

## The Meaning of the Lord's Supper

### The Traditional Reformed View

#### Guido de Brès

When Guido de Brès was put into prison, many people came to see him there. Some came just to make fun of both him and his friend and colleague, Peregrin de la Grange. But others came for a serious reason—to convert him. Among these was the bishop of Atrecht, François Richardot.

After they had exchanged some pleasantries, they got down to business—a theological discussion. The bishop asked Guido de Brès what subject they should discuss. “Whatever you like,” replied Guido de Brès. “Let us then speak about the sacrifice of the Mass,” said the bishop. The Protestants usually oppose the sacrifice of the Mass on the basis of Hebrews 10:26: “There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” The bishop explained, “The apostle, however, speaks in this text only about the unforgivable sins, for which there is no forgiveness. But you have to acknowledge, I think, that the sacrifice of Christ is useful for all other sins.” The bishop undoubtedly was about to prove that the forgivable daily sins need a daily sacrifice of Christ through the Mass.

But Guido de Brès answered, “Would it not please you to begin with the institution of the Mass—who instituted it and when? I do not find a word about the institution of the Mass in Holy Scripture. But I have read what Luke wrote in Acts 2:42, where he describes the situation of the first congregation. This text says that the congregation devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. This ‘breaking of bread’ refers to the Lord’s Supper. If

---

\* Originally published as “The Meaning of the Lord’s Supper,” *Koinonia* 14.1 (1993) 1–41. Used with permission.

the Mass would have existed at that time, Luke would not have been silent about it, since it is, as the Church of Rome says, a sacrifice for the living as well as for the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

This was the beginning of a lengthy debate between the bishop and Guido de Brès. The whole debate focused on the issue of whether the Mass is a sacrifice, as the Roman Catholics say, or a meal, as the Protestants say. In this debate, many texts and quotations from the church fathers were discussed. In this discussion the question as to whether the bread and the wine change into the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation) was also debated. However, throughout the debate, the main issue remained: what is the character of this sacrament—a sacrifice or a meal?<sup>2</sup>

This discussion shows us what the fundamental issue was in the controversy concerning the second sacrament. If one would ask today what the main difference was between the Roman Catholic view and the Protestant view, he will probably answer, “Transubstantiation.” The Roman Catholics taught that the bread and the wine change into the body and blood of Christ while this was denied in the Reformation. To be sure, transubstantiation was an important issue, but it was not the centre of the debate. The real issue was the meaning of this sacrament—is it a meal or is it a sacrifice? The matter of transubstantiation was discussed *within* the context of this question.

This difference was so far-reaching that it even led to a different name for this sacrament. The Roman Catholics and the Reformed use the same name of baptism for the first sacrament. But while the Roman Catholics called the second sacrament “Mass” or “Eucharist,” the Protestants changed the name to “the Lord’s Supper.” With this name, they indicate the Reformed position that it is not a sacrifice to God, but a meal for God’s people.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Dutch Book of Martyrs, *Waerachtige Historie der vromer Martelaren en getrouwe Bloedt-getuyeen Jesu Christi*, fol. 424. The edition I used has no title page. Since the last story dates from 1655, it is probably the edition of I. G. Oudorpius (Amsterdam: Schippers, 1671).

<sup>2</sup> The discussions are presented in *Waerachtige Historie*, fol. 423–430. Transubstantiation is not debated before fol. 428. The discussion between the bishop and Guido de Brès’ colleague Peregrin de la Grange follows the same pattern. Within the context of the question of whether the sacrament is a supper or a sacrifice, the doctrine of transubstantiation is discussed.

<sup>3</sup> C. Trimp has summarized the same contrast between the terms “altar” and “table.” See his *Het altaar gebroken - de tafel hersteld: De reformatie van de avondmaalsliturgie in de Gereformeerde Kerken van de zestiende eeuw* (Apeldoorn: Willem de Zwijgers-tichting, 1979).

## Calvin

Calvin deals extensively with the Lord's Supper in his *Institutes*.<sup>4</sup> He develops it in direct confrontation with the Roman Catholic doctrine. The main point in that confrontation is, just as we saw with Guido de Brès, not the doctrine of transubstantiation, but the meaning of the Supper. According to Calvin, the Holy Supper “has been taken away, destroyed and abolished” by the invention of the Mass. “The Supper is a gift of God, which ought to have been received with thanksgiving. The sacrifice of the Mass is represented as paying a price to God, which he should receive as satisfaction.” The difference between the two is the difference between giving and receiving. The sacrifice of the Mass means that Christ must be sacrificed daily to be of benefit to us. But the Lord's Supper was intended to be distributed in the public assembly of the church (4.18.7). Again, the difference between the two parties concerns the question of whether this sacrament is a sacrifice or a supper.

That is the summary of the explanation in the previous chapter. Calvin says here that the signs of bread and wine represent the invisible food which we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ (4.17.1).<sup>5</sup> Note well Calvin's words. He does not say that we eat the body and blood of Christ. We receive invisible food, and this invisible food comes to us from the flesh and blood of Christ.

When Calvin works this out, he calls God a good provider, “supplying continually to us the food to sustain and preserve us in that life into which he has begotten us by his Word” (4.17.1). Calvin takes his starting point in the fact that God has regenerated us. We are now alive. But in order to stay alive we need food. That is provided by the Supper.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> We will use the translation *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). In the text we will refer to book, chapter, and paragraph. Calvin wrote more on the Lord's Supper; see *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics, vol. 22; trans. J. K. S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.) 142–143, 168–169, 258–259; see also his commentary on the institution of the Lord's Supper, in *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke* (trans. A. W. Morrison; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 3.131–132.

<sup>5</sup> It is remarkable that Calvin here speaks of “flesh and blood.” The words of institution do not speak of “flesh and blood” but of “body and blood.” Calvin's expression is derived from John 6, a chapter he refers to often in the many paragraphs he devotes to this sacrament.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin does not mean here that the Word does not play a role anymore after

The Lord's Supper is, therefore, in character a meal or a banquet. The Supper is not itself a sacrifice, but is based on a sacrifice. The purpose of the sacrament is, according to Calvin, "to confirm for us that the Lord's body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now eat of it, and by eating feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice" (4.17.1). In other words, the sacrifice of Christ is not repeated, but the benefits of that sacrifice are distributed in the Lord's Supper.

After having given the general meaning, Calvin becomes more specific. He distinguishes between bread and wine. When the bread is given as a symbol of Christ's body, we must at once grasp the comparison. "As bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ's body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul" (4.17.3). Concerning the wine, we must consider the benefits of wine, for they are the same as those imparted by Christ's blood. "These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden" (4.17.3). Calvin derives the meaning of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper from the meaning they have in a meal. This leads him to attribute to wine a special meaning that goes beyond the meaning of bread: joy.

When the Lord's Supper is a meal, then not only the elements of bread and wine are important, but also the eating and drinking. Christ is the bread of life, and the believer is reminded of that fact in the sacrament. Yet, reminding is not enough. There has to be participation. "The Lord intended, by calling himself the bread of life, to teach not only that salvation for us rests on faith in his death and resurrection, but also that, by true partaking of him, his life passes into us and is made ours, just as bread when taken as food imparts vigour to the body" (4.17.5).

From the preceding it can be seen that Calvin takes the meal character of this sacrament very seriously. He has worked this out in an elaborate meaning:

- Jesus Christ gives himself in this meal. He shares the benefits of his life, death and resurrection.
- When we partake of this Supper in faith, we receive Jesus Christ and all his benefits.

---

it has worked regeneration. The expression does not intend to limit the importance of the Word, but to emphasize the importance of the Lord's Supper. It is well known that Calvin emphasized the necessity of frequent participation of the Lord's Supper, at least once a week. This emphasis is connected with the sustaining function of our spiritual life, which he ascribes to the Supper.

- The bread in the Supper shows that Christ gives us strength while the wine shows that he also gives us joy.

### **The Second and Third Sense in Calvin**

Even this elaborate meaning of the Lord's Supper is, however, not the full meaning of this sacrament. Before Calvin discusses the meaning further, he first has to deal with the opposition of his time from the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. This defense is very extensive, spanning more than fifty pages and more than thirty paragraphs. In this section, his counter arguments to transubstantiation are found. This structure confirms the impression previously stated that transubstantiation was not the main problem, but that it was embedded in the larger dispute concerning the meaning of the sacrament

When Calvin finally returns to the discussion concerning the meaning of this sacrament, he starts by summarizing the first meaning: "the Lord not only recalls to our memory...the abundance of his bounty, but, so to speak, gives it into our hands and arouses us to recognize it" (4.17.37). Then Calvin points out another meaning. He refers to the fact that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated in remembrance of Christ (Luke 22:19) and that we have to declare the death of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:26). "With a single voice [we must] confess openly before men that for us the whole assurance of life and salvation rests upon the Lord's death, that we may glorify him by our confession, and by our example exhort others to give glory to him" (4.17.37). The second meaning of this sacrament is outward confession. Here Calvin includes a Zwinglian element in his doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

A third meaning follows from the fact that Christ intended this sacrament to be an exhortation. More than by any other means, the Lord's Supper can inspire us to a pure and holy life, as well as to love, peace, and concord. Calvin especially emphasizes the last of these. Since Christ has only one body of which we are made partakers, we are all made one by participation in the Lord's Supper. This unity is especially represented in the bread. In connection with 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 Calvin says, "As [the bread] is made of many grains so mixed together that one cannot be distinguished from another, so it is fitting that in the same way we should be joined and bound together with such great agreement of minds that no sort of disagreement or division may intrude" (4.17.38).

To summarize Calvin's view on the meaning of the Lord's Supper, he sees this sacrament as a meal at which we receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, confess and glorify Christ, and are united with the fellow partakers into one body.

To use Calvin's own summary: "We see that this sacred bread of the Lord's Supper is spiritual food, as sweet and delicate as it is healthy for pious worshippers of God, who, [1] in tasting it feel that Christ is their life, [2] whom it moves to thanksgiving, [3] for whom it is an exhortation to mutual love among themselves" (4.17.40).

### **The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper**

The true meaning of the Lord's Supper was not just a topic for a debate between theologians; church members, too, had to know what the Lord's Supper signified in order that they might benefit from it. Forms for the celebration of the Lord's Supper were made to instruct the people. Our form was one of several that were made in the sixteenth century. It was written for the Reformed Churches of the Palatinate by Caspar Olevianus, a student of Calvin. He derived the first part (about the institution of the Lord's Supper) from Calvin's form, but for the second part of the form (the remembrance of Christ) he used as primary source the form used in the Lutheran state of Württemberg.<sup>7</sup> An explanation of the meaning of this sacrament is given in this second part. It is remarkable that this explanation does not strictly follow Calvin.

Originally only two meanings of the Supper were given. The first meaning was derived from Calvin, that Christ's sacrifice is the food for our spiritual lives. "From this institution of the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ we learn that he directs our faith and trust to his perfect sacrifice, once offered on the cross. It is the only ground for our salvation. Thereby he has become to our hungry and thirsty souls the true food and drink of life eternal."<sup>8</sup> In this part, where the Lord's Supper is explained as a meal, some slight differences can be detected in the way the Form speaks about the bread and the wine. The Form, speaking here in the name of Jesus Christ, says, "I nourish and refresh your hungry and thirsty souls with my crucified body and shed blood to everlasting life." This sentence probably intends to make a distinction between the significance of the bread and the wine. Just as the bread sustains the flesh, so Christ nourishes the hungry soul with his crucified body. But the wine does something different: Christ

---

<sup>7</sup> See for the form, B. Wielenga, *Ons avondmaalsformulier* (Kampen: Kok, 1913), especially 19–20, 283–284. Trimp says about this combination of a Calvinist and a Lutheran form that it is an attempt to show that the Calvinist and the Lutheran view on the Lord's Supper are not mutually exclusive, *Het altaar gebroken, de tafel hersteld*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper," in *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1984) 598.

refreshes the thirsty soul with his shed blood.

It should also be noted at this point that the sentences about bread and wine are not parallel. About the bread, the Form says that it is broken: "...as certainly as this bread is broken before your eyes"; but it does not say about the wine that it was poured: "...and this cup is given to you."

After this first meaning of the Lord's Supper, the Form mentions as the second the unity of the participants. "By the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body. For the apostle Paul says: *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*"

If we compare this to Calvin, we see that both agree on the point of sharing in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice and on the point of the unity of the participants. The second meaning given by Calvin, that of confession, is not mentioned as a meaning in the Form. This does not mean that the confession of faith does not form a part of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Apostles' Creed has a place after the prayer, before the communion.<sup>9</sup>

Neither Calvin nor the Form give as part of the meaning our expectation of Christ's return. But in the revised version, the Form mentions this element. "We receive at his table a foretaste of the abundant joy which he has promised, and look forward to the marriage feast of the Lamb."<sup>10</sup>

Therefore the Form now mentions three meanings of the Lord's Supper: Christ's sacrifice is our food; the unity of the body of Christ; and the foreshadowing of the feast at Christ's return. It is remarkable that these three meanings seem to be unrelated—at least, the Form does not indicate how they are connected.

## The Practice

The Reformed conviction concerning the Lord's Supper is also expressed in the way it is celebrated. The main opposition against the Roman

---

<sup>9</sup> At least, according to the new Form as found in *Book of Praise*, 600. The Apostles' Creed was a part of the prayer in the old Form. If our guess is correct that Calvin included the confession as an essential part of the celebration because of his involvement with the Zwinglians, we can understand why it was not included in a Form that functioned in the Palatinate in Germany.

<sup>10</sup> This part was inserted by Synod Smithville 1980 of the Canadian Reformed Churches. See *Acts of Synod Smithville, 1980*, Article 136, pp. 102–103, 158–159. The Reformed Churches in The Netherlands have made the same change in the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper. See on this, C. Trimp, *Het altaar gebroken - de tafel hersteld*, 44–46.

Catholicism is manifested in the presence of a table. Even in congregations where the Lord's Supper is not celebrated by sitting at a table, a table is placed in the front of the church building, and the elements are ready on the table. It is not an altar where a sacrifice is brought to God, but a table where a meal is prepared for God's people.

Of the three meanings, the first has been developed into several ceremonial actions:

- the bread is broken, meaning that Christ's body was broken for our sins
- the wine is poured from the pitcher into the cup, meaning that Christ's blood was shed for our sins
- the bread and the wine are handed out, meaning that the salvation work of Christ is offered to us
- the bread and the wine are received, meaning that we receive in faith the work of Christ for us and for our salvation
- the bread sustains and the wine refreshes us, meaning that Christ's work for us keeps us alive and gives renewed strength

The second meaning, the unity, is expressed in the one bread baked out of many grains and in the one wine pressed out of many grapes. This is based on the expression of 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." It should be noted that Paul speaks here only about the bread and not about the wine.

Sometimes the unity finds liturgical expression. The bread, even though it has already been cut, is placed in the form of a loaf to symbolize the unity. The unity is also visible in the one pitcher from which the wine is poured.

Since the third meaning, the expectation of Christ's coming, has been introduced into the Form recently, it is probably not foremost in the minds of the congregation when they celebrate the Lord's Supper. It would not be easy to find a liturgical expression for it.

## Criticism of the Reformed View

This Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper, however, has come under attack from three quarters. Changes have been proposed for exegetical, dogmatological, and practical reasons. In what follows, some of these criticisms will be presented. They have important consequences for the celebration of this sacrament that is so central in the life of the church of Christ.



### Exegetical Criticism: H. Ridderbos

H. Ridderbos has discussed the Lord's Supper extensively in his book on the synoptic gospels, *The Coming of the Kingdom*.<sup>11</sup> Ridderbos accepts the conclusion of the study of J. Jeremias<sup>12</sup> that the Lord's Supper was instituted at a Passover meal, as it is prescribed in Exodus 12–13. This background in the Passover meal is very important for the understanding of the Lord's Supper, according to Ridderbos, but we have also to investigate how exactly the Lord's Supper is related to the Passover. Did Jesus Christ present himself here as the true Passover lamb? Many scholars think so, but Ridderbos does not agree. When Jesus Christ speaks of his body, he does not distribute the lamb, but the bread. And concerning the wine, Jesus Christ does not say that this refers to the blood of the Passover lamb, but to the blood sprinkled at the making of the covenant (425). Ridderbos is of the opinion that the bread and the wine do not represent the sacrifice of Christ.

The true background for the Lord's Supper is the sacrificial meal. This means that the Lord's Supper is a meal similar to the meal which the people of Israel enjoyed after having sacrificed an animal to God. The important consequence of this is that the sacrifice itself is no longer a part of the Lord's Supper. Just as in the sacrificial meal the offering is not represented in the meal, so Christ's sacrifice is not present at the Lord's Supper. The Passover meal is the result of the sacrifice. Similarly the Lord's Supper does not set before us the death of Jesus Christ, but only the beneficial results of his death (426–427).

At first sight, this may not seem very important. But this impression changes when we see how Ridderbos applies this to the elements of the Supper. Every direct representation of Christ's death has to be removed from the celebration of the Supper—for example, the breaking of the bread does not belong to the symbolism. When Jesus said: "This is my body," he did not refer to his sacrifice, but to the bread he was distributing. The breaking itself does not have any particular meaning. Breaking bread was a customary action which the father of the family did at every meal (429).

---

<sup>11</sup> H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (trans. H. de Jongste; ed. R. O. Zorn; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), chapter 9: "The Coming of the Kingdom and the Lord's Supper." The numbers in the text refer to the pages of this edition. Ridderbos also discussed the Lord's Supper in his book *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (trans. J. R. De Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 414–415; but for the meaning of the sacrament he refers back to his *The Coming of the Kingdom*.

<sup>12</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (trans. N. Perrin; London: SCM Press; 1982). This is a translation with revisions from the third German edition.

Ridderbos objects even more strongly to the pouring of the wine as a symbol of the shedding of Christ's blood. The verb *ekchynnein* or *ekchein* ("to shed") cannot be used for the action of pouring wine into a cup. Moreover, the wine was not poured out at this moment of the Passover meal. The wine had already been poured into the cup and had been standing there for some time when Jesus spoke these words (429–430).

Ridderbos concludes that it is not the acquisition but only the application of salvation that is represented in the Lord's Supper. In other words, Christ's death is not represented in (broken) bread and (poured) wine. The only symbolism in the bread and the wine is that they must be eaten and drunk. In this believing act of remembrance, the participants continue to receive the benefit of Christ's expiatory death (437–438).

Ridderbos' view, which has been adopted by other scholars,<sup>13</sup> undoubtedly reduces the traditional Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper. Of the four meanings we found (the meal, the confession, the communion, and the expectation of Christ's return), Ridderbos retains only the first.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, every reference to Christ's death is removed from this first meaning. He proposes that the Lord's Supper should be conducted without the breaking of bread or the pouring out of wine. And finally, there is no distinction indicated between bread and wine.

Ridderbos' view on the meaning of the Lord's Supper can be summarized under two aspects:

1. Christ gives the results of his work of satisfaction;
2. we receive the results of Christ's work of satisfaction.

---

<sup>13</sup> See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (trans. H. Bekker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 211–213; W. L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 504–505.

<sup>14</sup> In *The Coming of the Kingdom*, Ridderbos speaks extensively about the eschatological perspective. Eschatology is very important for Ridderbos, but he does not see it as a meaning of the Supper. "But the specific redemptive-historical significance of this Supper is not to be sought primarily in the eschatological perspective disclosed by Jesus, but much rather, in connection with Jesus' expiatory death, or, in other words, in the meaning that Jesus attributes to the bread and wine which he gives to his disciples. The eschatological perspective imparts the character of a farewell to the last meal which Jesus had together with his disciples" (416). In his book *Paul*, Ridderbos pays attention to the unity expressed in the Lord's Supper (423–424). In his method Ridderbos seems to imply that the idea of unity is not present in the Synoptic Gospels, but only in the epistles of Paul.

### Dogmatical Criticism: M. J. Erickson

The evangelical scholar M. J. Erickson discusses the Lord's Supper under the title, *The Continuing Rite of the Church*.<sup>15</sup> When he speaks of the meaning of this rite, he distinguishes three things that are symbolized:

1. It is in particular a reminder of the death of Christ and its sacrificial and propitiatory character as an offering to the Father on our behalf.
2. It further symbolizes our dependence upon and vital connection with the Lord and points forward to his second coming.
3. It symbolizes the unity of believers within the church and their love and concern for each other (1123–1124).

This division concentrates on the Father, Jesus Christ, and the church, respectively. In content it sounds close to the Reformed interpretation. Sacrifice, unity, and eschatology are all mentioned. The only remarkable thing is that the meal character of the sacrament is not mentioned. Is this intentional?

It is striking that Erickson characterized the Lord's Supper as a reminder. From 1 Corinthians 11:26 Erickson draws the conclusion that the rite is basically commemorative (1122); the Lord's Supper is essentially a memorial (1123). This indicates that Erickson does not see the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. It is not God who shares his grace in it. We ourselves have to make it work. "The Lord's Supper, properly administered, is a means of inspiring the faith and love of the believer as he or she reflects again upon the wonder of the Lord's death and the fact that those who believe in him will live everlastingly" (1127). This explains why Erickson does not describe the Supper as a meal. In his view, Christ does not hand out his grace, but we commemorate Christ's work in the past.

The fact that Erickson sees the Lord's Supper as a memorial and not as a means of grace influences the way he speaks about the celebration. If our chief concern were, says Erickson, to duplicate the original meal, then we would have to use unleavened bread since that was eaten at the Passover meal. But if our concern is the symbolism, we might just as well use a loaf of leavened bread. Erickson is of the opinion that we should try not to duplicate but to bring out the symbolism. The Lord's Supper must be celebrated in such a way that it inspires the believer to faith and love.

---

<sup>15</sup> M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–1985) 3.1107–1108. The numbers in the text refer to this edition.

This means that leavened bread can be used for the bread. Erickson here adds that this loaf symbolizes two things. In the first place, the oneness of the loaf symbolizes the church's unity. In the second place, breaking the loaf signifies the breaking of Christ's body (1125).

But Erickson has confused things here. In one context, the bread has two distinct meanings. The bread is first (in its oneness) a symbol of the church, and next (in its brokenness) a symbol of Christ. Is it indeed possible to see the bread within the one action of the Lord's Supper, as representing first the church and then Christ? I realize that if this critical remark is correct, we may have to critically examine our own tradition, too.

Since the Lord's Supper must inspire us, the elements can be replaced by substitutes. But the substitutes should retain the symbolism. Fish may replace the bread. Erickson even says that fish might well be a more suitable symbol than bread. He does not give the reason for this statement. Perhaps he thinks that fish is a good substitute because it is a traditional symbol for Christ. But bizarre substitutes such as potato chips should be avoided. We would then focus our attention on the mechanics of the Supper instead of on Christ's atoning work (1125).

Concerning the wine, Erickson says that if we want to duplicate the original institution, wine has to be used, probably diluted with water. But if our concern is to represent the blood of Christ, then grape juice would do equally well. But again, bizarre substitutes such as cola bear little resemblance to the original and should not be used (1125).<sup>16</sup>

From a Reformed point of view, we have a general disagreement with Erickson because he denies that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace. But his opinion also presents us with more specific questions. Do the bread and the wine themselves contribute to the meaning of the sacrament? Or can they easily be replaced, as long as we maintain the general symbolism?

### **Practical Criticisms: Two Movements from the Nineteenth Century**

Two movements from the nineteenth century have had an impact on the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the first place there is the movement to abolish alcoholic beverages, often called the Temperance Movement. This movement began within the churches, and thus the Scrip-

---

<sup>16</sup> The examples of potato chips and cola are probably not as far out as we might suppose. In the December 6, 1991 issue of *Calvinist Contact*, an article appeared about a celebration of the Lord's Supper at which Wonder bread and Kool-Aid were used for the elements (see p. 20). But it is possible that the opportunities were limited, since this Supper was celebrated within a penitentiary.

tures were often seen as the strongest bulwark to defend the doctrine of total abstinence.<sup>17</sup> Then the Lord's Supper became an embarrassment because it involved the use of wine. This led some to define the word "wine" in the New Testament as grape juice. Charles Hodge reacted strongly against this in his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>18</sup>

This discussion is no longer as fierce as it was during the last century, but churches are still faced with related questions. If there are (former) alcoholics in the congregation, would it not be better to replace the wine with grape juice? Does it not set a better example if the Lord's Supper is celebrated without wine? This leads to questions concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Does the wine itself contribute to the meaning of the Lord's Supper, or does the meaning not suffer when it is replaced by grape juice?

The other movement which had an impact on the celebration of the Lord's Supper is the movement for hygiene. H. Bavinck remarks in his dogmatics that of late, many churches were replacing the one communal cup with individual cups.<sup>19</sup> This movement began out of the concern that the use of a communal cup could lead to the spread of contagious diseases. This movement seems to be gaining strength due to fear of AIDS. This also leads to questions concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Is the communal cup part of the meaning or not?

## The Centre of the Lord's Supper

The traditional Reformed understanding of the meaning of the Lord's Supper is being questioned from several sides. These questions force us to go back to Scripture, because the church did not invent this ceremony. It only followed the instructions of Christ, who had instituted the Lord's Supper in the church (1 Cor. 11:25).

---

<sup>17</sup> See the article "Total Abstinence" by W. J. Beecher, in *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (ed. S. M. Jackson and L. A. Loetscher; 15 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969) 11.468–472.

<sup>18</sup> Ch. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1884) 3.616.

<sup>19</sup> H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4 vols.; 4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1930) 4.548, n. 2. English translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008) 4.572, n. 79.

But where shall we begin, now that the meaning of the Lord's Supper is no longer obvious to many? By studying the passages in the Bible that speak about the Lord's Supper, it can easily be seen that this sacrament has its centre in the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. We should, therefore, first investigate the meaning of eating Christ's body and drinking Christ's blood. Then we will be in the right position to understand the several particulars of this sacrament.

## The Body

The traditional Reformed position is that *sōma* ('body') refers to Christ's body, as he gave it over to be crucified on the cross for our salvation. Some theologians today, however, are of the opinion that the word *sōma* refers not to the body, but to the person of Christ. This is defended in different ways.

For example, W. L. Lane in his commentary on Mark says that the Aramaic word for "my body" means no more than "I." What Jesus says here is no more than "I am myself this bread" or "My person is this bread."<sup>20</sup> This kind of exegesis must be rejected. Whether the Lord Jesus said these words in Aramaic or not is a debated question. But we do not have an Aramaic version, and therefore we do not know what word he would have used in Aramaic. We have a Greek version, and that should remain the basis for exegesis. In other words, we should not correct the Greek text from a supposed Aramaic original.

Another attempt to explain *to sōma mou* ('my body') as meaning no more than "I" was made by J. P. Versteeg. According to him, the word *sōma* refers first of all to a person as a creature of God (see Rom. 12:1). It is used as an equivalent for "oneself" in Ephesians 5:28. *Soma* is the concrete person in his actions toward God and man (see 2 Cor. 5:10). And when Jesus Christ says, "This is my body," he means, "This am I" in the very concrete sense of "Christ as he gave himself for his people in his death on the cross."<sup>21</sup>

Even this brief summary makes it clear that the meaning of the word *sōma* is constantly shifting. Versteeg gives no reason for his translations. But

---

<sup>20</sup> Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 506. Lane refers to the article on *sōma* by J. Behm in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76) 3.736 (hereafter *TDNT*). Jeremias says about the origin, "Most authors join G. Dalman, who, in 1922, proposed [the Hebrew] *guf* as the equivalent of *sōma*," *The Eucharist Words of Jesus*, 198.

<sup>21</sup> J. P. Versteeg, "Het avondmaal volgens het Nieuwe Testament" in *Bij brood en beker* (ed. W. van 't Spijker et al.; Goudriaan: De Groot, 1980) 42–43.

the most important criticism that must be brought against Lane as well as Versteeg is that they fail to explain the word *sōma* in the context.<sup>22</sup>

From the several meanings of *sōma*,<sup>23</sup> only the first ('living or dead body') is relevant. Within the context of the institution of the Lord's Supper, the word *sōma* is used in combination with the word *haima* ('blood'). This is very unusual. The usual combination is "flesh and blood." It is not hard to determine what "flesh and blood" means. Flesh and blood denote the two main parts of our body. But blood normally belongs to a body, so that there is no need to speak of body and blood separately. Why is the blood mentioned next to the body in the institution of the Lord's Supper?

The combination "body and blood" is used only once in the New Testament, in Hebrews 13:11: "For the bodies (*ta sōmato*) of those animals whose blood (*to haima*) is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp." The word *sōma* in combination with *haima* here refers to a dead body. The same meaning of the word *sōma* can be found in the Septuagint and in Philo.<sup>24</sup> Would this meaning also fit Christ's words at the institution of the Lord's Supper (*touto estin to sōma mou* ('this is my body'))? Rather than reject this interpretation off-hand as impossible,<sup>25</sup> let us see whether this would fit the context of the Lord's Supper.

---

<sup>22</sup> See also Jeremias, who not only disagrees with the translation from the Aramaic on which this opinion is based, but also brings in objections from the context: "But then we must again reject *guf* as an equivalent of *sōma*, because its complement is *nowhere haima*," *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 198–199. The quotation is from p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> The dictionary for N.T. Greek gives the following meanings of the word: **1.** body of man or animal – a. dead body; b. living body; **2.** plural: slaves; **3.** bodies of plants and heavenly bodies, 1 Cor. 15; **4.** over against *skia*: the thing itself, Col. 2:17; **5.** the Christian community. See W. Bauer, W. A. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 799–800.

<sup>24</sup> See the examples given by Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 222, n. 1, 4, which show that *sōma* is taken in the sense of "dead body." Of these examples, the first two refer to a sacrifice, but the last one to divination.

<sup>25</sup> C. F. Evans in his commentary on Luke 22:19 sees the problem in this way: "The use of 'body' rather than 'flesh' along with 'blood,' and of 'body' in the vocabulary of sacrifice, is said to be almost without parallel" (*IDNT* 7.1059). But he shrinks back from the only parallel without giving it serious thought: "The only NT parallel—'the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp' (Heb. 13:11)—hardly lends support, as there 'bodies' means 'carcasses.'" See his *Saint Luke* (London: SCM;

## The Blood

In the words of institution, *to haima* ('the blood') is almost always (with the exception of 1 Cor. 11:25) connected with the verb *ekchynnein* ('pour out'). To quote the gospel according to Mark: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out (*to ekchynnomenon*) for many" (Mark 14:24). Bauer, in his Greek dictionary, says that the expression *haima ekchynnein* or *ekchein* ('to pour out blood') in the New Testament always means: 'to commit a murder.' A survey of the New Testament shows that this statement is correct.<sup>26</sup> This word of Christ could then be understood as referring to the violent death which he was about to die.

But to give this meaning to the words *haima ekchynnein* in the expression of Mark 14:24 is not an adequate explanation. The reference to the covenant and the fact that the blood is poured out *for many* cannot be explained within the context of murder. Matthew has preserved a fuller expression: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). These words remind us of sacrifices in which blood is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>27</sup>

This is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's *death* until he comes." Both the bread and the cup refer to the death of Jesus Christ—the bread by the comparison with the body which was broken, the cup by the comparison between the wine and the blood which was shed.

We may conclude that Christ's words, "This is my blood...which is poured out" refers to his sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. This supports the opinion stated above, that the word *sōma* refers to Jesus' dead body. Just as in Hebrews 13:11, the words *sōma* and *haima* refer to the dead body and the blood poured out at the sacrifice.

Therefore we have to disagree with Ridderbos' opinion that the death of Jesus Christ is certainly in the background but is not present in the Lord's Supper itself. Our investigation has led to a different conclusion. The sayings about body and blood refer directly to Christ's death. The tra-

---

Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990) 789.

<sup>26</sup> See Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 22, s.v. *haima* 2.a.; see also the article of J. Behm, in *TDNT*, 1.173–174.

<sup>27</sup> In the Septuagint, the expression "to pour out blood" is used for murder, for domestic slaughter, and for the sacrifice; see Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 222. An example is Ex. 29:12: "pour out the rest of it [the blood] at the base of the altar"; see also Lev. 4:7, 18, 25, 30, etc. This outpouring is specifically required only for the sin offering.



ditional Reformed conviction that Christ's sacrificial death is made visible in bread and wine is correct.

### **“Eat...”**

Jesus Christ does more than indicate the meaning of bread and wine. He also says what the disciples have to do with bread and wine. They have to take the bread and eat it. According to Matthew, Jesus said: “Take and eat; this is my body” (Matt. 26:26).<sup>28</sup> The disciples have to accept it out of the hand of Christ and use it. Bread is meant to be used as food. The expression “Take and eat; this is my body” can only mean that the death of Christ should be accepted in faith as food. This food will keep them alive.

Luke, in his gospel, does not include the last two words in the expression “take and eat.” In this gospel another expression is used which points in the same direction: “This is my body given for you” (Luke 22:19). “Given for you” is not the same as “given to you.” When Jesus Christ says that his body is given for the disciples, he means that his death will benefit those who participate in it. The words “take and eat” are, in effect, very close in meaning to “this body is given for your benefit.”

### **“...and drink”**

The emphasis on receiving and using the sacrament is repeated with the wine. Luke mentions that Christ said about the cup: “Take this” (Luke 22:17). Mark 14:24 does not mention a command to take, but while the disciples are drinking, Christ explains: “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” Christ reveals in these words that his death will benefit more than just the few disciples who are at that moment eating with him.

In Matthew 26:27–28 we find both the commandment to drink from the cup and the explanation that the blood is poured out for many. This passage is especially important because it explains in what respect the blood of Christ will benefit the participants: the blood “is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” In this expression, we hear in what sense the death of Christ benefits the many: Christ died a violent death so that the sins of many would be forgiven. Drinking the wine means nothing less

---

<sup>28</sup> There is a textual problem in Mark 14:22. The RSV translates this text: “Take, this is my body,” without the commandment to eat. Many manuscripts, however, have the word “eat” in the text; see the text critical apparatus in the edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece* (ed. E. Nestle and K. Aland; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1991).

than to receive the forgiveness of sins through Jesus. This sacrament makes visible and tangible this promise of forgiveness.

### The Covenant

One more element is connected with the blood: the covenant. Mark 14:24 says, "This is my blood *of the covenant* which is poured out for many." The "new covenant" is spoken of in 1 Corinthians 11:25. What is the background of this expression? The text does not indicate that we have here a quotation or a reference to a specific Old Testament situation.<sup>29</sup> But

---

<sup>29</sup> The words "blood of the covenant" have often been connected with Ex. 24:8, where we find the same expression. This chapter speaks of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, who are standing at the foot of Mount Horeb. Half of the blood of the covenant was thrown against the altar; the other half was sprinkled on the people. Then Moses said: "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." Lane remarks that the allusion to Ex. 24:8 in the institution of the Lord's Supper "serves to set the whole of Jesus' Messianic action in the light of covenant renewal," *The Gospel according to Mark*, 507. The meaning is then that just as the old covenant was ratified by the blood of animals, so the new covenant is ratified by Jesus' death. Versteeg uses the same parallel in a different way. The blood was, according to him, the sign that stood for Israel as God's people. Similarly, Jesus makes his blood the only sign that indicated that his people could share in the new covenant. See W. van 't Spijker, *Bij brood en beker*, 49.

J. van Bruggen has objected to this parallel between the Lord's Supper and the covenant at Sinai. Although some of the words are the same, the context is different. First, Exodus speaks about a two-sided covenant, but the covenant mentioned in the Lord's Supper is not two-sided. Here the human party is not required to make a promise. Secondly, in Exodus the blood is sprinkled on many, while in the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper the blood is shed for many. I think that these objections are strong enough to discard the parallel. It is not enough to have a parallel of words; the content must be parallel too.

Van Bruggen prefers a parallel with the earlier covenant of the exodus from Egypt. God led his people out of Egypt because of his promises to the patriarchs. This is a covenant with a promise of liberation. It is even called a covenant in Ex. 19:4–5. This is shown more particularly in the promise that the blood of the lamb will make the angel pass by the houses of the Israelites. Similarly, Jesus promises in the Lord's Supper that he, by sacrificing his body, will lead many out of the slavery of sin. See J. van Bruggen, *Marcus: Het evangelie volgens Petrus* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1988) 339–340.

This exegesis does not convince me. Van Bruggen tries to combine two things here: 1) the exodus as the result of the promise to the patriarchs; and 2) the salva-

in many places the New Testament makes a contrast between the old and the new covenants. The “old covenant” refers to the Mosaic covenant with its laws and institutions, while the “new covenant” refers to the newer relation between God and his people, in which the Mosaic laws have been abolished (see 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 4:24; Heb. 7:22; 8:8; 9:15; 10:16).

The covenant established at Sinai could not bring the solution. God lived among his people in a tabernacle, but he only met them concretely through the sacrifices. These sacrifices could not really take away the sins of the people, but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the new covenant is established. His death provides the satisfaction on the basis of which the people can live in communion with God.

### **The Centre of the Lord's Supper**

Now we can summarize the central content of the Lord's Supper:

- Body and blood symbolize the sacrificial death of Christ.
- This death benefits many (more than the eleven!).
- Christ's death benefits many because it is for the forgiveness of their sins.
- The relationship with God (the covenant) is based on it.
- The people should use Christ's body and blood as bread and wine; they stay alive by receiving in faith the sacrifice of Christ.

Let us from this vantage point look at the many implications indicated in the symbolic language of this sacrament.

## **The Symbolic Language of the Sacrament**

### **The Bread**

Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper at the Passover meal. This meal consisted of several elements. Scripture prescribed the meat of the Passover lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8), while tradi-

---

tion from the destruction worked by the angel of the Lord. The word “covenant” belongs to 1); the blood and the lamb belong to 2). But Van Bruggen transfers the word “covenant” from 1) to 2). The fact is, however, that in the context of the institution of the Passover the word “covenant” is not mentioned. Therefore, it seems unwarranted to explain the words “new covenant” in the institution of the Lord's Supper against the background of the exodus.

tion added green herbs, mashed fruit, and wine.<sup>30</sup> From this range of dishes, Jesus selects the bread to form a part of his new sacrament. Why?

Bread was the common staple in Israel. The Old Testament speaks of the staff of bread (Lev. 26:26; Ezek. 5:16; 14:13), indicating that bread kept them physically alive. In the Lord's Prayer, it represents the food man needs daily: "Give us today our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). Jesus Christ chooses this daily food for his sacrament. By making bread the symbol of his body, he shows that we need his death as our daily food. Our daily life before God depends on him.

Should this bread be unleavened? Since unleavened bread had to be used at the Passover meal, we can take it for granted that unleavened bread was used at the institution of the Lord's Supper. However, the New Testament nowhere emphasizes that special bread had to be used. It is true that in the New Testament leaven is the symbol of malice and evil (1 Cor. 5:8), but this text is not applied to the bread in the Lord's Supper. Nothing specific is prescribed concerning the bread. Unleavened bread can be used, but leavened bread will do just as well. The Roman Catholics, however, have changed the unleavened bread into paper thin wafers. Reformed theologians have correctly objected to the use of wafers in the Roman Catholic Mass, because the idea of food has disappeared.<sup>31</sup>

Another question is of what this bread should be made. Our tradition prefers the use of white bread, but this is not prescribed in Scripture. Neither is there a rule concerning the grains to be used for the bread.<sup>32</sup> The function of the bread in the Lord's Supper is to show that we need Christ's death as the daily food by which we stay alive.

### The Breaking of the Bread

Several theologians today no longer consider the breaking of the bread as belonging to the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Ridderbos is one of them. He gives the following arguments:

1. The texts about the institution do not support it. The expression "the bread which is broken" is absent in the Gospels; in 1 Corinthians 11:24 these words are mentioned in a number of manuscripts, but not in

---

<sup>30</sup> See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 85–86.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. W. à Brakel, *Redelijke godsdienst* (2 vols.; J. H. Donner; Leiden: Donner, 1882) 1.997.

<sup>32</sup> See the articles of J. van Bruggen, "Sago en thee voor brood en wijn?" in *De Reformatie*, 52 (1976–1977) 581ff., 597ff.

the most important ones.

2. The breaking of bread does not suggest a violent death; it was also not a part of a sacrifice.

3. John 19:36 says that “not one of his bones will be broken.” The breaking of the bread mentioned in the gospels is no more than the customary act of a father at every meal.<sup>33</sup>

This opinion is connected with the fact that, according to Ridderbos, the death of Christ is not as such presented in the Lord’s Supper. We have already objected to this view of Ridderbos and stated that the words *sōma* and *haima* refer directly to Christ’s death. Within this context, does the breaking of the bread have a specific meaning? Reviewing the evidence, we discover that the breaking has a prominent place in the institution.

1. All three gospels mention it. Matthew 26:26 says: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples” (see also Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). If breaking the bread were no more than a customary action, there would be no reason for it to be mentioned so emphatically at that point between Christ’s action of blessing it and giving it. All three actions were customary; the father of the family always blessed, broke, and handed out the bread. Ridderbos would not deny that it has special significance that Christ himself distributed the elements to his disciples. In the same way, it can be maintained that the breaking of bread can have a special meaning in the Lord’s Supper, even though it was done at every meal.

2. The Lord’s Supper can be summarized as *the breaking of the bread*. Acts 2:42 says about the congregation of Jerusalem, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Within this context of the liturgy of the church, the *breaking of the bread* must refer to the Lord’s Supper.<sup>34</sup> This name would have been derived from a meaningful symbol.

3. In 1 Corinthians 11:24 we are confronted with a text-critical problem. Does the text say, “This is my body which is for you” or “This is my body which is *broken* for you”? The external evidence suggests that the

---

<sup>33</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 429.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g., F. W. Grosheide, *De Handelingen der Apostelen* (2 vols.; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1941) 1.94. Grosheide gives several reasons: e.g. the text does not speak of individuals but of the life of the congregation; v. 46 distinguished between the breaking of the bread and the eating; the verb *proskartereo* could not be used if the “breaking of the bread” referred to a common meal.

word "broken" is original. The omission in a few manuscripts can be explained as caused by the concern that this word "broken" would create a contradiction with John 19:36.

Jesus Christ makes the breaking of bread, even though it was done at every meal, into a meaningful part of the Lord's Supper just as he did with all the actions of this sacrament. Giving bread, taking it, and eating it took place at every meal, and yet Christ gives important meaning to these actions.

What does the breaking mean within the whole sacrament? According to the gospels, Jesus Christ broke the bread and said that this bread was his (dead) body. The breaking shows that his death would not be the result of natural causes, but that it would be an imposed death. The same applies to 1 Corinthians 11:24, where the word "broken" is connected directly with the body. The expression that Christ's body is "broken for you" means that Christ is put to death for their benefit. Luke has retained another expression used by Jesus Christ: "This is my body given for you" (Luke 22:19). The verb (*didomi*) means here 'to give up.' In the context of the Lord's Supper, this expression emphasizes through the bread that Christ is going to die on behalf of other people.<sup>35</sup>

We can conclude that the breaking forms a part of the meaning of the Lord's Supper. It is a visible representation of the violent death of Jesus Christ. The breaking should be maintained as part of the symbolic actions at the table.

### The One Bread

In 1 Corinthians 10:17 yet another element of the Lord's Supper is emphasized: the unity. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." The one bread teaches us the unity of the partakers. But how? A brief survey will show that the interpretation has changed in the course of the centuries.

Already in the *Didache* (an exhortation dating from the first or the beginning of the second century) we find an interpretation of the expression "the one bread." In the instructions for the celebration of the Lord's Supper it says, "As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains and after having been gathered, became one, thus thy church must be brought together from the ends of the earth into thy Kingdom."<sup>36</sup> The comparison

---

<sup>35</sup> Bauer gives as sixth meaning of this verb: "to give up, to sacrifice." The same verb is used for Christ in Gal. 1:4; Titus 2:14; see *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 193.

<sup>36</sup> *Didache*, IX.4. Hymn 46:2 has taken up this very old expression:

goes as follows: the grain of which this bread was made grew on many hills but was brought together to form this one bread. Similarly the church, which is now spread over the whole world, must be brought together into the Kingdom. The unity symbolized here is eschatological; it will be realized with the final gathering of the church.

In Calvin's explanation, the emphasis is on the unity of faith: "As [the bread] is made of many grains so mixed together that one cannot be distinguished from another, so it is fitting that in the same way we too should be joined and bound together by such a great agreement of minds that no sort of disagreement or division can come between us."<sup>37</sup> Here, too, the call for unity is based on the one bread which is made out of many kernels of grain. But the unity is not something of the future. It is something for today, and the unity is threatened by present quarrels.

In the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, the scope of this call for unity has been expanded to include the wine. I quote the old version of the Form: "For as out of many grains one meal is ground and one bread baked, and out of many berries, pressed together, one wine and drink flows and mixes together, so shall we all who by true faith are incorporated in Christ be all together one body, through brotherly love...and show this toward one another, not only in words but also in deeds."<sup>38</sup>

W. van 't Spijker has also elaborated on this expression. He emphasizes the element of grinding and pressing and applies that to church life: "Are we so weak because what is meant here is experienced so little? Traditionally people have pointed at the oppression and trial under which God's church must become one. Maybe we lack this too much!"<sup>39</sup> Suddenly the grinding has become a significant part of this representation of unity.

---

As grain, once scattered on the hillsides,  
Was in the broken bread made one,  
So from all lands Thy Church be gathered  
Into Thy kingdom by Thy Son.

<sup>37</sup> *Institutes*, 4.17.38.

<sup>38</sup> This part of the form is taken almost literally from the Form used in Württemberg, see Wielenga, *Ons avondmaalsformulier*, 19–20. The expression used in the revised Form is simplified but essentially the same.

<sup>39</sup> Van 't Spijker, "Het klassieke avondmaalsformulier," in *Bij brood en beker*, 407. Strange for its passivity is the statement, "Maybe we lack this [oppression] too much!" Can the church only become one under pressure? Refreshing on the same page is the emphasis that unity is not vaguely spiritual, but real.

There are, however, several problems with these elaborations on 1 Corinthians 10:17. When this chapter speaks about the unity, only the bread is mentioned. The inclusion of wine is probably due to the tendency to make a complete parallel between the bread and the wine. Secondly, the idea that bread consists of ground grain is absent in this text. The text takes its starting point in the result: the one bread. It does not reckon with how this bread was made. In the third place, the main problem with this application is a shift in the comparison. The bread, as Jesus Christ said so clearly, represents his body as it was given up to death. But in this application the comparison suddenly goes in a completely different direction. The bread is no longer Christ; it represents the congregation.

This brings us back to the question of how the unity is expressed in 1 Corinthians 10:17. A closer look at the text reveals that the unity is expressed in the participation of the one bread. Paul does not say, "We *form* one bread" but "We, who are many, are one body, for we all *partake* of the one bread." This bread is the bread of the Lord's Supper, mentioned in verse 16, the bread which is broken to symbolize Christ's death for us.

The unity of the believers is not expressed in the fact that so many people have been brought together as grains to form one bread. 1 Corinthians 10:17 says that they receive the same bread which refers to Christ's broken body. This constitutes their unity. In other words, the unity is based on the fact that they share the same bread and so receive the same benefits of Christ's death.

When we take "bread" in this sense, we have solved the problem of the double meaning of "bread" in the Lord's Supper. There is actually only one meaning of "bread": it always refers to Christ's body given over to death. The special emphasis in 1 Corinthians 10:17 is that those who participate of this one bread form a unity.

Should this unity be expressed at the Lord's Supper by sharing one loaf? There is no need for that. Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 does not emphasize that the Corinthians share only *one* loaf instead of two or three. He draws their attention to the fact that they share the same bread. It is, therefore, not necessary to place the bread on the table in the form of a single loaf.<sup>40</sup>

In connection with the unity, some attention should be given to the

---

<sup>40</sup> The word *artos* means 'bread' as well as 'loaf.' See Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 110. See for the meaning of *artos* in this text, H. A. W. Meyer, *Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über den ersten Brief an die Korinther* (3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1856) 222; L. Batelaan, *De sterken en zwakken in de kerk van Korinthe* (dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam; Wageningen: Zomer & Keuning, 1942) 73–74.



word *sōma*: “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one *body*” (1 Cor. 10:17). The same word occurs in chapter 12: “Now the *body* is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say...” (vv. 14–15). *Sōma* is not an invisible entity or a group of persons who accidentally met. It is a structured community of people who have different gifts and different duties within that community. The church at Corinth was such a body.

Eating of the bread which represents Christ binds different people together as members of one body. Participating in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper means that one takes one’s place within the community of the church.

## The Wine

It cannot be denied that Jesus Christ, in the institution of the Lord’s Supper, used wine. Several cups with wine were prepared for a Passover celebration. When Jesus instituted his sacrament, he used one of these cups. Neither can it be denied that at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Corinth wine was used, for some got drunk (1 Cor. 11:21). But is it important to maintain that it should be wine? Is grape juice not a suitable substitute?

It is sometimes thought that the choice for wine was determined by the colour. Wine can have a colour other than red, but it seems that the Passover ritual required red wine. The red colour was to remind the people of Christ’s blood.<sup>41</sup> The Bible, however, nowhere gives any attention to the colour. Just as there is no similarity between the bread and the body of Christ (if there was, then the meat of the Passover lamb would have been used), so also the use of wine is not based on similarity in colour with blood.

Wine, however, was exceptional in that the people did not usually drink wine. Bread was daily food, but the common drink was water (Isa. 3:1). This holds true in New Testament times too, otherwise Paul need not have said to Timothy: “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine” (1 Tim. 5:23). Wine belonged to special occasions, in particular, to festivities. Wine was drunk during the festivities at the sanctuary (Deut. 14:26; this can also be deduced from the words of Eli to Hannah, 1 Sam. 1:14). It was used at festive meals (Job 1:13) and at weddings (John 2:13). It is part of the feast which the Lord will prepare for his people (Isa. 25:6). God has given wine

---

<sup>41</sup> It was traditional, according to Jeremias, to drink red wine at the Passover celebration. “Jesus and his disciples drank red wine at the Last Supper. That follows clearly from the comparison between the wine and the blood.” He uses this as one of the proofs that Jesus instituted the Supper during the celebration of the Passover; see his *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 53.

“to gladden the heart of man” (Ps. 104:15; cf. Isa. 22:13).

The wine in the celebration of the Lord's Supper emphasizes the festive character of this meal. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is an occasion for great joy (see also Acts 2:46). Within the celebration of the Lord's Supper, it is especially the act of drinking that looks forward to the joy of drinking wine with Christ in his kingdom (Mark 14:25).

Here we note the reason the Lord used two elements. The Roman Catholics withhold the wine from the congregation. They think that there is no need for the laity to drink the wine, since the grace of the sacrificed Christ is received fully through the bread. We saw that in opposition to this both Calvin and the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper began to distinguish the function of bread and wine; however, in practice the elements of the sacrament are usually equated. We ought to continue in the direction of Calvin.

Both the bread and the wine refer to the same death of Christ (1 Cor. 11:26), but they represent Christ's death in different ways. In the bread, he is presented as the bread of life; he alone can keep us alive. In the wine, he is presented as the cause of our joy. When we think of the death of Jesus Christ, we become sad—even more so when we realize that our sins made his death necessary. But the wine shows that great joy should be added to our sadness. Through his death Christ has accomplished salvation for us, and that is joyful indeed. We should express this joy in songs of praise to God (Acts 2:47).

Wine makes an important contribution to the meaning of the Lord's Supper. This alcoholic drink, therefore, should be maintained in the celebration of this sacrament. Once this general rule has been established, special allowances can be made for those brothers and sisters who, for whatever reason, cannot drink wine. They should not be forced to drink wine. Since these are individual problems, individual solutions ought to be found.<sup>42</sup>

## The Cup

We have the custom of pouring the wine from a pitcher into a cup during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. We know, however, that at the first celebration the wine was not poured out at that moment. The cup had been prepared beforehand and had been standing there for some time be-

---

<sup>42</sup> See for this problem and for possible solutions: J. van Bruggen, “Drinkt daaruit allen, maar hoe? Alcohol en de gemeenschap der heiligen bij het avondmaal,” three articles in *De Reformatie* 66 (1990–1991) 461ff., 481ff., 497ff.

fore it was drunk. But even though the Lord's Supper was instituted at the Passover meal, the Supper may not be equated with this meal. We have to ask whether the words of the institution emphasize the pouring out of the wine. The answer is no. There is a consistent emphasis on the breaking of the bread, but not a parallel emphasis on the pouring of wine. The pouring of the wine into the cup is not even mentioned. The verb *ekchynnein* is only used in connection with Christ's blood: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28).<sup>43</sup> The custom of pouring wine out at the table was probably caused by the tendency to equalize the elements.

Another question is whether the use of the cup is important. Protestant theology has always drawn attention to the fact that the second word at the Lord's Supper was not about the wine, but about the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). This formulation has always been used against the Roman Catholic theory of transubstantiation. Since it is impossible that Jesus meant that the cup changes into his blood, the first word cannot mean that the bread changes into the body of Christ.

After the Roman Catholic theory was rejected, however, not much was done with the fact that Jesus spoke about the *cup*. The discussion centred around the wine. Clearly there was little special discussion concerning the cup as is evidenced by the fact that everywhere one or more communal cups were used. But when hygienic questions arose, the matter of a communal cup was examined and exegetical reasons have been cited to show that individual cups were used at the institution. Mainly two arguments have been brought forward:

1. The rabbinic sources show that individual cups were used at the Passover meal.

2. The way Luke 22:17 is formulated indicates that the disciples share the one cup by pouring from it into their own cup.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> See also Mark 14:24. The RSV translation of Luke 22:20, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood," is wrong. The words *to hyper humon ekchunnomenon* should be connected with *to haimati* as the order in the Greek shows: *Touto to poterion he kainē diatbekē en to haimati mou, to hyper humon ekchunnomenon*. The verb *ekchunnein*, when used in connection with wine, does not mean that wine is poured out of the pitcher into the cup, but that wine is spilt. See Matt. 9:17; see the discussion of the verb in Bauer, *A Greek-English*, 247. We can, therefore, agree with Ridderbos that pouring wine into the cup does not belong to the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

<sup>44</sup> H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und*

These arguments have little value. Concerning the rabbinic sources, they all date from a later time, and do not prove that during the first century aversion was felt toward a common cup.<sup>45</sup> Concerning Luke 22:17, Christ does indeed tell his disciples to divide the cup among themselves, but nothing compels us to understand this to mean that they divided the communal cup by pouring from it into their own individual cups. But even more important is that Luke 22:17 does not describe the cup of the Lord's Supper, but a previous one.

About the cup with which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, we read: "Then he took the cup...offered it to them, and they all drank from it." (Mark 14:23). *Ex autou* ("from it") can only refer to "from the cup." The text can only mean that they all drank from the same cup. The communal cup is indicated in a different way in Matthew 26:27: "Then he took the cup...and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you.'" Those who received the cup shared together in the blessings of Christ's death.<sup>46</sup>

This does not mean that even when 120 people together celebrate the Lord's Supper, only one cup can be used. If we were so literalistic, then only twelve people (or eleven!) should sit at the table, and unleavened bread and wine mixed with water should be used. Nowhere does the New Testament indicate that we should copy the first celebration. In fact, the only place where the Lord's Supper is discussed in the epistles of Paul (1 Cor. 10–11), the celebration is quite different from the institution. The point is that the words of institution show that the cup is a meaningful element of the Lord's Supper. The joyful results of Christ's death are shared within the congregation. In a time when individualism threatens the community of the church, it is important to maintain the communal cup as a sign that we together with many different people, who are not all our friends, need and receive the fruits of Christ's salvation work.

Again, after the meaning of the cup has been established, it is possible to make accommodation for special situations. As far back as 1581, the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands decided on special rules for celebrations where lepers were present. When this point came up again in the twentieth century as the result of the attention for hygiene, Synod Leeuwarden 1920 limited the use of individual cups to special situations with

---

*Midrash* (6 vols.; 5<sup>th</sup> ed.; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1969) 4/1.58–59.

<sup>45</sup> See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 69–70.

<sup>46</sup> See Van Bruggen, *Marcus*, 339, who concludes, "Apparently drinking together from the same cup belongs to the commandment."

contagious diseases.<sup>47</sup> The use of communal cups reflects best the intention of the Lord in the institution of the Supper.<sup>48</sup>

### The Table

Over against the Roman Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice to God, the Reformed have emphasized that it is a meal. Therefore, they replaced the altar with a table. The table was placed in full view of the people. But there was no uniformity in their use of the table. Three practices have existed within the churches of the Reformation. The first was that bread and wine were brought by the ministers and elders to the people who remained sitting in the pew. The second was that the people walked up to the table, received there the elements, and ate and drank standing. The third was that the people went forward, sat at the table, and there partook of bread and wine.<sup>49</sup>

All three practices can be traced back to the sixteenth century, but none is original. At the Passover where the Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus and his disciples reclined at the table (Luke 22:14). In the apostolic church, the Lord's Supper was celebrated in connection with a communal meal. Nowhere does the institution give special attention to the fact that the Lord's Supper was celebrated at a table. The table is indirectly important, to emphasize that this sacrament had the character of a meal. We can, therefore, use the table in such a way that it contributes to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, given the local opportunities.<sup>50</sup>

But on one occasion the word "table" in connection with the Lord's Supper received special attention. In 1 Corinthians 10:21 Paul writes, "you

---

<sup>47</sup> This decision was upheld at Synod Sneek 1939; see the decisions in F. L. Bos, *De orde der kerk* ('s Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Guido de Bres, 1950) 230–231.

<sup>48</sup> At this point, I would also like to refer to a remark of K. Schilder which deals indirectly with this situation. In one of his Press Reviews, Schilder passes on a report that some people had left the church they belonged to and had established another because in their former church individual cups had been introduced. Schilder says that he does not think that a church, by introducing individual cups, becomes a false church. He disagrees with leaving for that reason; see K. Schilder, *De kerk* (2 vols.; ed. J. Kamphuis; Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1960) 1.369–370.

<sup>49</sup> See the illustrations in Van 't Spijker, *Bij brood en beker*, 174, 139, 222.

<sup>50</sup> I prefer to sit at the table, where the idea of a meal and of eating and drinking occurs in its natural environment. But this should be balanced by what is best for large congregations. Repetition of the formula with many "tables" does not contribute to an attentive participation.

cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons." This text must be explained in the context. Paul is discussing the question of whether Christians can participate in a sacrificial meal for heathen gods.<sup>51</sup>

Paul has already stated that idols are nothing (1 Cor. 8:4). But this statement should not be used as an argument to participate in heathen sacrificial meals. Even though idols do not exist, demons do. As a matter of fact, they have prepared these sacrificial meals (1 Cor. 10:19–20). By partaking of such meals the believers would in fact become partakers of the table of demons. The church at Corinth should know that such behaviour is very dangerous. It provokes the Lord to jealousy (v. 22), and they knew what happened when the Lord was provoked (vv. 7–10).

It was hard for the Corinthian believers to keep this command not to partake in a sacrificial meal. It meant that they could no longer be members of any social societies. These societies were very important for social contacts. They offered assistance to their members if they would become poor, they took care of them when they would fall ill, and they organized the funerals of the members. But the most important aspect was the social contact the members could enjoy with other people. Just as today, it was important then to know the right people.

These societies, however, adopted a god and held their gatherings and meals under the auspices of that god.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, Christians were not allowed to participate, and that placed serious restrictions on their social contacts. Because these societies were so pervasive, Christians could not participate in political and social life. They could not become civil servants, for then they would have to sacrifice to the emperor. Some Christians even died as the result of this command of Paul, when under Nero they either had to eat food sacrificed to the emperor or suffer death.

At the Lord's Supper, believers enjoy communion with God and with Jesus Christ. This communion, therefore, excludes any participation in the festivities of the social societies. The communion at the Lord's table requires from the participants a clear break with everything that is tainted with other religions.

---

<sup>51</sup> The problem in chapter 10 is different from that of chapter 8. There the question is discussed as to whether meat, earlier sacrificed to idols, can be eaten by Christians. See on these chapters especially Batelaan, *De sterken en de zwakken*.

<sup>52</sup> See Batelaan, *De sterken en zwakken*, 10–15 and 79–82.

## Gifts from the Table

Yet another meaning of the Lord's Supper can be seen when we consider that it was first celebrated as part of a communal meal, as is indicated in 1 Corinthians 11. Each member of the congregation brought food according to his means. These meals served not only the communication of goods between the saints, but also the communion of the saints. The poorer members of the congregation received food at these occasions. Such meals were called *tais agapais* ('love meals').<sup>53</sup>

This combination of a celebration before the Lord and support for the needy had a long history before the Lord's Supper was celebrated. When Israel appeared before God at the harvest feasts, they had to come with their families and dependents, but also with those who had no fields and therefore no harvest. They were the Levites who were living in the towns, the sojourners, the fatherless, and the widows (Deut. 16:11, 14). All these people shared in the fruits of the harvest. They probably also received what was left of the tithe after the celebration (Deut. 14:22–27). And once every three years they received the whole tithe (Deut. 14:28, 29).

This command was still kept in a somewhat different form during Jesus' earthly life. That is the reason why the disciples could think that Judas had left to give something to the poor (John 13:29).<sup>54</sup> It is possible that the combination of Lord's Supper and care for the poor is also indicated in Acts 2:46 and 6:1–3. At any rate this combination is present in 1 Corinthians 11.

Paul has no problem with combining the Lord's Supper with a meal for the whole congregation. But he does have a problem with the way the meal was organized in Corinth. The rich, who had brought much, began to eat on their own. As a result they got drunk, and the poor remained hungry (1 Cor. 11:21).<sup>55</sup>

The fact that poor sinners receive the riches of Christ at the Lord's Supper should lead to financial care for the poor in the congregation. The Lord's Sup-

<sup>53</sup> The name occurs in the epistle of Jude (v. 12). See D. H. Wheaton, "Love Feast," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 660–661.

<sup>54</sup> See on this, Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> This is the contextual background of eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner (1 Cor. 11:27). This does not speak of the unworthiness of the participant, but of the unworthiness of this way of celebration. It is unworthy when the meal which should express the community of people who are different in social status but alike in believing Jesus Christ becomes a meal for the high and mighty, excluding the poor. See for this C. Trimp, *Woord, water en wijn* (Kampen: Kok, 1985) 87–88.

per does not only direct our love toward Jesus Christ, but also toward those who with us participate in the gifts of Jesus Christ. This is the meaning of the offering plate at the table. There is no admission fee required for participating in the Lord's Supper. At the table we feel one with the other participants, and we express our gratitude for the gifts God has given us by caring for the poor. The collection at the table should be for the deacons to support the needy.<sup>56</sup>

### Eschatological Perspective

The Lord's Supper has one more important meaning, indicated at the moment of its institution. Probably already before the Lord's Supper was celebrated by the disciples, Jesus Christ had said: "I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:16).<sup>57</sup> Jesus Christ himself did not participate. The Lord's Supper looks forward to the time when the kingdom of God has come on the earth. Then Jesus Christ will again be in their midst, and he will participate in the great celebration that will begin then. That will be the fulfillment of the joy of the Lord's Supper.

When the table is prepared today, Jesus Christ is not there to eat with us. But he promised that he will participate in the great celebration of which the Lord's Supper is only a foretaste. The celebration of the Lord's Supper should make us long for the time when he will join us.

## Conclusion

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is celebrated regularly in the congregations. This is a good custom and in accordance with Christ's ordinance. But repetition can easily lead to inattentiveness and a shallow celebration of this sacrament. A clearer understanding of the rich meaning of Christ's institution can lead to a richer experience at the celebration and a more conscious life of faith.

---

<sup>56</sup> For this part, I owe much to an article of C. Trimp, "Avondmaal en diakonie" *Dienst* 22:3 (1974) 8ff.

<sup>57</sup> Mark records that Jesus said after the drinking of the cup: "I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). So Jesus Christ has probably repeated this word. The expectation of a future with Christ is also mentioned in Matt. 26:29 and 1 Cor. 11:26.