

On the Way to the Lord's Supper

Request for admission to the holy supper

We have seen that there is a close connection between baptism and profession of faith.

There is also a close connection between profession of faith and the Lord's Supper. Those who profess their faith request admission to the holy supper at the same time. The second section in the form is formulated in this way: "Since you have now come here to make this profession before God and his holy church, and hereby to receive admission to the holy supper, we ask you to answer sincerely to the following questions..."

The person requesting this admission should also *desire* this admission. It may not be an *automatic* thing, in the sense of: in doing profession I have gained the "right" to celebrate the Lord's Supper. No, those who have been baptized, and have learned to understand their baptism, must also feel the need to sit down at the table of the Lord, the "table of the covenant."

Old church

For years there has been this connection between confession and the Lord's Supper. The apostle Paul says that we have to examine ourselves before celebrating the Lord's Supper. (I Corinthians 11:28) Public profession of faith is of course no examination in the usual sense, yet it does contain the element of the result of teaching, of instruction. That is why the old church demanded that the person who was admitted to (adult) baptism, first make profession of faith.

This profession, then, was the result of the instruction of the church, leading not only to baptism, but also to the Lord's Supper.

Devaluation

In later times a loss of value, a devaluation, of the confession took place. "Confirmation" took the place of the profession of faith. This "confirmation", made into a sacrament by Rome, was more and more separated from admission to the Lord's Supper. It became increasingly

a special ceremony, between baptism and Lord's Supper, but without any connection with either. It became a ceremony with a meaning and working of its own.

Calvin

Calvin rediscovered the connection between public profession of faith and holy supper. Those who had not professed their faith were not permitted to partake in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. But the reverse was also true: those who had professed their faith were obedient to the faith, bound to proclaim the Lord's death. Hence the rule established by Calvin that there should be an opportunity for making profession of faith before each Lord's Supper celebration.

Calvin did not deem it right to limit this opportunity to once a year. To him profession of faith and the Lord's Supper belonged together. For the person who has confessed his faith, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is no longer a problem at all. It isn't something that depends on human insight. It is an act of obedience: obedience of the faith!

Dutch Reformation

In the "war year" of 1568, the convent of Wezel (which was a preparation for the church confederation in the Netherlands) decided: "It is not improper to examine in the presence of the whole church children who have followed the catechetical instruction, according to the shorter catechism, with the main parts of the greater catechism added to it. This will take place eight days before the next celebration of the Lord's Supper. Those who have been properly examined, be they children or adults, will present themselves to the church on the day before the celebration of the Lord's Supper. After they have been examined in the main points of faith and doctrine, they will be asked to voice their agreement with these. They will also submit themselves to the discipline of the church and allow their names to be entered in the church records. Finally they will be presented to the congregation, in order that, barring lawful objections, they may be admitted to the table of the Lord on the following day."

From this we can see how rigorously the confession was tied to the Lord's Supper.

Voetius and Koelman

In the seventeenth century after the Reformation in the Netherlands, the confession of faith was connected with the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a matter of course. A well known figure of the time, Gijsbertus Voetius, formulated the questions for public profession as follows¹:

1. Do you declare that you consider the doctrine of the church, insofar as you have learned, heard and confessed it, to be the true doctrine of salvation, in accordance with the Holy Scriptures?
2. Do you promise, by the grace of God, to remain steadfast in the confession of the doctrine of salvation, and to live and die in it?
3. Do you promise to live your life, according to this doctrine, faithfully, honestly and blamelessly, and to adorn your confession with good works?
4. Do you promise to submit yourself to the admonition, correction and discipline of the church, and to be submissive, if it should happen (which God may prevent) that you should become delinquent in doctrine or life?

In these questions the Lord's Supper is not specifically mentioned. But we should not imagine that Voetius and Koelman abandoned the connection between confession and Lord's Supper. On the contrary: the confession of faith was regarded as the admission to the Lord's Supper, and this was considered so obvious that it was not even explicitly formulated.

In later times

In following years the philosophy arose that making profession of faith was only a "rational assent to objective truths". In this way people with subjectivist tendencies snuck something between profession and Lord's Supper, namely the acquisition of the certainty that this truth had become a personal possession of faith. This certainty was usually looked for in the way of various experiences which were considered to be extraneous to knowledge of faith.

¹ Shortly after him, Jacob Koelman in his book "Office and Duties of Elders and Deacons" used the same formulation.

Thankfully, in the nineteenth century during the Secession, a man names Hendrik De Cock remained faithful to the questions of Voetius and Koelman.

After the union of Secession and Doleantie in 1892, many questions circulated in the reformed churches (often also with reference to the use of the sacraments, i.e. the holy supper). The Synod of Utrecht 1923 reworded the questions in the form, wording the second question thus: "now requesting admission to the Lord's Supper"; later the same matter would be rephrased at the Synod of Groningen-Zuid 1978 in the newer version. In the Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches, these words had first been phrased in the second question of the *Form for the Public Profession of Faith* as "now that you request admission to the holy supper," but in the revised edition (1984, 2014) this phrase is now placed before the questions in the Form, according to the decisions of the Synods of Smithville (1980) and Cloverdale (1983).

So it is the Scriptural, reformed doctrine that profession of faith and celebration of the holy supper cannot be separated – they belong together!

K Deddens