2	We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,
1 Thes 4:18	Therefore comfort each other with these words.
1 Thes 5:11	Therefore encourage each other and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.
1 Thes 5:14	And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.
2 Tim 4:2	Preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.

The home visit is one of the means which the Lord uses for this purpose. It is a means by which the rule of Christ over our lives grows and deepens. In the N.T. the verb "to visit" is used to describe the great work of redemption in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel.

Luke 1:68	"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people,
Acts 15:14	Simeon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

The office-bearers have to visit the families in the congregation. Visiting and overseeing the flock are connected. The Greek word to oversee (episkopos), is used in the Greek translation of the O.T. as a translation of the verb to visit. An overseer is one who visits. In visiting he helps, shows his care or even admonished. In the following texts the words that refer to visiting are underlined.

Exodus 3:16	"Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - appeared to me and said: <u>I have watched over you</u> and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt;
Exodus 4:31	And when they heard that the LORD <u>was concerned</u> about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

Ps. 8:4	what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that <u>you care</u> for him?
Jeremiah 27:22	'They will be taken to Babylon and there they will remain until the day <u>I come for them</u> ,' declares the LORD. 'Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.'
Jeremiah 29:10	This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will <u>come to you</u> and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.

Note that the word visiting in these texts includes knowing the situation with which God's people are confronted. Visiting can also mean coming to punish, admonish

Exodus 20:5	You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, <u>punishing</u> the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,
Exodus 32:34	Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me <u>to punish, I will punish</u> them for their sin."

The visit by the office-bearers is a mean by which the risen and exalted Lord shows His care for His flock and helps His sheep to live from the treasures of His grace. In the home visit we are confronted with the electing love of our Covenant God.

2. Confessions/Church Order/Form for Ordination

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession does not explicitly mention the home visit. In article 30 we do confess the nature and purpose of the government the church. The home visit fits in this.

Article 30 - The Government Of The Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

In Lord's Day 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess the benefit of the glory of Christ, our Head. The proof text of Eph.4:7-12 shows that the office-bearers are part of the heavenly gifts which Christ pours out in order to defend and preserve the church against all enemies. Again, the home visit can be understood within this context.

Q/A 51 How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us?

First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.

Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.

2.3. Church Order and Liturgical Forms

Both the Church Order and the Form for Ordination mention the task of the elders to visit the families in their homes.

Church Order:

Art. 22 The office of Elder

The specific duties of the office of elder are: together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life according to the gospel; faithfully to visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly.

Art. 27 False doctrine

To ward off false doctrine and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct, the minister and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning and of admonition, as well as the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

Form for Ordination:

In His unceasing care for His flock the Good Shepherd called apostles to be the foundation of His catholic church. The apostles in turn appointed elders in every Church with the cooperation of the congregation.

The office of elder is, therefore, one of authority given by Christ. Elders are to fulfil their duties by reminding God's people of His ordinances and by exercising discipline over the disobedient, by caring for the flock and defending the sheep against the dangers that threaten them.

Mandate of the Elders

As for their mandate, the task of the elders is, together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's Church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel. For this purpose they shall faithfully visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly.

With regard to the deacons, the Church Order and the Form for Ordination imply the need to visit. Both state that the deacons have to acquaint themselves with existing needs and exhort the members to show mercy. How can they do this unless they visit the members?

Church Order:

Art. 23

"duties of the deacon is to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

Form for Ordination:

The task of the deacons is "to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the Church. They shall acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy."

3. Goal

The home visit is one of the means by which the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ, helps His people to live in their daily lives from the redemption which He has obtained by His blood. It is one of the means by which Christ gathers, defends and preserves His church by His Word and Spirit and in the unity of the true faith. Thus the goal of the home visit is that each member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel. To put it differently, the goal of the home visit is that the members of the congregation may daily grow in true faith and fellowship with Christ. This in turn means that the home visit has as aim to

- increase the spiritual knowledge of the members in the congregation;
- strengthen the sanctification of life;
- help in mutual supervision;
- warn against heresies, and
- strengthen the bond between the members of the congregation.

4. History

The practice of visiting families in their homes is not new. In fact, its history can be traced back all the way to the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. In this Reformation, the Lord brought His church back to the Word of God. This also led to a renewed understanding of the offices in the church. The Romanist distinction of the clergy versus laity was done away with and instead the spiritual character of the leadership in the church was stressed. The Church is to be ruled by God's Word and Spirit. Congregation and office-bearers must see their relationship in this light. Rome connects salvation to the priests and his actions, whereas the Reformed churches confess the Biblical teaching of salvation out of grace through faith in Christ. Christ comes to us in His Word and uses His servants for that purpose.

Two elements of this history are noteworthy. In the first place the home visit replaced the Romanist Sacrament of Penance. In this sacrament the members are expected to come to the priest who has the authority to give absolution. The Reformed churches decided that the office-bearers go to the members rather than the members having to go to the office-bearers, In the Sacrament of Penance absolution is given by the priest. The Reformed Churches realized that the home visit was not a means to give absolution. The preaching of the gospel opened and closed the Kingdom of Heaven. (see Heidelberg

Catechism, Lord's Day 31) The visit was seen as a means to encourage, comfort, instruct and admonish the members with the Word.

In the second place we learn from history that home visits were closely connected to Lord's Supper. Initially they were brought before each celebration, in order to teach the people the right doctrine concerning the sacraments and to prepare them for the celebration. It was part of the supervision connected to the table of the Lord. Over time this close connection with the Lord's Supper faded. Yet it can be very helpful to keep this connection in mind to understand the goal and purpose of home visits. Self-examination prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper deals with knowing our sin and misery, confessing our redemption and desiring to serve the Lord with our whole life. These three parts are indeed vital parts of a home visit.

The Reformed Churches have always regarded the home visit as an important part of the life of the congregation. In the Articles of Wezel of 1568, chapter IV we read of decisions and instructions agreed upon by the churches.

- 1) Now follows the order of the elders,
- 2) It is beyond all doubt that their office consists of the following:
 - They must, each over every one in his own parish (or ward) diligently be on guard and visit from home to home those (members) entrusted into their care at least once a week and further as often as it is the custom according to the rules of every church, especially when the celebration of the Lord's Supper draws near;
 - they must carefully inquire after the pureness of their walk of life and morals, after their faithful education of those who live in their homes, after the prayers which they pray for those who live in their homes in the morning and at night, and similar matters
 - _____ they must calmly, yet seriously, admonish and depending of the situation and their findings exhort them to steadfastness or strengthen them to patience or encourage them to the serious fear of God
 - everyone who needs either comfort or reproof, they shall comfort or reprove, and give the matter for discussion with those who with them are appointed over the brotherly admonitions, to determine together the admonition according to the offence.
 - they must also keep in mind to admonish all and everyone in their ward to send their children to catechism classes.

To give two more examples:

Church Order of Middelburg (1581) Art. XVI

The office of the elder is, ... when the celebration of the Lord's Supper comes closer, to visit those who will go to the Table, to prepare them the more.

Church Oorder of s'Gravenhage (1586) Art. XXI

The office of the elder is to make visits according to the customs of the time and the place, for the upbuilding of the congregation, . both before and after the Lord's Supper, to comfort the members of the congregation, to instruct and to admonish them to the Christian religion.

5. How?

The manner in which home visits are to be conducted is determined by the teachings of the Scriptures as outlined above. A good understanding of these teachings is foundational for conducting good home visits. The opposite is true too. Misconceptions with regard to these doctrines will have consequences as well. If, e.g., the church is seen as a human association then the visit can become a social event. Or, if the church is seen in terms of election, then the visit will tend to focus on the election of the person. If, however, in line with the Reformed confessions the church is seen covenantally as the gathering of true believers, then the visit will focus on the promises and obligations in the covenant.

The same can be said about the Scriptural teaching concerning the office. This teaching too determines how home visits are conducted. If, e.g., the office-bearers are seen as elected representatives who have to do the wishes of the voters, then the members can regard the visit as a opportunity tell the office-bearers how well they are doing. Or, if the office is viewed in a dictatorial manner, then the office-bearers may be inclined to use the visit to lord it over the congregation. From the Bible we learn, however, that Christ is the Head of the church. He rules us by His Word and Spirit. In this rule He makes use of the office-bearers. They have authority from Christ, and must be received as such. This authority is given to

serve the Body of Christ. Office-bearers do well to keep this in mind as they visit. In the home visits we meet the care of our Lord for His flock.

Then how should a good home visit be conducted? When is a visit a good visit? If office-bearers would be asked to tell some of their experiences with regard to bringing home visits one will hear a variety of answers. Some visits go very well, others go very difficultly. It can even be that one year a visit to a particular family goes well, but next year's visit is much more difficult. It can happen the other way around too. There are visits office-bearers may think will be difficult, but then it turns out to go much easier than expected. There are many visits where the office-bearers come away strengthened by the discussion. There are also visits that can leave a feeling of disappointment. This disappointment can be because of the members, their unwillingness to open up, or with the office-bearer himself, because of his own shortcomings, and the feeling of inadequacy.

If the members of the congregation would be asked for their reactions to the home visits, one will hear different reactions as well. One can hear positive answers, but also negative reactions. These negative reactions can be caused e.g. by the fact that the members felt misunderstood, or had difficulty with the manner in which the elders asked questions. It can be that members have a problem with one of the elders, or with the consistory. Some will even say that home visits are a waste of time, and will not open up to the office-bearers.

Yet, year after year the members and families are visited. This section will deal with the practical aspects of the visit. The following topics will receive attention:

1. the set up of the visit;
2. the contents;
3. the difficulties we can meet;
4. the way in which the reporting takes place, and
5. the preparations for home visits.

5.1. The set up

5.1.1. Arranging

Home visits need to be arranged. The elders and the family have to agree on a time to meet. This is not always easy due to busy schedules. In making the arrangement both the elders and the family have to realize the character of this visit. The family should be aware that this is an official visit by the ambassadors of Christ. Time may have to be made available to meet the elders. It may even be necessary to cancel other obligations in order to meet the elders. Once a meeting has been established it should not be cancelled lightly. At the same time the elders must be sensitive to the schedule of the family. They should be aware of other activities in the congregation. Elders cannot expect members to drop everything at a short notice in order to meet the elders. Elders will have to consider whether reasons preventing or cancelling a meeting are genuine and valid, or whether they reflect lack of respect for the visit by the elders.

In planning the visit the elders do well to keep in mind the situation of the family, for example, at what time the father comes home, how many children are going to school, or whether health reasons call for an early visit. To visit a families with growing up children may mean that no other visit can be arranged for that evening. After all, one evening per year for one family is certainly no luxury.

The consistory should make clear that the children of school age and up are expected to be present at the visit. Teenage children should be offered the possibility to meet separately with the elders. In case of young children, they can leave at some point during the visit, giving the elders the opportunity to meet with the parents separately. This separate visit allows the elders to speak about the married life of the parents and the way they bring up their children. When the children become older it becomes more difficult to

send children away during the visit and yet parents or elders can feel the need to meet and speak separately. This should be indicated ahead of time if at all possible. At the same time we should not be afraid to ask personal questions within the family circle, or ask questions about the diligence of the parents and the obedience of the children while all are present. After all this is a family visit.

The character of the visit also means that members of the family should not walk in and out of the meeting, or sit in a place where they are not part of the meeting. It is noteworthy that visits around the kitchen table (with Bibles open on the table) tend to be more open and productive than those in living rooms while sitting on couch and easy chair.

5.1.2. Opening

The elders come in the name of the Lord Jesus. The elders and the family being visited must realize this. It is therefore important to start with prayer and Bible reading (and singing?). Some suggest to have Bible reading at the end. In this way the elders can read a passage that fits the visit. The disadvantage is that elders have to think constantly about a suitable passage while conducting the visit. This can hinder listening to the members of the family. Secondly, there is the danger that only some well known passages of Scripture will be read. It is impossible to have the whole Bible in one's head. The advantage of beginning with reading is that it puts the visit in the right perspective. If because of the discussion or circumstances in the family it becomes clear that the visit needs to be concluded with Scripture, then the elders can always do so.

The elders can use the passage that was read to begin a discussion. They are not expected to give an in-depth explanation. The purpose of the visit is not to show how much elders know, but to find out what lives in this family and how they live with the Lord. It will be helpful to inform the other elder ahead which passage will be used.

5.1.3. Leading

The elders come in the name of the Lord. This gives the elders authority. They lead the visit. The agenda for the evening is set by them. At the same time the elders must be aware that they are guests in someone else's home. They have to respect this. The leadership of the elders comes out in directing God's people to His Word. It shows in giving direction to the discussion. They have to make sure that it doesn't become a social visit, or a visit in which much time is wasted with sipping coffee and exchanging common places. Start the visit as soon as possible. The coffee can wait.

The leadership also comes out in giving direction to the discussion. The elders have to make sure that the discussion does not go in circles, or that only a few speak whereas the rest remains silent. The elders should have a focus in mind and direct the discussion accordingly. They can at a certain moment stop the discussion about a certain topic and direct it to something else. The questions we ask must reflect this leadership and the respect for the flock of the Lord. The questions should be pastorally direct.

When a specific matter needs to be addressed, do not be afraid to address it. Waiting for an opening or opportune moment can mean one never comes to it. Cooperation and consultation between the two elders is very important in this regard.

Proper leadership shows in proper time management. If the visit is scheduled for one and a half hour then the elders should make sure to come and you leave in time. During the discussion the time must be kept in mind as well (without this becoming too obvious). Ask the questions which must be asked. It should not be that 80% of the time is spent on trivial things, whereas quickly at the end suddenly some important questions have to be answered yet. A great help in this regard is to remind oneself of the goal and purpose of the visit. To facilitate a good discussion it can be helpful to indicate at the beginning of the visit the direction of the discussion. This can be done by formulating ahead of time a few questions. Read these to the family at the beginning of the visit and then use them as a guide for the ensuing discussion.

5.1.4. Concluding

Part of giving leadership is knowing when to stop. The conclusion should not come as a surprise. If possible try to summarize in short what has been said or discussed. In case of requests, disagreements, or admonishments make sure there is a clear understanding of what will be reported or asked. It may even be helpful to put them down in writing. These matters have to be related to the visit. A home visit is a not a opportunity to dump certain issues or pet peeves on the Consistory table.

The visit is to be closed with prayer. This prayer should, among other things, express thankfulness for the blessings of the Lord, and, if possible, include some elements of the discussion, address the needs of the family, and the needs of the congregation.

5.2. The contents of the visit

In light of the purpose of the home visit, asking questions is an important part of conducting a home visit. The elders are not busybodies but need to be able to report to the Consistory about the spiritual life of this family. They have to ask the right questions, be able to listen well, and be prepared to teach, instruct or admonish. Why? Because the home visit is one of the means by which the Head of the Church helps His people to live in their daily lives from the redemption which He has obtained by His blood. It is one of the means by which Christ gathers, defends and preserves His church for Himself by His Word and Spirit and in the unity of the true faith. This means that with questions and instruction the elders may have to

- encourage the congregation to live from the promises of God in all of life,
- encourage the members to live as Christians in a world that becomes more and more unchristian,
- admonish if there is deviation, or a danger of going the wrong way, or
- teach or instruct if it appears necessary, e.g. about life style, education, devotions, financial stewardship, or otherwise.

What then should be the contents of a regular home visit? The elders want to hear how the members daily live with the Lord. This can be done in several ways. They can speak about the riches of God's promises, as revealed in His Word and signed and sealed in the sacraments. Do the members see the riches of these promises and how does this come out in the way they live? They can apply this to many areas of life, their personal faith-life, their work, their family life, or their place in the congregation. The questions can also deal with our task as prophets, priests and kings (see L.D. 12). Another avenue is to focus on the fruit of faith, and speak about the source, the need and the expression of this fruit. In Appendix I to this chapter several suggested questions are listed.

Some churches have the practice of formulating a theme for the home visits in a certain year. The congregation is made aware of it and in the preaching this theme will receive attention as well. The advantage of a theme is that repetition of what was discussed in a previous visit can be avoided. It is also a good tool to educate and instruct the congregation in a more systematic way. To help the congregation in preparing for the visit a hand-out with pertinent information or question can be given to the family involved prior to the home visit. The draw back of working with a theme is that it does not leave enough opening to dealing with matters that can cause difficulty in a family or the life of a member. It could hamper the spontaneity of the visit. Another draw back is that in the beginning of the season the theme is alive for elders and members, but by the end of the season it can be more difficult to generate a good discussion. With regard to both approaches much depends on how the elders lead the visit. For examples of themes and how to work with them, see P.G.Feenstra, The Glorious Work of Home Visits.

This brings us back to the components listed earlier: asking questions, listening, and instructing. Asking the right questions is an skill office bearers have to and can learn. A requirement for asking the right questions is knowing the family or member involved. It does make a difference whether it is a visit with a recently married couple, with a family with growing up children, or with a retired couple. Other elements that can have influence on the discussion can be the work situation (e.g. in case of

unemployment), the health of members of the family (e.g. in situations of sickness or handicaps), or concerns about loved ones. In spite of all these specific situations the goal must be kept in mind with each visit. There are elements that vary from family to family, there are also elements that are the same in each visit.

Overseers have to learn to ask the right questions. Questions should be clear and direct. Do not be afraid to ask for explanation. "What do you mean with this?" or, "How does this show in your life?" In asking these questions it is possible to go beyond the regular answers. There is always the danger that the regular and expected questions are asked. The elders will then receive the standard answers. The report will be positive, but the visit has stayed on the surface. Without becoming busybodies or overly suspicious, yet elders do not have to take yes or no for an answer. The Lord is interested in, and shows care for the life of His children.

What applies to asking questions applies to listening as well, we have to learn to listen. To give a response is not necessarily a proof that one listens. It can be good to summarize the words of the other as a way of indicating that you are listening. Before elders give their answers they must make sure they understand the members well.

Helpful and very informative in this regard are the chapters 14 and 15 from Service With A Vision: A Handbook For Deacons, by M.Assink, translated in Diaconia. Sept. 1996, Vol. X. No.2. It shows that asking questions and listening are skills that can be honed. The concentric method of questioning mentioned in chapter 15 is helpful as well. The questions begin with the general things, then move on to the immediate surroundings and lead to the personal sphere.

When children are present they must be recognized as well. The elders must speak with them. The home visit is the place where the pastoral care for the younger members becomes very close and concrete. At the same time we should not forget the family as a whole. The visit may not end up in an examination of each child and that is it. We have to try to involve them in the discussion, and use the question we ask them within the whole discussion. In order to speak with the young children it will be helpful to know what is happening in school. Elders can acquaint themselves by means of newsletters published by the schools. To involve the teen-agers in the discussion will be more difficult. Some find it difficult to open up, especially when their parents are present. Others look very critically at the office-bearers. Others struggle with their own characters, with their place in this world, and struggle with doubts. They will not say all this at the visit. The elders have to try to convey to them that they also belong to the congregation. Children can easily feel that they are under attack of the elders. Yet, the questions of the elders have to go beyond the common and expected and address the issues that young people in their situations meet.

Article 27 of the Church Order states that the elders shall use in family visiting the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, to ward off false doctrines and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct. This is no small task. It implies that the elders themselves are aware of these dangers. In view comes here e.g. the literature used in the home and read by the members of the family, as well as the use of VCR and TV or Internet. We have to warn against literature that propagates an unchristian philosophy, but also literature that presents itself as Christian but is not Reformed.

The older version of Art. 27 dealt with the printing of books. No one, it said, belonging to the Reformed religion shall have any book, whether original or translated by him, printed without prior ecclesiastical approval. This rule has been dropped, but it shows the concern of the churches for the purity of doctrine and the sanctity of life. (See W.W.J.Van Oene, With Common Consent, pages 124-126) It is no luxury to talk about the literature that enters the home, the programs that are watched. As elders we should not be afraid to instruct, refute, warn and admonish in this regard.

All this describes the content in a rather general way. It is incorrect to suggest that there is only one way of doing this. Situations differ. Not every family is the same. Elders have their own talents and weaknesses as well. In Appendix I to this chapter several examples of more specific outlines can be found. These are suggestions, no more. The format (Yes or No questions) makes it difficult to use them. They are not to be used as a check list, but as a means to help in preparing for the visit.

5.3. Difficulties

There can be several obstacles on the road to a good home visit. These obstacles can come from the side of the office bearer and/or from the side of the members. Some will be listed as well as a suggestion how to deal with them. This list is not exhaustive but given with the purpose for reflection.

On the side of the office bearer:

- not being clear in his own mind - Take the time to prepare.
- not being clear in what he says - Make sure the others can follow and understand.
- not asking the right questions - Help each other.
- not listening properly - Tell yourself to listen; Don't come with your opinion right away.
- not giving proper leadership - Reflect on the task.

On the side of the members there can be:

- unwillingness or inability to express oneself
- aversion to questions that deal with their lives
- lack of communal vision or Scriptural insight

If this happens on a regular basis it will be good to address this with the family.

Other difficulties can be that the members bring up matters that do not belong at the visits. This can be because of genuine interest or concern, it can be because of nosiness, it can also be done maliciously. The elders have to try to stay focussed. If questions come up which are outside the scope of the visit, it will be helpful to acknowledge them, but then to indicate that they can be discussed at another occasion. This is also the case when members are at odds with the consistory and in this way want to show their opposition. It will be important then to state that the difference with the consistory will be addressed at a separate meeting.

At times you elder may ask the question: "Is there anything you want to bring to the attention of the council?" This can be a legitimate question, it can also be a dangerous question. The members have indeed the right to bring matters to the attention of council, but the overseers must watch out that they do not become messengers through whom the members can place all kinds of issues before the council. If members want to bring matters to the attention of council they can do so in writing with proper grounds. The same applies with regard to the question about the preaching. It is good to ask questions about the preaching, but the focus is how the preaching functions in the life of this family. What do they do with the Word? The home visit is not the place to vent grievances with regard to the preaching or the preacher. There are other ways of addressing these matters.

5.4. Reporting

The elders report the visit to the consistory. To report both elders must be present. If one is not able to attend a written report can be submitted if signed by both elders. Reporting must be done carefully. The ninth commandment also applies to the elders. Confidentiality is important in visiting, in the consistory meeting, but also at home. Elders will lose their trust when things said at visits or in consistory meetings is told by family members to others.

After the visit the elders should first discuss and agree what shall be reported. This is even more important when difficulties came up or requests have to be conveyed. Not everything that was discussed has to be reported. The Consistory's first task is to make sure the visit is made. The elders give the main conclusion. It should not be too simple, nor too detailed. The other members of the consistory receive the opportunity to ask questions if necessary. The clerk records the conclusion of the report in the Minutes.

He can also include elements of the report that are important for future visits. In the end the meeting will decide what goes into the Minutes.

An important question is, what is a good visit? Does it mean there were no problems? That the visit ran smoothly? A visit can run smooth without problem and yet not be a good visit. It is important that the elders understand what they mean with good. This will be a part of the evaluation.

5.5. Preparations for the home visit

Because home visits are so important elders ought to prepare ourselves properly. Sloppiness in this regard will have negative results for the elders, for the consistory and for the congregation.

5.5.1. Personal

Preparations start with the elder himself. He should not leave it to the last minute as to what should be talked about and which passage to use. In addition he has to acquaint himself with the situation of the family that is to be visited. Are there special needs? What age are the children? Are there special circumstances that must be kept in mind? In general, the elder must prepare himself with prayer and the study of God's Word. He has to keep up with what is happening in the church and in the world.

5.5.2. Team

Each Ward has two elders. They work together in the home visits. They should know from each other what the focus of the visit will be, and if there are special matters that need to be mentioned. Also the evaluation of the visit is done together. In general, the two elders help each other in giving suggestions and/or constructive criticism. No one should ever think that he is "pro" at this work and can "wing" it without help from the other. Of course a beginning elder can learn a lot from constructive comments of a more experienced elder. But the other way around, a more experienced elder can be helped by the questions and suggestion of a beginning elder.

5.5.3. Consistory

It will be very helpful for elders to discuss the manner of visiting the families and the problems they encounter on a regular basis. At the beginning of each season it will be good to determine together whether there are things that need to be addressed. If need be a certain topic can be addressed within the consistory first in order to prepare for the visits. Elders can also help each other in asking advice as to how to deal with difficult situations, in being honest if there is disagreement with a fellow office-bearer or a certain approach and if this is expressed in a constructive manner. Elders should also be prepared to receive and evaluate criticism from the congregation.

5.5.4. Congregation

The congregation is involved in the preparations as well. The congregation must understand that the love of Lord comes to our homes through the work of the office bearers. If it is well they look forward to such a visit. It will be good to let them be aware of the difficulties that elders can meet so that we can help each other. In informing the congregation we prepare future office bearers for the task of elder as well. The visits must be remembered by the congregation in their prayers. The sermons have to direct the congregation in this regard as well. This can mean a sermon on the care of the Lord for His sheep, but also sermons an specific topics that will be addressed at the home visits.

6. Diaconal visits

6.1. What?

Deacons visit members and families too. They visit those who are in need, those who are suffering, those shut in, handicapped and elderly. Besides these visits the deacons should visit the families and members of the congregation on a regular basis as well. It must be admitted that this is a more recent development.

6.2. Why?

Because we are dealing with something new it is good to look why this is done? However, really it is not that new. Already in the report of the gathering of Reformed Churches in Wezel of 1568 we read about deacons visiting in a more organized way, and not just in connection with financial need. To quote from the Articles of Wezel:

Chapter V - Of the Deacons

[1.] It is completely certain from the testimony of Scripture that the office of deacon is that they serve the tables, that is, they come to the help of the poor in their needs and provide them with what is necessary by gathering the alms.

[5.] It would be beneficial when especially in the larger congregations, two kinds of deacons are appointed. The first will apply themselves to the gathering and distribution of the alms and take care at the same time, that if any goods are bequeathed to the poor, these will be requisitioned in a legal manner and faithfully will be distributed to the beneficiaries.

[6.] The other part will mainly take care of the sick, wounded and those in prison. Besides the gift of faithfulness and zeal, these [deacons] should be endowed also with the gift of comforting and with more than a general knowledge of Scripture. They will diligently ask the elders whether there are sick and weak in their wards who need comfort and uplifting.

Yet it is a new element in the churches. This new element was recognized by the churches in the most recent Form for Ordination. Comparing the old to the new we note an addition. The Old maintained there are two tasks for the deacons:

"that they in the first place collect and preserve with the greatest fidelity and diligence, the alms and goods which are given to the poor: yea, to do their utmost endeavour, that many good means be procured for the relief of the poor."

"The second part of their office consists in distribution, whereto are not only required the gift of discretion and prudence to bestow the alms only where there is need, but also cheerfully and simplicity to assist the needy with compassion and hearty affection..."

Our current Form has these two as well but adds that the Deacons must see

"to the good progress of the service of charity in the Church. They shall acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy."

This change is also reflected in the Church Order. In Art. 23 we maintain that the

"duties of the deacon is to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

The new element is that deacons are charged to acquaint themselves with existing needs and to exhort the members to show mercy. How can you do this? By visiting in a systematic manner. Acquainting and exhorting is not waiting till the members come to the deacons, but implies visiting of all the families by the deacons. Thus we may conclude that visits by the deacons is not a luxury, but part and parcel of their task.

We can go a step further yet. For why would the Church Order and The Form come to state this? To answer this we can refer to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is very important for the work of the deacons. After all the term deacon in the Greek refers to a table servant. The work of the deacon finds its beginning, focal point and goal in the celebration and its joy. We see this in the Church Order, Art. 23:

the "duties of the deacon is to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

If we look at this closer, we see the following elements:

- The congregation enjoys at the table unity and fellowship
- This is a gift of the Holy Spirit.
- This joy must be protected.
- This joy and unity must be promoted

It is the task of the deacons to promote that unity and joy by word and deed. Again here not just the needy, the whole congregation is in view. Thus to promote this is much more than help those in need, it is also to stimulate all others to help. How else can we do this, but by visiting?

Is there a Biblical reason for these visits? We will pay attention to two elements, first the caring for each other, then the visiting by the deacons. See also the chapter about The Ministry of Mercy (2-2)

The Biblical mandate is to show mercy to one another

Deut.15:11

For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.

Lev.19:9-10

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

Lev.23:22

"And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God."

Leviticus 25:35-37

"And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.

Deut.24:10-13

"When you make your neighbour a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the LORD your God.

Deut.24:15

you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the LORD, and it be sin in you.

The Lord Jesus reminded God's people of this call.

Mat. 9:13

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Mat. 23:23

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

Mark 10:43-44

But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

John 13:15

For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

He showed the importance of this service of mercy with the parable about the sheep and the goats.

Matthew 25:40

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'

The apostles continued this instruction of the Lord Jesus, calling the church to show mercy. They also gave the example, e.g. in the collection for the needy in Judea.

Rom.12:8

he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

2 Cor.8:14-15

but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

Gal.5:13

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.

Gal. 6 : 10

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Heb. 13:16

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

1 Tim.6:18

They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous,

James 2:13

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.

1 John 3:16-18

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in Him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.

6.3. How?

6.3.1. Character of the Visit

The Form makes very clear that the work of mercy finds its origin in the mercy which Christ Himself has shown to us.

"The Lord Jesus Christ, who has shown us the Father, came into the world to serve. In His mercy He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and showed compassion to the afflicted. Thus He gave an example, that His church should do likewise. The ministry of mercy, as assigned to the deacons, proceeds, therefore, from this love of our Saviour."

Deacons must give an example, promote this unity and fellowship by word and deed. Their visit has to reflect the care and mercy of our Lord. The visit is characterized by the confession that the congregation is special in the Lord. Not lording it over, but exhorting.

Although the character of this visit is somewhat different from the home visit by the elders, yet there is also a common element. Also the deacons come in the name of the Lord. It is not without reason that we have one Form for Ordination which applies to both elders and deacons. Our fathers did this on purpose. Under Rome the deacon had become the servant of the bishop, but with the Reformation the work of the deacons once again received its proper place. To indicate that the office of deacon is no less than the office of elder, our fathers used one Form. This means that the beginning of the Form when it speaks about the authority and the character of the office applies to both elders and deacons. Also the deacons come in the name of the Lord. Also they come with authority. The members must receive you as such. Refusing deacons is just as wrong as refusing elders. The difference lies in the focus. Deacons are concerned with the progress of the service of charity.

6.3.2. Manner

For deacons is it also important to ask proper questions, to listen well, and to be prepared to instruct. We can refer to what has been written about this earlier in this chapter. Also these visits are conducted by two office bearers and have to be opened and closed with Bible reading and prayer. Since this visit is more limited in scope, one hour should be sufficient. Each family does not need to be visited every year. Most churches seem to do it once in three years.

6.3.3. Contents

What ever approach one takes, the purpose of the visit is twofold. In the first place the deacons have to ascertain whether and how this family uses its gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit of the other members? In the second place, the deacons can find out whether there is a particular need in this family.

To work this out, with regard to the first:

Does this family use the gifts the Lord has given for the upbuilding of the congregation? Are they aware of the needs of others? What are they doing to become aware of them? Are sick visited? Are those who have difficulties remembered in word and deed? The argument of not having time should be discussed. Is the education of the youth of the church seen as a responsibility of the whole congregation and how does this show? If a members are part of a larger family, do they make an effort to go outside their own family circle as well? Do they make an effort to speak to others and visit others. Keep in mind that help is more than giving to the deacons, it can be bringing a visit, offering a ride, bringing a meal etc. If this is found lacking these members must be exhorted with the Word of God to promote the unity and the fellowship of the Lord's Table.

The second aspect of this visit is whether there are needs in this family. Sometimes the deacons already know ahead that there is need, in other situations they do not. "No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty." Some families may have an easier time to speak about their needs than others. Take the concerns of the members seriously. Do not right away come with your answers and solutions, but listen. At the same time do not be fooled. Ask questions of clarification that show that you understand and are interested, but also that gives you the opportunity to assess the situation. Do those bound to home receive visits? Do meals have to be brought in? Do they need transportation? Is professional help required?

Because of this more limited focus similar matters will come up each time a family is visited. This does not matter if a family is visited once in the three years. The deacons change and the situation of a family can change. We all need to be reminded constantly to show mercy. To prevent unnecessary repetition it might be helpful to approach the visit from different aspects. To give some suggestions:

- Explaining the work of the deacons.
- Showing the connection with the Lord's Supper.
- Discussing the ministry of mercy in the congregation
- The implications of our confession concerning the communion of saints.
- The use of money in the kingdom of God.
- Doing good to all men, especially the household of faith.

6.3.4. Reporting

The visits are official, must be reported on at the meeting. Minutes should record that a visit had been made and the character of the visit. A report can be submitted only when both deacons are present. The reports have to be specific but not too detailed. If there are needs or other points to be followed up, these should be recorded. If elders have to be made aware of something, the deacons can bring it to the attention of the ward elders or mention it at the council meeting.

7. Literature

The following books and articles are mentioned to further study. Much of the material of this chapter was also taken from these sources.

- P.Y. DeJong, Taking Heed to the Flock, Baker 1948. Reprinted in Diakonia vol. IV,# 4, vol.V # 1-4
- Pointers for Elders and Deacons, in Diakonia, vol.1, #1
- A.N.Hendriks, "The Elder and Family Visitation," in Diakonia, vol.II # 1
- W.Meijer, "Family visit Tonight," in Diakonia, vol.III # 1, 2
- W.W.J.VanOene, "Family Visiting", in Diakonia, vol.III #1
- W.Huizinga, Diaconal Visits, in Diakonia, vol.III, # 3.
- C.Trimp, Zorgen voor de Gemeente, Vanden Berg, Kampen, 1982.
- C.Van der Leest, Dienstvaardig I & II, De Vuurbaak, 1987 & 1989.
- P.G.Feenstra, The Glorious Work of Home Visits, Premier, 2000

8. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and Confessional basis for this work, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. The evaluation can deal with the practical aspects of the visits. This applies to both visits by elders and deacons. Are we in agreement on the set up of the visit? Is it easy to arrange visits? If not, why not? What could we do to improve this? Similar questions can be asked about the content of the visits, how we lead it, how they are reported and how we prepare for our visits.
3. Often the report is given, it was a good visit. But what is a good visit?
4. How do the members receive the elders and deacons?
5. How is the attendance and participation of the youth of the congregation? Do they receive sufficient attention?
6. How can we help each other as office-bearers?
7. Do the deacons visit all the families on a regular basis?
If yes, how is this going? How often are the families visited? What are the themes used?
If no, should we consider the possibility?
8. Are there concerns with regard to the home visits and the diaconal visits?
What are these concerns?
Why are they a concern?
What plan of action could be followed?

Outline

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LITURGY

Introduction

The word liturgy comes from a Greek word that means "to serve." It was used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, for the service of the priest in the temple. We use it to refer to the format or the order of the worship service.

In this chapter we will reflect on what happens in the worship service. We use the expression "worship services." The combination of "worship" and "service" is telling. It shows that to serve God is to worship Him. Serving the Lord is not forced labour but worship in adoration. By the grace of the Lord we are allowed to have fellowship with the Almighty God. It also shows that worshipping is service. The Lord God places us on this world to serve Him and this service comes out in that we worship Him. We come to church to serve God. In the third place the combination of "service" and "worship" highlights that the weekly worship service is not to be severed from our service and worship during the whole week. Certainly the services on the Lord's Days are highlights, but they are part of a life of service.

Rom 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.

1. Scripture

"We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length." (Art. 7 B.C.) The letter to the Hebrews speaks about this worship in wonderful terms. The Holy Spirit shows the church that her worship is to be seen within the whole of God's work.

Heb 12:22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

We also learn from the letter to the Hebrews that the service of the priest in the temple has been fulfilled by Christ and is being continued by His work as our only High Priest in heaven. We find this in the chapters 8 and 9. The last book of the Bible shows that our liturgy will come to its climax in the end, for the aim of God's plan is His eternal praise.

Rev 7:11-12

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

In order to deal with this in more detail we will first look at the way Israel worshipped the LORD and in the second place the way the Church of the New Testament may do this.

1.1. Old Testament

The LORD God created man so that man would praise and glorify Him. Adam and Eve served the Lord in perfect liturgy. This came to an abrupt halt with the fall into sin. By his fall man forfeits the privilege of living in fellowship with the LORD. He broke this communion by his disobedience. Yet the LORD restores it. He comes to Adam and Eve after they fell into sin. He gives His wonderful promise. We may see in this His electing love and sovereign good pleasure. The seed of the woman may find her strength in this reality, God with us. While the seed of the serpent finds its strength in boasting (Gen 4:23), the seed of the woman worships and seeks her strength in fellowship with the LORD.

Gen 4:26

Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.

The patriarchs lived in the reality of this fellowship. As they sojourned they called upon the Name of the LORD, inquired of Him, and sacrificed to Him. The LORD was with them. But this presence of God with

His people became more visible and wonderful with the building of the tabernacle at Mount Sinai. The LORD in His glory is willing to dwell among His people.

Exodus 40 : 33 - 38

Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out--until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.

The worship of the LORD by Israel now centres around the tabernacle, and, later, the temple. We hear this in several Psalms.

Ps 5:7

But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple.

Ps 95:6-7

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice,

Ps 99:9

Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.

Other Psalms that speak about this are e.g. 42, 84, and 122.

The LORD in His grace initiated this communion. He therefore sets the rules that must govern it. We do not have a detailed outline of the order of worship in Israel, but we do learn enough from the Bible to teach us that it was rich and orderly. We can mention a few things. The tabernacle had to be built according to the blue print shown by the LORD. Israel was to worship the LORD in the place which He chose (Deut. 12). The people were called together by means of trumpet sound (Num.10). There was the reading of God's Word and instruction in the law (Lev.10:27). The people sang, and there were choirs (1 Chron.15 and 16). The people were sent home with the blessing of the LORD. We learn from Neh.8:7 that the people stood when the law was proclaimed, and that it responded with lifting up their hands and saying Amen. We also read about kneeling. Some of the elements of the public worship were: sacrifices, ceremonies, praise and public prayer.

2 Chr 7:5

And King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God.

2 Chr 7:6

The priests took their positions, as did the Levites with the LORD's musical instruments, which King David had made for praising the LORD and which were used when he gave thanks, saying, "His love endures forever." Opposite the Levites, the priests blew their trumpets, and all the Israelites were standing.

2 Chr 5:13

The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud,

1 Chr 16:36

Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Then all the people said "Amen" and "Praise the LORD."

1 Chr 15:1

After David had constructed buildings for himself in the City of David, he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it.

2 Chr 5:1

When all the work Solomon had done for the temple of the LORD was finished, he brought in the things his father David had dedicated-- the silver and gold and all the furnishings-- and he placed them in the treasuries of God's temple.

This communion between the holy and Almighty God and His people Israel was a gift of immeasurable grace. It could only come about through the shedding of blood. This explains the many sacrifices that were part of Israel's worship. This also explains the many rules and ceremonies connected to the service in the temple, think e.g. of the laws concerning clean and unclean. These laws were necessary to protect the holiness of God against the sinfulness of the people, and the other way around to protect a sinful people from the wrath of a holy God. Careful obedience showed Israel's love, dedication and respect.

This communion with His people is so special in the eyes of the LORD that He gives several laws to protect it. With the Second Commandment the LORD instructs His people to serve Him only in His way. All self-styled worship is an abomination to the LORD. With the Third Commandment the LORD teaches His people to call upon Him. The Fourth Commandment demands of God's people to observe the Sabbath day. The LORD protects the communion with His people against the attacks of self-willed service and ritualism. The first one says we can serve the LORD in our own way. The sons of Aaron brought strange fire before the LORD and were instantly killed (Lev. 11). The sons of Eli took the pieces that belonged to the LORD and were killed as well (1 Sam. 2:34). The second, ritualism, means that God's people go through the motions thinking that these ceremonies themselves will give them salvation. The LORD rejects this as well and tells His people to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving (Ps. 50:14)

Isa 1:12-14

When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them

Even after they came back from captivity and were allowed to rebuild the temple (see Ezra and Nehemiah), the prophet Malachi had to warn against self-willed service and ritualism.

Mal 1:7-8

"You place defiled food on my altar. "But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' "By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.

Mal 1:12-14

"But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.' And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD. "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations.

1.2. New Testament

We learn from the Gospels that the Lord Jesus participated in the worship as prescribed by the LORD.

Luke 4:16

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read

He taught the true worship.

Luke 4:5-8

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' "

Mat 23:23-24

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

He also fulfils the Old Testament worship.

John 4:21-24

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Mat 27:51

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

After the death and resurrection of Christ the temple has no function anymore. National borders fall away. Israel of the New Testament is the Church of Christ. This church does not have to sacrifice animals anymore, but the truth and substance of the O.T. ceremonies remain (Art. 25 B.C.) The church is called to worship the Lord in truth and Spirit (John 4). If Israel was rich because of the indwelling of the LORD, how

much more the church today, because the Spirit has been poured out to dwell in the church. If Israel under Moses had to be careful in worshipping the LORD, how much more the church today. She has not come to Mount Sinai, but to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem. The indwelling of the LORD has become more beautiful and powerful, but also more serious in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor 3:16

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

2 Cor 3:7-11

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Heb 12:22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

This teaches us how wonderful it is that as church we may worship. Yes, the church that is gathered in the name of the LORD, in obedience to His will may know that He is present among her to give salvation. This also warns us not to take our worship for granted and treat it lightly. In the N.T. we find several instructions in this regard as well. Think e.g. of 1 Timothy 2.

1 Cor 14:40

But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Heb 10:25

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The last book of the Bible shows that our worship will come to its culmination on the new earth. The aim of God's plan of redemption is His eternal praise.

Rev 7:11-12

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Our worship here on earth is the beginning of this eternal song of praise.

Revelation 19 : 6 - 7

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him the glory. For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."

2. Confessions/Church Order

2.1 Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession calls the church a holy congregation and assembly. Coming together is part and parcel of being church. This coming together has as purpose the worship of God's name as it is regulated by the Word of God.

Art 7

We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length. It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture: yes, *even if it be an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul says.

Art. 27

We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

Art. 32

We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only mediator, has commanded. Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which

binds and compels the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism explains this principle further.

Q/A 54

I believe that the Son of God ... gather, defends and preserves for Himself by His Word and Spirit in the unity of the true faith a church chosen to everlasting life ...

Q/A 96

We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.

Q/A 98

He wants His people to be taught ... by the living preaching of His Word.

Q/A 99

Rather we must use the holy Name of God only with fear and reverence, so that we might rightly confess Him, call upon Him and praise him in all our words and works.

Q/A 103

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor.

Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

2.3. Church Order

By its liturgy the church presents itself in public as a Reformed church. For this reason the Church Order addresses the public worship.

Art. 52

The consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day. The consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.

Art. 53

Each year the churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Art. 55

The metrical Psalms adopted by general synod as well as the hymns approved by general synod shall be sung in the worship service.

Art. 56

The sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of the adopted Forms.

3. Goal

The goal of our liturgy is that in worshipping we may show ourselves thankful to God and He may be praised by us. This in turn leads to the following goals of the worship service:

- to hear God's Word and use the sacraments;
- to confess the Name of the Lord;
- to call publicly upon the Lord, and praise Him in song;
- to give Christian alms.

4. Form and Contents

The worship service is the covenantal meeting of the LORD and His Church. He is present in her midst by Word and Spirit to give her salvation. She may respond with thanksgiving and praise. No doubt the preaching of the Word of God is central to the worship service, yet liturgy is more than preaching. Liturgy includes the whole of the covenantal meeting of God and His people. Because we meet the LORD our worship must come from the heart and reflect careful obedience.

This is an important element in connection with liturgy. The love to the Lord comes out in worshipping Him with careful obedience. The Bible alerts us to the two dangers of self-willed service and ritualism. On the one hand self-willed service says, it doesn't matter how you worship, what counts is what lives in your heart. This leads to a rejection of ceremonies and order. On the other hand when these ceremonies are seen as a purpose in themselves, ritualism may be the result. We read about these two dangers in the Bible, we also meet them in the history of the church. The way to get out of this is not by making it a choice of either or, for that would mean giving in to a false dilemma. The form and contents of worship are not opposed to each other. In fact, the form in which we worship has everything to do with what lives in our hearts. The two have to be in harmony. The Lord Jesus did not disregard the ceremonies in Israel, He fulfilled them. The same can be found with the apostles, or later with the Reformers. Take the time of the Great Reformation, the worship as prescribed by Rome had deteriorated into ritualism. The Reformers rejected this and rightly pointed to the call for faith. But they also rejected the approach of the Anabaptists who wanted to do away with every form. Calvin's exposition in His Institutes book IV, chapter 10 is very instructive in this regard. We need rules and laws, but these rules and laws must be in agreement with the Word of God and not obscure Christ. Carefulness in keeping the laws that govern our communion with and worship of the Lord reflects the love that lives in our hearts.

This has implication for evaluating the liturgy. To reflect on liturgy is important, but can also be over done. It is good to see whether the worship of the Lord is taking place in the proper manner. Carefulness is required in this respect. On the other hand, changes are always possible, but not always desirable. It should not be that change are made just to keep the attention of the members. Yet, when we look at our order of worship, we may ask ourselves questions, such as, Can it be done better? Is the worship of the Lord enriched if we change? Will it build up the congregation? It is important to think about these questions. The church should not get stuck in ritualism nor propose change for the sake of changing. Our desire is that our worship here on earth is in harmony with the praise of God's Name by angels and saints that surround His throne. If changes are considered, it is important to involve the congregation. This gives the overseers opportunity to explain the reasons for these changes and allows the congregation to have input as well.

5. The Order of Worship

The LORD gave clear and detailed instructions regarding the worship in Israel. The manner of worship is determined by Him. The church of the N.T. does not receive the same list of ceremonies. In fact several ceremonies of the Old Testament no longer apply. This does not mean that each can do what he wants. The church has to worship the Lord in an orderly manner as well. The letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus reflect this. We also read 1 Corinthians 14 that all things should be done decently and in good order. The order of worship is not a purpose in itself, and thus can be changed if need be. The way we deal with the order of worship reflects our respect for the presence of God in the midst of His congregation.

Who determines this order? The Lord by His Word. But within the congregation the order is determined by the overseers. Part of their task is that all things are done decently and in good order. This is reflected in the Church Order, in that the consistory has to call the congregation together, and ensures that things are done properly. Not the individual members, nor the minister determines the order, but the council. All matters related to the order of worship have to be dealt with in the combined meeting of elders and deacons. Any changes to the order are a decision of the council. It is thus task of the overseers to make a visiting minister aware of the order that is followed. He should be expected to follow the order as agreed upon by the council. The formulations used to introduce the different parts of the liturgy are the minister's responsibility.

The Book of Praise lists two Order of Worship in common use by the churches. Order A is often called the Middelburg Order. It reflects the history and development in The Netherlands in the 19th century.

Order B is more in line with the liturgy of the Reformed Church in the time of Calvin. The main differences between these two are:

1. The reading of Scripture and sermon form one block and are not interrupted by the collection.
2. The administration of baptism follows the preaching of the Word.
3. In the afternoon the Confession of Faith follows the preaching of the Word. Several churches that use the B Liturgy have the confession of faith in the beginning of the service, and the administration of baptism before the sermon.

These orders are in common use. The General Synod does not prescribe a certain order. This is left in the freedom of the churches. Thus there can be variations. At the same time it is true that although details may vary, the churches have agreed on the basic components in the liturgy. They will be dealt with next.

6. Components of the Liturgy

6.1. The Opening

The worship service begins with what is called the Votum, the confession that our help is in the name of the LORD who made heaven and earth. This confession expresses the proper attitude toward God in our worship. The congregation must be aware that this is not a formality but is part of a life in dependence on the Lord. This Votum is followed by the Salutation, or Greeting of Peace. The words of 1 Cor. 1:3 or Rev. 1:4,5a are used. The Lord addresses His people with a greeting which is at the same time a blessing. The difference between the salutation and the blessing at the end is that the salutation pertains to the worship service itself. This salutation is therefore a statement and not a wish.

In song the congregation responds to this salutation. Some suggest that for this reason this song should be chosen with a view to its function as answer to the salutation. This suggestion certainly has merit, at the same time it is also possible to choose a song that fits in with the sermon, or which prepares for what follows: the law and the confession of sin.

Some councils have the custom of praying before the service begins and thanking the Lord after the pm service. In the beginning of the 20th Century it was not uncommon to have a silent prayer in church as well. A few moments of silence before the Votum would allow every one to pray. This silent prayer in church has been done away with as being inconsistent with the covenant character of the worship service. With regard to the prayer in the consistory, the opinions are divided. In many consistories it was discontinued because it was felt that this custom came from the times of persecution. The consistory asked the Lord for an uninterrupted service. Since that is not the situation anymore, we do not need such a prayer. Others maintain that since the worship service takes place under the authority of the overseers a prayer is in place. The question could be asked, however, why the council would have its own prayer separate from the congregation? Do we not in the worship service ask the Lord for a blessing and express our thankfulness for the Word we have received?

Another matter is the manner in which the congregation prepares itself for worship. In the times of the Reformation it was not unusual to have a call to worship. The congregation was told to prepare to meet the Lord. Bible texts were used to express this. We may not have this practise, but the preparations for the worship services do need attention. The LORD warned Israel against thoughtless worship. Is the congregation prepared for worship? Do the families pray at home for a blessed worship service? Do we prepare by going to bed on time on Saturday so that we are able to concentrate and participate. Office-bearers must stress the beauty of the worship service, but then also the need to prepare oneself for the highlight of the week, meeting the Lord.

We have the custom that one of the elders shakes the hand of the minister before and after the worship service. It is unclear what the background and meaning of this custom is. Many answers have been given. Whatever the case, it does not indicate that the consistory agrees with the sermon. For how can one elder

decide this on his own? Or, are the elders going to have a quick meeting during the service if the minister would say something that is not right? Perhaps the best way of looking at it is that the handshake indicates that the minister is authorized by the consistory to lead the worship service. It is interesting to note that in the past some churches used the handshake only when a guest minister preached. It was not used for its own minister, since his letter of call gave him the authorization to lead the worship service.

6.2. Law/Confession/Forgiveness

The communion with God is possible only through the forgiveness of sins. This was foreshadowed under the Old Testament with the sacrifices. It is true that as church we may live in the reality of God's redemption, but at the same time the Lord requires that we confess our sin. In order to come to this confession we must submit our lives to the Ten Words of God's Covenant as the rule for our lives of thankfulness (see also Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44, q/a 115). The reading of the Ten Words is therefore an important element in the worship service.

We find the Ten Words in Exodus 20 and Deut. 5. There is a difference between the two passages. In Exodus 20 we hear the actual proclamation whereas in Deut. 5 Moses reminds Israel of this law. Some churches add the words of Matthew 22 to the proclamation of the law. The Lord Jesus did not give these words with the worship service in mind, yet using them has as advantage that the law is placed in its New Testament context as being the rule of thankfulness.

The proclamation of the law leads to the confession of sin. This is expressed in the prayer that follows. The Book of Praise contains several beautiful examples of such a confession. The minister can make use of these, but should not restrict himself to these.

The liturgy in the time of the Reformation also contained a proclamation of pardon. Often this was done in the form of the reading of a text which indicates that when we in true faith confess our sins, the Lord will forgive us. This practice can be connected to the Keys of the Kingdom (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31). At the same time it must be stressed that L.D. 31 addresses the preaching and its acceptance by the hearers, which is broader than a declaration of forgiveness. In addition, we note that the Salutation at the beginning of the service speaks of the mercy and grace of the Lord. It is the basis on which we offer our thanks. The service begins in the reality of forgiveness. The prayer following the proclamation of the Ten Words has to express thankfulness for forgiveness.

6.3. The Ministry of the Word.

For the significance of the preaching, and the sermon evaluation see chapter 1 - 5.

At this point we focus on the place of the preaching in the worship service. As indicated earlier the preaching of the Word is central in the worship service. The covenant relationship between the Lord and His people is by means of the Word. In speaking the LORD shows that He is the Living God. This is the background of the second commandment. This leads us to the main difference between order A and B. What speaks in favour of order B is the fact that Scripture Reading and the Ministry of the Word are one block, and that they come earlier in the service.

Art. 53 of the Church Order stipulates that the highlight of God's work of salvation are remembered each year. The council has to decide how to do this. The facts of salvation have to be remembered. How this is done is in the freedom of the churches. Most churches also have a special service on New Year's Eve. The Prayer for Crops and Labour and Thanksgiving receive attention on a Lord's Day as well.

6.4. The Administration of the Sacraments

For Holy Baptism: see chapter 1 - 3 and for Lord's Supper see chapter 1 - 4.

6.5. Prayer

For Prayer see chapter 1 - 5

6.6. Singing

Within the order of worship singing is not a separate component, but has a place in all components. The Salutation, the reading of The Ten Words, the Ministry of the Word are all followed by singing. Singing is an important part of our worship. We may express our thankfulness to the LORD with song. We learn this from the Bible. The Bible also gives us many songs of praise. The Reformed churches view singing as being at the same level as prayer, as a means to express our thankfulness. It will be helpful to go into this in greater detail, after all, as we learn from Revelation, our future is the eternal song of praise.

6.6.1 Old Testament

Part and parcel of Israel's life was the call to exalt God's Name. It played an important role in its life. The Psalms were not only made but also used in Israel. In addition one can think of the feasts the Israelites observed by command of the LORD. We find in the O.T. personal songs of praise as well as songs of praise by the whole people. In fact, there is no sharp distinction. When David, or Asaph, or the sons of Korah composed their psalms they knew themselves part of the whole people and their psalms were used by the people in its worship. David appointed Asaph to take care of the singing in the worship. We know that choirs and musical instruments were involved as well (1 Chron.16; 2 Chron 5:12; Neh. 12:27). Everything that had breath is called to praise the LORD (Ps. 150).

One of the sacrifices in Israel was called the sacrifice of thanksgiving. It is described in Leviticus 7 : 11 - 15. The peace offering is an offering of thanks for the restored communion with the LORD through the shedding of blood (the burnt offering). The thank offering expressed the gratitude of the believer. Thus words accompanied this sacrifice. For when you praise and thank the LORD you do so in deed and word. From the O.T. we learn which words were spoken at this occasion. For example, at the time the ark was brought to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16); and the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 5). In Jeremiah 33 : 10 and 11 we read that the streets of Jerusalem will again hear the sound of joy and gladness, the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying "Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good, his love endures for ever." These words we know so well from Ps. 136 and other psalms. In the Book of Psalms we have an example of what was said at the thank offering. Psalm 100 has as heading: a psalm for the thank offering. Here we have an example of how Israel exalted the LORD.

6.6.2. The New Testament

When we turn to the N.T. we are immediately met by songs exalting God's Name. Mary, Zachariah, the angels, they all sing. Also Paul calls the congregation to praise the LORD in all circumstances, to give thanks always. He himself sang psalms while in prison. When Paul speaks about the wonders of God's electing love in Ephesians 1 then the refrain is: to the praise of His glory. Limiting ourselves to the connection between the Psalms and the N.T. then we can note several elements. The Lord often quoted from the Psalms. He sang the psalms of the O.T. e.g. at the Passover. He fulfilled the psalms, we receive them through Him. Paul sees an important function for the psalms in our mutual encouragements and admonitions (Col.3:16). The book of the Psalms is the most quoted O.T. book in the N.T. Often when the Lord Jesus or the apostles want to show the fullness of God's work they go back to the Psalms. The language of the church in the N.T. is formed by the psalms of the O.T. This is not surprising. The expressions are words you learn in and with psalms become part of your language. In learning the psalms children become familiar with important words and concepts of the doctrine of salvation. Hopefully it becomes part of their thoughts and lives.

In the letter to the Hebrews we also find a connection with the O.T. thank offering. We read in Hebrews that the burnt offering has been fulfilled by the death of Christ, once for all. But the sacrifice of thanksgiving remains, it says. Hebrews 13:12 and 15: So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to

sanctify the people through his own blood. ... Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Notice here the relation between the burnt offering (Christ) and the thank offering. The fire of this N.T. thank offering also comes from the burnt offering, namely Christ. This sacrifice of praise is the fruit of our lips. There the letter to the Hebrews refers to what the person who was bringing this sacrifice would confess: The LORD is God, His steadfast love is forever more. To put it more up to date: this sacrifice of praise is the confession, I believe in God the Father Almighty etc; or: I belong with body and soul both in life and death to my faithful Saviour. The confession of the church is our sacrifice of thanksgiving. This shows how beautiful and important it is to have the creed sung.

When we turn to the last book, Revelation, a wealth of material opens up there. There we find many songs of praise, by angels, people, creation. We receive a preview of what is to come. Our future is the eternal praise, a praise which begins here already.

6.6.3. The Reformation

From the time the N.T. was written we now go to the time of the Reformation, and then especially the work of Calvin in Geneva. If we want to concentrate on the praise of God's Name in singing, then we cannot bypass what we have received in the Reformation. Still today we sing the Genevan tunes.

On May 21, 1536 the church at Geneva liberated itself from Rome. This reformation has far-reaching consequences for the liturgy of the church. The liturgy of the church of Rome was done away with. The mass was not celebrated anymore, the chanting of the priests was not heard anymore, and the organs were closed. A worship service consisted mainly of the spoken word, by the minister and but also some responses by the congregation.

At this point Calvin realized how different it must have been in the temple in Jerusalem. There was music, the people sang. This led him to the conviction that besides the spoken word there should also be the singing of the congregation as the answer of faith. Calvin saw the singing by the congregation at the same level as prayer. In our singing we respond to God's Word with the words that He gives to us, the Psalms. In his Institutes he deals with the singing of the Psalms within the part that deals with prayer: Book III, chapter 20, par. 32. The more he thought about this the more he became convinced that the song was an essential part of the worship by the church. In addition, it would strengthen the people in times of struggle and doubts, it would be a stimulus in the sanctification of life. He writes: "it both lends dignity and grace to sacred actions and has the greatest value in kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray." And thus on January 1537, eight months after the church had been reformed, a memorandum was given to the council of Geneva, informing the council that the consistory had decided to introduce the singing of psalms in the worship services. In this way the singing of psalms received a place in the worship service beside the ministry of the Word within the ministry of the prayers.

Calvin was of the opinion that we should use the 150 Psalms and other songs of the Bible first of all. He laboured hard to realize this goal. He also had opinion about the rhyming and the melody. The melody must be simple, supporting the text and also invigorating. He was opposed to all sentimentality when it came to words or music. From Institutes III, 20, 32: "Yet we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meanings of the words .." .. and on the other hand, such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest decree." The results were the so-called Genevan tunes.

Calvin saw the need for singing the Psalms in the worship services. Calvin did this because he saw the church of the reformation standing in the catholic tradition of Israel and the church in the time of the apostles. The expression the Reformers used to refer to the singing was: The sacrifice of thanksgiving.

When it came to the praise by the congregation the reformers were not afraid to use the word they opposed so much when it came to the mass, the word, sacrifice. In this way they linked it to what took place in the temple. The praise within the Reformed churches came to stand in the catholic tradition.

The church of all ages and places is a singing church. This takes shape in a remarkable way in the time of the Reformation. Under the direction of Calvin a Psalter was made, the Genevan Psalter with the Genevan tunes. As the Reformation spread this treasure went along. It went to different nations. They sing in different languages yet they sing the same psalms. Keep in mind then the situation in the refugee cities. Refugees from different nations and different languages met each other. In spite of the language barrier, they could sing together of the greatness of the LORD. The tunes united them. Thus at the Convention of Wesel in 1568 the Dutch churches also decided to use the Genevan tunes. It reminds us of the catholic character of Christ's church gathering work. Still today believers in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Hungary, Irian Jaya, the Netherlands sing of God's mighty deeds with the same tunes.

The children are an important element in this as well. The Genevan Church Order of 1561 stipulated in Art. 79 that children must learn the Psalms, then the whole church will follow. The Dutch churches in 1568 at the Convention of Wesel agreed that in the churches where there was a school, the school teacher should teach the youth the singing of psalms, so that the congregation could sing with the children. The sacrifice of praise must also come from the new generation.

6.6.5. Hymns

"Although in Reformed liturgy the Psalms have a predominant place, [the Canadian Reformed Churches] have not excluded the use of scriptural hymns. They, too, constitute a thank offering of praise when we sing of the facts of redemption by God in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Preface *Book of Praise*, page v) General Synod Chatham 2004 adopted the Principles and Guidelines for selecting songs. These Principles and Guidelines apply to both Psalms and Hymns. They are quoted here to understand the importance of using and selecting scriptural hymns.

PRINCIPLES:

THE SONG OF THE CHURCH IS TO BE SUITABLE FOR THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP TO THE GLORY OF GOD

1. The songs of the Church are to be scriptural

In content, form, and spirit the Church's songs must express the truth of the Holy Scriptures. Augustine, referring to the singing of Psalms, said, "No one can sing anything worthy of God which he has not received from Him . . . then we are assured that God puts the words in our mouth."

2. The songs of the Church are to be a sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15)

Singing is an important element of the congregation's response to God's redeeming work in Christ Jesus and the Word proclaimed in the worship service.

John Calvin wrote, "Singing has great strength and power to move and to set on fire the hearts of men that they may call upon God and praise Him with a more vehement and more ardent zeal.

This singing should not be light or frivolous, but it ought to have weight and majesty."

3. The songs of the Church are to be aesthetically pleasing

The songs for worship are to be a beautiful blend of God-honoring poetry and music. (Psalm 92: 1-4)

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING SONGS:

1. The songs of the Church must be thoroughly Biblical. They are to represent the full range of the revelation of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Psalm 147:1)
2. The Book of Psalms is foundational for the Church's songs. Therefore, all of these Psalms, in their entirety, ought to be included in the Church's songbook.

3. When Psalms or other portions of Scripture are set to music, the words must be faithful to the content and form of the inspired text. (2 Timothy 3:16)
4. In the case of songs other than the versification of Scripture, the words must faithfully express the teaching of Scripture (Proverbs 30:6) as summarized by our Reformed confessions.
5. The songs of the Church must be intelligible (1 Corinthians 14:15) and edifying to the body of Christ. (Colossians 3:16)
6. The songs of the Church must reflect and preserve the language of the Church of all ages rather than accommodating current secular trends. (Romans 12:2a)
7. In content and form, the songs of the Church must be free from artificiality and sentimentality.
8. The music of the song should suit the text.
9. The music of the Church should be expressive of the Reformed tradition. Where possible, use is to be made of music developed in the tradition of this rich heritage (e.g., the Genevan psalm tunes and the Scottish Psalter).
10. The music of the Church should not be borrowed from music that suggests places and occasions other than the Church and the worship of God. (Ephesians 5:18-21)
11. The melodies and harmonies of church music must be suitable for congregational singing, avoiding complicated rhythms, excessive syncopation, and a wide range of pitch.

6.6.6. Book of Praise

The General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches held at Homewood in 1954 appointed deputies "to study the whole matter of the rhymed version of the Psalms in the English language." (Acts 1954, Art. 110, 56) The Report of the deputies is called: "Op Weg Naar Een Engelse Reformatorische Psalmbundel." Rather than suggesting a selection of songs taken from different Psalters and Songbooks, the deputies proposed to produce an English Psalter, using the Genevan Tunes. The result was the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*.

For the history of the Anglo Genevan Psalter and the Book of Praise, see Preface in Book of Praise (page v) and G.VanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, p.62-75.

6.7. Collections

Giving Christian offering for the poor is part of the worship service. We may show our thankfulness in giving according to our blessings. The collection is thus part of the worship service.

See further: 3 - 2 Finances

6.8. Forms

The churches have adopted several Forms for use within the worship service. These Forms have a colourful history and in many ways complement our creeds and confessions. Valuable information about the history and contents of these Forms can be found e.g. in Our Reformed Church Service Book, by G.VanRongen (Inheritance Publications 1995), chapter 5.

6.9. Benediction

The closing of the worship consists of a closing song followed by the benediction or blessing. For the blessing the words of Num. 6 : 24-26 or 2 Cor. 13:14 are used. The blessing formed the climax of the worship service in the temple or tabernacle. The priest had gone with the incense into the holy place, and now came back with the joyful message that the LORD had accepted their sacrifice, therefore they could go home in peace. This meaning has only become more beautiful through the work of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Just read the conclusions of the letters in the N.T. God's people may know that they live under an open heaven. The blessing is not an indication that the worship service is over, but the climax of it. In the blessing the LORD promises to go with us.

7. Other elements related to the worship

There are several other items that play an important role in the worship services, but are not part of the liturgy. They are for example

- The church building. In order to worship, we need a place of worship. The task to maintain the building belongs to the Committee of Administration. See chapter 3 - 7 and Mandates and Regulations.
- Seating arrangements
- Ushers. If there are Regulations for ushers, see Mandates and Regulations
- Organists and Organ Committee. The Mandate for Organ Committee is part of the Mandates and Regulations.

8. Literature

The following books and articles are listed for further study. Much of the material of this chapter was also taken from these sources.

- C.Andree, 'Does God still do great things to us?' in Diakonia, vol.V, # 3 & 4
- K.Deddens, Where Everything points to Him, Inheritance Publications 1993.
- K.Deddens, Fulfil Your Ministry, Premier 1990, chapter IV, pages 58-132
- K.Deddens, 'A few Notes about the Worship Service', Diakonia, vol.IV, # 1
- R.Faber, 'The Reformers on Psalms and Hymns in Public Worship,' Clarion, vol.50, # 6, 7
- R.Faber, 'John Calvin on Psalms and Hymns in Public Worship,' Clarion, vol.51, # 16, 17
- R.Faber, 'The First Psalter in the Dutch Reformed Churches,' Clarion, vol. 52, # 5
- R.Faber, 'The Introduction of Evangelical Hymns in the Dutch Reformed Churches: Developments in the Seventeenth Century,' Clarion, vol. 52, # 14
- C.Trimp, De Gemeente en haar liturgie, Kampen 1983
- C.Trimp, 'Old and New in the Liturgy', in Diakonia, vol.II, # 3
- C.VanDam, 'What is Worship,' in Clarion, vol. 49, # 11-13, pages 245, 266, 289.
- G.VanDooren, The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy, Premier 1980.
- G.VanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, Inheritance Publications, 1995.
- G.VanRongen, Zijn Schone Dienst.
- G.VanRongen, Met Al De Heiligen, Liturgie in de Hemel en op Aarde, III.

9. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this work, as was as the goal of it. What is the essence of Reformed liturgy? Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. Evaluate the function of the components mentioned under point 6.
3. How much is the congregation aware of the importance of liturgy? Is this something that lives in the congregation? What can we do to improve this?
4. Does the system of ushering work properly? If necessary, review the regulations for ushers.
5. If there is an Organ Committee, does it function well? How can we promote the development of new talents.
6. Are there any concerns with regard to the liturgy? What are these concerns? Why are they a concern? What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Outline

Chapter 1 - 3

Holy Baptism

Introduction

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HOLY BAPTISM

Introduction

Sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25). The Lord added the sacraments to the Word because He is mindful of our insensitivity and weakness. The two sacraments Holy baptism and Holy Supper, represent better to our external senses both what He declares to us in His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts (Belgic Confession, Art. 33). Sacraments are a great treasure and have been given to be used.

The focus of this chapter is not to give a overview of what the Bible teaches about baptism, or of what we have learned in history of the church in this regard. The focus is the task of the overseers with regard to the sacrament of baptism. As overseers we have to help the congregation to work with and apply the sacrament of baptism. We may have to refer to baptism in situations of discipline. We may have to defend the Biblical teaching of Infant baptism in dealing with members. The elders have been charged to make sure that the sacraments are not profaned. This includes making sure that baptism is not used out of custom and superstition. In promoting the service of charity, baptism comes in view as well. By baptism we are grafted into the congregation of the Lord and have to use our gifts willingly and readily for the benefit of the other members. In order to deal with these points we will need to touch upon the Reformed doctrine of baptism, but this is done with the work of the overseers in mind.

1. Scripture

The command to baptize is given by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Mat 28:18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This command of Christ is given in the context of His glorious resurrection. Just prior to this command we hear that He has received all authority in heaven and on earth. He, as the risen Lord, who will soon ascend to take upon Himself the royal power, wants to reach all nations on this earth. His power will go to the ends of the world. For this purpose He makes use of baptism. This baptism is in turn connected to the teaching the commandments of Christ. Through baptism can one enter the circle of His disciples.

In Mark 16:16 we find the parallel text to Matthew 28:19, yet the wording is somewhat different.

Mark 16:15-16

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

In Mark we miss the reference to the Triune God in whose name one has to be baptized. Instead, baptism is related here to being saved. Some have taken this text to indicate that one has to believe before one can be baptized. If that were true then baptism is nothing but God's response to the decision of man. First man believes and then God will confirm that decision by baptism. However, careful consideration of the context shows that the text does not point in this direction. The saying about believing and being baptized comes in the context of the preaching of the gospel to the whole creation. This preaching comes with the demand to repent and believe. Both faith and baptism, yes, also the being saved are connected to the preaching of the gospel. Wherever this gospel will be preached, there man is called to answer in faith and there God will underline and confirm this gospel in baptism. Baptism is the confirmation of this preaching by God Himself.

How does baptism confirm the gospel? Baptism is performed with the use of water. Now water is, among other things, used for washing. In Scripture we find several references to this washing.

Titus 3:4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

1 Cor 6:11

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Eph 5:25-27

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Baptism, or the washing with water, is connected to regeneration, to sanctification, to justification, or, to being cleansed. Our daily usage of water shows this as well. Someone who is dirty becomes clean through the washing with water. We are dirty before God in and of ourselves, but now through baptism we may live as a clean person before God. Baptism points to this decisive point in our lives when a totally new future is opened for us by Him who wanted to become our Redeemer. Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 6:3

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death?"

Being baptized is like dying with Him and coming to a new life with Him. Baptism lays the foundation for the sanctification of life. We died with Him, but from day to day we live "in" and "with" Him. He is in us and we are in Him, in the Spirit. In this way the truth of God's redemption becomes a reality in our lives.

Baptism is the entrance gate into the kingdom of God. This kingdom manifests itself in the Church of Jesus Christ. Baptism tells us that we are in Christ. This Christ is the Head of His Church. The "in Him" cannot be isolated from the "in His congregation". Baptism is therefore also the public incorporation into the church and congregation of Christ. Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:13 that by one Spirit we have been baptized into one body. Baptism is never an individualistic matter. Life from now on, after this decisive break, is characterized by being in Christ and thus by living in His congregation. We see this in Acts 2.

Peter concludes His sermon with the call to be baptized in order to receive the gift of the Spirit and through Him the gifts of Christ. A few verses further we read that they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship.

It is in the same chapter in Acts that we also see the connection between Old and New Testament. Peter applies the words of Genesis 17 to the church of the New Testament.

Acts 2:38-39

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call."

The Reformed Churches have correctly linked baptism to the covenant. The covenant is the reality that the eternal God has connected Himself with man. "I am your God, you are My people." In this everlasting covenant the holy God comes to His people with His promise and says "I will at all times maintain My Word." This promise comes with an obligation, namely, to live as His children and to be obedient to His Word. The covenant is not a theory, but the reality in which we may live with this faithful God and Father. A reality which is firmly founded in God's good pleasure. When the LORD took Abraham He did so for the sake of His promise of redemption. Abraham did not deserve it in any way. The sacrament of circumcision confirmed this. By nature every Israelite could not be part of God's kingdom. God had to do something to him to make him fit. Circumcision was never to be regarded as a reward for good behavior, but rather as a proof of God's good pleasure.

In establishing His covenant the covenant the LORD did not give up on the rest of mankind. He clearly said that He would bless the nations in Abraham. He used Abraham and his descendants to bring the promised Messiah into the world. This helps us understand Matthew 28:19. The LORD wants to reach all

the nations of this world, first through Abraham and his descendants, but now through the church of Christ. This shows the unity of the covenant in Old and New Testament. The covenant established with the believers and their children in the New Testament is no other than the covenant established with Abraham. It is the same Covenant God who into all eternity is faithful to His promise. The covenant of Abraham has not lost its strength or validity. On the contrary it has only increased.

Baptism is a sign of this new covenant. Christ says this in Matthew 28:19. Peter shows this in his sermon on Pentecost, Acts 2. Quoting from Genesis 17 Peter can also mention the children in his sermon (vs. 39). If under Abraham they were already included, then certainly now under Christ. In fact in Christ we belong to a new and better covenant. As the promise is now richer, so also is the sign of the promise now richer. For those circumcised need baptism, but those baptized do not need circumcision anymore. That is what Paul shows in Col.2:11 and 12.

Col 2:11-12

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Holy Baptism is to be seen in the line of circumcision and since it has replaced circumcision.

2. Confessions and Church Order

2.1. The Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed is the only ecumenical creeds which mentions baptism. In the third part of this creed the church confesses: "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins." The Nicene Creed is in many ways parallel to the Apostles' Creed. The parallel sentence to the quotation above from the Apostles' Creed is "I believe the forgiveness of sins". Both Creeds mention the forgiveness of sins, but the Nicene Creed connects it to baptism. This expression does not mean that baptism itself takes sins away. Only God forgives sins. But the expression used in the Nicene Creed comes directly from Scripture. John had already preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). In baptism God signs and seals to us that He is the God who forgives sins.

The Nicene Creed also speaks of "one" baptism. We hear in this word "one" the words of Ephesians 4:5 and it points to the unity with the other members in the body of Christ, the Church.

2.2. The Belgic Confession

In the time of the Reformation and shortly after the Church had to take a stand against two directions: on the one hand against the over-emphasis of the sacrament by Rome and on the other hand the under-emphasis of the sacrament by the Anabaptist. Rome maintained that the sacrament itself gave grace. The Anabaptist made the sacrament dependent on the decision of man. This does not mean that the Reformers walked a tight rope balancing between the two extremes. No, they turned their attention to the God who speaks. They knew if we hear Him in these sacraments then we don't have to be worried for either extreme.

In the Belgic Confession we find the articles concerning the sacraments immediately following the articles about the church (Art 27-32). In Art 33 the character of the sacraments is described. They are seals of God's promises and pledges of His good will and grace to us. Our gracious God has ordained them because He was mindful of our insensitivity and weakness. We see in this article the opposition to Rome. The sacraments are not the grace of God in themselves. We also notice the opposition to the Anabaptist. The sacraments have been ordained by God. Against the over-emphasis of Rome we confess God speaks to us in baptism. Against the under-emphasis of the Anabaptist we confess that the sacraments are seals and pledges ordained by God.

In Art. 34 we find a description of the sacrament of baptism. This article begins with saying that the bloody custom of circumcision has come to an end. Christ put an end to all bloodshed. Baptism has been

instituted in its place. Baptism is also the entrance into the Christian Church. By baptism we are set apart. Here our confession makes use of the fact that the word sacrament in Latin referred to the mark, or ensign one could carry, as e.g. in an army. We bear the mark and emblem of Him who bought us. Further, baptism serves as a testimony that God will be our Father forever.

Next, the confession explains the sign element. As water takes away the dirt from the body, and as the water can be seen sprinkled on the one being baptized so we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Then we find a reference to the Red Sea. This reference we also know from the prayer of the Form for baptism. Most likely that prayer goes back via Luther to the early church. The reference to the Red Sea can be found in 1 Cor 10:1. In the prayer the flood is mentioned as well. 1 Peter 3:20 and 21 form the background of this comparison. As the water separated Israel from the slavery to Egypt and marked the new beginning, so baptism marks the end of the bondage to sin. In the N.T. this is also expressed as we saw before as having died with Christ. The minister gives what is visible, the Lord gives what is signified. Clearly, baptism is not a pledge of man to God, but a pledge of God to man.

In the last part of this article the Anabaptist error is rejected. It is enough to be baptized once. Baptism benefits us throughout our whole life, therefore we have to use the sacrament. It has to be used in faith. One cannot say "I am baptized thus no matter what I do it is all right". No, "Now that I have been baptized, now all the more I have to hold on to God's promise and live accordingly."

Finally, the confession deals with infant baptism. Children should be baptized because they are included in the covenant. If they had the promises under the Old Testament, then certainly under the New.

2.3 Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism shows many similarities with the Belgic Confession. Lord's Day 26 explains how baptism signifies and seals to us that we benefit from Christ's sacrifice. Lord's Day 27 rejects the teachings of Rome (q/a 72 and 73) and of the Anabaptists (q/a 74).

2.4. The Canons of Dort

In Canons of Dort Chapter 1, Article 17 we confess the following about children of believers who die in infancy:

We must judge concerning the will of God from His Word, which declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy.

2.5. Church Order

The Church Order reflects the Scriptural teaching concerning the sacraments, and the heritage of the Reformation.

Art 56

The sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of the adopted Forms.

Art 57

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

Art 59

Adults who have not been baptized shall be grafted into the Christian church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

The Church Order stipulates that baptism be administered in the official worship service. We reject the so-called emergency baptism by doctors or nurses right after birth in case a baby would die. Baptism has to be administered by an ordained minister of the Word. This highlights the close connection between Word and Sacrament. It must also be done with the use of the adopted Forms. The minister is not allowed to make his own speech. In this way things are done orderly, in addition the person who is baptized can later in life know exactly what was said and prayed at that time, and the parents who make a promise can be held to these promises.

2.6. The Form for the Baptism of Infants

The Canadian Reformed Churches have accepted two forms for baptism, one for infants and one for adults. These two differ in that the adult has to make profession of faith before being baptized. For the rest they are quite similar. The Forms explain the doctrine of baptism and the right to baptism. We recognize in these forms the heritage of the Reformation. For further information see e.g. G. Van Rongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book.

3. Goal

Using the Form we can say that baptism is to be used for:

- the glory of God;
- the comfort of the believers, and
- the upbuilding of the congregation.

In terms of Art. 34 BC we can say that the goal of baptism is:

- to be publicly received into the church of God;
- to be set apart from all other peoples and religions, and
- to be entirely committed to Him whose mark and emblem we bear.

The task of the elders is to help the members use baptism and to make sure that those who present a child for baptism do this for the right reasons.

4. History

4.1. Early Christian Church

In the first centuries after Pentecost the majority of baptisms administered were adult baptisms. The growth of the church was mainly by adults coming to faith. As more joined the church, infant baptism became more prominent. Baptism was often administered outside the church service. There was a separate room in the church where baptism could be administered at any time. Baptism made one qualified to be part of the worship service. This is connected to the teaching which gained in importance during the Middle Ages that baptism itself gives to the child the forgiveness of sins. A third element we learn from the early history is that the administration of baptism was surrounded by many other ceremonies, such as exorcism, anointing, special clothing. This would indicate the break with a previous life.

4.2. Reformation

The Reformation of the 16th century meant a return to the Word of God and his covenant promises. In terms of the developments noted above, it is significant to note that the Reformed churches reduced the ceremonies surrounding baptism and increased the instruction about baptism. This instruction focussed on the wonderful teaching concerning God's covenant. The Reformed churches maintained that the sacraments were added to the Word. Thus their administration found again a place within the worship service. The whole congregation was involved. Because the sacraments are signs and seals the Reformed churches emphasized the use of the sacrament. The believers have to apply in faith what the sacrament signs and seals. At the same time the Reformed churches had to defend the right of infants to be baptized. In this struggle they came to a better understanding of the covenant that God made with the believers and their seed.

5. The administration of baptism

The administration has the following elements: a prayer; an address to the parents and their answer; the actual baptism; a prayer of thanksgiving.

5.1 Prayer

The prayer that precedes the baptism has a long history. There are several parts in this prayer that come from the early church. The references to Noah and the Red Sea are used to show how water makes

separation. The water that saved Noah destroyed the godless world. The water that killed Pharaoh and his army, set Israel free. So the blood of Christ saves us and sets us free. We find a similar image in Art. 34 of the Belgic Confession. "The precious blood of the Son of God, which is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan."

This element is helpful for home visits. In the early church someone who joined the church by baptism had to renounce the devil and his kingdom. Before saying "Yes" to the LORD, the person had to say "No" to the devil. The older Form for Adult Baptism had this as part of the fifth question: "Do you firmly resolve always to lead a Christian life, to forsake the world and its evil lusts..." The older Form for Infant Baptism also said: "... that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, ..." The current Forms have replaced "forsaking this world," with "not loving this world." Our current Form for Public Profession of Faith still speaks about "forsaking the world."

To forsake the world must not be understood in the sense that we withdraw from this world, a kind of cloister mentality. Rather it means that although we are in the world, we are not of the world. The pleasures of the world are no longer our pleasures. By our baptism we are called to follow Christ and crucify our old nature. The home visit is a good opportunity to speak about this.

In the prayer before baptism the congregation thanks the Lord for His gifts and asks that in the life of this child the Lord may show Himself to be the faithful God and Father. It is a prayer that can strengthen us time and again.

5.2 Address to the Parents

The child is not aware of its great riches. The Lord gives parents the task to teach it, so that it may come to see this riches and how this determines their lives. The parents acknowledge the treasure given to the child in that although it was conceived and born in sin, yet it is sanctified in Christ out of grace. They make confession of the Reformed faith, and promise to teach the child in this doctrine.

The church can only ask these question from members who have made profession of their faith and live a godly life. This excludes non-communicant members and communicant members who are under discipline. In case one parent is unable to attend, the answer of the other parent is sufficient. In the past the church would baptize a child upon the promise given by grandparents if parents were unable, because of age or discipline. However, the church would only do this when it had been assured that the grand parents were responsible for the upbringing and education of the child. Otherwise the promise would be an empty promise.

In the situation that a parent cannot give the answer because of not being a non-communicant, it will be important to speak with this member about the baptism. If the member becomes a communicant member it must be pointed out that in making profession of faith there is also an obligation with regard to the children that have already been baptized. In the situation that one of the parents is not a member of the church, it will be very important to explain the meaning of baptism and its implication for the upbringing of the child. Hopefully the parent involved is prepared not to hinder this instruction.

For the connection between baptism and education see Chapter 1 - 7.

5.3. Administration of baptism

After the answer has been given the parents carry the child to the baptismal font and the minister sprinkles water on the head of the child. The formula given by the Lord in Matthew 28 is used. The child is baptized into the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The expression "into the Name" means that the life of this child is claimed or ruled by this Name.

We note that at the baptism the full name of the child is used. The minister does not say "Child, I baptize you" but uses the name of the child. Our relation with the Lord is indeed a personal relation in which He addresses us personally in our baptism. That name is as it were the hand by which the Lord takes this child personally and brings it into His church.

We have the custom to use both first and last name. Often the child also has a middle name. In the past it was the custom to use only the first and middle name. Our fathers did not think it necessary to use the family name, because receiving baptism is a personal matter. Dr.H.Bouwman in his explanation of the Church Order (dated 1934) still maintains that there are not sufficient reasons to change the old custom. At what point in time this was changed is not clear.

What we should note is that neither in the confessions nor in the Form the family is central, but instead, the God of the church who within His congregation speaks to each one of us individually. It is true that the Lord uses the family to gather and increase His church. However, the sacrament of baptism, by which God signs and seals the personal relation He has established with that child, has not been given to the family but to the church. Texts like Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38 clearly show this. We should not forget that the sacraments are signs and seals to the Word. Just as the Word is for to the congregation, so is also the administration of the sacrament. Each administration of baptism is a sign and seal to every member in the congregation. This is also the reason we administer baptism in an official worship service and not, for example, at home. Certainly the Lord uses the family bond to gather and increase His church, but yet the primary focus is on the congregation. Baptism should not become a social event.

After the baptism the congregation sings a song in response. Some have objected to the custom of standing in front during the singing. They would rather see that the parents and the minister go back to their places before the singing. They fear that otherwise the child is too much in the centre, or people think more about the clothing of baby or parents than the sacrament. This is a valid concern but standing in front does not have to be seen that way. Standing around the baptismal font can also highlight the reality of the sacrament. Having little children come to the front, whether they are siblings of the baptized child or other children in the church is not fitting in light of the purpose of baptism. The song for baptism is chosen by the minister, not the parents. It is important that the administration takes place in a way that the congregation can see and hear what takes place.

5.4. Prayer of Thanksgiving

The administration closes with a prayer in which we thank the Lord for His covenant promises and ask that He be with this child.

6. Preparations for Baptism

The parents have to answer three questions prior to the administration of baptism. The introduction to these questions states that the purpose of answering these question is to show that the parents do not request baptism out of custom or superstition. They are required to answer these questions sincerely. The answer to these questions therefore has the character of an oath. We make a promise before God and His holy congregation.

How do we know that parents answer sincerely? It will become clear in that they keep these promises. How do we know that it is not done out of custom or superstition? Again, the way these parents live up to these vows will show it. From the side of the elders it is also important to speak with the parents about these questions before the baptism. The overseers must find out in speaking with the parents whether they understand the questions and the implications of the questions.

This visit with the parents can take place before or after the birth of the baby. The advantage of doing it before the baby is born is that it is easier to arrange a visit in which the father can be present as well. If the

parents have already more children, the mother can look up against the delivery. This can also be discussed at the visit. The advantage of visiting after the birth is that the Lord can be thanked for giving and protecting life. If the parents have already other children this visit is a good opportunity to speak about the task to bring them up in the fear of the Lord and how baptism is a help in this as well.

The aim of this visit is to speak about the gift of children, to direct the parents to the strength of the Lord, to speak about the baptism of the child. Here follow some pointers for this visit.

1. Life is a gift of the Lord. How do these parents look at the gift of new life? Do they indeed see it as a gift of the Lord? Especially when they have already more children it is important to discuss this. In connection with this the elders can also speak about the pressure by medical staff, or by others, that two or three children is enough. When there is anxiety because of the delivery, or when there are concerns because of difficulties during previous delivery, it will be good to comfort the parents with the promise of the Lord that He will not leave us. The life of the mother and the life of the child are in His Hand (See Ps. 139).

Marriage and receiving children will be discussed in Chapter 3 - 7.

2. The questions at baptism can be used for a good discussion. The first question speaks about our children being conceived and born in sin. Do we realize this? In how far does this effect the way we deal with our children. Parents have the inclination to have a positive picture of their children. The first question also speaks about being sanctified in Christ. What does this mean for these parents? How does it come out in their family life and the way they deal with their children that these children are sanctified in Christ? Keep in mind that sanctified does not mean without sin, but claimed, set apart by the Lord to be His own. How does this e.g. determine the way they discipline their children, or what kind of freedoms they give the children, or the friendships of their children?

3. The second question deals with the doctrine of salvation as revealed in Scripture, summarized in the confessions and taught in the church. The reason why we ask this question is because the parents have to instruct them in this doctrine. Before we ask them to teach we want to make sure that we understand what has to be taught. What do parents do to fulfil this task? Family worship, personal study, and participation in church life come in the picture here. The church needs good instructors in the homes. This instruction has to be specific, the doctrine of salvation as we confess it. When they already have older children the question can be asked how this is put into practice.

4. In the third question the church asks the parents to promise to teach their children. Are the parents aware of this calling. Do they fulfil this calling and how? In connection with this education we can also speak about the schools. If the parents have no children at school age yet, are they involved in the school? Do they see the need to send their child to a Canadian Reformed School? If they have children in school, do the parents support the work done in the school? Do they also realize that the teachers never replace the parents? Bringing up children requires consistency and wisdom. The LORD is the source of this as well.

5. Bringing children in this world is not always easy. Raising children in the Lord is not easy either. It is also good to speak about the concerns and difficulties we can meet. We may point the parents to the promises and comfort of God's Word. We live in a society that is losing its Christian values. This has consequences for our families too. Parents can be at a loss how to bring up children in the fear of the Lord. Much instruction is required in this regard. It is no luxury to ask parents what they do to equip themselves for this task, how much time they take to discuss this together.

7. The time of Baptism

In Art. 56 of the Church Order the churches have agreed that the sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of

the adopted Forms. From this article it is clear that in the Reformed Churches the sacrament is added to the Word.

This brings us to the task of the consistory to ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible. Since there is a command to baptize the consistory has to ensure that the congregation heeds this command. One expression in art. 57 C.O. has a colourful history, namely the expression "as soon as feasible". What is meant by it? When should our children be baptized? Or to put it differently yet: How long may we wait and for what reasons may we postpone baptism?

In the first place we should note that our Church Order does not mention a time limit as was the case with circumcision under the Old Testament. Voetius, a Reformed church politician of the Eighteenth Century, gives as reason for not stipulating the time that the times of our lives -birth and death- are in the hand of God. We should also note that at the time the Church Order was drawn up the expression 'as soon as feasible' meant, not after two, three or more weeks, but on the first assembly of the congregation after the birth of the baby, either during the week or on the day of rest.

What is the history with regard to the question when children were to be baptized? It might be good to begin in the Old Testament. There is a very close connection between circumcision and baptism. We read in the Old Testament that a boy had to be circumcised on the eighth day. This means under the old dispensation there was a time limit. For seven days the children of Israel were not distinguished from the children of unbelievers. For seven days they were uncircumcised just like all other infants in this world. This humbled Israel and accentuated the grace of God. Every Israelite knew 'For eight days I had to miss the seal of the covenant.' Some have suggested that since the New Testament is so much richer than the Old, we, today, should not wait as long anymore before presenting our children for baptism.

Going to the New Testament we see that baptism was administered right away. When someone confessed his or her faith in Jesus Christ baptism followed, and if there were children in the "house", they were baptized as well. Whereas we find in the Bible that baptism took place immediately upon profession of faith, in the centuries following the death of the apostles we see the institution of a teaching period prior to baptism, a sort of pre-confession class. One had to complete such a "class" before being baptized. The institution of such classes thus brought about the custom that baptism was administered at certain times in the year.

When in the fourth century we find more and more evidence of infant baptism we also see that gradually the time for baptism is postponed. Some even left it till the moment of their death. This was done out of fear for sins which could be committed after having been baptized. The punishment for such sins was believed to be more severe than for sins committed before baptism. Thus the longer one could wait the better it was. This changed in the Middle Ages with the development of a mechanical approach to the sacraments. It was mechanical in this sense that by baptism itself grace was poured into the child. The water itself washed the child from its sin. Thus baptism became indispensable in order to be saved. Without baptism no one could enter heaven. It will be clear that with such a mechanical view on the sacrament the baptism should be performed as soon as possible. Yes, if an infant was born and would not live very long, -infant mortality was very high- then the parents, the doctor or the mid-wife were allowed to baptize the baby, lest the child would die without the grace of God as given in baptism.

The Reformers departed from this mechanical view on the sacrament. They stressed the Scriptural truth that already before their baptism the children of believers are in the covenant. Baptism is the sign and seal of what the children already have in virtue of their birth from believing parents. Without their knowledge they are included in Christ. Baptism was again seen as a sign and seal to the promise, and not as an end in itself. The Reformers rejected the practice of allowing parents, doctors or midwives to baptize a baby.

Yet, the Reformers maintained that a child should be baptized as soon as possible. One was even allowed to ask for a special worship service during the week because a child was born. It is known of Guido de Bres, the author of the Belgic Confession, that he had his child baptized the day after it was born. Also Calvin stressed very much that it should be done as soon as possible. Calvin even puts it this way: "Certainly if someone does not bring his child in time, he will be severely punished for this neglect. Every day the church is open (for baptism). If someone's child comes to die without having been baptized, because he did not make use of the opportunity then he will be punished."

This quotation shows very clearly the position of the Reformers. Baptize the children as soon as possible. Not because the child will otherwise be lost. They knew better. It is significant that in the words of Calvin quoted above, he does not speak of punishment for the child, but instead of punishment for the parent. Why does he say this? Because there is a command from God to have our children baptized. Parents who unnecessarily postpone baptism are negligent with regard to this command. The main reason why the Reformers insisted on baptism as soon as possible was the command of God and their sincere desire to always be obedient to His commands. If God demands it who are we to postpone it?

This indeed became the rule within the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. Children had to be baptized as soon as feasible. "As soon as feasible" meant the first assembly of the congregation after the birth of the baby. This meant that often the mother could not be present, but the word of the father, as head of the family, was considered sufficient. The Regional Synod of Dordrecht of 1574 made the following decision:

"The Covenant of God must be sealed to the children with baptism as soon as Christian baptism can be obtained, unless there are some weighty reasons to postpone baptism for a time, of which reasons the consistory shall judge. But the affection of parents who want to delay baptism of their children till the time that the mother herself can present the child, or who wait for family, the brothers do not see to be proper reasons to postpone baptism."

The beginning sentence of this decision was taken up in the Church Order.

We should note the role the consistory plays in this respect. Parents have to present their children as soon as possible. When this is impossible then they have to ask the consistory whether it can be postponed for these reasons. The consistory has to judge whether these reasons are indeed valid reasons. The decision to postpone is not a decision of the parents but of the consistory. The word "ensure" in Art. 57 points to this task of the consistory as well. The decision of 1574 became the rule and was in effect till the beginning of the 19th century. However, the rule was not always kept. One can read many warnings issued by consistories and classes urging the people to keep the rule. The celebrations connected to baptism were often a reason to postpone it. The whole family had to be present at this feast. Or such a feast was so expensive that baptism was delayed till there were more babies. The way baptism was used reflected the general state of decline within the Reformed Churches in this time between Reformation and Secession (1834).

In the beginning of the 19th century, to be exact, in 1817 the Dutch State Church made a new Church Order. At that time the prevailing thought was that the church had to stimulate religious feelings. This means that also with regard to baptism more attention was paid to the emotions. Sentimentality was introduced. This meant for example that there should be many people present. But also, the more babies the nicer. And the mother should be there. The whole service was centred around the special occasion of baptism.

In the Secession the Church Order of Dort was again given its proper place. This did not mean however that there was uniformity with regard to the time of baptism. Some returned to the older Reformed practice whereas others continued in the existing practice. On the whole one could say that it became normal to wait till the mother could be present as well. It were the men of the Second Secession (the "Doleantie" of 1886) who more forcefully argued to go back to the old custom. Dr.A.Kuyper and Dr.F.L.Rudgers advocated a return to the 16th century practise. The followers of Kuyper also in this respect went further than he did himself and saw it as a terrible sin to wait till the mother had recuperated. Even if she was

present she would be ignored. This extreme position called for a reaction in which the bond of mother and child and the education of the child by the mother was stressed. Rudgers was more careful. Though he fully favoured early baptism, he did not say that waiting till the mother was fit again was useless. He also believed that to wait for this does not in itself show contempt for baptism. However, he was afraid that such a custom could easily lead to contempt for the sacrament. He used the well-known example of the an earthly king. If an earthly king would give our children great riches and an inheritance in his kingdom, how long would we wait then before presenting the child? Would we not be eager to do it as soon as possible?

Dr. H. Bouman, the Reformed church-politician from the beginning of the Twentieth Century, is of the opinion that a child should be baptized in the first church service after birth. That is, if the health of the child allows it. If the mother cannot be present, then the father will have to give the answer to the questions as head of His wife. Bouman adds another argument yet. Indeed, baptism itself does not give the grace of God, but the Lord wants to sign and seal His covenant, and thereby strengthen the faith of His people. For this reason the congregation has a right to this sign and seal. This is why it should be done as soon as possible. Postponing baptism deprives the congregation of being strengthened. This is echoed by Deddens and VanRongen. "Wherever almost all babies are born in a hospital and as a rule are released together with their mother within one week, there is no longer any cause for friction. It is clear that delay of baptism is wrong. We may not let the Lord wait, when He is ready to sign and seal His covenant to our children!"

It used to be that mother and child stayed for five or six days in the hospital, but lately this has been cut back to only a few days. It can easily happen that a mother does not feel all that well when she has just come home and will not be able to sit through a whole church service. This leads to the question how necessary it is for the mother to be present. Because the mother plays an central role in the education of the child it would be important that, if at all possible, the mother is present. If the mother comes home but is not feeling well, there is no objection to postponing baptism for a week if so requested by the parents. As elders we have to trust that the parents do this for the right motives. It would, however, be incorrect if the mother is doing all her other tasks, visiting and going out, but does not feel she is ready for going to church. To postpone for the sake of family is not correct either. In such situations the elders should speak with the parents and point out the wrong. If the mother is so ill that she cannot come for a few weeks the baptism could be administered without her being present. It is up to the family whether the baptism takes place in the morning or afternoon service.

Because we can travel easily, the practise of visiting elsewhere because of a baptism becomes more and more common. As such it is not wrong to visit another sister church, at the same time it is important that we maintain what the Reformed Churches have always confessed, central is not that baby or the family, but God. Certainly it is beautiful when the family can be present because the Lord shows in the Bible how He gathers His church in the generations. The family may never take the place of the congregation.

8. Literature

The following books are listed for further study. Much material of this chapter was taken from these sources.

- H. Bouwman, Gereformeerd Kerkrecht, Kampen, 1928
- K. Deddens, Where Everything Points to Him, Inheritance Publications, 1993, chapter 9
- G. VanDooren, The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy, Premier Printing, 1992 (3rd printing), chapter 5
- W. W. J. Van Oene, With Common Consent, Premier Printing, 1990, see under articles: 56, 57, 59
- G. vanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, Inheritance Publications, 1995, chapter 5.
- C. Trimp, Woord, Water en Wijn, Kampen 1985
- W. van 't Spijker ed. Rondom de Doopvont, Goudriaan 1983

9. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this sacrament, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. How can we help the congregation to see the significance of baptism? How can we help them to “use” their baptism?
3. How does the sacrament of holy baptism receive attention in preaching, teaching, visiting, comforting, encouraging and/or admonishing?
4. How do the visits with parents function? Are the questions and their implications clear to the parents?
5. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
6. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation? What are these concerns? Why are they a concern? What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Outline

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LORD'S SUPPER

Introduction

The Lord's Supper is the other of the two sacraments given to the church. It has in common with Holy Baptism that it directs our faith to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only ground of our salvation. The difference with Holy Baptism is that the admission to the Lord's Supper involves our answer of faith. Article 35 of the Belgic Confession puts it this way: "We believe and confess that our Saviour Jesus Christ has instituted the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and sustain those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His church."

The Lord's Supper is a high light in the life of the congregation. It is also a focal point of our life with the Lord. We may see and taste the love of God for us sinners. The Lord knows our struggles and weaknesses and wants to help us in these by means of this sacrament. The history of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper shows many and deep controversies. It is good to be aware of this historical back ground and learn from it. But this should never cover up the main purpose why the Lord has given it, namely to help and encourage us, to teach us to live as sinners from the forgiveness of sins. This has to be our focus too when as office bearers we apply the riches of the Lord's Supper to the members of the congregation.

The purpose of this chapter is not to deal with all the doctrinal issues connected to the Lord's Supper. Although these issues are important and one can learn a lot from them, the focus of this chapter is how the overseers can help the congregation to work with the Lord's Supper. To be more concrete, the Lord's Supper is given to strengthen the communion with the Lord and with the other members. How can we as overseers help the members in this? In addition, the elders have the charge to supervise the table and admit those who have made profession of the Reformed. We will reflect on this as well.

1. Scripture

The Bible shows us that the Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ Himself.

Matt 26:26-28

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"

1 Cor 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover celebration. In celebrating the Passover, Israel remembered its deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 12 and Numbers 9). This feast was called "Passover" because on the night the Israelites were set free the angel of wrath passed over the homes that had blood of a lamb on the door posts. The LORD set His people free because He was mindful of His covenant promises. This is fulfilled in Christ who set us free from the dominion of sin.

1 Peter 1 : 18-19

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Connected to the Passover was the feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:17). This unleavened bread symbolized the hardship of Egypt as well as the complete break with the corruption of Egypt. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is an encouragement for us to fight against sin and our sinful nature.

1 Cor. 5:7-8

Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

The yearly celebration of Passover included the children. It was the task of the youngest child to ask the question why that night was different from other nights. The father had to explain the facts of redemption in a way that even the youngest could understand it.

Ex 12 : 26-27

And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.' "

Though children do not partake of the Lord's Supper, yet they are part of the worship service. They see and hear what happens. Parents have to be encouraged to use this visible instruction in a practical way as they bring their children up in the fear of the Lord.

Another element in the O.T. background of the Lord's Supper is the place of the meal in the worship service. The Israelites knew of festive meals that followed the sacrifice. An example can be found in 1 Samuel 1. Elkanah and his household went each year to Shiloh to sacrifice, and after the sacrifice had a meal. This was a festive meal to rejoice in the redemption received and the communion that had been restored. The future of the Messiah is described in the O.T. in terms of a meal as well.

Isa 25:6

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine--the best of meats and the finest of wines

The Lord Jesus celebrated the Passover during his life on earth. On the last one before His death He instituted the Lord's Supper. He took bread and a cup and used them to teach, remind and assure His people about His work. The broken bread and the cup which is given sign and seal what He did for us, and what He does in us. They also make us look forward to what lies ahead. The Lord will drink the wine new with us in the Kingdom of His Father.

The church after Pentecost followed the command of the Lord. We read in Acts 2:42 that those who came to faith in Christ devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. We receive the impression that meals of communion were an important part of church life after Pentecost. These so-called love meals were concluded with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Paul has to admonish the church at Corinth because of sinful behaviour in this regard. His admonition shows the seriousness and importance of the Lord's Supper. It is a meal of communion with the Lord Jesus and with each other as members of one body.

1 Cor 11:23-29

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Paul also uses the Lord's Supper to warn the church not to associate with a heathen lifestyle. At the table we have communion with Christ, and this must determine the lives of the believers.

1 Cor 10:16-17

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

The future of Christ's work is described in terms of a feast as well (Mark 14:25)

Rev 19:7

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

2. Confessions, Church Order and Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The proper administration of the Lord's Supper is one of the marks of the true church.

Art. 29

It [=the true church] maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. ...It [=the false church] does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases.

In article 35 the church explains the Scriptural teachings concerning the Lord's Supper. It is explained that the bread and wine are outward symbols. Yes they are not empty, because Christ is their contents. We become one with Him through the working of the Holy Spirit and by faith.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism has several Lord's Days that deal with the Lord's Supper. The Catechism explains the meaning of the sacrament (L.D. 28); defends the scriptural teaching concerning Lord's Supper (L.D. 29); and rejects wrong teachings (L.D. 30). The Catechism also states who are allowed to come to the table, and so leads to the use of discipline as one of the keys of the Kingdom of heaven.

Q/A 81

Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

2.3. Church Order

The churches have agreed to the following:

Art. 56

The sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of the adopted Forms.

Art. 60

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

Art. 61

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister-churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

Art. 68

Anyone who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public sin shall be suspended from the Lord's supper.

The Church Order also gives instructions for the office bearers with regard to the Lord's Supper:

Minister - Art. 16

He also is to administer the Holy Supper as instituted by Christ.

Elders - Art. 22

They shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned.

Deacons - Art. 23

They shall promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

2.4. Form for Celebration of the Lord's Supper

The churches have adopted two forms for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The first, and longer one, is the older one. The second is an abbreviation of the first one. For the history of the first one, see VanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book chapter 5.3.4.

The Form is explains in a beautiful manner the teaching of the Lord's Supper and points to the obligation of each member to live in Christ. The treasures of this form should not be left unused. In fact, overseers should use this Form in their work as much as possible. The members of the congregation hear this Form many times. The words and sentences are familiar, but the contents is not always clear. In our work as

overseers we can show the congregation the riches of the communion with the Lord and with each other and use the Form in our discussions.

The Form begins with referring to the institution of the Lord's Supper by the Lord Jesus. In this sacraments are dealing with a gift of the Lord. This has consequences for how we celebrate the Lord's Supper. If it were a human institution we could do with it what we felt is proper. Because it is instituted by the Lord we have to realize that we are dealing with His gift to us. We must listen to His instructions. The focus is not in the first place how I feel about it, but on what He says to us in this sacrament.

Following the part about the institution, the Form deals with self examination. (See section 1-1 about the connection between home visit and self examination) We must come to the table of the Lord in faith. This is what self examination is all about. We have to admit that we are sinners, that we seek our lives in Jesus Christ, and that we want to serve Him. Self examination describes the manner or attitude in which we come to the table. Note that the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 11 says that a man must examine himself, and so come to the table. The history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands shows that at times members refused to go to the Lord's Supper because they felt unworthy. They looked for a confirmation of their election in themselves, apart from the Word of God. But then we make the call of the Lord subject to our human experience. He may call us to come, but we want to be sure in ourselves first. Having said this, we must be careful, however, not to go to the Lord's Supper out of custom. We may not make the self examination into a formality. We must come in faith, a living faith. The overseers have to task to help the members examine themselves properly.

From the self examination the Form goes on to the invitation and admonition. Who are allowed to come and who should not come? The Forms follows in the list of warnings the Ten Commandment as explained by the Heidelberg Catechism. The verbal warning to those who know themselves guilty of the sins listed not to partake of the Supper does not make the fencing of the Table superfluous. We forbid the use of the sacraments to those whom we know live in sin. But there can also be hypocrites in the congregation, and there can be sins only the person involved knows about. The task of the elders to supervise the table does not diminish the task of the individual members to discipline themselves. This list of sins could give some the feeling that they should not go to the Lord's Supper because they are weighed down by their sins. The Form encourages them to come. The Lord's Supper is for sinners who repent. In going to the table we confess our sinfulness and seek salvation outside of ourselves in Christ. This pastoral element is wonderfully expressed in the Form and can be of great help when dealing with members who struggle with their sinfulness.

It can happen that a member does not attend the Lord Supper for personal reason. When this member is contacted by the elders, he or she could inform them that for personal reasons he or she could not go. The elders do not have to ask further about the nature of this. If there is a sin involved, the elder must ask whether there is willingness to break with and fight against sin. If the same person withholds himself more than once the elders should ask further questions in order to help the member to live from the grace of the Lord.

Next the Form explains the significance of the Lord supper by pointing to four elements. The Lord's Supper Table is a meal of remembrance, a meal of assurance, a meal of communion and a meal of expectation. Again, as overseers we can benefit from these explanations in fulfilling our calling.

A Meal of Remembrance.

The Form describes in a beautiful manner how we have to remember the death of the Lord. To remember is to accept with a believing heart what He did for us. We confess the blessings that we receive from and through Him. Note in this section the contrast between Christ and us, as well as the treasures we have in Him.

A Meal of Assurance.

To show that these blessings indeed apply to us, the Lord calls us to His Supper. In our work as office bearers we may help the congregation to live from this grace. Members can doubt whether the Lord is indeed caring for them or whether He indeed will forgive their sins. We can help those struggling with doubts and sins by pointing to the Lord's Supper.

A Meal of Communion

The believers may share in Christ and all His benefits. As the bread and wine become one with our bodies, so Christ and we are one. This communion is worked by the Spirit and the Word of Christ. The believers are also members one of another. We do not eat alone. My relationship with the Lord cannot be separated from my relationship with the brotherhood, and the other way around. The Lord's Supper table shows that the communion we have is based on the blood of Jesus Christ. The church is not a gathering of like-minded people who can get along well with each other. It is the gathering of those who seek their lives outside of themselves in Jesus Christ. Thus I may not pick and choose who I want as my brother and sister. There is always the danger that we have fellowship with those whom we like, who agree with us, or who are related. Each celebration is a reminder of who the other members are, why they are my brothers and sisters, and why I have to show brotherly love not only in words but also in deeds.

A Meal of Expectation

The Lord's Supper celebration is a foretaste of what is yet to come. This is not meant as an escape from reality. We live in a broken world. Each Lord's Supper teaches us to look beyond what we see and feel hear. Christ's body was broken to heal God's creation. Christ has promised to eat and drink with us in the kingdom of His Father.

All in all this Form contains much that is very helpful in our work as office bearers in the congregation. We must do our utmost to show the congregation its riches, and direct the congregation how to live now as God's people bought by the blood of Christ. In that way each celebration will lead to a daily increase in faith and fellowship with Christ.

3. Goal

We celebrate the Lord's Supper in order to

- proclaim the Lord's death
- be strengthened in our faith in:
 - remembering Christ's work for us
 - being strengthened in the present
 - being comforted with a view to the future
- be reminded of our bond with the other members

As overseers we may help the members use the celebration of the Lord's Supper, so it may lead to a daily increase in faith and fellowship with Christ.

4. History

The history of the doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper is very colourful. Our confessions reflect this. Lord's Day 30 gives a clear condemnation of the popish mass. Bread and wine do not change in substance, they are signs and seals to be received in faith. The Reformers rejected the teachings of Rome in this regard. But also between the Reformers there was no unanimity. Luther still struggled with the words "This is My body". Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper only as a reminder us of what Christ did. Calvin, agreed that it is a meal of remembrance of what Christ did for us, but it is also a meal of assurance of what He does in us. He asked attention for the nature and character of the sacrament. When we receive the sign in true faith, we will also receive what it signifies. When we eat and drink in faith we can

be sure that the Holy Spirit works in us what bread and wine signify. We eat the true body and drink the true blood of Christ. Our Confessions reflect this teaching of Calvin.

5. The Celebration of the Lord's Supper

The administration of Lord's Supper has the following elements: reading of the Form, prayer, profession of faith, exhortation, communion, doxology and thanksgiving. The Form has already received attention. In the Prayer that follows, we thank the Lord for His grace in Christ and we ask that our contrite hearts be nourished with Christ. Because we must come to the table in true faith, the prayer is followed by a profession of faith. After this profession the congregation is exhorted to lift up their hearts to Christ and so eat and drink.

In many churches it is customary that the deacons prepare the table. They would be in charge of setting up the table and of making sure that there is bread and wine. Why is this? Their work is very closely connected to the table. The Deacons are charged to promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord. (Church Order, Art. 23; see also Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons)

The way in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated can vary from church to church. Some have a table in front of the church to which members will come. Others distribute bread and wine in the pews. Some have communal cups, others individual cups. Some have wine, others also have grape juice, Some have plates with pieces of broken bread, others pass around a loaf of bread from which each member breaks off a piece. This is not the place to discuss the pros and cons of all these matters. Each council must evaluate whether the way the Lord's Supper is celebrated indeed serves the glory of God and helps the congregation to be strengthened in faith.

The communion is followed by a doxology or expression of praise and prayer. The doxology is a combination of several passages from the Bible, Ps. 103, Rom. 8 and 5. According to the Form the minister speaks these words on behalf of the whole congregation. Some suggest that it would be more meaningful if this were done by the congregation as a whole.

6. The Collection at the Table

Some churches have a container on the table in which money can be deposited, and usually the money collected is for the Ministry of Mercy. This custom has a rich background. We learn from Acts 2 that the feeding of those who were in need was closely connected to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Members would bring food along, so that those who did not have enough could eat as well. It did not take long or the Deacons were appointed to distribute this. Members would take food along, leave it with the deacons who then would distribute this after the service to those who were in need. In the course of the Middle Ages the food was gradually replaced with money. This money the deacons distributed to those in need. The link between the Lord's Supper and the work of the deacons is a rich one. The poor in the congregation are fed from the hand of the Lord. The celebration of the Lord's Supper generates and stimulates love and communion between the members.

In showing its concern for the needy the New Testament Church put into practise what it had learned throughout the whole Old Testament. The Israelite was not allowed to come empty-handed before the LORD to celebrate one of the feasts. Included in the feasts were meals of rejoicing. The LORD also stipulated that when they would rejoice they would include those who had no income, the sojourner, the widow, the fatherless (See Deut.14:28,29; 16:11,14; 26:11).

The collection at the table has a rich history and a rich meaning. When we rejoice together in the redemption which Christ obtained for us, then it would not be right that some one cannot rejoice because there is no food in the house. No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness and poverty.

7. Preparations for Lord's Supper

Preparations for the Lord's Supper take place in several ways. In the first place the council has to make sure that everything for the table is ready. Then there is the preparation by the elders in their supervision over the congregation. This comes out in that before each Lord's Supper celebration members who are under discipline have to be visited. Thirdly, there is also the preparation by the preaching. On the Lord's Day before the celebration some attention is given to the upcoming celebration of the Lord's Supper.

This last custom was more rigidly adhered to in the past than it is now. Some churches would read the first part of the Form a week before the celebration. In the preparatory sermon the self-examination would receive much attention. After the Liberation of 1944 it was felt that this placed too much attention on the decision of the member, and led to many wrong questions or practices. It was not unusual in some places that many communicant members would not come because they did not feel worthy enough. Self-examination was seen as a looking in yourself to see whether you could go, rather than placing your life in the light of God's promises. In addition, since the Lord's Supper is celebrated at least four times per year, adhering rigidly to the custom of preparatory sermons would mean that the congregation would hear quite a number of sermons on the death of Christ. However, if no mention would be made about the upcoming celebration, it could happen that members come unprepared to church. We have to eat and drink in faith, and thus not come to the table without due consideration. It is important to maintain a proper balance in this regard.

Also the members of the congregation have to prepare themselves. For this reason the date of the Lord's Supper is announced to the congregation. It would not be good that members come into church Sunday morning and suddenly realize that it is Lord's Supper. We have to prepare ourselves. The family worship gives a beautiful opportunity to do this. The visits by the elders and deacons too are a means to help the families in this.

8. Frequency of Celebrating

The Church Order stipulates that the Lord's Supper must be celebrated at least four times per year. Some sister churches have it once every two months, or every month. Calvin wanted it done every Lord's Day. This was seen as too much by the churches in The Netherlands. They suggested six times per year. The minimum was put in the C.O., at least four times per year. This shows that the number can be increased. The increase in number must be based on good grounds. To do it in order to cater to those who do not attend regularly would be incorrect. But if congregation and council come to the conclusion that the spiritual life of the congregation needs more strengthening, the number of celebrations could be increased.

9. Admission to the Table

The Table of the Lord is holy and must be kept holy. Desecration of the table would incur the wrath of God over the whole congregation (See L.D. 30 q/a 82). Thus the Lord entrusted the elders with the task to watch that the table is not profaned. The Form for the Celebration contains a verbal warning. This warning is meant for the hypocrites in the congregation, in order to force them to repentance. In addition to this verbal warning the elders must bar from the table all who they know live in sin and refuse to repent. This barring has to be done with words, not with physical force. If someone still would come to the table, the person should be asked to go back to the pew. If this does not help, the whole celebration can be stopped

or, the elders can make sure that the person involved does not receive the plate of bread and the cup of wine, or the celebration will continue and the person involved will be notified afterwards that he ate and drank judgement upon himself.

The supervision of the elders also involves the examination of young members who want to be admitted to the Lord's Table. One of the goals of catechetical instruction is the admission to the Lord's Supper. The catechism is divided in the same three elements which, according to the Form, make up true self-examination. Before young members can be admitted it must be established that they in word and deed live in Christ.

See further, chapter 2 - 6 Catechism Instruction.

The Canadian Reformed Churches do not agree with child communion. It is true that a child can confess its faith, but making profession of faith also involves making several promises. A child is too young and not mature enough to enter in such a binding agreement. There is, however, no set age for making profession of faith.

The elders have a responsibility toward guests as well. Also the guest must be living a godly life in word and deed. The word of the person involved is not enough. The consistory needs a testimony by a body that is competent to judge the life and doctrine of the person involved. This means that guests from sister churches are admitted on the basis of a good attestation. Their names are announced to the congregation. The clerk of the consistory shall note on the attestation that the person involved has participated in the Lord's Supper, and sign it. The consistory cannot accept an attestation from a consistory which it does not recognize as a sister-churches. We expect our members who want to attend Lord's Supper in a sister church to ask for a travel attestation. Such an attestation can be signed by two elders and does not have to be dealt with at the consistory meeting.

For many churches on this continent the requirement of attestations is a unknown practise. Many churches have a policy where guests are verbally warned, but then it is up to the guests themselves. Others require a short interview before the celebration, or ask that the guest fill out a visitor's card which is then mailed to the church to which this person belongs. Many regard our practise as condemning others. This is not correct. Not admitting does not have to mean that the person is not a believer, but indicates that the overseers do not have sufficient grounds to open the table. This is done out of the desire to keep the table holy.

After the celebration of the Lord's Supper the elders note who did not attend. Some may already have informed the elders of this. If not, then the elders will inquire for the reasons. These reasons are presented to the consistory and recorded in the Minutes. If the reasons are not legitimate the members shall be visited and admonished.

10. Literature

The following books are listed for further study. Much material of this chapter was taken from these sources.

- K.Deddens, Where Everything Points to Him. Inheritance Publications, 1993, chapter 9
- N.H.Gootjes, 'The meaning of the Lord's Supper, in Koinonia, vol. xiv # 1.
- C.Trimp, De Gemeente en Haar Liturgie, Van den Berg -Kampen, 1983.
- G.VanDooren, The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy, Premier Printing, 1992 (3rd printing), chapter 5
- W.W.J.Van Oene. With Common Consent, Premier Printing, 1990,
- G.vanRongen, Our Reformed Church Serice Book, Inheritance Publications, 1995, chapter 5.3.4.
- W. van 't Spijker ed. Bij Brood en Beker, Goudriaan 1980

11. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this sacrament, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. How does sacrament of Lord's Supper receive attention in our work as office-bearers?
3. How can we help the congregation to see the significance of the Lord's Supper? How can we help them to apply this sacrament to their lives? How can we help the members to "increase in faith and fellowship with Christ"? How can we help them in examining themselves?
4. The evaluation can also deal with matters such as
 manner of celebrating;
 admission to the table;
 frequency of celebrating.
5. How does the Lord's Supper function to bind the members together as members of one body?
6. Is the celebration of the Lord's Supper a feast for congregation? What can we do to stimulate this? How can we encourage the congregation to long for the marriage feast of the Lamb?
7. Many young members witness the Lord's Supper, but do not yet partake of it. How can we help them to be strengthened by what they see?
8. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation?
 What are these concerns?
 Why are they a concern?
 What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Outline

Chapter 1 - 5

Sermon & Prayer

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 - 2.1. Belgic Confession
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THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD & PRAYER

Introduction

The relationship between the LORD and His people comes into existence and is maintained by the Word of God. In speaking the LORD shows that He is the living God. His Word shows His power. He speaks and it is (Gen 1). For this reason Israel was forbidden to make images (Deut.4:15-16). Israel has to live from the Word of God (Deut. 8:3). This applies to the church of the N.T. as well. The church is a visible proof of the power of God's, and is known by her obedience to the Word. It has the task to administer the Word of grace (Acts 6). The preaching is the central part of the worship service. God comes into our lives in speaking to us. This is why in John 1 the Lord Jesus is called the Word. Since both the preaching and the public prayers are under the supervision of the elders we will deal with both in this chapter.

1. Scripture

1.1. Old Testament

The O.T. shows in many ways that our God is a God who speaks. Many times we read "Thus says the LORD". In Deut. 4 the LORD makes exactly the point that Israel at Mount Sinai saw no form but heard a voice. The LORD comes to His people in and with His Word.

Deut 4:11-12

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.

Deut 8:2-3

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Deut 18:18

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.

1 Sam 3:21

The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

Isa 40:9

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

Isa 52:7

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

Ezek 3:17

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

The LORD shows His people the power of His Word.

Isa 55:10-11

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Ezek 37:4-7

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.

Ezek 37:9-10

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet-- a vast army.

1.2. New Testament

The Lord Jesus Christ is called the Word.

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

His Word has power too.

Mat 7:28

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, [29] because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Mat 8:13

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

Mark 4:39-41

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

As He is about to ascend into heaven He entrusts the proclamation of this Word to His apostles

Matt 28:19-20

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Luke 24:46-47

He told them, "this is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem

The apostles knew that they had to preach this Word.

Acts 11:14

He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

Rom 1:16

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

1Thes 1:4-5

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

1Thes 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

We come across the expression "the ministry of the Word of God," for example in Acts 6:2. The Word of God has to be administered, preached.

Acts 8:30-31

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?"

Preaching is the task of office bearers.

Rom 10:14-17

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

2 Cor 5:20

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

1Thes 2:4

On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

2 Tim 4:2

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-- with great patience and careful instruction.

It brings about faith.

1 Pet 1:23-25

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

2. Confessions, Church Order, Forms and Prayer

In the Reformation the churches came to understand again the significance of the preaching. Whereas Rome placed the emphasis on the sacrament, as the means to give grace, the Reformed churches confessed that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Over against the Anabaptists, who maintained that the Holy Spirit does this without the use of means, the Reformed churches confessed that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use the preaching of the Word to work this faith in our hearts. This does not mean that we want to restrict the Holy Spirit in His work. It is rather the other way around, the Holy Spirit expects us to submit to the order which He has established. We should not be wiser than the Lord. This is why in the Reformed confessions the preaching receives a prominent position as the primary means of grace.

2.1. Belgic Confession

The preaching of the gospel is one of the marks of the church.

Art. 29

The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel.

It is the task of the government to see to it that the preaching can go on.

Art. 36

Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the Church and its ministry in order that *the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism mentions the preaching in connection with the work of the Holy Spirit, the Keys of God's Kingdom, the Second and the Fourth Commandment.

Q/A 65

Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.

Q/A 84.

How is the kingdom of heaven open and closed by the preaching of the gospel? According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest upon them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

Q/A 98

But may images not be tolerated in the churches as "books for the laity"? No, for we should not be wiser than God. He wants His people to be taught not by means of dumb images but by the living preaching of His Word.

Q/A 103

What does God require in the fourth commandment? First, That the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

2.3. Canons of Dort

In the Canons of Dort the Churches confess that believing in a decree of election does not do away with the need to preach the gospel. It is through the preaching that God brings about His decree of election. It is also by the preaching that He preserves His people.

Chapter 1, Article 3

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He wills and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?

Chapter 2, Article 5

The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

Chapter 3/4, Article 6

What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and new dispensation.

Chapter 3/4, Article 8

But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.

Chapter 3/4, Article 11

God carries out His good pleasure in the elect and works in them true conversion in the following manner. He takes care that the gospel is preached to them, and powerfully enlightens their minds by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. By the efficacious working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works.

Chapter 3/4, Article 17

The almighty working of God whereby He brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which He according to His infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise His power. So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or cancels the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, reverently instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre and the more directly His works proceed. To God alone, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen.

Chapter 5, Article 14

As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments.

2.4. Church Order, Forms and Prayers

The Church Order shows that the preaching of the gospel is the task of the minister, but under supervision of the elders.

Art. 15

No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of the consistory of that church.

Art. 16

The specific duties of the office of minister of the Word are: thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of the Lord;

Art. 22

Finally, it is their duty to assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

Art. 27

To ward off false doctrines ... the ministers ... shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word and in Christian teaching and family visiting.

Art. 52

The Consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day. the consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.

The Form for Ordination for Ministers is in agreement with this.

Duties of the Minister

First, he must declare the whole counsel of God to His congregation,

Charge to the Minister

Preach the pure doctrine, so that by your preaching and teaching the congregation may be kept in obedience to the Word of God.

Charge to the congregation

Take heed to receive the Word of God, which you shall hear from him, and accept his words, spoken according to the Holy Scriptures, not as the word of man but as what it really is, the Word of God.

Prayer

Enlighten his mind that he may understand the Scriptures, and open his mouth that he may proclaim the mysteries of the gospel with boldness.

The Prayers in the Book of Praise reflect this as well.

Prayer 1.

Open now the mouth of Thy servant, and fill it with Thy wisdom and knowledge, that he may boldly proclaim Thy Word in all its purity. prepare our hearts to receive it, to understand it, and to preserve it.

Prayer 2.

As it pleases Thee that we should pray for all mankind, we beseech Thee, bless the propagation of Thy holy gospel, that it may be proclaimed and received universally. May the whole world be filled with knowledge of Thee. Enlighten the ignorant, strengthen the weak. may everyone by word and deed magnify Thy holy name. To this end send faithful servants into Thy harvest and equip them to discharge diligently the duties of their office. Destroy, we pray Thee, all false teachers, fierce wolves and hirelings who seek their own honour and profit rather than the honour of thy holy name and the salvation of men.

Prayer 3.

May it please Thee to make us understand Thy holy Word in accordance with Thy divine will, so that we may learn to put our trust in Thee alone and not in any creature. May our old nature with all its evil desires be put to death day by day and may we present ourselves a living sacrifice to Thee, to the honour of Thy Name and the benefit of our neighbour.

See also the Prayers 4, 5 and 6.

3. Goal

Since the preaching is the means by which the Lord opens and closes His kingdom and He uses the preaching to work and strengthen faith in our hearts, the goal of the preaching is to proclaim faithfully the whole counsel of God. In this way the true religion is preserved to God's glory and our comfort. Using the Church Order and the Form for Ordination we can work this out in the following manner:

It is the task of the **minister** to:

- Thoroughly and sincerely proclaim to the congregation the whole counsel of God;
- Faithfully administer the word of grace to the congregation of the Lord;
- Shepherd the congregation (includes encouragement, exhortations, admonitions and instructions);
- Please God and not men.

It is the task of the **overseers** to:

- Call the congregation together for worship;
- Make sure that God's Word is faithfully preached;
- Make sure that the minister thoroughly and sincerely proclaims the whole counsel of God;
- Assist the minister with good counsel and advice;
- Exhort the congregation to live from the Word of grace;
- Call a minister in case of a vacancy.

It is the task of the **congregation** to:

- Receive the Word thankfully and joyfully as the Word of God;
- Obey the Word;
- Make sure that the preaching remain faithful;
- Maintain the ministry of the gospel (Theological College, financial obligations, mission).

4. The Minister

The minister is called to administer the Word twice on the Lord's Day and whenever the congregation is called together for worship. In the preaching he has to be faithful to the Word of God. The preaching must be in agreement with the doctrine of God's Word, as summarized in the confession. In selecting his texts he has to keep in mind that the whole counsel of God be proclaimed, the congregation be built up in the faith and God's people be called to repent and believe. The sermon has to explain the text and apply the message of the text to the congregation. In the faithful preaching the Lord Himself is speaking to His people. The sermon may not become a discourse nor a lecture, but has to remain an address. The God of the covenant addresses the people of the covenant.

The text choice is the freedom of the minister. The input of the council is part of the assistance they are to give to the minister. In choosing the text the minister has to keep in mind that he has to proclaim the whole counsel of God. There should be a good balance between Old Testament and New Testament texts, between texts that encourage and texts that warn, between historical, poetical and prophetic passages from the Bible.

It can be necessary to address in the sermons certain matters in the congregation, e.g. in situations of distress, sorrow, disobedience, or wrong ideas. This could determine the choice of text. It can also be that rather than dealing with certain concerns right away, it is better to deal with them some months later. Preaching in series is a good way to let the congregation see the riches of God's revelation. It forces the minister to stick to his text and prevents preaching on hobby horses. It can be helpful to make the congregation aware of the preaching schedule.

In the afternoon the minister as a rule proclaims the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. This custom is typically Reformed and has been practised for many centuries already. The strength of the custom is that the congregation on a regular basis is reminded of her confession. It also helps the minister in proclaiming the whole counsel of God. The Catechism is broader than the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort. It covers more topics. The sermons can refer to the other confessions, but the Catechism is to be used as the basis for a sermon. Regular Catechism preaching will also strengthen the Catechism teaching and the other way around.

With regard to the catechism preaching the question has been asked whether the minister should use a Bible text and so explain what we confess, or whether he can use the answer of the Catechism as his "text." It is not necessary to make a choice either way. It is very well possible to combine the two approaches. Especially because the minister will have to go through the Catechism more than once. Some variation will not hurt. At the same time, the question we mentioned is helpful, for it reminds us of two things. Firstly, the preaching should make clear that the catechism summarizes the doctrine of God's Word. Secondly that the minister may use the sermon to show the riches and depth of our confession. Preaching from the catechism must also be preaching of the good news.

In his preaching the minister must keep in mind the needs and situation of the members of the congregation. The members have to be able to work with the preaching. At the same time the minister must be careful not to cater to the likes and dislikes of the people. No one like criticism, not a minister either. There is always the temptation to say or not say things because of the listeners. The preacher must be faithful to the Word, and dare to warn or admonish, but not in such a way that he and the congregation become opponents. His task is to reach the hearts of the hearers.

The minister in preparing for the preaching has to study the Word of God. In addition, he needs to continue to study the areas and aspects of his ministry. See 1 - 7 Study/Education.

5. The Overseers

The consistory calls the congregation together for worship twice every Lord's Day. They have to make sure the members attend faithfully. In case of irregular attendance a visit must be made, and if the absence is not legitimate, admonitions have to follow. Not only attendance, also behavior in church may need the attention of the elders. The elders also have to ascertain how the congregation works with the preaching.

With regard to the preaching the overseers have the task to supervise the preaching to make sure that no false doctrine or heresies are proclaimed. They also have to help the minister with good counsel and advice. It is important that the overseers evaluate the preaching on a regular basis. It is better to do this when there are no difficulties or complaints, than to wait till it becomes difficult to resolve the differences. Regular input and constructive criticism by the elders is important. It is indeed the task of the minister to preach the gospel and he has been trained for this task, but this does not mean that he has no need for help and advice. The purpose of the regular evaluation is therefore not to voice criticism on a particular sermon. That should be done separately and can be done at any meeting. Nor is the purpose to unduly elevate the minister. To be sure, when the Word of God reaches God's people and God's people receive this Word with thankfulness, then there is cause for thankfulness. If this is the case then this ought to be mentioned in the proper manner as well. The purpose of sermon evaluation is to help the minister in preparing the sermons, so that the Word reaches the people of God. Each minister has his weak points and his strong points. This evaluation is meant to help him use his talents to the best of his ability, with the aim of building up the congregation. This sermon evaluation stresses to all involved that the preaching of the gospel is not the sole possession of the minister, but in entrusting the Word to his servants, the Lord has given it to the whole congregation. The evaluation focusses on three elements: the Word that is proclaimed, the congregation which hears the Word, and the format in which the minister brings it.

The Word that has to be preached is the promise of the LORD. This promise comes to the people with the command to repent and believe. It is not correct to distinguish within the sermon between promise and demand. All preaching is preaching of the promise. The warning to accept it and live from it is part and parcel of that Word. "For grace is conferred through admonitions,..." C.o.D. III/IV, 17. Each sermon must be based on the text that was chosen. Each text has its own flavour. Some sermons will place greater emphasis on the promissary character of God's Word. The congregation is reminded of its riches in Christ, and its freedom to make these riches their own. Other sermons will stress the call to repent and believe. The members congregation have to be confronted with the question how they now live as God's people. In evaluating the preaching the overseers have to see whether over all the whole counsel of God is preached. To say that the preaching is faithful not exactly the same as to say that the whole counsel of God is being proclaimed. To be sure the two are very closely related. With regard to the first the criterion is: does the sermon go against Scripture and Confession. The second deals more with the question, whether all aspects of God's revelation receive proper attention. The minister can be within the bounds of the Confession and yet be very one-sided. In leaving things out, the minister can also hinder the upbuilding of the congregation. Here the counsel and advice of the overseers is very important.

When it comes to the congregation, the evaluation must deal with the question whether the Word reaches the members and whether they can work with it. How is the Word received by the congregation? This is not done to please people. The gospel can also go against our inclinations and feelings. After all the Word is a two-edged sword. At the same time we believe that the Word of God is a power unto salvation. We must do our utmost to make sure the Word comes across. If this is not the case we have to look at whether this is so due of the way the minister brings it, or because the people have a difficulty understanding it. Whether it is a matter of not being able to, or not being willing to hear.

Overseers must be careful when concluding that members are not willing to hear. A disagreement can easily develop in a question of authority. Office bearers can hide behind this. Ministers must even be more

careful in this regard. They can feel personally attacked when criticized. It can develop into a power struggle. We must keep in mind that the members are in a disadvantage, because they do not have the authority that the office bearers have. It is even more detrimental when the minister attacks from the pulpit those who criticized him.

In the evaluation the format of the sermon must receive attention as well. The format is not what makes the Word acceptable or not. But the format can be a helpful tool, or it can also be a hindrance. Keeping in mind that we all have our limitations and characteristics we nevertheless must evaluate whether all that can be done is being done for the Word to reach the people.

6. The Congregation

The congregation has to receive the Word of God and work with it. This is not easy to gauge. In the home visits the elders have a good opportunity to see how the congregation works with the preaching of the Word. (See 1 - 1 The Home visit) This is to make sure that the Word reaches God's people. Also here it is not a particular sermon, but the over all picture. And if there are difficulties is this due to the sermon or the listener. The aim is to help each other in living from the Word. Confessing the clarity of Scripture also implies that members can have criticisms that are valid.

How should members of the congregation go about voicing criticism or concerns about a particular sermon? The sermon is a public matter, therefore if a member believes that something was said that was wrong he or she can go directly to the consistory. It is not necessary to first go to the minister, since the rule of Matthew 18 does not apply. On the one hand it can be helpful for members to first go and speak to the minister. In this way misunderstandings can be taken away, or further clarification can be given. On the other hand it also good to keep the option open that the members can go directly to the consistory, otherwise a minister could intimidate or even obstruct the proper course of action.

Part of maintaining the ministry of the gospel is that the congregation maintains a church building and contributes regularly so that the preaching can go on. There is a financial aspect to all of this as well. Without the proper support the preaching could not go on either. It is important that the congregation is reminded of the close connection between the two. Our love for the Lord and His Word comes out in contributing according to the measure in which the Lord has blessed us.

7. Sermon Discussion

Here follows an outline for sermon evaluation. This is not to be used as a checklist. Nor is this to be used for just one sermon. The evaluation wants to deal with the overall picture. These pointers and questions are only suggestions to stimulate a productive discussion. Not every point applies to every text and sermon. These pointers are to be used with discretion, to help the regular sermon evaluation.

7.1. The Text

- How does the sermon deal with the text?
 - is the sermon based on the text?
 - is the text used as a window into a larger picture of the work of God throughout the ages?
 - is the text used to air personal ideas?
 - is the explanation of the text too technical?
 - is the explanation of the text too speculative?

- How does the sermon/exegesis deal with the context? Is sufficient attention given to:
 - the immediate context, the vss/chapters before?
 - the context of the book/letter?
 - the context of the Bible?

- Is the whole of God's Word kept in mind in the sermon?
 - does the O.T. background come in the picture in N.T. texts?
 - does the N.T. fulfilment come in the picture in O.T. texts?
- Does the sermon mention the work of the holy Trinity?
 - is there attention for the work of the Father (creation)?
 - is there attention for the work of the Son (redemption)?
 - is there attention for the work of the Holy Spirit (sanctification)?
- What is the relationship between the sermon and the confession?
 - is the sermon confessionally sound?
 - in explaining the text does the confession play a role?
 - is the text used to show the Biblical foundation of the confession
- Is the sermon covenantal?
 - does it proclaim the promise, and obligation without separating them?
 - does it mention the sanction?
 - does it also show the unity of the covenant?
- Is the doctrine of election properly explained and applied?
- With regard to days of commemoration, do the sermons pay sufficient attention to these highlights?
- Is there a proper choice of texts?
 - does the minister follow a certain pattern?
 - does he preach sermon series?
 - is there enough variation: O.T. and N.T., historical, poetic, prophetic, gospel etc.

7.2. The Congregation

- How is the congregation addressed?
 - are they shown the promises?
 - are they reminded of their obligation?
 - are they reminded of the warning?
 - is there a proper balance?
- Are all members addressed?
 - are certain sections of the congregation overlooked?
 - are certain sections of the congregation receiving too much attention?
 - are those in special circumstances addressed?
- How do the sermons come across?
 - is there feedback from the congregation?
 - is the minister open to feedback?
 - do the members work with the sermons? (home visits)
- Is there a good use of the sacraments?
 - is baptism referred to?
 - is Lord's Supper brought into the picture?
- How is the application?
 - does it address the members in their lives?
 - does it flow from the text?

- does it deal with today's issues?
- can the members work with the application?

- Do the sermons give proper spiritual leadership?
 - does this leadership come from the Word of God?
 - is the minister addressing misconceptions or heresies in a proper manner?

7.3. The Format

- Is the sermon understandable?
 - is the language clear?
 - are the theme and points helpful?
 - is the set up logical?
 - is the language dignified?

- Do the children understand the sermon?

- Is there integration of the work of the elders/deacons and the sermon?
 - are concerns/suggestions mentioned by the overseers followed up?
 - can you work with the sermons on your visits?

- Is the preaching pastoral?
 - does it encourage?
 - does it comfort?

- Do the sermons reflect study on the side of the minister?

- Do the sermons show that the minister is a servant?

- Does the liturgy blend in with the preaching?

7.4. The Catechism Sermon

Many of the above mentioned points apply here as well. Some more specific questions are:

- Is there regular preaching from the Catechism?
- Do the sermons explain the only comfort in life and death?
- Is the doctrine of the church explained to the congregation?
- Do the sermons show the scriptural background of the confession?
- Do the sermons show respect and love for the confession of the church?
- Does it come out that this is the confession of the church?
- Is there enough variation each time the minister goes through the Catechism?

8. Ministry of Intercession

The relationship between the LORD and His people comes into existence and is maintained by the Word. Once this relationship is established God's people may and must answer, also in words. In answer to God's Word we may now direct our words to Him. That is what prayer is all about, to come to the LORD on the basis of His own Word. In this section we will deal with public prayer in the worship services. The public prayer does not do away with the need of private prayer, nor the other way around. In public prayer the congregation as a whole comes before God to give Him thanks and praise, to ask Him for His blessing, and to intercede.

8.1. Scripture

The O.T. uses the expression "to call upon the Name of the LORD." This expression includes more than prayer, but prayer is certainly part of it. The first time we meet it is in Gen. 4 : 26 "At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD." While the seed of Cain seeks its strength in itself, the seed of the woman calls upon the LORD for help. We also read in the book of Genesis of the many altars which were build by the patriarchs. They called upon the LORD. During the sojourning through the wilderness we read about times when Moses had to pray to the LORD on behalf of His people. We also learn from these histories how powerful such a prayer is. The best example of public prayer during the O.T. is the prayer in the temple by the priest. The sacrifice of incense symbolized the prayers of the people. We also meet several other examples, the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron.6), the prayer of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19) at the time Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrians, and the prayer of Daniel in exile (Dan.9). Finally, we find many examples of prayers in the Book of Psalms (44, 60, 66, 72).

The Lord Jesus Christ, our only High Priest, continually intercedes for us before the Father. This is the benefit of His ascension. In John 17 we have a beautiful example of His prayer for His Church. Prayer was also an essential part of the church after Pentecost. Acts 2 : 42 says that the Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. When the first persecution is felt the church again prays, and "after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken." (Acts 4:31) The letters of the N.T. mention prayer as well.

1 Tim. 2 : 1-2

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

1 Tim.2: 8

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.

In Revelation 6 : 10 we read that the souls under the alter cry with a loud voice. The end the Bible speaks about the prayer of the Bride, that is the Church, Come Lord Jesus.

8.2. The Confessions

The Confessions speak about prayer in general, but very little about public prayer. The Heidelberg Catechism deals with prayer under the Third Commandment. Although it does not mention the public prayer as such, yet it is part of hallowing the name of the LORD. The explanation of the Fourth Commandment does mention the public calling upon the Name of the Lord. The calling upon the Name of the Lord is seen as an integral part of the worship service. Certainly also the explanation of the Lord's Payer is of importance for the prayer in the church. The Belgic Confession mentions prayer in Article 26 that speaks about Christ's intercession. Our prayers are possible because Christ intercedes for us. It does not mention public prayers in this article. We do find a reference to public prayer in Art. 36 which deals with the civil government. "We ought to pray for them, that God may direct them in all their ways and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." Another reference to prayer we find in Art. 31 which deals with the officers of the church. They have to be chosen to office by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order.

8.3. Church Order and Liturgical Prayers

The Church Order deals with public prayer in several articles.

- Art. 3 The election to office shall take place ..., after preceding prayers, ...
- Art. 16 The specific duties of the minister of the Word are: ... publicly to call upon the Name of God in behalf of the whole congregation;
- Art. 34 The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with calling upon the Name of the Lord.
- Art. 54 In time of war, general calamities, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches, a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the churches appointed for that purpose by general synod.

We find several examples of public prayers in our Book of Praise. These prayers have a long history. (See VanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, p.142-171). In the church of Rome prayer has become more and more a standard ritual. Over against this the Reformed churches stressed that prayer is the expression of thankfulness. At the same time they did not want to leave it to the spur of the moment what we say in prayer, but wanted to instruct God's people that indeed it is very important how and what we bring before the Lord in prayer. These Form prayers are an important part of our heritage. We should use them. They can be used as they are, they can also function as teaching models.

Besides these Liturgical Prayers we also have several prayers in our Liturgical Forms that are to be used in public worship.

8.4. Goal

As church we must call publicly upon the Name of the Lord to:

- praise Him
- confess our sins
- ask for His grace and blessing
- lay our needs before Him
- pray for the needs of the world and those in high positions

8.5. Practice

It is clear that public prayer forms an important part in the life and the worship of the congregation. As people of the Lord we may call upon the Lord. This requires respect from the one who leads in prayer. The way in which we pray must reflect our love and respect toward the Lord. This public prayer also requires preparation. This prevents repetition, omissions or sloppiness. All the points mentioned under the goals must be addressed in prayer. When it comes to specifics in prayer we note that there are certain matters that should not be forgotten, e.g. the confession of sin or the blessing over the preaching. However, there are also needs which should be mentioned on a regular basis but do not need to be mentioned each and every Lord's Day, such as e.g. the government, the schools, the handicapped.

Because the prayer on behalf of the congregation has a public character, the council as a whole has responsibility in this regard. The leader of the worship service speaks also in these prayers on behalf of the whole congregation. Public prayer is something in which the whole counsel is involved. It should evaluate the prayers just as well as the sermons. In evaluating the public prayers the following points can be looked at:

- Does the prayer show love and respect for the Lord?
- Does the praise of God's Name receive sufficient attention?
- Is the confession of sin done properly?
- Are the needs of the congregation properly brought before the Lord?
- Are other needs mentioned as well?
- Is there is proper balance?
- Do special situations receive sufficient attention?

If there are special situations the overseers should let the one who leads in public prayer know, preferably before the Sunday. It is also important that before the worship service the council review which special situations will be mentioned.

What and who should or should not be mentioned in prayer? It is not always easy to give a clear set of rules for this. What makes it even more difficult is that some members do not inform the elders of certain situations and do not expect to be mentioned in prayer, while others do not request prayer and yet expect to be mentioned. There are also those who rather not be mentioned at all. Some sensitivity and discretion needs to be exercised. Prayer should not make people uncomfortable nor be a means to advertize one's problems. It should also be kept in mind that although at times it is good to mention names, the congregation should realize that all members are included in the public prayer. Does the fact that a name is used make any difference, or would the prayer any less powerful? No. Members do well to make prayer request well in advance, if possible. The council will have to judge whether this request can be granted. It will be helpful if there are some agreed upon guidelines in this regard. Consistency is important, without becoming rigid. In all this we must keep in mind the tremendous riches of being allowed to call upon the Lord to lay our needs before Him, as well as the fear and respect we must have for His awesome holiness.

Days of Prayer are not proclaimed very often. The Church Order says that such a day is to be proclaimed in time of war, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches. General Synod has appointed the churches of Burlington-Waterdown and Edmonton -Providence to proclaim such a day. How is such a day of prayer to be observed? There are no clear guidelines. The custom is that after the prayer after the morning sermon pays special attention to it. Every year there is a the Prayer for Crops and Labour as well as the Prayer of Thanksgiving. The question with regard to days of prayer, applies here as well. How do we observe this? Does the prayer itself receive sufficient attention? These matter may need further reflection.

9. Literature

The following books are listed for further study. Much material of this chapter was taken from these sources.

- K.Deddens, Where Everything Points to Him, Inheritance Publications, 1993
- C.Trimp, De Gemeente en Haar Liturgie, Van den Berg -Kampen, 1983
- G.VanDooren, The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy, Premier Printing, 1992 (3rd printing)
- W.W.J.Van Oene, With Common Consent, Premier Printing, 1990,
- G.vanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, Inheritance Publications, 1995
- C.Trimp, A resounding Gospel, printed in Diaconia

10. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this chapter, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. For evaluation see part 7 and 8.5.
3. Are there any concerns with regard to the preaching or the prayers? What are these concerns? Why are they a concern? What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Outline

Chapter 1 - 6

Communion of Saints

Introduction

1. Scripture
2. Confessions, Church Order, Forms and Prayers
 - 2.1. Apostles' Creed
 - 2.2. Belgic Confession
 - 2.3. Heidelberg Catechism
 - 2.4. Church Order
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3. Goal
4. The Communion of Saints and the Lord's Supper
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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Introduction

The expression "the communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed follows the confession "I believe one holy catholic Christian church." The words "communion of saints" are a further explanation of the church. These words teach us what the church is, as well as what she ought to be, namely the communion of saints. The saints are the children of God set apart by the Lord so that they may serve Him. These saints have communion, and that is what the church is all about. In this section we will look at how the congregation functions as the communion of saints.

The expression "the communion of saints" is taken in this chapter in a broad sense. At times you notice that it is used in a limited way, e.g. helping each other in situations of need. Certainly this is an important part of the communion of saints, but it includes much more, such as, encouraging each other, admonishing each other, worshipping together, studying God's word together, etc.

1. Scripture

The LORD God made man to have communion with Him and with fellow human beings.

Gen 2:18

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Scripture also teaches that after man destroyed this communion by his fall into sin, the LORD God restored it again by His work of redemption. When the LORD redeemed Israel, He redeemed them as a nation. Israel walked through the wilderness as a people. Even the order in which they had to march and how they had to be camped showed this (See e.g. Numbers 10). The Lord is redeeming a nation.

Exod 19:6

you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

This has also consequences for receiving the new land. Together the people of Israel inherited the land.

Joshua 22 : 26-27

That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar -but not for burnt offering or sacrifices.' On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you, and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the LORD.'

Judges 1:3

Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them.

Within this nation each individual has a place. The Israelites are called to care for their brothers and sisters. The LORD gives laws to preserve the communion.

Ex 21:2

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.

Ex 22:25-27

"If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

Deut 14:28-29

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deut 15:11

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Ps 16:3

As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.

Ps 42:4

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.

Ps 55:14

with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

Ps 122:8

For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you."

The communion showed in mutual discipline. The Israelites were called to protect the communion in making sure that the one who sins is punished, lest God's wrath comes on the whole congregation. See e.g. Deut. 13.

The Old Testament also speaks about the breakdown and rejection of this communion.

Gen 4:9

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Josh 7:1

But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel.

Ps 10:2

In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.

Ps 55:12-13

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend,

Micah 2:1-2

Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.

Psalm 133 sings of the beauty of the communion of saints.

Ps 133:1-3

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Christ came to restore the communion with God and with each other. Through faith in Him the communion can be enjoyed.

Matt 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Luke 8:21

He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."

John 13:13-14

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

The church after Pentecost put this in practice. Their communion was a fruit of obedience to the teaching of the apostles.

Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2:44-45

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

The apostles continue the teaching of the O.T. The church is compared to a house. Now a house is more than the total sum of stones used. It is a structure in which each stone has its own place. So the church is a communion in which the members support, help, encourage, protect and warn each other. In this way it becomes a house. The congregation is a holy nation and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). The members

must care for each other. At the same time we must keep in mind that unity is not the same as uniformity. The congregation is a unity, but not a uniform group of people. The Holy Spirit gives to each member his own talents. The talents are to be used for the well-being of the whole congregation. The Bible uses the example of a body. It consists of many members, each with a different function. All these different members function together in the body. They need each other and support each other. We receive salvation within the communion of saints. (Hebrews 11:40: "that apart from us they should not be made perfect.") The Bible does not know of a dilemma between corporate and individual as if we had to choose the one or the other. They go together and complement each other. As a member of His body I have communion with Him and with the other members.

Rom 12:4-5

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Rom 12:13

Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

1 Cor 12:26-27

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

2 Cor 8:14-15

At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Phil 2:4-7

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

1 Pet 5:5

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

James 1:27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 2:13

because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Also in the New Testament we read of the duty to show care for each other in admonishing when necessary. Because sin breaks down communion and drives people apart, mutual discipline is a gift from the Lord to protect the communion of saints. The rule which the Lord Jesus gave in Matthew 18 has as aim that we do not lose each other. The communion of saints is so precious that it needs to be protected against the destructive power of sin. The easiest thing to do is desert leave the one who is sinning, and let him be in his sin. However, the Lord wants us to care for each other. The communion we have shows in admonishing one another in a brotherly manner. The expression "bear one another's burdens" in Gal.6:1-2 shows this as well. (See also part 2 - 2 Church Discipline)

Gal 6:1-2

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

Our future is the perfect communion on the new earth.

Rev 7:9-10

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Rev 21 :3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

2. Confessions, Church Order, Forms

2.1. Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed connects the communion of saints to the church and mentions it in the section about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. This communion is a gift of God and comes about through the preaching of the gospel and by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. The new life we may live as redeemed people we live in communion with God and our brothers and sisters. We receive this new life within the communion of the saints. We may even say that this communion is a tool to sanctify the life of the believers.

I believe one holy catholic Christian Church, the communion of saints

2.2. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession brings out that we are duty bound to be joined to the church, and this also means to serve the edification of the brothers and sisters. Participating in the communion is an obligation.

Article 28

We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

To observe this more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.

All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

2.3. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism brings out very beautifully that the relationship with the other members is founded in and motivated by the relationship with Christ. We should never separate the unity we have in Christ from the unity we have with each other. It also brings out our calling in regard to discipline to protect the communion.

Q/A 55

What do you understand by *the communion of the saints*?

First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.

Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.

Q/A 82

Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.

Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

Q/A 85.

How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.

Q/A 111.

What does God require of you in this (eighth) commandment?

I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

2.4. Church Order

The communion of saints is connected to the work of the deacons and is protected by mutual discipline.

Art. 23 Deacons

The specific duties of the office of deacon are to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

Art. 66 Church Discipline

... which (=church discipline administered in a spiritual manner) can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 is followed in obedience.

2.5. Forms**Form for Public Profession of faith**

Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of His church?

Form for Lord's Supper

By the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body. For the apostle Paul says, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. As one bread is baked out of many grains and one wine is pressed out of many grapes, so we all incorporated in Christ by faith, are together one body. For the sake of Christ, who now so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds."

Forms for Excommunication and Readmission**Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons****The Ministry of Mercy**

...the Lord impressed upon His people Israel the obligation to show mercy to the needy

They shall promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord. In this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men.

Form for Marriage**The Duties of Marriage**

Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need.

3. Goal

For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds. The task of the overseers is to make the congregation aware of the treasures we have in Christ and to encourage them to use these readily and cheerfully for the wellbeing and benefit of the other members.

4. Communion of Saints and Lord's Supper

The Apostles' Creed uses the expression "the communion of saints" as a further explanation of the church. The church is and ought to be the communion of saints. It is both a gift and a calling. This is what we learn from the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Lord Supper shows the unity we have with Christ, for we eat His true body and drink His true blood. The Lord's Supper also shows that we have communion with each other, for we drink together. We eat from one bread and we share a cup. Rejoicing in God's redemption is not something you do by yourself but together with others. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is therefore a wonderful reminder of our bond with Christ and with each other. It also strengthens this bond.

5. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this work, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. In evaluating the functioning of the communion of saints two things can be asked:
 - Do the members of the congregation see the basis of this communion in Christ's work of redemption?
 - Do the members of the church use their gifts for the well-being of the other members? Of course, the question is also how we as office-bearers help the congregation in this?
3. This can be worked out into the following questions:
 - Are the members aware of the gift of the communion of saints?
 - Is this gift explained in the preaching and teaching?
 - Is the celebration of the Lord's Supper seen as a means to strengthen and direct the communion?
 - How do members help each other?
 - Do all members participate in the communion?
 - Are those in special circumstances remembered, helped and visited?
 - Do new comers feel at home in our midst?
 - Is there a tendency of peer pressure in the congregation?
 - Do the lonely, elderly, or handicapped receive attention?
 - Do the members see their calling to admonish if necessary?
 - How does the rule of Matthew 18 function?
4. We can also look at certain specific areas. Members can be overlooked or fall between the cracks. Do members make an effort to get to know the other members? There is always the danger that we make our own groups and forget about others. Are we aware of this? Do we warn against this? Do we teach this to our children? If a congregation consists family clans, then we should watch that the involvement in the immediate family hinders the involvement in the congregation.
5. Most congregations have a committee in the congregation that arranges help for those in need. Often the sisters are involved in this work. But it need not be restricted to them. Such a committee would do well to have a good relationship with the Deacons. The purpose of these care committees is to organize help when needed. The committee members should not do all the work themselves, but ask and encourages other to help out. This help by a committee should never go at the expense of the individual initiative in the congregation.
6. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
7. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation?
What are these concerns?
Why are they a concern?
What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Outline

Chapter 1 - 7

Instruction / Education / Equipping

Introduction

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2. Confessions, Church Order, Forms and Prayers

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4.1. Home

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5. The Office bearers

6. Evaluation

INSTRUCTION - EDUCATION - EQUIPPING

Introduction

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (2 Pet. 3:18) God's people have to grow in knowledge, in service, dedication and obedience. In this chapter we will pay attention to the instruction, education, and equipping of the members of the congregation for service in God's Kingdom. It involves the children as well as the adults, formal as well as informal instruction.

1. Scripture

God has revealed Himself to us and thus we can know Him. He has revealed His will in His Word. In studying this Word we grow in knowledge. This knowledge begins with fearing the LORD and shows in loving Him from the heart. To know God and His will is gift of grace and a great treasure.

Prov 1:7-9

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.

Prov.3:13-18

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better return than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

This instruction comes from the LORD

Ps 25:12

Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him.

The Lord uses parents to teach.

Deut. 6: 4 - 9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Prov 4:1

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.

The Lord also used others, prophets and priests. Samuel was instructed by Eli (1 Sam.2). The prophets had students (2 Kings2; Isa.8:16)

Lev 10:11

and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses."

Ps 32:8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

The purpose of this instruction is to grow in knowledge and service.

Deut 4:9

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

Prov 9:9-10

Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Ignoring this instruction leads to disaster.

Prov 5:11-13

At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors.

Hosea 4:6

my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.

Also the N.T. shows us the need to grow in knowledge.

Col 1:10

And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

Heb 5:11-6:3

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

2 Pet 1:5-8

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Pet 3:18

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

This growing in knowledge involves teaching.

Acts 15:35

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

1 Tim 4:11

Command and teach these things.

The textbook for this teaching is the Bible and its goal is the service of God.

2 Tim 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

To know God is to love Him. Deepening in knowledge strengthens this love as well. The opposite is true as well, when knowledge grows shallow there is the danger that the love declines. Paul's prayer for the congregation at Philippi is telling.

Phil 1:9-11

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

2. Confession, Church Order, Forms

2.1. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism has as aim to teach the youth of the church. Thus it comes as no surprise that it speaks several times about knowledge. We were created to know God.

Q/A 6

Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?

No, on the contrary, God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.

Knowledge is renewed by faith, and is part of faith. Thus the Lord calls His people in the First Commandment to know Him and to ask for this knowledge in the First Petition. (underline mine, DA)

Q/A 21.

What is true faith?

True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word. At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.

Q/A 94.

What does the LORD require in the first commandment?

That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry, witchcraft, superstition, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God, trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honour Him with all my heart. In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against His will.

Q/A 103.

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

First, That the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal sabbath.

Q/A 122.

What is the first petition?

Hallowed be Thy Name. That is: Grant us first of all that we may rightly know Thee, and sanctify, glorify, and praise Thee in all Thy works, in which shine forth Thy almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth. Grant us also that we may so direct our whole life -- our thoughts, words, and actions -- that Thy Name is not blasphemed because of us but always honoured and praised.

2.2. Canons of Dort

The perseverance of God's elect includes the use of means. This involves the study of God's Word.

Chapter 5, Article 14 The Use Of Means In Perseverance

As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threatenings, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments.

2.3. Church Order

Art. 16. The Office of the Ministers of the Word

also to instruct the children of the Church in the doctrine of salvation

Art. 27. False Doctrine

To ward off false doctrines and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct, the minister and elders shall use the means of instruction

Art. 58. Schools

The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the Church has summarized it in her Confessions.

2.4. Forms

Form for Baptism

Questions to Parents

Third, do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he(he) is able to understand, and to have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?

Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons

To do their work well as shepherds of God's flock, the overseers should train themselves in godliness and diligently search the Scriptures, which are profitable in every respect, that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.

2.5. Prayers

A Prayer after the Sermon

We thank Thee, merciful God and Father, that Thou hast brought us to the knowledge of Thee and of Thy Son by Thy Spirit and Word and hast caused Thy Word to be proclaimed to us. Grant that we, having received Christ Jesus the Lord, may live in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as we were taught, abounding in thanksgiving

A Prayer before the Explanation of the Catechism

Heavenly Father, Thy Word is perfect, reviving the soul; Thy testimony is sure, making wise the simple. Thy gospel is the power unto salvation to everyone who believes. We, however, are by nature blind and incapable of doing any good. We beseech Thee, therefore, that Thou wilt illumine our darkened minds by Thy Holy Spirit.

A Prayer after the Explanation of the Catechism

Thou gavest pastors and teachers to equip the saints for their service to Thee, so that the body of Christ may be built up. We beseech Thee that Thou wilt continue to work in the hearts of all children of the covenant, both old and young, in order that we may grow in the knowledge of thy grace in Christ until we reach complete

maturity in Him. May we, by Thy power, not be tossed to and fro and carried with every wind of doctrine. Bless our families and endow the parents by Thy Spirit with the wisdom which is from above, that they may bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. We pray Thee for all teaching which is based upon Thy holy Word, as we have summarized it in the Confessions of the Church. Be with all who labour in it and provide them with that knowledge and wisdom which is rooted in the fear of thy name.

3. Goal

The members of the congregation have to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They have to grow in knowledge and godliness. This requires oversight and instruction by the overseers. The overseers have to be equipped for this as well.

4. Home-School-Church

The instruction of the congregation takes place in many ways. It takes place in a formal as well as an informal setting. In this paragraph we will look at some of these elements. Using a well known-division we will pay attention to the instruction which takes place in the home, in school, and in the church.

4.1. Home

The home is the primary place for instruction. The vow given at baptism clearly indicates that the parents have the first obligation in educating the children. The Old Testament gives many examples of this instruction. By means of stones, customs and festivals the LORD made sure that parents spoke with their children about the mighty deeds and the will of the LORD. Parents are called to instruct the children in the doctrine of salvation. This is much more than an abstract and theoretical knowledge, rather it is the wisdom as Proverbs speaks about it. Parents have to help their children to apply the doctrine of salvation to their daily lives. This teaching should not stay in generalities. Of course, in order to do this parents themselves have to grow in knowledge as well. In this connection we do well to keep in mind that knowing God and His will involves our whole life. We should not separate life into a material and spiritual part. The material aspect of life is ruled by the spiritual and vice versa, the spiritual aspect of life shows in how we deal with the material things of life. Parents have the task to teach their children to follow the Lord in all of life. The media that are part of our lives do not always help us in this task, since they often promote a goal that clashes with the will of the Lord. The home visit is a means to ask about these things and to find out whether and how this instruction takes place.

4.2. Schools

Organized in societies the parents operate day schools, kindergarten, elementary and secondary schools. The establishing of the schools flows out of the promise given at baptism. Our children belong to the Lord and this has implication for their instruction. At baptism parents make the promise that the instruction of their children will be done in the fear of the LORD and in agreement with the doctrine of salvation as taught in the church. All decisions further in life about the education of their children has to be in line with the promise made at baptism.

The Reformed churches have always stressed the importance of sound instruction. The close bond between what is taught at home and in church led to the establishment of Christian day schools. We want our children to be taught in a way that is consistent with the teaching at home and in church. Not only do we need to maintain our schools, we also have to take care that the curriculum and training of teachers will help our schools. Curriculum development and teachers training need to be promoted. We do not support our schools because the public system is so bad, but because we want to teach our children that Christ is Lord in all of life. One more reason for establishing our schools is the realization that our children are part of the communion of God's people, and that, if at all possible, the education should take place within this communion. It is noteworthy that the Catechism (L.D. 38) mentions the schools in connection with the commandment to keep the Day of the Lord holy, and the call to maintain the ministry of the gospel. The schools help our children to function in the church and the worship of God's Name.

These schools are a great blessing to the churches. At the same time we must not close our eyes for some problem areas. It can happen that parents lose sight of their primary task as instructors. The schools can only function well when it is supported by the instruction at home. There is also the danger that we take for-granted having our own schools. We need to constantly make the members aware of the need for these schools. It would be good to make the younger generation aware of the reasons why their grandparents worked hard to establish these schools. A third danger is that the school is supported mainly by the parents of school age children. We need to stimulate the thought that the whole community supports the education of the children. A fourth area of concern is that although we have our own schools and our children are privileged to receive this instruction, the knowledge and lifestyle of the children do not always reflect this. It is important that if there are concerns in this regard they be brought to the Board in the proper way.

The schools which we maintain are operated by the parents as organized in the respective societies and boards. Council does not run these schools. Yet there is a connection between the schools and the church. Lord's Day 38 of the Catechism connects the schools to the ministry of the gospel. Art. 58 of the C.O. stipulates that the consistory must ensure that the education which the children receive is indeed in harmony with the promise made at baptism. It is note-worthy that this article is found in the part of the Church Order that speaks about the functioning of the church as the gathering of believers. This part speaks about the worship services and the use of the sacraments. This shows that the function of the school can be seen also in terms of the worship service. The children learn skills that help them to function as living members in the church. Another connection between school and church is that the true and complete doctrine of salvation in which the children have to be taught, is the doctrine that is preached in this Christian church. As parents we want our children to be taught in the true faith. The teaching in the school is to be done in accordance with the Word of God. This Word is administered and confessed by the Church. A third connection is the financial one. The education is to be supported by all members. The financial burden should not only fall on the shoulders of the parents, but should also be carried by the younger and older generation.

Article 58 of the Church Order indicates that the elders have an obligation with regard to the way in which parents fulfil their task. Elders indeed have to ask questions and judge the answers of the parents. The overseers can become involved in the financial matters as well. When a member fails to pay the required membership fee, the Board, usually contacts the parents. If there is no improvement the School Board should inform the consistory of this. The elders bring a visit to determine whether these parents are unwilling or unable to pay. If there is unwillingness then admonitions follow. If they are unable then the Deacons will be involved. A covenant child should not be expelled from school for financial reasons.

The last ten years has seen the development of home schooling. Christian parents who were sending their children to the public school became increasingly alarmed about the teaching their children received and started to teach their children at home. This has grown into a much larger movement, which promotes the idea that only parents should teach their children. In the situation where there is no Canadian Reformed school home schooling would be an option. In situations where there is Canadian Reformed education it becomes more problematic. It can happen that times parents opt for home schooling because they have a problem with the Board or a teacher. However, home schooling should not become an easy way out if one doesn't get his way. Financial reasons should not be a reason for home schooling either. But more importantly, to home school while there is the possibility to send the child to a Canadian Reformed day school runs counter to the principle that as a church community we belong together. It is true that in Bible the parents are instructed to teach their children, but that did not exclude the use of teachers. We need one another, also in running a school and educating our children. It is very well possible that parents can do an excellent job in teaching their children, but they will miss out on something more important, namely, to learn to function within the communion of saints. Home schooling can result in promoting a community that runs separate from the communion which the Lord gives.

In a situation of home schooling the elders should visit to find out the reasons. The elders have to explain why they do not favour home schooling. If the reasons given are not sufficient, they should not be afraid to show the parents their wrong. In addition, they must see to it that the instruction which the parents provide is in line with the promise given at baptism. Most of the home school curriculums are not Reformed. As we are developing Reformed curriculums, it doesn't make sense to seek the help of non-reformed sources.

4.4. Church

When we look at the task of the church to instruct and equip the members for service we can mention in the first place the preaching of the gospel. The church has been entrusted with the gospel and the proclamation of it. This proclamation has to build up the congregation in the knowledge of the truth and train God's people in godliness. (See 1 - 5 Preaching) In addition to this, there are several other ways in which this training takes place such as: catechism, home-visits, study societies. These are all discussed in other parts of this Handbook.

The instruction of the congregation also involves reading books, periodicals. Since there are many books available that claim to be Christian, but which do not maintain the Reformed teachings, a good church library is important.

5. Office bearers

The need for training and equipping applies also to the office bearers. The Form for Ordination refers to this as well. In order to do our work well, we need to train ourselves in godliness and diligently search the Scriptures. This should be done on a personal level. It can also be done together as overseers. This Handbook is one way of addressing this need. But there are other means possible as well, such as office bearers conferences and/or workshops.

The Scripture teaches us that when one aspires the office he aspires a noble task. We must encourage younger brothers to prepare for office. This is done in the men's society, but it could also be done in organizing study evenings for this purpose.

The minister's task is to teach and instruct, but he himself needs to be equipped as well. The elders do well to ask about this. Does he see the need for this himself? How does he do this? The budget contains a book allowance. This is done so that the minister can continue his study. Does he use it well? To stimulate such study it can be beneficial to give him time to study.

6. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this chapter, as well as the goal mentioned. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. How can we help the congregation to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus?
3. The evaluation can deal with the instruction that takes place at home, in school and in the church. How does this function? What is our task as office-bearers? How can we help the parents to teach their children? How is the bond between church and school? What is our approach to home schooling? How can we foster the awareness of why we establish our own schools? How can we stimulate the participation of the whole congregation in the schools?
4. With regard to the church: is there a good library? Does the library function well? How can we promote the use of a good library?

5. How do we as office-bearers train ourselves? Do we take the time for this? How can we prepare younger brothers for the office? Does the minister study? Does he have time to do this?
6. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
7. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation?
What are these concerns?
Why are they a concern?
What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Outline

Chapter 1 - 8

The Minister of the Word

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THE MINISTER OF THE WORD

Introduction

Article 2 of the Church Order reads: "The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder and of the deacon." In this chapter we will deal with the office of the Minister of the Word.

1. Office

Before dealing with the task of the minister of the Word it will be helpful to review the character of the office in the church. An office is a task received from the Lord with the view of building up the congregation. See Belgic Confession, art. 30 and 31. An office has three components: a calling from the Lord, authority from the Lord, and a specific task for building up the congregation. We believe that the Lord Jesus is the Head of the church. He bought His Church with His blood. He has entrusted the care of His congregation in the hands of the overseers. The overseers are therefore in the first place servants of the Lord. At the same time they have to be servants of the Lord in the congregation. We reject a democratic model, as if the office bearers are elected representatives. We also reject the dictatorial model, as if the office bearers can do what ever they want. Christ rules the church through the office bearers.

2. Minister of the Word

In an earlier chapter we have considered the Ministry of the Word (see 1 - 6). This ministry had been given by the Lord Jesus to the apostles. We read in the N.T. that the apostles appointed elders in every town. According to 1 Tim.3:17 there were elders who ruled the congregation. Some of them were also called to labour in preaching and teaching. The latter are now called ministers of the Word. They have received the ministry of reconciliation. (See 2 Cor.5:18-20) The ministers are elders. They have the same authority as the other elders, yet their task is different. Ministers are called to preach and to administer the sacraments. The task of a minister also includes teaching.

3. Confessions, Church Order

3.1. Belgic Confession

The Confession makes clear that the ministers have authority, but also stress that ministers are not higher or more powerful than the other elders.

Article 30 The Government Of The Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church.

Article 31 The Officers Of The Church

Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

3.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism mentions that God in the Fourth Commandment requires that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained. This means the churches have to make sure there are ministers and that those who want to become a minister receive a proper training

Q/A 103.

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

First, That the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained

3.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons do not address the office of ministers as such, but speak highly about their task.

Chapter 1, Article 3 The Preaching Of The Gospel

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?

Chapter 3/4, Article 17 The Use Of Means

For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together.

4. Duties of the Minister

The Form for Ordination and the Church Order give a clear outline of the task of the minister.

4.1. Form for Ordination

The Form lists the following elements:

- declare the whole counsel of God to the congregation
- in public and from house to house:
 - expose all heresies as unfruitful
 - exhort the members to walk as children of light
- teach the Word of God to the youth; and others whom God calls
- visit the members in the congregation; comfort the sick and sorrowing
- call the whole congregation to the redemption which is in Christ Jesus
- administer the sacraments
- to call upon the Name of the Lord in public worship
- together with the elders see to it that in the congregation all things are done decently and in good order.
- Together supervise the doctrine and life of the membership
 - shut and open the kingdom of God by Christian discipline

Charge to the Minister lists the following:

- feed the Lambs and tend the sheep, not by constraint but willingly
- take heed to yourself set the believers an example in speech conduct in love in faith in purity
- preach the pure doctrine
- Share in suffering as a good soldier
- Do not neglect the gift you, with which the Lord has endowed you for this ministry
- Devote yourself to your duties with all your strength

4.2. Church Order

According to the Church Order the ministers are

- thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of God
- to administer the sacraments
- to publicly call upon the name of God in behalf of the whole congregation
- to instruct the children of the church in the doctrine of salvation
- to visit the members of the congregation in their homes
- to comfort the sick with the Word of God
- with the elders
 - to keep the church in good order
 - exercise discipline
 - govern the congregation in such a manner as the Lord has ordained

4.2. Church Order about the Minister

The following articles of the Church Order mention the minister:

Art. 3	Calling
Art. 4	Eligibility
Art. 5	Ordination and Installation
Art. 6	Bound to one church
Art. 9	From one Church to another
Art. 10	Proper support
Art. 11	Dismissal
Art. 12	Bound for life
Art. 13	Retirement
Art. 14	Temporary Release
Art. 15	Preaching in other places
Art. 16	The duties of the Minister
Art. 17	Equality among Ministers
Art. 26	Subscription to the Confessions
Art. 27	Ward off false doctrine.
Art. 38	Consistory
Art. 42	Ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy
Art. 45	Counsellors for vacant congregations
Art. 46	Church Visitors
Art. 56	Administration of the sacraments
Art. 63	Marriage
Art. 71	Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers
Art. 73	Christian Censure

5. Calling

5.1. Extending a call

"No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto." (C.O. art. 3) This lawful calling involves the congregation. Prior to calling a minister it will be helpful to formulate Guidelines.

These Guidelines would deal with

- the mandate for a calling committee
- make up of the committee
- involvement of congregation in nominating
- criteria for investigating a minister or candidate

These investigations could include the following points:

preaching; catechism instruction; rapport with the congregation; rapport with young people; personal data; visiting; length of service in current congregation; attitude toward schools and organization; stand point in matters under discussion within the churches

- how to inform the congregation
- voting procedure and required majority

After the election by the congregation the council will issue a letter of call to the minister/candidate. This letter has to be signed by all elders and deacons as well as the counsellor. An example is added to this chapter. The council must also present the minister/candidate with detailed information about stipend, allowances, housing, holidays, moving etc. This is usually written down in an Appendix to the Letter of Call and also signed by council and counsellor. The minister as a rule receives three weeks to come to a decision. In the case of a candidate six weeks is the usually time. During this time the minister/candidate will be asked to meet with the congregation.

If the minister accepts the call, the council has to come to an agreement with the council where he was serving for a proper change over, the date and time that the minister becomes the responsibility of the

new congregation. The date of ordination has to be announced to the congregation. Classis has to be asked for its approbation as well. See art. 5 B and D of the Church Order. To grant approbation Classis needs to see the letter of call, the letter of acceptance, the certificate(s) of release, the agreement between the two councils and a statement by the calling church that the name has been announced and no objections have been brought forward.

5.2. Receiving a call

"A minister, once lawfully called, shall not leave the Church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of the consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis." When the minister who serves in this congregation receives a call, he shall inform council of this. The congregation shall be informed as well. Before he makes a decision on the call the minister has to discuss the matter with council. It can happen that council would like to see the minister stay, but as such has no objection if he would decide to leave. It could also happen that council is of the opinion that the minister cannot leave. Council will have to give proper reasons for this. Sometimes a calling church will come back after some time to ask permission to issue a second call. If the minister agrees to this he can only decline if there weighty reasons. Also in this situation advice from council is very important.

Vacant churches that are asking for information concerning a minister have the freedom to approach whomever they want. If they ask individual members of the congregation, these members answer as individuals. If they approach members of council it would be advisable that these members bring the matter to council, so that if need be council as a whole can give an answer. If need be the minister can be absent from this part of the meeting. All in all it will be helpful to have a good understanding of the procedure in case a call is extended.

6. Workload of the Minister

It is not always easy to outline the work load of a minister. His schedule can vary from week to week. Yet there are several elements that form a regular part of his schedule. It will be helpful to list them, in order to be able to evaluate this, since the elders are charged with the supervision over the minister.

6.1. Preaching

As a rule the minister preaches twice on the Lord's Day in his "own" congregation. The time needed to prepare these two sermons varies. It depends on the text, the person of the minister, the events that took place in that week. It is fair to assume that preparing sermons takes a considerable part of the week. Most churches allow their minister regular exchanges in addition to the holidays. Not only does this help the minister, it is also good for the congregation to hear other ministers.

6.2. Teaching

The minister's task is also to teach the youth of the church, as well as those who have expressed the desire to join the church. Some times a consistory can decide to ask others to help out with teaching. This is not wrong, but is at all possible the minister should teach most of the classes. It will strengthen the bond between the minister and the youth of the church.

6.3. Visiting

As a rule the minister visits those who are ill, in hospital, or are bound to home due to age and others who are in need. In some congregation he also visits parents who have received a baby and. It is possible that the minister becomes involved in discipline visits and home visits. There is something to be said for this. He gets to know the congregation in this way. At the same time, it can also be healthy that the minister focusses more on preaching and teaching. By being not directly involved in situations of discipline, the minister it is less likely that elements of these situations find their way into the preaching. Whatever the case, it should be clear what is expected of him. The minister visits also when there are problems in a family, or a person's life. At times this is called counselling. See chapter 3 - 4 of the Handbook.

6.4. Supervision

Together with the elders the minister must supervise the congregation. This mainly takes place at the consistory meetings. It can also involve disciplinary visits, but is not limited to it. When it comes to the work of the minister supervision also takes place via the preaching.

6.5. Council/Consistory/Deacons

The minister is chairman of the council and consistory. Some churches are changing this. At this point our Church Order still stipulate that as a rule that the minister is the chairman. The minister also visits the meeting of deacons if necessary.

6.6. Federation

Most ministers are involved in ecclesiastical work within the federation in one way or another. It could be as delegate to a major assembly, member of a synodical committee, as counsellor of a vacant congregation or as church visitor. The council should be aware of the work he does.

6.7. Study and other activities

It is important that a minister continues to study. This will benefit the sermons. This study can be done in different ways. To mention some examples: it can be by following a program at a University, by personal study or by preparing speeches. The elders should stimulate the minister in this, if at all possible.

6.8. Family

Usually the minister is also a husband and a (grand)father. There has to be time to fulfil the tasks connected to these callings as well. The elders must make sure of this.

7. Theological College

The churches maintain a institution in which men are prepared for the ministry. This College is under the supervision of the Churches via its General Synods and Deputies. This is not the place to evaluate this institution and its set-up. What is more important in this context is the support for the College. This support is evident in prayer, financial contributions. It also involves making sure that there are students of theology. If there is a shortage of ministers we need to ask ourselves the question what we can do to promote young men entering the College.

8. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this sacrament, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. Does the minister have enough time to do his work? Does the minister have enough time for his family? Are there health concerns that need to be taken into account?
3. How does the minister function within the council/consistory?
4. Do we have Regulations for calling a minister? If necessary they may need to be reviewed. If there are no Regulations, would it be helpful to formulate them?
5. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
6. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation?
What are these concerns?
Why are they a concern?
What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Letter of Call

Dear brother in the Lord,

The Council of the Canadian Reformed Church at, wishing to have the vacancy in the ministry filled in order that this church be provided with a minister of the Divine Word, has assembled for this purpose on, and after having called upon the name of the Lord that it mighty please Him in His grace to a give a minister to this church, and having received the consent of the congregation, has decided to extend a call to you

Hereby informing you of this call, we wish to inform you that we accept and maintain the Three Forms of Unity as the agreement of ecclesiastical communion, and that we abide by the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Because we know that this confession is also yours and that you are willing to abide by this Church Order and maintain the ecclesiastical communion, we urge you to seriously consider this call and, if the Lord guides you this way, to accept it in order that in due time you may come over to be publicly installed in this church.

It is our sincere wish and prayer that you as a man filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, with grace and power may become an instrument in the hand of the Lord to build up with Him this church upon the only foundation, laid by God, and that the Holy Spirit may equip you with His gifts so that your service in the congregation may be to the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we expect you to expound and apply the Word of God to the congregation, to administer the sacraments, and to lead in public prayers. You will be charged to faithfully administer the keys of the kingdom of heaven from the pulpit, in the catechism classes, in the meetings of the consistory and the council, and in the homes of the church members, in order that those who lack knowledge may be instructed and the disobedient may be admonished, the afflicted may be comforted and the sick may be visited, and that as a faithful shepherd who carries the souls of the congregation in his heart you may proclaim to everyone that the ungodly will be rejected and that only he who is justified in the blood of Christ has peace everlasting.

On our part, we pray that we may receive grace to assist you in brotherly love and faithfulness and in unity of the spirit, in order that we with you may feed the flock of the Lord Jesus Christ at this place.

Further, in obedience to the Word of God we pledge to provide for the proper support of you, who labour in the Word in His church, to enable you to work without undue worries. You will find the particulars in an appendix attached to this letter of call.

Entrusting you to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will be grateful to receive your favourable reply indicating your willingness to become our pastor and teacher. If at all possible, we would like to have your decision within three weeks from receipt of this letter,

With brotherly greetings,
The council

(All the members of council sign, as well as the counsellor.)

