

Ps 79:5
Hy 1A
Baptism – Ps 105:3
Ps 85:3,4
Ps 119:49,50
Ps 23:1,2,3
Ephesians 4:1-16
Lord's Day 21.54D; Art 30,31,32

Yarrow, June 20, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The church, we learned in the last number of weeks, is not the work of finite man but is instead the work of triune God. The Father has chosen particular people for salvation and given them to the Son, the Son has laid down His life for these elect, and the Holy Spirit in turn works in these elect persons the gift of faith and regenerates them. More, after His ascension into heaven God the Son controls world history in such a way that He causes the elect to come to know the gospel and believe in Him, yes, and sovereignly, majestically He gathers all these persons into His church.

In the whole mix of things we're to add too the fact that God created people to have responsibility; we're not like turtles or tulips void of duty, but were created to image God. The Biblical picture that draws out the nature of our responsibility in relation to the church is the picture of the shepherd and his sheep; the Good Shepherd uses His voice to summon His sheep. That's Lord's Day 21.54: Christ Jesus gathers His church "by His ... Word" – to which we shall listen.

The sheep, then, need to discern which voice they hear is the authentic voice of the shepherd (instead of a stranger or hired hand), and follow the true Shepherd. Translated to the subject of church that means: people are responsible to focus on the preaching; does the preaching I hear sound like the Scriptures? Do I recognize in the preaching the voice of God or the voice of man? That is *the* central guide one is to use in finding one's way among the 60 churches of Chilliwack; the church legitimate in God's eyes in town is the one where the pulpit unabashedly and faithfully proclaims what the Lord says in His Word. That's where we left off last week.

That Word is so vitally important, to the point that it is *the* critical mark of the church. This reality has a number of practical applications in what a true church invariably looks like. This is the material that needs our attention today.

THE WORD IS CENTRAL IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH.

This has application in relation to:

1. The look of the church service,
2. The task of the office bearers,
3. The feel of church discipline.

1. The Look of the Church Service

I suspect that many of you have heard of the so-called 'worship wars' happening in so many churches. There was a time when every Protestant church in our community very obviously had a pulpit pointedly placed as the central attraction in the front of the sanctuary. The Word proclaimed from this pulpit received an echo in the singing of the congregation, a singing that was sometimes assisted by a

choir and sometimes assisted by musical accompaniment. With the rise of the worship wars of the last number of decades, the pulpit has been squeezed away as the central attraction in the front of the sanctuary and been replaced by music. The traditional pipe organ so many churches had was replaced by a more contemporary instrument, and of late that more contemporary instrument has been replaced by a band. The whole thing has been a 'war' in many churches around us because the older generation has resented the shift away from their traditional style of music, and the younger generation has in turn resented the insistence of the older to stay with the traditional – something that made no sense to the younger and on top of that was out of step with the music of their daily lives. It made 'church' sound so inauthentic to the younger, and so churches ended up doing one of two things. Either they grew grey with the loss of their young people (heading off to more progressive churches) or they altered their worship practices in an effort to retain their youth. The fight has left a lot of bad blood, hard feelings and empty churches.

By the grace of the Lord Canadian Reformed Churches across the nation have experienced very little of these 'worship wars'. Yet we've had our casualties too. There are those who left us over the years because they no longer appreciated the traditional feel of our worship service, and so sought a place where the style of worship was more contemporary – and that's a reference first of all, we understand, to music. Furthermore, there's a growing appreciation in our midst for the "Praise and Worship" style of doing things, and then we're naïve to think that the worship wars that consumed other churches around us will surely pass us by in time to come. That is why it is imperative that we understand why our worship service looks the way it does.

That worship service: we know when to stand and when to sit, know when to sing and when to reach for our peppermints. But what, congregation, is the central element of the worship service, the one golden thread that ties the whole service together? Is it audience satisfaction? Getting a lift, feeling good? Is it displaying talent, be it on the organ (or some other instrument) or the microphone (be it in preaching or in singing)? Is it even showing how nicely you can dress or how quietly you can have your children sit in church? Or is it simply to see how traditional we can be? What's the service really all about??

Given the material of the last few weeks I trust it's clear that none of the above possible answers are sufficient. The worship service is simply not about people. Church is about Jesus Christ; when you think 'church' you need to think *Christ*. And Christ from heaven gathers His church, grows His church, strengthens His church through His *Word*; He is the Good Shepherd who leads His sheep through His *voice*. That voice is heard today through the preaching; it is the will of the ascended Christ that preachers proclaim that Word faithfully and fully so that the sheep of the Lord will know the will of the Lord in today's world. This was one of the critical elements recovered in the Great Reformation over against the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, and that is why historically all Protestant churches have a pulpit strategically located in the front of the sanctuary, and that pulpit was used. *The voice of the Good Shepherd* is the golden thread through the entire worship service.

Yet it simply is not the will of the Lord that His voice be heard and nothing more; the Lord's identity as God requires that there be *response* to the voice. To stay with the imagery of the shepherd and his sheep: when the shepherd calls, the sheep must get up and follow. This 'following' is caught in the worship service by the way the congregation reacts to what the Good Shepherd says from the pulpit. This second thread, the response of the congregation, is dependent on the first thread, the Word of the Shepherd. It may never be that the sheep, the congregation, takes the lead in what is happening in church; the Word, the Shepherd, takes the lead and the sheep always *respond*.

That, brothers and sisters, is why the church service is put together the way it is. The worship service begins with the congregation professing its dependence on the Lord, and doing so with words borrowed from the Scriptures God has given. "Our help," we say together, "is in the Name of the Lord who made heaven and earth" – words that come from Ps 124. In some of our churches it's the minister who says the words on behalf of the congregation; in other congregations it is the people as a whole who recite these words together. Either way, it is the congregation who is confessing dependence on the Lord. In the face of that dependence, the Lord through the minister extends His greeting to His people: "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ" – words again lifted from the pages of Scripture. But think about it, brothers and sisters: holy, sovereign God would tell sinful, finite people that His grace rests on them; how wonderful and exciting! The grateful congregation invariably *responds* to the Shepherd's assurance with a song of praise. The Shepherd in turn gives His people His Word of instruction, reminds them in the preamble to the law that He is their God and they His redeemed people, and then tells them –again– the stipulations of the covenant. The Good Shepherd speaks, and the sheep listen submissively to that law. They respond through singing. And so it goes throughout the service; the Good Shepherd speaks and His sheep listen and respond. The central element in the service is Christ speaking, and of the several things Christ says in the service the central is the preaching, the sermon, the opening of the Scriptures. That is not the time to tune out, and it is not the time either to complain on the style of the preacher (and sinful men have irritating styles), but it is the time to marvel that the Good Shepherd would actually take the time to address me (sinner that I am), to comfort, to instruct, to encourage, to reprimand, to teach. He knows of our three sworn enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, and knows how much we need rich pasture and good water, and so as faithful Shepherd He feeds us in perfect wisdom. And we respond again in song and prayer..., and respond throughout the week in thankful reflection on the word received and obedience to its instruction. In a word: the Good Shepherd speaks, and we follow. *In that order!* And that order of things flows from the very heart of what the church is: the work of Christ.

But what happens if Jesus Christ is pushed to the background and the emphasis is placed on the sheep? Why, then in the liturgy the Voice of the Good Shepherd is pushed to the secondary place and the thoughts and feelings of the sheep are lifted to primary place. But then response is no longer truly response; instead, the sheep end up centre stage, end up setting the agenda for the service and determining its feel, its mood.

What a sheep-centred, people-centred, service looks like? It can look like a variety of things. The pulpit could be pushed to the side, the sermon made shorter and less authoritative. In its place can come contributions from the congregation, be it testimonies of personal experience or performances of music or even drama. Then the inevitable happens: church becomes entertainment that has to compete with other entertainers of town. People have different thoughts as to what's appropriate in church, the young incline this way, the older incline another way – and you have your worship wars.... The only way to prevent those wars is to ensure that the Voice of the Good Shepherd has and continues to have primary place of importance in church, and all human response to be exactly that – *response* to the Good Shepherd. And the only way to keep the voice of the Shepherd central is to keep seeing 'church' not as a human thing but as Christ's work. You see: how things are done in church depends on what you think 'church' is.

We come to our second point:

2. *The Task of the Office bearers*

When one thinks of the church, we've said before, one is to think of Jesus Christ. It turns out that Christ is in heaven. In His care for His church on earth, though, the Lord was pleased to give office bearers. It's what we read from Ephesians 4. Christ ascended, says that passage, and when He did so He "gave gifts to men" (vs 8). These gifts are listed in vs 11: "It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers." Some offices of that list turned out to be temporary offices, while others last throughout the time of Church History. The apostles died, and were not replaced. The prophets were a short-term office that disappeared when the Bible was complete half a century or so after Jesus' ascension. Evangelists appear three times on the pages of Scripture and disappear, and the nature of that office is nowhere clearly spelled out. But pastors and teachers have continued. We read of the apostles appointing elders in every church (Acts 14:23), and read too of the mandates the apostles give to the elders; I'll come back to that in a moment.

But the thing that needs our attention now, congregation, is the connection between the officers of the church and Jesus Christ Himself. Christ in heaven, we said before, continues to *speaks*, and through His Word leads His people. Then yes, Christ has given His Bible; that is His Word. Yet that Bible-by-itself is silent; it needs to be read and to be opened. It is the task of the office bearers to open those Scriptures for the people of the Lord (cf Rev 1:3). This is Article 30 of the *Belgic Confession*: "we believe that this true church" –and that's the church we've been speaking of in the last number of weeks– "must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word." Accordingly, "there should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons...."

In relation to the minister we have a fairly clear understanding of what he is to do. Paul's words to Timothy, minister of the Word of God in Ephesus, apply to all ministers: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). With the preaching from the pulpit comes also the teaching in Catechism classes. I mentioned last week already the responsibility that comes with this mandate; preachers *dare not* speak differently than the Good Shepherd, lest they scatter the sheep of the Lord. The item that is critical to the point being made is this: because the Lord of the Church shepherds His flock through the Word, every preacher is duty-bound to speak that Word faithfully. It is his responsibility (together with the elders) to ensure that when the sheep of the flock hear his voice they recognize in his words the Voice of the Good Shepherd.

But the same thing is true, congregation, in relation to the elders. In our thinking we connect elders with home visits and with oversight, and that is fine. But what is the colour of the oversight the elders have to give? Why do they come on home visits? What's their actual task in the congregation? We understand that they are to lead. But it may never be that they lead according to human standards or human wisdom. They are to go into the homes and get to know the sheep of their ward, certainly. And that requires much listening, and asking the right questions. But the guidance the elders give may not be human-centred guidance, the sort of guidance that feels good to people. For the church is the Lord's; when you think 'church' you need to think first of Jesus Christ. When any officer speaks in Christ's church he needs to speak distinctly and clearly as Christ would speak. No office bearer can do his work faithfully with his Bible closed. That Bible has to direct his thinking and his analyse of the needs of any given home, and that Bible has to determine the nature of the feed he distributes at any particular address. That does not mean that in every visit the elder must solve a pastoral problem by

reading an applicable portion of Scripture, but it does mean that the flavour of his answer must be the same as the flavour of Scripture. And the sheep must be able to recognize it as such.

That has implications for elders. Specifically, elders need to know their Bibles. And again, I do not mean with that that they have any given passage of Scripture at their finger tips (wonderful as that may be). Instead, to be able to carry out their office well elders need to master the flavour of Scripture and know how to speak its wisdom in the dust and dirt of daily living. Elders shall need to keep on staying busy with the Scriptures in their personal lives so as to be the better equipped to speak to the flock of Jesus Christ with the voice of the Good Shepherd. More, elders shall need to listen carefully to the opening of Scripture as it happens on the pulpit, and listen to that preaching with two ears – one tuned to the elder's personal life and the other tuned to the needs of the members of his ward. In relation to his personal life, the elder shall need to submit readily to the Good Shepherd and follow wherever He leads. The elder who does that will model to the people of his ward what obedience to Jesus Christ actually looks like. With the other ear the elder needs to listen to the preaching with the needs of his ward in mind. It may very well be that a member of his ward does not hear that a particular word of comfort or instruction in the preaching is actually a Word from Christ for that specific sheep. It is the elder's duty, as shepherd under Christ, to take that sermon (or that paragraph in the sermon) to that particular address and make sure the sheep understand that sermon (or paragraph) and work with it in their circumstances. This, of course, involves making far more visits than the annual home visit. Exactly because the church is Christ's and He as Good Shepherd would lead His sheep through elders is your calling, brothers, so demanding – and such a privilege!

I trust we're all agreed here. But two obvious consequences follow for the congregation. The first is how the congregation receives these brothers. That the Good Shepherd from His throne in heaven above would shepherd His flock is such a delightful reality, and we're thankful for it. That He would use sinful men, brothers we perhaps know from years ago, is His perfect wisdom we dare not criticize. But then I need to receive these brothers into my home and into my life readily and eagerly – not because of their persons but because of the Christ who sends them and who speaks to me through them. More, I need to be open with them, and respect their guidance and instruction readily and eagerly too.

The second consequence is just as obvious, and it's this: we need today to prepare ourselves to be office bearers tomorrow! That is: today brothers in the congregation –and sisters as their helpmeets– need to make it their business that they master the flavour of Scripture and so are able to speak with the authority of the Word of God in the midst of life's brokenness. Getting insight into Scripture and learning to speak the way the Good Shepherd speaks does not happen the moment one is ordained into the office. If we confess that the church is Christ's, and confess too the Lord gathers His church through His Word, and recognize that there's a consequence here for the office of the elder, then we have to be consistent and make it our business today to guarantee that tomorrow's elders are able to speak to the sheep of God with the voice of God. That is a training that begins in the home, with the diligent labour of father and mother. And that is why it is not a good thing that many of us pour more energy into mastering details of entertainment and exercise than mastering details of Christian living. Recall from last week: God created us to be *responsible*.

The other office is that of deacons. At the heart of their work too lies the word of the Good Shepherd. In our thinking we associate the deacons with money and so with the financially stressed, and that's understandable because that's what the eye sees. But the Biblical picture is different. Deacons are to be not associated first of with the check book they carry, but are to be associated first

of all with the Bible they carry. For the deacons, like the elders and the minister, represent Jesus Christ the Head of the church, and Christ gives His leadership and His care through His word. Deacons, then, most definitely need to do their utmost to understand the pressures a given family is experiencing, but their answer to those pressures may not be simply a check or first of all a check; their answer must first explore with this address how the Good Shepherd wants this family to respond to the pressures He gives – be it responding with patience or with learning better money management or drawing in help from wider family, etc. Then certainly, let deacons give liberally as there is need in the congregation, but let this office also make plain to the flock that it's all about Christ and how He is leading His people.

So we're back to the response of the congregation, this time to the deacons. They come with Christ's word, and so are to be readily and eagerly received – not because of the check book they may carry but because of the Bible they carry. And there's a second necessary response: since the Good Shepherd sends deacons with the mandate to speak His word, today's brothers (and sisters as helpmeets) need to know the wisdom of Scripture and be able to speak it in the grunt of daily living, for tomorrow's generation needs capable deacons. The church is the Lord's and so deacons too need to be able to speak from God's Word in those very sensitive areas where life hurts.

That leaves us with our last point:

3. The Feel of Church Discipline

I need not today explain in detail what church discipline is or why it is necessary. Given that the church belongs to the Lord, is the flock of the Good Shepherd, is the house of the master Builder, it will be clear to us that there is no place for bad drywall in His house or for a goat amongst His sheep. But the question that needs attention now is this: *how* shall the goat be removed or the bad drywall? Is sin to be cut out of the church of the Lord by force? Shall we use money to buy the better behaviour of a member of the church? Or shall we resort to system of rewards?

Given that the church is the Lord's and that the Lord governs through His Word, it is surely clear that the only means one can use to address sin is the Word. And make no mistake: the word is effective. Recall what happened in Genesis 1 when God first spoke. Recall what happened too when the Lord Jesus Christ issued a command to the wind during the storm at sea and issued another command to dead Lazarus in the grave. Recall too what happened when Peter preached the word on Pentecost Day. As the apostle to the Hebrews says, "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow..." (Hebrews 4:12).

What is the consequence? This: when office bearers and congregation members address each other on any point in life where there is need for growth or correction, it's to be done on the basis of the Word of God. Our culture would say that words of encouragement or correction need to be sensitively formulated so as not to make the other person feel bad. More, our culture would say that you need to encourage the other person to draw strength from his inner self, and even that you need to tell him to be his true self. This psychology of the day has its impact on how we encourage or correct each other in marriage and family, as well as in congregational admonitions and even home visits; more, it determines how we expect to be addressed.

But the church is the Lord's, and its members are sheep of His flock. The Good Shepherd Himself knows best what sort of nurturing His sheep need, and He is pleased to give it through His Word. So anyone who would nurture any sheep of the Lord in the joys and sorrows of life must speak as Christ would speak. That's not psychobabble, but words of authority that carry the flavour of Scripture.

There's a double implication here, the same as before. The first is this: the sheep of the Lord's flock need to be open to encouragement and correction that sounds Biblical, and not worldly. That

requires that the sheep have a healthy sense of the Voice of the Shepherd – and that's possible only when they know their Bible. The second is this: those who would offer a word of encouragement or admonition must do so from out of the wisdom and flavour of Scripture – and that too is possible only when they know their Bible.

I've spoken of liturgy, of the work of office bearers, of church discipline. What, congregation, was the underlying theme of it all? The unifying theme was the notion of God's Word; that *Word* determines what the liturgy looks like, what the office bearers do, what church discipline feels like.

And that is not surprising. Think back to how Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession* lists the marks of the true church. They're threefold: "it practices the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins." Then the Confession adds this striking sentence: "In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head."

That, brothers and sisters, is precisely the point. The church is Christ's work. That is why liturgy, office bearers, church discipline, and indeed anything and everything that happens in church always is determined by Scripture and always tastes like the flavour of the Bible. And that, of course, is the ongoing challenge: in changing circumstances, with changing people, always and again going back to Scripture. As long as you stay with the Word, as long as you listen humbly and readily to the Voice of the Shepherd, you shall stay 'church' of Jesus Christ. But as soon as human feelings and wants become central, you have lost the essence of what 'church' is all about. And the wars and the deterioration will follow.