

Outline

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Lord's Supper

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LORD'S SUPPER

Introduction

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

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

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

1. Scripture

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

Matt 26:26-28

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

1 Cor 11:23-26

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

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

1 Peter 1 : 18-19

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

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

1 Cor. 5:7-8

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

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

Ex 12 : 26-27

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

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

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

Isa 25:6

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

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

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

1 Cor 11:23-29

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

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

1 Cor 10:16-17

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

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

Rev 19:7

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

2. Confessions, Church Order and Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

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

Art. 29

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

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

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

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

Q/A 81

Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

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

2.3. Church Order

The churches have agreed to the following:

Art. 56

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

Art. 60

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

Art. 61

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

Art. 68

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

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

Minister - Art. 16

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

Elders - Art. 22

They shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned.

Deacons - Art. 23

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

2.4. Form for Celebration of the Lord's Supper

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Meal of Remembrance.

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

A Meal of Assurance.

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

A Meal of Communion

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

A Meal of Expectation

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

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

3. Goal

We celebrate the Lord's Supper in order to

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

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

4. History

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

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

5. The Celebration of the Lord's Supper

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

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

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

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

6. The Collection at the Table

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

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

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

7. Preparations for Lord's Supper

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

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

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

8. Frequency of Celebrating

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

9. Admission to the Table

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

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

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

See further, chapter 2 - 6 Catechism Instruction.

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

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

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

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

10. Literature

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

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

11. Evaluation

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