

LITURGY OF GOD'S COVENANT

OUTLINES ON THE REFORMED LITURGY

by

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Published by the Inter-League Publication Board of the study societies of The Canadian Reformed Churches and the Publication Committee of The Free Reformed Church of Launceston.

This publication, in the form of a booklet, was written and published in 1966. Apart from some cosmetic corrections, the text remains unaltered from the original.

The booklet was published for the purpose of providing Bible study societies with outlines. The chapters (outlines) originally had some questions with it and a more exhaustive literature list, mostly referring to Dutch publications. REV. G. VAN RONGEN

The following books on the topic of Liturgy are readily available:

G. VanDooren, The Beauty of the Reformed Liturgy (Premier Publishing, Winnipeg);

G. van Rongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book (Inheritance Publications, Neerlandia).

Any quotations from the Bible are taken from the King James Version.

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1. WHAT HAPPENS IN CHURCH?

Yes indeed, what does happen in Church? Of course each of us is able to answer this question. One person would say: we go to Church to worship God. Another would answer: in Church we hear God's Word. A third would proclaim that in Church God speaks to us, and we answer Him by means of our singing, our prayers and our offerings. Number four would even quote Lord's Day 38 of our Heidelberg Catechism: "to learn God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms".

Each of these answers is correct. But some other questions must be asked. For example: Why is our liturgy just as it is? Why does the minister start with the words: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth"? Why does he continue with: "Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"? Why sometimes even a long and quite different sentence: "Grace be unto you and peace from Him Which is, and Which was, and Which is to come; and from the seven Spirits, Which are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, Who is the faithful witness, the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth; unto Him, that loved us and washed us from our sins with his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests to God and his Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen"?

Besides, what is the best order for the several "elements" in our Church service? For, it is a true fact that there are some differences between the Churches with respect to their liturgy. It may be of some use to write about all this. It may prevent us from becoming too accustomed to things happening in our Church services and in the meantime remaining unaware of their real meaning, unaware of the riches of our "Reformed liturgy".

2. "THE WORD IS VERY NIGH UNTO THEE"

Our starting point has been taken from the text in which these few words are found. This text is located in Deut. 30:11-14 and we quote,

"For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it".

Later on the apostle Paul quoted these words in his epistle to the Romans, chapter 10, when he was dealing with the "problem of Israel". His fellow-Jews rejected the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, though the Word was nigh unto them (Romans 10:8). There Paul applied the quotation from Deuteronomy 30 to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ's coming into this world and His resurrection.

But let us first read it in its old testament context. This is very useful. What, then, is this Word which is "nigh unto thee"? In verse 11 of chapter 30 a different word was used. The word "Commandment", the same as in verse 16. In verses 16 and 17 Moses mentions the well-known pair of blessing and curse. The old leader of the ancient Jewish nation was speaking about the Covenant God made with them on Mount Sinai. The Word of God which was very nigh unto them was God's commandment, God's Covenant, as we read in Deuteronomy 20:1: "*These are the words of the Covenant . . .*"

In Deuteronomy 2:11, we also read about God's promise. "Then, there shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there". God would reveal Himself there. The Israelites would meet their God there by means of His Name, His revelation.

In His Word He Himself would be "*very nigh unto thee*". By means of His Word, God Himself would dwell among them.

In the New Testament it is the same. The Apostle Paul applied Deuteronomy 30 to the Gospel of Christ, to the new testament days. He was writing about the New Covenant in Christ's blood, in contrast with the Old Covenant, "*the Law of Moses*". Still today God is in the midst of His people by means of His Word, which is nigh unto us. Liturgy is a matter of the Covenant-relation with God! This Covenant has been inscripturated in the Bible. The Holy Scripture is the Covenant document. By His Word God is in our midst whenever we are gathered together in the name of the Saviour.

3. GOD'S COVENANT

"Reformed Liturgy" is based upon God's Covenant. If this is true - and it is - we have to know what God's Covenant means.

First the general question: what is a covenant?

Surely, we can say: a covenant is a solemn promise made binding by an oath. But this will not be sufficient to provide us with a clear picture.

In recent years literature about the covenants and international treaties of the ancient Near East has accumulated. Excavations and other archaeological enterprise resulted in the discovery of many documents containing the texts and ratification-ceremonies of covenants.

Especially the *suzerainty* (Suzerain: a sovereign exercising control) type of international treaty drew much attention. It would be worth while to go into the details, but we can not do this now. It is, however, a matter of fact that there is a remarkable resemblance between God's covenant with Israel and these profane treaties - though in this light the peculiar character of God's covenant comes forward the stronger by being completely different!

The pattern of the *suzerainty* treaty can be traced in the "Ten Commandments", in the

book of Deuteronomy, in the renewal of the Covenant according to Joshua 24, in the covenant with king David and in several Psalms - God was the heavenly *Suzerain*. Israel was His vassal-nation, to be obedient to Him. When keeping His covenantal words, His commandments, He would provide them with prosperity and happiness.

Sometimes a vassal-king was formally "adopted" by his overlord. Just the same with respect to the nation of Israel: they became God's heirs, when He created them unto "His own", "His peculiar treasure unto Him above all people" (Exodus 19:5). This was celebrated by means of giving and receiving a "territorial gift", the land of Canaan - just like the "great kings" (as they used to be called) endowed their favourite vassals with the gift of some cities.

And now we come straight to the core of the matter. It is a remarkable thing that all the great covenants of the Bible were made with people of "royal standard".

Noah was a sort of king in his days. Abraham was of royal stature. We are used to speaking of "king David". When the Lord Christ said: "*This is the New Covenant in My blood*", He added: "*I appoint you the Kingdom*".

It is the same with respect to the nation of Israel. The proclamation of the Covenant of Sinai - in which the treaty was summarized, according to ancient custom - reads: "*Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagle's wings, and brought you unto Myself; now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine; and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation*" (Exodus 19:4-6; compare Isaiah 61:6).

A kingdom of priests, a royal nation! It is the same later on in the Bible, also the same with respect to the Christian Church: "*He has made us kings and priests unto God and His Father*" (Revelation 1:6; compare 5:10; 20:6; I Peter 2:9).

This way the covenants of the Bible are in complete accordance with the "great commission of mankind", which God gave in the beginning: "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, to subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth*" (Genesis 1:28).

Man had to be a king, reigning as a sovereign, representing the "Great King", the Creator. Man had to show the image of God; that means: to be a king. For right after the words of God: "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*" followed this: "*and let them have dominion . . .*" (1:26).

After the "failure of first mankind", when life was destroyed by the apostate rulers, Lamech and the tyrants of Genesis 6, Noah could start anew. He received the same mandate: "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth . . .*" (9:1, 2).

After the second "failure" - the story of the Tower of Babylon - God made a new beginning with Abraham. He even made a formal covenant with him, entrusting him with an important commission, endowing him with a "territorial gift", and promising to make him into a blessing for "*all the generations of the earth*". A renewal and enlargement of this covenant is to be seen in the covenant of Sinai. A complete "way of life" was ordered:

Israel had to show itself to be a "kingdom of priests", meaning a people of throne-servants of the heavenly Overlord, a royal nation - later on under a human king, the dynasty of David -even still later on, according to the prophecy, under the great Son of David, the messianic King to come.

Though Israel was not obedient to this covenant, and lost its "territorial gift" in the Babylonian exile, God promised a "new covenant" (Jeremiah 31:31-34): return from exile, even a regenerated Israel.

This return into their own land was only a provisional fulfilling of the promised new covenant. Christ Jesus, during the last Passover, spoke: "*This is the New Covenant in My blood*", and "*I appoint you the Kingdom*". According to the prophecy He endowed His new nation with the gift of His Holy Spirit. This Spirit would reform His covenant-nation, renew them after the image of Christ, so that they would show the image of God the heavenly Suzerain again, as His vassal-nation. It is as our Heidelberg Catechism says: "*Why are you called a Christian? Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus a partaker of His anointing (with the Holy Spirit), that I may confess His Name, present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and with a free and good conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures*" (Lord's Day 12).

Presently His people will share His joy of eternal sabbath, when the battle against the devil and his dominion will be won.

This is our privilege. This is the "great commission" we have been endowed with: to be a royal people, God's representatives in this life. This is the redemption in Jesus Christ - not only that we are "going to heaven" but also that we have the remission of our sins. God starts with us, time and again, in spite of our sins. We have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. And, are renewed by Christ. It is not in vain that the work of God the Holy Spirit is accentuated so clearly in our Heidelberg Catechism!

Even more strongly, the "great commission" also contains the propagation of the Gospel all over the world, wherever and whenever we can. Other people too, have to be called unto the privileges as well as the commandments of the New Covenant. Christ's words in Matthew 28:10 show the pattern of covenantal language!

We may belong to the people of the New Covenant!¹

4. LITURGY OF THE COVENANT

What are we doing in Church? What is liturgy? And especially, what is our Reformed

¹ Literature

The New Bible Dictionary, 1962, the contribution of Meredith G. Kline on "Ten Commandments".

M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 1963.

Liturgy?

It is all a matter of the Covenant. Of the New Covenant in which we may now live. The Word of the Covenant is very nigh unto us. The Lord dwells among His people by means of it. The Lord Christ rules us with it. We possess the Bible. We are a "Church with the Bible". The Bible is the great covenantal document, the "Book of the Covenant" par excellence. Time and again the characteristics of the covenant renewals were added unto it. Our Reformed Liturgy is the liturgy of the Covenant!

5. VOTUM

"Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth".

These are the very first words of our Church services, the "votum": a word of dedication. As a term it is a remnant from the days in which Latin was the official language of the Church.

This solemn statement typifies the whole of the proceedings. For, what is the purpose and meaning of these words?

Before we will answer this question we want to tell - briefly something about the "historical background" of the "votum".

It is a fact that the new testament epistles usually begin with a "salutation". Reading of the apostolic epistles in the meetings of the young Christian churches may have resulted in the adoption of this "salutation" as the beginning of every service. At any rate, we find a "salutation" at the beginning of a Church service quite early in Church history. But, later on the so-called "introit" was introduced: the clergy entered the Church, and meanwhile the congregation sang a "song of entry". After this the priest turned to the people with a "salutation".

When the liturgy was extended more and more the priest had to perform all sorts of ceremonies before he could start his real work. One of these ceremonies was the confession of his personal sins and a prayer for forgiveness and cleansing. This prayer, then, began with the words: *"Our help is in the name of the LORD"*, while one of the assistants responded by saying: *"Who made heaven and earth"*.

This is the origin of the traditional beginning of our services: first the "votum", then the "salutation".

We may understand that since the Reformation these words do not apply to the "clergy" any longer, but to the whole congregation.

This is a very fine and useful tradition. For, what actually happens when the minister speaks these words on behalf of the congregation? *"Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth"*. This is a quotation from Psalm 124, from that song in which the Israelites expressed their thankfulness because the LORD God had helped them out of trouble. This gratitude consisted of a firm trust in the LORD's name. His name, that means: His self-revelation as the actively present God. The LORD had shown His presence

and activity by redeeming Israel from its enemies. Very serious were the dangers of being destroyed completely: *"If it had not been the LORD Who was on our side . . .!"*

The nation of Israel depended - and God's people still always depend on the help of God, on God's activity and presence.

Indeed, it is a nice "votum" to begin a Church service with! Besides, Psalm 124 is one of the *"Songs of Degrees"* or *"Songs of Ascents"* (Psalms 120-134). It is generally assumed that these Psalms were sung by processions of pilgrims while ascending Mount Zion during the three great Temple festivals of the Jewish year. They came to present themselves before the LORD, to worship Him, to call upon His name, since their only help was in the name of the LORD, of God Almighty.

"To present themselves before God" is an expression derived from Joshua 24:1. There it is used for the gathering of all the Israelite tribes when the Covenant of Sinai was to be renewed after the initial conquest of the promised land and before the death of Joshua (according to the custom of covenant-renewal, when the reigning king felt his death coming nearer and nearer: he made provisions for the succession by his heirs and for the faithfulness of his vassal-kings to his successor, a "succession-covenant").

This ceremony was as it were repeated as often as the Israelites ascended Mt. Zion in order to present themselves before God, singing *"Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth"*.

Even more strongly: it is the same with regard to ourselves! When these words are spoken at the beginning of our Church services we express in this way our feelings of gladness and gratitude because we may live in covenant relationship with the LORD God, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, Whom we confess to be actively present still today to help and to redeem us and make us to enter into the full riches of His Kingdom to come!

By means of this fine "votum" we typify the whole of our Church service.

We do not isolate ourselves from everyday life. We do not gather together to fulfil our "religious duties", neither to satisfy our "pious feelings". No. We want to present ourselves before the LORD, our Covenant God, Whom we wish to worship because He is our Helper, Whom we want to pray to for His active presence to assist us against all dangers and enmity, temptations and "little faith". We do not forget our daily worries and difficulties, our struggle to serve the Lord faithfully in our way of life. We take all this with us into Church, though it does not hinder us. For, we are to be comforted and strengthened in our faith: God is with us, by means of His Word, His testimony!

Indeed, the very first words of our Church services characterize our liturgy as having everything to do with the covenantal relation in which we may live, not only during the services but every day of our life.

6. SALUTATION

During our morning services we hear after the "Votum" the well-known words: "*Grace be unto you and peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*".

In many Churches the "salutation" - as it is called - is the same in the afternoon services. But usually we hear then:

"Grace be unto you and peace, from Him which is and which was and which is to come, and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne, and from, Jesus Christ Who is the faithful witness, the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth, unto Him that loved us, and washed us from all our sins with his own blood and has made us kings and priests to God and his Father, to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

The first salutation has been taken from the apostle Paul's epistles. Many of them begin this way: Romans, I and II Corinthians,- Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians and Philemon. (In I and II Timothy and in Titus the word "mercy" is inserted between "grace" and "peace". The apostles Peter and John, and also Jude, used some different formulations, but it is remarkable that the words "grace", "mercy" and "peace" return in them too.).

The "addition" given by some ministers: "in the communion of the Holy Spirit" is unknown in the apostolic greetings. Since the apostles did not make them "trinitarian" why should we do so?

The second-mentioned salutation has been derived from Revelation 1:4-6. Without any reason many ministers cut it in half. This is the more regrettable because the "proclamation of the covenant" (Exodus 19:5, 6) returns her: "and has made us kings and priests unto God and His Father" - "*Thou shalt be unto Me a kingdom of priests*".

Really striking is the word "peace".

We find this word very frequently in the treaties of the ancient Near East.

It pictures the relation between the two partners of a "parity-treaty", but no less the situation created by a "suzerainty-covenant". This situation and relation was one of peace. No enmity, no tension, no war, but both kings would promote the prosperity of the other one, especially the *suzerain* would provide his vassal with his "peace".

The word "peace" was also used by the ancient Jews in their greetings: "sjaloom leka"; "peace be unto you" (Judges 6:23; I Samuel 25:6 etc.). Christ spoke the same words on the day of His resurrection to His followers (John 20:19). Sjaloom means: welfare, prosperity, the consequence of a peaceful relation with the LORD God, the heavenly Suzerain.

Again we hear "covenantal language"!

It is the same with respect to the word "grace". This is the mercy of the divine Overlord towards them who were rebellious against Him before. It is mercy for the sake of Christ's merits.

In this connection the apostle Peter's way of formulating his greetings is remarkable. II Peter 1:2: "*Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of*

Jesus our Lord".

This reminds us of what is to follow during the Church service: the preaching of the Word of God. For, there is no knowledge without the preaching of the Gospel. In other words: when the minister assures the congregation of the grace and peace of God, he points at the knowledge this congregation has already received by means of the preaching.

Even more strongly: he points at things to happen during the Church service: God's Word will be preached, the testimony of His covenant. This will supply the knowledge of God and the Saviour which is causing peace.

The words of the salutation are not idle ones!

They are not just another set of ordinary greetings, though in the ancient Jewish style. No! These greetings, as it were, picture what is going to happen, what will be the result of the preaching of God's Word if accepted in faith.

The minister speaks these words on behalf of God.

The "Votum" pictures our relation to God: we expect our help from Him. The "Salutation" expresses God's relation to us: He wants to come with grace and peace; this is what the preaching of His Word will testify.

We prefer these forms of salutation above the one which is introduced in many churches - rather: re-introduced, for the church of Rome has it in its "Introit": "*The LORD be with you*" - speaks the minister -, "*and with your spirit*" - responds the congregation.

The first part may be in accordance with the ancient Jewish way of greeting (Ruth 2:4; Judges 6:12; Luke 1:28); the second part with II Timothy 4:22, Galatians 6:18; Philemon : 25. But, the last words were used as a "farewell". The first ones do not contain as much as the apostolic greetings.

Sometimes this re-introduction is a part of the "restoration" of the just-mentioned "Introit" - the entry of the "clergy" in solemn procession, while the congregation is singing; after which an "introductory text" is read.

We would not welcome such a re-introduction.

It may be of interest to tell that in the church of Rome only the Pope and the bishops are allowed to say: "peace be unto you", but that an "ordinary" priest has to say only: "the LORD be with you" . . . another proof of Rome's hierarchy.

The best attitude is to listen to this "salutation" with open eyes. Do we ever close them when we are greeted by somebody?

The "Amen" is to be said by the congregation, or to be sung in a so-called "amen-song".

7. GOD'S LAW

In the first section we drew attention to the remarkable resemblance between God's covenant with the nation of Israel and the secular treaties dealt with in the literature

accumulated during the last decennium.

We may repeat that the pattern of the suzerainty treaty - a covenant imposed upon his vassals by a "Great King" - can be traced in the "Ten Commandments" and some more biblical "documents". The suzerainty treaty: God is the heavenly Suzerain; Israel his vassal-nation must be obedient to Him. He will provide them with prosperity if they will keep His covenantal words, His commandments.

Well, this is very important for the good understanding of the reading of God's Law during our Sunday-morning services.

God's Law is said to be something special of the calvinistic Church. This may be correct, though we remember that the "Ten Commandments" were read during the services with a special instructive character in some regions during the Late Middle Ages.

But, John Calvin introduced the reading of the Law of God as a regular "liturgical element" indeed.

This replaced the so-called "Great Gloria" of the liturgy in the Church of Rome. Since the 4th century the "Introit" -which we already mentioned before - was followed by the "Kyrie": Lord, have mercy upon us! Originally this was only an utterance of the priest's feelings of unworthiness; but, later on it was applied to all people present in church.

John Calvin replaced this, then, by the singing of the "Ten Commandments". Yes, indeed, the singing!

This was the calvinistic "Great Gloria", the solemn promise to serve the LORD by keeping His commandments. Is not the scriptural way of serving the LORD being obedient to His holy will?

This was combined with the "Kyrie" of old, for every stanza of the "metrical version" of the "Ten Commandments" was followed by the singing of this word, this prayer of mercy. No wonder, it was the response to the preceding elements of confession of sins and absolution: but the mouth of the minister the congregation confessed its sin and prayed for forgiveness - the "public confession of sin" on page 44 of our "Book of Praise" is a sort of remnant of this -, and after this the minister proclaimed the forgiveness of sins for the penitents.

This was Calvin's practice in Strasbourg. After his return to Geneva he introduced the reading of the "Ten Commandments". This happened after the sermon. The order was changed, compared with "Strasbourg": first the reading of God's Law, and only then public confession of sins and absolution.

On the proposal of the well-known Peter Dathenus the reading of the "Ten Commandments" was inserted in the first part of the service in the Churches of Holland. During the morning services God's Law would be read before the first prayer, and the Apostles' Creed in the afternoon services. In our opinion this is a good and suitable place.

For, what is the character of the Law of God? What are the "Ten Commandments" actually?

They are the Constitution of the Covenant God imposed upon His people. The

"fundamental law".

First we hear the "proclamation of the Covenant", in Exodus 19:3-6 (why would we not read these words together with the text of the "Ten Commandments" during our services?) "Ye shall be unto Me a Kingdom of priests, a holy nation . . ."

Then we find the Constitution in Exodus 20, the "Ten Commandments".

After that follows the "Book of the Covenant" (Exodus 21-23), in which the commandments have been elaborated and applied in casuistic form. Later on, at the renewal of the covenant just before Moses' death, this "Book of the Covenant" was extended unto the "Book of Deuteronomy"; and in a certain sense we can say that the whole Bible is today's "testimony" of the Covenant. But this is a subject we hope to deal with later, when we have to discuss the matter of the preaching of God's Word.

During about a decennium the Hittite and Assyrian suzerainty treaties have been studied. The resemblance with God's Covenant on Sinai is really striking. This may be proved in brief when we mention the following typical marks of those vassal-covenants:

The text of the treaty began with a "PREAMBLE": "*These are the words of . . .*", in which the "Great King", who made the covenant with his vassal, was identified..

"God spake all these words, saying: *I am the LORD thy God . . .*". This is the "preamble" of God's covenant.

Then followed the "HISTORICAL PROLOGUE": the "Great King" reminded his vassal of the previous relations between them, and especially of the acts of benevolence performed from his own side. These were considered to 'be the foundation of the vassal's obligations. This vassal had every reason to act according to the stipulations of this covenant.

The same element we find in God's covenant in the words: ". . . *Who brought thee out of The land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*".

The third and most elaborate part was that which contained the "STIPULATIONS". Usually the first one of them was a prohibition for the vassal to enter into any alliance with another king.

"*Thou shalt have no other gods before Me*", this is the treaties' counterpart in the covenant of Sinai: the relation with God is an exclusive one!

BLESSINGS AND CURSES were formulated.

In God's covenant they have not been put into words in a special part of the "treaty-text". We find them in the 2nd, 3rd and 5th commandments.

Another remarkable and important aspect was found by the provisions for "DEPOSIT AND PERIODIC PUBLIC READING" of the covenant.

The vassal's copy of its text had to be deposited in the temple of his main god. Public reading of it had to take place at stipulated times, usually from one to four times a year.

This is what happened also to the "Tables of the Covenant of Sinai" (Exodus 40:20) : they were deposited in God's sanctuary.

And in Deuteronomy 31:10-13 we read clearly about some provisions for the periodic reading of God's covenant in the assemblies of the nation of Israel.

Another interesting fact is that the covenantal relation was renewed with the successive generations of the vassal's dynasty. The stipulations were modified and modernized to face the "new situation". This may explain the slight differences between the text of Exodus 20 and that of Deuteronomy 5.

Besides it may give us insight in the meaning of God's prophecy in Jeremiah 16 and 23:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but, the LORD liveth, which brought up and Which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land",

a prophecy closely connected with the coming of the "Branch of David", the promised Messiah.

This means then that in the meantime, since Sinai, the situation has changed considerably, for we are living under the New Covenant!

Well, let us see the reading of the "Ten Commandments" during our morning services in this light!

We do not think a re-introduction of "public confession of sins and absolution" to be necessary, in the first place because we can confess our sins in prayer and we hear about remission in the preaching of God's Word, but in the second place because of the reading of God's Law in our new testament "situation": the 'historical prologue' contains the "absolution" and we reply to God's will by means of singing a Psalm as a sort of "amen".

Another proposal is being made today, namely that we - because of these New Testament days - should no longer have the reading of the "Ten Commandments" in our Church services, but rather the reading of some apostolic institutions and admonitions.

But, though we have to be aware of the fact that the Covenant has been renewed in the meantime, and we are living now under the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31, Hebrews 8 etc.) and as a result the "application" of the "Ten Commandments" has to be made in the light of this renewal, these apostolic institutions and admonitions are to be compared with the "casuistic application" of the "Constitution of the Covenant", the "Fundamental Law". It would not be wise to replace the reading of the "Ten Commandments" by them.

If we did, we would loose a very fine element in our liturgy, which characterizes the whole of it: liturgy is a matter of the Covenant-relation with God. Even more forcibly, our whole life consists of enjoying the privileges of the New Covenant.

The reading of God's Law is a very fine part of our "Reformed liturgy"! It teaches us, just like the Old Testament one (Deut. 31:12) "To learn and fear the LORD, and observe to do all the words of this Law".

8. PROFESSION OF FAITH

During the afternoon services of our Churches the congregation professes its faith by the mouth of the minister who recites the "Apostles' Creed".

This Creed - the name comes from "credo", Latin for "I believe" - is an old one. It goes back to the 3rd or even to the 2nd century. It's origin has not yet been revealed completely.

There were several conditioning factors which played a role.

The Roman imperial cult required the acknowledgment that Caesar was Lord. When asked to attest their allegiance the Christians confessed before the authorities by means of a brief confession of faith, as for example "Jesus Christ is Lord".

More certain is that the origin of the "Apostles' Creed" was closely related to the sacrament of baptism. The religious instruction of the converts consisted of teaching them the meaning of the baptismal formula: "*I baptize you into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*", as a summary of the whole sacred history, in which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit came to the front successively. The formula of public profession of faith, which had to take place before baptism was administered, was in full accordance with this: people to be baptized had to recite a sort of summary of this religious instruction. This formula became more and more a fixed one.

Another factor was the growth of heresy in the Christian Church. Some of the confessional formulations in the New Testament are very clearly a sharp reaction to false doctrine. The apostle John wrote: "*Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son*" (I John 2:22). And also this: "*Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God*" (4:2).

But there is more. It is a remarkable fact that the N.T. already contains some simple confessions or creedal fragments.

Against the unbelieving Jews, who called Jesus accursed, the Christians professed: "*Jesus is the Lord*" (I Cor. 12:3).

The eunuch from Ethiopia, before being baptized stated: "*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*" (Acts 8:37).

No wonder, for more and more a sort of "body of distinctive Christian teaching" grew. This is why the author of the epistle to the Hebrews could speak of "our profession" (3:1; 4:14) or "the profession of our faith" (10:23). And Jude (verse 3) of "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints".

"Delivered", is a well-known term in the N.T. writings. The apostolic men had "received" this sacred deposit themselves first before they "delivered" it to others. The apostle Paul states so with respect to the institution of the Lord's Supper, and to Christ's death and resurrection (I Cor. 11:23; 15:3). "Received" and "delivered" were already among the Jews' technical terms for the transmission of authoritative teaching.

All this resulted in the development of confessional formulas. Rom. 10:9, 10 and 11; II

Cor. 4:13, in which the necessity of professing the Saviour is acknowledged, may prove this.

Some examples of confessional formulas are found in I Cor. 8:6: *"But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him"*; and in Eph. 4:4-6: *"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all"*.

These last two texts are very important to make us understand the meaning of the "liturgical element" we are discussing. They show the clear influence of the "Shema".

Everybody who knows what this word means, is reminded of it when reading or hearing the two just-mentioned texts.

What, then, was this "Shema"? Well, the name itself is another "technical term". It has been derived from Deut. 6:4: "Hear, O Israel" (in Hebrew: Shema Jisrael).

The Shema became Israel's confession of faith. It was even recited twice a day, morning and evening. This ritual was based upon Deut. 6:7: *"When you lie down, and when you rise"*.

It was composed of three passages of Scripture. In the first place Deut. 6:4-9:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD' our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon throe hand, and they shall be as frontlets between throe eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates".

The second part of the Shema was Deut. 11:13 -21, containing a summary of the blessings and curses of God's covenant and a partial repetition of the final words of the Deuteronomy 6 pericope.

In the third place came Numbers 15:37-41, in which is dealt with the matter of making fringes in the borders of their garments, *"that ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God. I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God"*. During the services in the synagogue this confession of faith was preceded and followed by the saying of some benedictions, which even grew out in later days to the so-called "Shemone Esreh", containing 18 eulogies, today even 19, but at the time of the Lord Jesus Christ's being on earth perhaps only 6.

It is said that this Shema, together with the "Ten Commandments" was written on one scroll, and was to be read in the synagogue. But apart from this, it may be clear to us now that this Jewish confession of faith was a fixed reaction to the graces and obligations of the Covenant of Sinai as expressed in the Decalogue.

Do not Paul's words in I Cor. 8:6 and in Eph. 4:4-6 clearly remind us of this Jewish creed?

Can they not be called a new testament version of the Shema?

A commentator suggests that in the first-mentioned text the apostle is quoting from the letter the Corinthians had written to Paul. If this were true, the young Christian Church would already have been endowed with a "Christian Shema", which could be considered to have been expanded into the "Apostles' Creed".

It is really striking indeed that these texts have something in common, not only with the ancient Jewish confession, but also with our oldest and briefest creed!

All this may show us the close relation between our act of professing our faith during the afternoon services and the renewal of our faithfulness to God's covenant by listening to the reading of the Constitution, the "Ten Commandments", during the morning services.

God's commandments and our profession of faith are not contrasts, but rather counterparts.

God's Law - as we saw earlier - is to be seen in the light of the "preamble" and of the "historical prologue" of this covenant-document.

But it is a remarkable thing that Israel's confession of faith ended in a repetition of the very same sentence: *"I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt"*.

The Shema of the Christian Church (I Cor. 8:6 and Eph. 4:4-6) contains an enlarged "historical prologue", a renewed one, because of the "new situation", the New Covenant.

This development was as it were completed by the "Apostles' Creed". This document is fundamentally nothing but a summary of the whole Bible, the complete sacred history in a nutshell.

Because of this it is of importance that the Genevan Reformers, William Farel and John Calvin, replaced the reading of the "Nicene" Creed with the "Apostles' Creed". The last one is the "original" one as compared with the "Nicene Creed" and with the "Athanasian Creed", still in use in the Church of England as a liturgical alternative.

The place of the congregation's confession of faith was in earlier days at the end of the service. We may understand this: it was caused by its relation to public profession of faith and baptism.

For some good reasons its present place in our liturgy is to be preferred: in the beginning of our afternoon-service.

The ancient custom that statements made to or on behalf of a congregation were answered or confirmed by saying "Amen", may be maintained or re-introduced, though in a more "modern" form: by singing an "amensong".

But why should not the very best thing be done? Why should not the whole congregation recite or sing its Creed? This would be the best way to express its thankfulness to the LORD for the privilege of living in the covenant relation with Him!²

² Literature

9. PRAYER

Usually there are two different prayers in our Church services, one at the beginning, another one at the end.

"... because it is the chief part of the thankfulness which God requires of us, and because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them". This is how our Heidelberg Catechism answers question no. 116: "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?".

His grace and the Holy Spirit . . . By these words the contents of the Christian prayers, also the Church prayers, are typified.

This is in full accordance with the saying of our Saviour: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13). The Lord Christ taught His Church that to pray the heavenly Father is to ask Him for the strength of the Holy Spirit.

What does that mean?

Indeed, the expectation of the Jews in the days when the Saviour was on earth - though not clearly expressed in the prayers by which the so-called "Shema" was accompanied - was one concerning a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Who would strengthen especially the coming Deliverer. All sorts of Jewish writings may prove this.

More or less this expectation was based upon the prophecies of the Old Testament. In Isaiah 32:15, Ezek. 11:19, Joel 2:28 etc. we hear about the promised renewal of Israel as the people of God's covenant associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, then, would be one of the most important gifts of the New Covenant!

When teaching His disciples to pray for the Holy Spirit, the Lord Christ meant to say: the New Covenant is there! God's covenant has been renewed indeed! The people of God's covenant were being endowed with the precious gift of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit would enable them to promote the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom all over the world, and to show a completely new way of life. No wonder that our Heidelberg Catechism so often speaks not only of the blood of Christ but also of the Spirit of Christ, about the regeneration by the Holy Spirit. No wonder this booklet put everything it states concerning prayer in the light of the "grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after the image of God, till after this life we arrive at the goal of perfection" (No. 115).

"Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" that means: for the people of the new

"Credal Elements in the New Testament" in "Una Sancta" (Free Reformed Churches of Australia Magazine), Vol. 12/22 - 13/8

Covenant. As God's "New Covenanters" we are asking for the gift of this covenant: The Holy Spirit.

Prayer also is a matter of the covenant.

This is clear when we read Psalm 50, which sings about the coming of God to judge Israel's way of life whether it is in accordance with the covenant or not. The correct way of worshiping God is this: *"Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: and call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me"* (vss. 14, 15).

It is just the same in Psalm 123: the song on the "servants" whose eyes look unto the hand of their masters. The word "servant" was also used in referring to the vassal-kings. In case of injustice done to them by other ones they could make an appeal to their *suzerains* on the ground of the covenant-relation between them.

It is even more clear from the "address" of "the Lord's Prayer": "Our Father, Who art in heaven". Father, this is how the believers address God. For the sake of Christ they have been adopted as His children and heirs; the vassals have been made into *"children of the Great King"*.

To pray is to acknowledge and to honour the heavenly Suzerain, to accept the covenant time and again.

There is a close relation between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

We took the starting-point of this series of outlines in Deut. 30:14: *"The Word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it"*. God is with us by means of His name, His Word.

Well, this is why the forms in our liturgy-book, "Book of Praise", contain no less than three different prayers to be used at the beginning of the Church services, before the sermon. In the days of the Great Reformation the first prayer of every Church service used to be a "general (or 'public') confession of sins" and a petition concerning the preaching of God's Word as well as the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

The second prayer, after the sermon, may contain a thanksgiving for the gift of God's Word, and also the intercessory prayers. Our forefathers called this "a prayer for all the needs of Christendom".

This seems to us to be the correct order: at the beginning of the Church services, after the opening-elements, the preaching of God's Word first, preceded by a brief prayer in respect to this preaching, and only then the congregation's reaction and activities in offerings, intercessions etc.

10. SCRIPTURE-READING AND SERMON

We may repeat once again the starting-point of these outlines. It was Deuteronomy 30:14, *"The Word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest*

do it".

This may show us that two of the most important elements of our "Reformed Liturgy" are the Scripture-reading and the preaching of God's Word. They belong together.

There may have been some historic reasons for the order followed by the majority of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and other countries, but why break in on the reading and preaching of God's Word by means of prayer, and - even worse! - by the offerings and singing of a Psalm? This is really an interruption.

Besides, as far as "historic reasons" are concerned, we want to draw the attention to the fact that already the New Testament (Luke 4 and Acts 13 for example) informs us about the close relation between "the reading of the Law and the Prophets" - that means: the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament -, and the interpretation of them straight after that. From the Old Testament Levitical priests, who were entrusted with the instruction in and interpretation of the Word of God, the group of Scribes came to the fore after the exile, a professional class of teachers, "doctors of law", of which the well-known Ezra was the first one. The Christian Church took - though in a really "reformed" way - this over from the synagogue: some of the elders were appointed to "*labour in the Word and doctrine*" (I Timothy 5:17).

This is why the two elements of Scripture-reading and sermon still take their important place in our Church services. They ought to be maintained like that, in spite of the efforts of the so-called "Liturgical Movement" to have this altered.

But this is also why we would prefer them to be put closely together in our services - as is indeed done in the majority of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia: the Scripture-reading right before the preaching of the Word of God, the sermon immediately after the Bible-reading.

But what is the Bible actually? And as a consequence, what is actually the meaning of the Scripture-reading and of the sermon?

When we dealt with the matter of "the reading of the Law of God" we pointed to the old rule of the periodic reading of the ancient covenant documents.

But another parallel is this that the preaching reminds us of the instruction and interpretation of the Law of God in the days of the Old Testament.

By bringing these two parallels to the fore we want to stress that also the Scripture-reading and the sermon - just like the other elements of our "Reformed Liturgy" - are to be seen in the light of the covenant God made with us.

This was already clear since in our first section we read Deuteronomy 30:14 in its context and learned that Moses was speaking about the covenant of Sinai. For there are some remarkable synonyms of the expression "the Word", namely "commandment", and "the words of the Covenant".

The apostle Paul applied this mosaic saying to the new testament days. When he wrote about the New Covenant in Christ's blood he quoted Deuteronomy 30:14 (in Romans 10:8) ! The New Covenant, the same that we are living under!

The Bible is the inscripturation of this covenant.

Its beginning (the book of Genesis) informs us about the "pre-history" of it, and makes clear: making this covenant God wanted to restore the life of His people according to His original intentions when He created man after His own image. Israel should be "a Kingdom of priests", a nation of God's throne-servants, representing God here on earth, living as His vassal-kings, showing in their way of life as His adopted princes and princesses His royal glory and dominion.

Later on we read something about the establishing of the covenant; Abraham, Sinai; about the several renewals of it, until at last the promise of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31) began to be realized in the Lord Jesus Christ, Who pointed to the elements of "the Lord's Supper" and said: "*This is the New Covenant in My blood*".

No wonder that also the "proclamation of the covenant" (Exodus 19:3-6) is repeated and applied to the people of the New Covenant, the Christian Church by the apostle Peter (I Peter 2:9) and in the Book of Revelation (1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Even the missionary preaching of the Gospel must be seen in this light. Christ's words in Matthew 28:19 show the pattern of covenantal language: the heathen have to be called unto the Gospel and unto the community of and His authority in the New Covenant!

The same pattern is to be seen in the apostolic epistles: the Christian Church is further instructed in the privileges and duties of the New Covenant. It even comes to the front in the epistle to the Hebrews, and - though not mentioned by name - in the epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians.

In brief: the whole Bible can be considered as the inscripturation of the Covenant and its different renewals.

It also opens a wide perspective upon the complete fulfilling of God's covenantal promises when the celebration of the Lord's Supper "till He comes" will be replaced by an even better feast.

The Scripture-reading as well as the preaching of God's Word have to be seen in this light.

The Covenant document for today, the Bible, - consisting of the Old and New Testament, that means: covenant! - is to be read. God wants His relation with us to be known to us!

God's covenant Word is to be preached, that means: explained, interpreted, applied, in order that we may realize the privileges and the duties of this relation, that we may learn to know the blessings and curses of this covenant time and again, and that we may be stimulated to enjoy our task, and to fulfil it in thankfulness: to be a Kingdom of priests, God's peculiar treasure, His own people.

11. OFFERINGS

After the sermon and the congregation's response by means of singing an "Amen-song" the Offerings take place.

After the sermon! When dealing with the Scripture-reading and the sermon we expressed as our opinion that to place the Offerings after the "first prayer" - as usual in the majority of our sister-churches in the Netherlands and Canada - means to make an interruption in the proceedings of the Church-service.

Our Heidelberg Catechism interprets the 4th commandment of God's covenant-law as laying upon His people the obligation, *"that the ministry of the Gospel . . . be maintained, and that I . . . diligently attend the Church of God, to learn God's Word . . . and to give Christian alms"*.

The ministry of the Word used to be maintained by means of "regular contributions", though now and then, here and there, there is also a collection for the Church.

But as for the Christian alms, these are given in "the collection for the needy" or "the poor".

The way of bringing together money by means of collections goes back to the days of the apostle Paul, as we may read in I Cor. 16:1, 2: *"Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."*

It is not quite clear whether these collections were "for the poor" in the Church of Jerusalem - Romans 15:26 and II Cor. 9:12 may suggest this, because they make mention of *"the poor saints which are at Jerusalem"* and of *"the want of the saints"* - or for the *"needy Church of Jerusalem"*. This latter interpretation of the two just-mentioned texts is also possible. But that the origin of the weekly collections in Church is to be found here is a matter of fact.

An even more important question, however, is this: what character do these collections have? And not only this way of gathering money, but also the "regular contributions". Hebrew 13:15 calls them *"sacrifices"*: *"But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased"*. In Romans 15:17 the Offerings in the congregations of former Gentiles are called a matter of ministering, of liturgy. And II Cor. 9:12 speaks of *"the administration of this service"*, "the diaconia of this liturgy". The Offerings are sacrifices to God. They are a liturgy, a priestly service to God. God is their goal. The worship of God is their purpose. Only then are they a matter of helping other people, and other Churches.

Do not these Offerings have their legal place in our "Reformed Liturgy"?

This liturgy is characterized by the covenant-relation between God and us: He is our heavenly Great King, and we are His vassals, representing the glory of His Kingdom here on earth.

The vassal-kings of the ancient Near East had to come and bring their annual tribute before the throne of their suzerain: gold, silver, the fruits of the land, animals, etcetera.

This is what we are doing in Church by means of the Offerings.

No, the Offerings do not mean: to take some money and put it into that black offertory-

bag "for a good cause".

Also this part of our "Reformed Liturgy" is a matter of the covenant! It is a sign and proof of our subjection, and of our thankfulness for the privilege that we may live in a covenant-relation with the LORD God, our Great King. It is a matter of bringing honour to our Covenant-God!

12. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Together with the Offerings - though they are our tribute to our Great King in the first place - the interests of the community of the Church and its members come to the front. In many churches the announcements have much in common with a supposititious child: here they are made before the service, there just at the end. But why not give them an official place after the Offerings? Or before them? If only they are restricted to announcements which have to do with the interests of the Church community.

13. CHURCH SINGING

There is an ancient tradition among the Jews which says that the "Five 5 parts of the "Book of Moses" found their counterpart in the 5 parts of the "Book of Psalms".

There are 5 parts in our Psalter indeed: 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106 and 107-150; each of them ending in a doxology. But we cannot follow this tradition: there is too much fantasy in it.

Nevertheless one thing is sure - and this may be what the Jews wanted to express in their tradition - that the "Book of Psalms" must be seen as the response to the "Book of the Law":

This "Book of the Law", then, contains the description of the Covenant the LORD God gave to His people. As a consequence of this we may typify the "Book of Psalms" as the pious reaction to this Covenant.

The very first Psalm makes this clear. It is called "The Psalm of the Two Ways". But actually it is a poetical reaction to the promises and curses of the Covenant: "The righteous' delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law he doth meditate day and night"; he loves the LORD and likes to live in the covenant relation with Him.

That we have to read - and to sing - this Psalm this way is confirmed by Joshua 1. When Joshua took over from Moses, the covenant was renewed under this new leader - it became a "succession treaty". Then God said to him: "This book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth: but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; then thou shalt make thy way prosperous; and then thou shalt have good success". Joshua had to have a copy of the "Book of the Covenant" with him: the Book of Deuteronomy or a part of it; just like the king of the future is said to have a copy of the covenant-text with him. When Joshua

would do according to the regulations and stipulations of the covenant, his way would be prosperous.

The same applies to the New Covenant, under which we are living now. For it is a remarkable fact that in the "proclamation of the New Covenant", the so-called "Sermon on the Mount", the same idea is expressed: *"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it"* (Matthew 7:13, 14). Besides, Christ began this "sermon" with the "Beatitudes": *"Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . blessed are the meek . . ."*. And He finished it by dividing His hearers into the same two groups of Psalm 1, of Joshua 1, and of the ancient covenantal documents: *"Whosoever heareth these saying of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken them unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock ... and every one that-heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken them unto a wise man, which built his house upon the sand..."*.

Psalm 1 is an introduction to the whole of the "Book of Psalms". This whole book, then, is a poetical and liturgical reaction to the covenant, and as such a part of covenant life itself.

Well, our "Reformed Liturgy" - as we have seen before - is all a matter of the Covenant. No wonder, that the word "church singing" can be replaced by the word "Psalm singing" as far as our Church services are concerned.

Still today the "Book of Psalms" can be called the expression of our faith and joy to accept the Covenant of God, and of our trust in the Covenant LORD. It has to be the main part of our "Book of Praise".

What about other songs, "hymns" etcetera? Well, our Churches here in Australia as well as in Canada and in Holland would like to find some good "metrical versions" of other poems and songs ("Psalms outside the Book of Psalms") in the Bible, to be used in our Church services, because God's people used to sing at the culminating-points of sacred history. We would like to repeat our plea that this series should be restricted to those "scriptural" hymns and not be expanded to all sorts of "familiar pericopes put on rhyme".

And what about "hymns"? Did not the apostle Paul write "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 6:19)? Yes indeed, if only we do not identify these "hymns" and "spiritual songs" with the well-known so-called "hymns" of our own days.

For the majority of the last-mentioned ones do not sing of the LORD, of His work, of the Covenant, but of the "experiences of the pious soul". This "subjectivism" and "individualism" is a deadly danger to the Christian Church!

No wonder that in those churches in which the Bible is no longer acknowledged as the Word of God, the Psalms had to make room for the "hymns". Those churches hardly know what the word "covenant" means.

Let us go on having our delight in the Word of God and meditating in the Bible, this covenant-document!

Let us continue to listen to the Word of our heavenly Suzerain and sing our response in a

really scriptural way!

14. BENEDICTION

At the end of our Church services the Benediction is given.

This is the liturgical form of a blessing.

Our custom has its roots in the fact that the old testament priest, when he had finished his work in the sanctuary, came out to bless the people, and that the apostles used to end their epistles with a blessing (e.g. Rom. 15:13; II Cor. 13:17; Heb. 13:20, 21) : both of them were a matter of liturgy, as may be clear from the O.T. ritual without any further explanation, and from the N.T. practice of having these epistles read during the Church services.

A benediction is a solemn pronouncement of blessing and a petition for blessing at the same time.

But especially the first-mentioned element is stressed in the well-known formula of the "Aaronite blessing" (Numbers 6:24-27)

*"The LORD bless thee, and keep thee;
The LORD make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace".
This benediction is mostly used in our morning services. In the afternoon-services the "apostolic" one is spoken: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all".*

The "Aaronite blessing" was a well-known formula among the ancient Jews. We find many reminiscences of it in the Book of Psalms, e.g. in Psalm 4:7, 31:17, 43:4, 44:4, 80:1, 4, 89:18 and 118:27. The last one, Psalm 118, was, sung during the feast of Tabernacles. Then all Israel had to come and appear before the LORD God (Dent. 31:11).

In the sanctuary was God's "panim", His face, His countenance. Israel appeared before the face of the LORD. There God's glory, His "shekinah", rested upon the Ark of the Covenant: the majestic manifestation of His active presence (Exodus 34:33-35).

This "shekinah", sometimes an immense light, is often identified with God's "panim" - hence the expression in Psalm 4:7: "LORD, lift Thou up the light of thy countenance upon us" (cf. Psalm. 27:1, 8, 9; 31:16).

This light would shine upon the Israelites. This face (Numbers 6) and this countenance would be lifted upon them, according to the "Aaronite blessing". This impressive and unforgettable symbol of God's presence and activity would shine upon them not only as long as they would be in the sanctuary, but also when they were to return and to take up their daily duties again. God would be with them by means of His Word: His Name (His Word) was put upon the children of Israel by means of the Benediction (Numbers 6:27). *"The Word is very nigh unto thee".*

This benediction was closely related with the covenant of God.

Though the word "covenant" is not used in the very beginning of the Bible, we find it for the first time in the story of the Flood: the covenants God made with Noah. It is a remarkable fact that the first blessing the Bible mentions is the command to take the position of God's royal representatives on this earth (Genesis 1:27 and 28) : *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth"*—a blessing in the imperative!

Is not this the leading idea of all the great covenants of the Bible that they installed a man or even a whole nation into the position of God's vassal-king or kingdom?

This element shows us already that the benediction which the priests had to "lay upon" the Israelites was closely related to the covenant.

But besides, we find God's blessings, together with His curses, in the different covenantal texts the Bible reproduces: the "Ten Commandments", the book of Deuteronomy, especially 11:26-32 and the chapters 27-29; Joshua 24, etcetera. The benediction of Numbers 6 may be considered as a sort of liturgical summary of the blessings of these covenant texts.

When the Lord Christ came to establish the New Covenant, He issued a "new set of blessings", in the so-called "Beatitudes" (Matthews 5:3-12).

The whole Gospel of Christ was symbolized in the gesture with which He left His disciples when He ascended into heaven: He blessed them (Luke 24:51).

It was put into words by His apostles at the end of their epistles. And presently the New Covenant will be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem. Revelation 22:4, 5 reminds us clearly of the "Aaronite blessing": *"And they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light; and they shall reign for ever and ever"*.

What does the Benediction at the end of our Church services express? This, that God will abide with us, in His active presence, with His Word and Spirit. The covenant relation is continued also in everyday life. We may see our daily life and doings in the light of the perspective of Revelation 22: they are not "profane".

This end of our services is a fine one. It sums up as it were the whole "liturgy" and what it intends: to strengthen us in the conviction that God is with us, His Word is nigh unto us, that we may live in a covenant with Him, in order that we may renew our faithfulness to the covenant.

And, at the same time this liturgy shows us that "Reformed Liturgy" is not to be restricted to some "pious hours in the Church", but that the real liturgy starts only when the Church service is finished.

15. HANDSHAKE

Though not an element of the "Reformed Liturgy" in the strict sense of the word, the "handshake" at the beginning as well as at the end of our Church services requires our attention.

In brief we may say that the first one is a symbol of the fact that the minister is not going to enter into the pulpit on his own authority, but as delegated by the Church Council, and called by God Himself unto this work.

The final one is of slightly different character. It does not only express that the minister has done his work on the authority of the Church Council, but that he has fulfilled his task faithfully. It is not, though, a sign of agreement with every word he has said.

16. ORDER

It may be clear now that in our opinion the order, which expresses the covenantal character of our liturgy in the best way, is the following one:

- Votum
- Salutation
- Response
- Reading of God's Law (a.m.); or: Profession of Faith (p.m.)
- Prayer for the Opening of God's Word
- Scripture-reading
- Sermon
- Response
- (Administration of the sacraments; and other ceremonies)
- Announcements on behalf of the Church Council
- Offerings
- Singing
- Prayer
- Singing
- Benediction

So, after the opening-elements first occurs the preaching of the Word of God, preceded by a brief prayer, only then the reaction and the activities of the congregation in the Offerings, intercessory prayer, etc.

Of course this is only generally speaking. In the meantime the congregation has already reacted by singing her "amen-song" as a response to the Salutation, to the Reading of God's Law, the Apostles' Creed, and the Sermon.

As for the facultative ceremonies, as the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the Public Profession of Faith, the Ordination of Office-bearers, etc., their natural place is after the sermon and its response.

17. IMPROVEMENTS

In our opinion it would wise to give the congregation a stronger feeling of being active in the liturgy.

In respect to this it is to be considered to introduce an alternative for the response by means of singing a Psalm: a sung or spoken "Amen".

In particular we would like to suggest the reciting of the "Apostles' Creed" and of the "Lord's Prayer" by the whole congregation.

But the greatest improvement of all would be this; that we would learn to understand the better the character of our "Reformed liturgy":

"The (covenant) Word is very nigh unto thee" (Deut. 30:11-14). God's Name is dwelling in our midst (Deut. 12). His covenant is preached unto us. His covenant-law is publicly read time and again. This covenant is accepted anew by the congregation, week after week. We are strengthened in the covenant community with our LORD, for Christ's sake, as we may enjoy it in our everyday life.

And God likes to see us being faithful to it. He enjoys looking down upon His Kingdom of Priests, His holy nation.