

“WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE”

Speaking Confessionally

In article 2 of the Belgic Confession the Church confesses that God is made known to us by His “creation, preservation, and government of the universe. It is before our eyes as a most beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible qualities of God ...” A few weeks ago, as we left Lotus Land (otherwise known as the Fraser Valley) on our annual vacation, we were reminded of this part of our Confession. We traveled by road eastward. We saw the rugged Rockies with their sparkling brooks and streams. We traversed the rolling hills of Alberta and the endless plains of the Prairies. We saw swamps, bulging rivers and other after effects of devastating flooding in Manitoba and Northern Michigan. We viewed the endless forests and farms, giant lakes, and the powerful, constant plunging of Niagara Falls in Ontario. Later, as we flew back, we received another perspective as we saw most of it again from the air. Reflecting on it all we remembered that “All these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse.”

Isn't it wonderful that we have such clear summaries of God's holy Word to help us remember the many truths proclaimed there? For four hundred years these truths have been maintained by the Church. As children we have been taught them. As adults we could examine them in the light of their place of origin. And the more we get to know them the more we should be pleased to use them.

From the very beginning of history language has been very important. The very first temptation was a question about what God had said. The Evil One twisted the Word of God; he tried to put a different “spin” on it. Eve corrected him. She repeated God's Word, she confessed (or professed) what He had told our first parents. That struggle has continued throughout the ages. During the time our Lord walked on the earth Satan tried again. He quoted texts from the Bible to our Lord. Satan tried to make these texts say something other than the truth of Scripture. But each time our Saviour professed the truth of God's Word and obeyed it.

Today the struggle continues as Satan and his forces, the elemental spirits of this world, twist the word of God and put wrong “spins” on it. The Church and its members must respond by speaking confessionally, by professing the truth of the Word of God accurately.

But often we hear other sounds. There appears to be a desire to say things differently. Such variations are excused for many reasons. Someone will say that our expressions are “old fashioned”, not modern enough, and will not attract those to whom we are witnessing or evangelizing. Others say there is a danger of forming a separate “church language”. Still others say that we must conform to the language that is being used by so many of our ‘brothers and sisters’ in other denominations.

Now when we speak of language, or ‘confessional language’ we do not primarily mean the old structure of English language that the Church has used (for example) in the King James Version of the Bible, but rather the confessional formulations of the doctrines of Scripture. Let us give a few examples.

It is not uncommon to hear people speak or ask about a *personal relationship* with Jesus Christ. Now a Reformed Christian will not deny that faith is also a personal thing. However, such a Reformed Christian will never forget to speak confessionally, thus repeating Scripture when it speaks of a covenant with the triune God that emanates from God. It is God Who established a covenant with those whom He chose. We have all learned that in Lord’s Day One of the Heidelberg Catechism. So the talk of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ leads the hearer to confusion. What is the speaker, either mistakenly or purposefully trying to convey? They are leaving out the judgment of God that needs to be satisfied by Jesus Christ so that we may be restored in our relationship (not only with the Son, but) with the triune God.

How often don’t we hear questions (rhetorical or otherwise) about evil in the world? “How can there be a God that rules all things if there is so much evil?” some ask. Others will point to the good that lives within so many people. Among the Reformed Christians one can also hear some strange expressions in this regard. But our confessional language should be that we are conceived and born in sin and subject to all manner of evil. Yes, that I am prone, by nature, to hate God and my neighbour. But such language is not politically correct and thus is often forgotten or left out.

For years the Church has struggled with the question of baptism. The fact that the Confessions (The Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession) speak of this issue indicate the great struggles the Church has undergone regarding it. Yet, today there are in the Church those who propagate that “believer only baptism” is a ‘non-essential error’ that we should not discipline members for. But our confessional language is very clear. Should infants also be baptized? Yes ... (Lord’s Day 27).

So easily we can fall into the temptation of thinking that we have some good in us. Some may think that the Lord has deemed us worthy - so worthy that He sent His Son to die. But our confessional language sounds different. “We believe that, when the entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin by the transgression of the first man, God manifested Himself to be as He is: merciful and just. Merciful, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in His eternal and unchangeable counsel he has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord...” and “We believe that, when he saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvelous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him. He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman, to bruise the head of the serpent and to make man blessed.” (Arts. 16 and 17 of the Belgic Confession)

When we forget our confessional language or have not learned it well we run into the danger of easily picking up unrefined spiritual speech. Today we can read many books that speak religiously. But most of them do not speak confessionally. We need to watch our language and the language we

pick up from others. And until we are well steeped in confessional language we should stay away from reading unrefined and non-confessional language for it will only serve to confuse us.

The Songs of Zion in Evangelism

By Wes Bredenhof

We live in an exciting time. No longer are our Reformed churches so isolated by language or other cultural barriers. We live in a time when we are moving forward with the spreading of the gospel in our own local communities. Such work began already in the 1970s and 1980s, but today there is a great deal more enthusiasm for evangelism. This enthusiasm manifests itself in the various evangelistic efforts which take place in many places. Organized outreach occurs in the universities, in drop-in centers for teens, in Vacation Bible Schools, in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, in old-age homes and in many other venues. Certainly this is encouraging and definitely something which must be continued! These efforts are not only a blessing to those who hear the gospel and believe, but can also be a real blessing in the lives of those who bring the gospel.

Improvements?

Nevertheless, we must carefully reflect on how we go about doing this work. Is there perhaps room for improvement in certain areas? I believe that there is, and one area of particular concern is the type of songs which are usually employed in these outreaches. Song can be a very powerful tool for the spreading of the good news about Christ, there's no question about it. Music plays very strongly on the emotions, and it's sometimes said that with the right music you can soften just about anyone's heart. However, we are not so much concerned with manipulating people in such a way as we are with using the music and lyrics which befit our evangelistic task and which will bring the greatest honour to God's Holy Name.

Most of the time, the various types of outreach, if they include songs, the songs are usually well-known evangelical hymns. It is true that the obligatory Psalm 23 or maybe Psalm 100 are sometimes included, but for the most part, songs such as "Amazing Grace," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and others predominate. This is not to say that such songs cannot express Scriptural truth. They were written by mere sinful men, but even mere sinners can express Christian things in a fitting manner. Even so, Reformed Christians must be very discerning when using these types of songs. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," for example, is a hymn which cannot lawfully be used to praise God, being an expression of the conviction of the writer that the Yankee North in the American Civil War was on a divinely approved mission. So hymns, if they are used in outreach, must be used with great discretion.

What about the Psalter?

But now what about the Psalter? What about God's covenant song-book? Why is it that, in outreach, the Psalms generally fall by the way side? It could be because we think the Psalms are the exclusive property of the Church (God's covenant people), but could not the same thing be said about the Bible? Maybe it is because we simply haven't thought about it. I'm not quite sure why the Psalms have been ignored in evangelism, but I do know that there are three strong reasons why the Psalms should have a predominant place in our singing in outreach.

In the first place, we do sing the Psalms in our worship services. The ultimate goal of evangelism is, by the power of the Spirit, to draw unbelievers to Christ and into His Church. Imagine the shock of a person who has been weaned through an evangelistic Bible study (singing only hymns) and who now desires to come to a Reformed church. He can't figure out why the hymns sung at the Bible study aren't sung in church. He might wonder, "Am I in the right place?" It is important for the sake of those we are seeking to draw into the church that we try to maintain a consistency between the songs sung in the church and those sung in outreach. This naturally means a greater emphasis upon the Psalms.

Secondly, consider the relative quality of these two types of songs. Psalms come from our God Himself. They are inspired compositions intended for the worship of God's people. Hymns come from finite, sinful, fallible men. Their saccharine levels have been known to cause truth decay through history. Psalms or hymns? It is clear which is of a superior quality. The Psalms are beautiful in every way, inspired by God's Holy Spirit, "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." (2 Tim.3:16). If we are trying to teach the truths of God's Word, there is no better medium than the words of God Himself which He intended to place on our lips. When we consider the qualities of the Psalter, we can only conclude that it far surpasses any human work.

In the third place, the Psalms adequately treat every evangelistic theme that one could conceive. There is no need to claim that something is missing in the Psalter that might be provided by a hymn. Examples: Sin and Repentance--Psalm 51 (or any other penitent psalm); Creation--Psalm 100; Christ--Psalm 110 (and many others); Thankfulness--Psalm 136; Praise--Psalm 146 (and others); God's Law--Psalm 119; Adversity--Psalm 31; Sovereignty of God--Psalm 18. Truly the Psalter is a complete repository for songs suitable for evangelism. God's song-book, by implication, ought to be high on our list of songs to be sung in outreach. How can we ignore such a treasury?

Objections

Naturally, some will bring forward objections to this proposal for a renewed appreciation for and increased usage of the Psalter, especially as it pertains to outreach. Someone will say, "But the people don't know the Psalms, the words are foreign to them, and the tunes, well, we won't even talk about those Genevan tunes. How can you expect someone who's never been to church to be

able to sing Psalms?" When we come to people with Scripture and proclaim to them Scriptural truths, they are not usually familiar with Scripture as a whole either. As you work with people, you often find that (by God's grace and Spirit) they grow in grace and knowledge; there is development - something always wonderful to see!). This development can also take place with the use of the Psalms. Those whom we are evangelizing are learning, they may also learn new songs, songs which contain the very Word of God, songs in which the Holy Spirit Himself speaks.

Moreover, the objection concerning tunes is not at all insurmountable. While it would be ideal to teach the Genevan tunes, since after all, we would like to see these people in church in the future (and the tunes are eminently fitting to the subject matter in most cases), it is not necessary to use them if they will cause undue difficulty. There are other Psalters available which allow the interchanging of various tunes. The Book of Psalms for Singing (from the RPCNA) uses the tune of "Amazing Grace" (New Britain) for Psalm 3. However, the same tune, being Common Meter, can also be used for Psalm 98. Singing Psalms to the Genevan tunes would be ideal, however singing Psalms to familiar tunes is still better than singing no Psalms at all.

All around us, the evangelical churches continue their tradition of ignoring the Psalter and replacing it with man-made hymns and puerile, repetitious praise and worship songs. Reformed evangelism (and also Reformed liturgies) needs to be on guard that this influence does not poison our own churches. In our outreach, let's reflect that healthy appreciation for God's covenant song-book which distinguishes the Reformed Churches from those on the path of apostasy.

From the Editors

1. First a bit of unfinished business. In our last issue of Vol.3 we printed an article by Rev. Hofford. Attached to this article was an editorial comment. For the record it should be known that the article of Rev.B.Hofford was indeed rejected by Clarion but with an invitation to shorten it and resubmit it as a "Reader's Forum" contribution. We thank both Revs. R. Schouten and B. Hofford for helping us correct the impression we left.

2. As we begin our fourth Volume we take a quick look back and continue to plan for the future. Our purpose remains the same - to publish reformed, short, readable articles concerning important issues in the Church. Although this endeavour continues to be a part-time effort of concerned members of the Church, we hope to encourage others to join us in writing. As the writing and reading takes up much time we encourage our readers to continue promoting our little paper (as many of you have done).

Although costs continue to rise we do not want financial considerations to prevent subscription. For this reason we will continue to leave our subscription rate at \$15 per year (Sept. -June). We would ask those of you who have not done so to send us your subscription fee so that too much time does not get taken up with administration.

We pray that the Lord will continue to bless all of us (readers, writers and other helpers) in the coming season.

Well-known Words, Much Value

by **Rev. J. G. Feenstra**

HEARING GOD'S WORD

The Word of God must be proclaimed in the congregation. We often speak about the administration of the Word. But when we speak this way we do not mean a friendly talk, nor do we mean a so-called theme-sermon where a few good thoughts are hung onto a text. Rather, we mean that the Word of God must be explained and applied. The Word itself must speak. In the end the adage must be true: He who hears you hears Me.

It is through the preaching that our faith life is strengthened and built up. A rich blessing emanates from the regular administration of the Word. That's why it is so sad when members of the church hold to a wrong minded habit of not attending the worship services regularly. We ought not to neglect the regular gathering together of believers.

There must be an active effort to overcome such a sin. Also when young people propose to publicly profess their faith attention must be given to this matter. That's why it is so saddening when the older ones give the younger ones wrong examples. Families who regularly attend the worship services are of great importance in God's congregation. After all, this is the meeting of God with His people. It is the means used by God, a proven means. Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of the Word of God. And that same Word also serves for the strengthening of faith.

READING GOD'S WORD

We ought to read the Word of our Lord at regular times. In our families the Bible is an open book, not a closed book. Still that is not enough. I would like to pay particular attention to personal Bible study. When young men go into the service the Bible must not be left behind. When people go on holidays the Bible should find a place in their suitcase. But does that always happen? What would the custom officers find in our suitcases? Could it be that at times they might find contraband instead of the Bible? Also our sick should have a Bible with them when they go to hospital. For the personal study of God's Word is of upper most importance.

CONSIDERATION OF GOD'S WORD

It is not enough that, through the preaching, we hear and also read God's Word, but we also have a calling to consider it. Mary kept all these words and pondered them in her heart. That's what it means to work with the Word of our Lord that we have heard and read. It is important to pay attention to that. It appears that many hearers prefer nothing better than to be spoon fed. They

don't want to expend too much effort. They prefer all types of goodies over nutritious bread that they must chew. Chewing involves effort and they'd rather not expend any. Maybe it would be good to inscribe the words, "He who does not work does not eat" above our church doors. Hearers have a task. They must take the Word with them and consider it. When they read God's Word at home they must ask what the Lord is saying to them. In our faith life we are not fed intravenously. Meditation about scripture receives far too low a priority. With many it enters one ear and leaves via the other.

THE INFLUENCE OF GOD'S WORD

The Word of our Lord always has a message for us. God speaks in it with authority. We cannot avoid it. That Word comes to us with admonition. It admonishes us when we fall into sin. It admonishes us when we refuse to walk in the ways of the Lord. The Word of God spares no one. It means exactly what it says. When the admonitions of God have no effect and are ignored, then that same Word comes with threats. God angers Himself about sin. He will act justly and punish sin. At times God's people receive special punishments for they cannot sin inconsequentially and we cannot say that we didn't know. Especially members of the covenant who sin but don't care about the admonitions and threats will be severely punished for they have known the way but have not walked in it.

But when we listen to the admonitions and threats, it is so wonderful that that same Word begins to strengthen and comfort us with the rich promises contained in it. We may accept these promises in faith. Out of grace we may make these promises our own. In this way, under the influence of the Word of our Lord, our life will become truly rich and happy.

WATCH AND PRAY

Watch and pray so that you do not fall into temptation. The high and the low points of our faith life lay close together. Soon after Christ was baptized and the heavens opened He was led away by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Soon after Peter had celebrated his first Lord's Supper, he was sifted by Satan - he denied Christ.

If we want to stand fast we must watch and pray; for Satan often appears unexpectedly. How often might it not happen that you have enjoyed a sermon, celebrated the Lord's Supper, heartily sung a psalm and shortly after - a temptation appears? The devil knows our weak spots very well and will direct his arrows there.

Every day we must put on the armour of faith. Of special importance is our morning prayer. When Martin Luther was very busy he would say: "Now I must pray very well, else I will not get done today". We must prepare well each morning. A teacher once asked his students how it was possible that David, a man after God's own heart, could have committed such a great sin. One of the children said simply but accurately: "I think that the king had forgotten his morning prayer". Surely it will often happen, even though we do not watch and pray enough, that God will save us from gross sins. But the Lord can also consider it necessary to leave His own alone for a period. Then they are helpless standing in their own strength, then they keep their sin secret and God

allows the devil and the world to have extra power. Then God's people put their feet in the trap, and the trap is set. For a little while, God gives them over to their own foolishness. Then there is not only the possibility that they fall but God arranges that they fall. The times of relapse in our faith life are so very dangerous for without Me you can do nothing.

How is it with our prayer life? There is much to correct. We must watch and pray.

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