

A CANADIAN REFORMED IDIOSYNCRASY? (1)

The “Long-Established” Practice of “Close(d) Communion”

In the year-end 1996 edition of *Clarion* we find an editorial by Rev. R. Schouten titled, “Is a Church Federation Required?” In answering this question it is noted that “local churches are called to express and manifest their given unity.” Furthermore, “we are obligated to work towards a single federation of Reformed churches, united in confession and practice.” (Dr. Venema) We must move on quickly to visible church unity with Reformed churches outside of our federation for “if these churches are united in their submission to the Word of God, in their subscription to the Three forms of Unity, and in their willingness to honour a church order adopted by common consent, then they (and we RD) should be united in a single federation of Reformed Churches.”

In the closing words of his editorial Rev. Schouten states that if we are not prepared to move on to visible church unity with these churches “let’s identify the areas of concern and talk about them openly at all levels.” In the same issue of *Clarion* Rev. C. Van Spronsen (Rev. VS) indeed identifies one such “area of concern” namely admission of visitors to the Lord’s table. (“Visitors at the Lord’s Table”- Reader’s Forum) He notes that “in the light of recent discussions in contact with other Reformed and Presbyterian churches, I could not but further reflect on a variety of questions pertaining to guests at the Lord’s Table.” Rev. VS’s article definitely does deal with one of the “areas of concern” in our discussion with other Reformed churches and in particular the Presbyterian churches. (OPC)

The “long-established” Reformed practice of “close (d) communion” or a “closed table” means that we admit to the Lord’s Supper *only* communicant members of the congregation and guests who are communicant members in good standing of sister churches. This Reformed practice has been attacked by members of other Reformed churches and federations as being narrow-minded, judgmental and sectarian. They describe this practice as a “Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasy”^(a). The *lack* of such a “long-established” Reformed practice in the OPC is also one of the reasons that a number of our sister-churches, in obedience to the Word of God, have seceded from this Presbyterian Church. There is therefore no doubt that we need to discuss this “area of concern” before we “move on quickly to visible church unity” with other Reformed churches. And we definitely need to resolve our differences with the OPC on the matter of admission to the Lord’s Supper now that we have already declared it to be a true church. We should in fact have resolved this matter *before* we made this premature and unsubstantiated declaration. We therefore appreciate that Rev. VS has presented us with a timely opportunity to further discuss this important matter.

“I have nothing against Article 61 of the Church Order” says Rev. VS. That is an encouraging statement because it is in line with the expectation that a minister in the CanRC should exhibit the “willingness to honour a church order adopted by common consent.” When we read Article 61 of our Church Order (CO) we see that this article is abundantly clear. We have agreed that “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 grounds of a good attestation concerning doctrine and conduct.”

We note that the only “visitors” or guests for which the CO makes provision are “members of sister-Churches”, and then only “on the grounds of a good attestation concerning doctrine and conduct.” Clearly this Reformed practice of “close(d) communion” makes no provision or allowance for Rev. VS’s suggestion that the consistory draw up “established protocol” for admission to the Lord’s table of “visitors from outside the federation.” Nor does it give us the liberty to go “visiting outside the federation” to celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

Rev. VS states that he has nothing against Article 61 of the CO, but would suggest some additions or changes “to clear up some of the confusion.” If there is indeed confusion in the CanRC about our “long-established” practice of close (d) communion or the admission of guests or visitors to the Lord’s Table then it is definitely of recent vintage, and it certainly cannot be attributed to a lack of clarity in what we read in Article 61 of our CO. Such confusion is more likely the consequence of a less than clear understanding of this article, or may even be the result of an unwillingness to accept what can be easily known. Unfortunately Rev. VS’s own reflections on this article and his proposals for changes have not helped to increase our understanding of this “area of concern.” At times it seems that Rev VS has joined the ranks of those who consider the “long-established practice” of “close (d) communion” as a Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasy. Sometimes it seems as if the enthusiasm for new approaches, also in the matter of admission to the Lord’s Supper, outweighs the understanding of the reasons we have for doing things in certain established ways. Then confusion is inevitable. In the hope of clearing up some of the confusion and also gaining a better understanding of the reasons we have for doing things in a certain *long-established* Reformed way, let us “engage in a true wrestling with what we have said confessionally” concerning “admission to the Lord’s Supper.”

- 1) The task of the elders is to watch over the table and to admit *only* those members of the congregation whom they *know* are sound in faith and godly in conduct.
- 2) As communicant members we *also* have a task. “If we are to celebrate the holy supper for the strengthening of our faith, we must *first* examine *ourselves*.” (Form for the Lord’s Supper) To partake in the Lord’s Supper is a *personal* decision and responsibility. Nevertheless, we are members of “the Christian church” that “is duty bound to exclude those who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly.” (HC. Q&A 82) Therefore *we*, along with the elders, are also involved in making sure “that the covenant of God is not profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.” (HC. Q&A 82, 1 Cor. 11:17-24)
- 3) In essence, the *first* responsibility rests with the communicant members. And yet, the elders bear the *final* responsibility. The *final* decision for participation in the Lord’s Supper rests with them, for the sacrament is celebrated under their supervision. *That* is the norm. We note that the church order does not make provisions for admission of guests from non-sister churches. The CanRC policy on the admission to the Lord’s Supper is in the Reformed line. Obviously no one would allow unbelievers to the Lord’s Table. Therefore the real point of contention is the different admission procedures or methods used. Do these procedures or methods harmonize with what Scripture teaches? (1 Cor. 10:16+17, 11: 17-34) Do they

correspond with what we believe and confess in the Heidelberg Catechism? (Q&A 81-85)
Do they comply with what we have agreed upon in our Church Order? (Art. 61)

- 4) The ultimate question is: Who bears the final responsibility for admission to the Lord's Table? The answer to that question is that the *elders* have the solemn duty to bar from the table those who "call themselves Christians but *show* themselves to be un-Christian in doctrine or life." (HC. Q&A 85) "How are elders ever to do that responsibly, unless they *know* these people? Does the word 'show' not imply that these people are under the supervision of the elders? That the consistory can vouch for their Christian doctrine *and* life?"^(c)
- 5) The *elders* must determine whether the criteria for admission of guests (visitors) to the table have been properly met. They bear the *final* responsibility. They may never absolve themselves of that responsibility by relying on the guests' self-attestation regarding his faith and conduct of life.

Rev. VS mentions that the impetus for his reflection on the matter of admission to the Lord's Supper was the fact that he was "preaching the Word of God as summarized by the Heidelberg Catechism." (HC) As we have seen, the HC summarizing Scripture is *abundantly* clear on who may be admitted to the Lord's Table. "The catechism is the confession of the church. It does not speak in vague and general terms but it professes the faith of those who wholeheartedly agree with its contents. And that content is spread over 52 Lord's Days in which the whole doctrine of salvation is confessed. This also means that these Lord's Days are interconnected. We may not just lift one O&A out of its total message in order to 'prove' our point.

With regards to Q&A 81, ("Who are to come to the table of the Lord?") that means e.g. that we must read it in the light of Q&A 85, where the elders have the solemn duty to bar from the table "those who call themselves Christians but *show* themselves to be un-Christian in doctrine or life."

^(d) As we noted earlier, the word *show* clearly implies that these people are under the supervision of the elders. They have the *final* responsibility for admission to the Lord's Table. Therefore our confession, summarizing Scripture, makes no provision for admission of guests or visitors to the Lord's Table beyond what we have agreed upon in Article 61 of the Church Order. We have agreed that "members of sister-Churches shall be admitted on the grounds of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct." We can not just admit a person from "other churches within the federation" or a "visitor from outside the federation" simply on his or her personal testimony. Why not? Because that would mean that the admission requirements become the final responsibility of the individual rather than the consistory. This "long-established" practice has been "the common rule within the Reformed churches at least since the Separation of 1834."^(e)

In 1975 the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) *officially* changed its stand on the admission of guests to the Lord's Supper. They changed the rules to allow *all* sincere believers to attend (Acts 1975, art. 101). These sincere believers did not necessarily need to be members of the CRC. They could be members of other denominations, or have no church affiliation at all. "The consistory was no longer to exercise the final judgment on who may attend the table. The task of the elders became one of simply *identifying, informing, and inviting* guests. After the elders had identified, informed, and invited a guest, the guest was to exercise final judgment." (b) Since the

guest or visitor may not be known to the consistory the final responsibility rested with the individual rather than the consistory.

The CRC and many of the Reformed churches that have seceded from the CRC now accuse the CanRC of narrowness and sectarianism because of our stand on admission to the Lord's Table. It is regrettable that they have already forgotten their Reformed heritage and don't know anymore what they once believed, agreed upon, and practiced. It is unfortunate that many members of the CanRC, in their eagerness to "move on quickly to visible unity" and "to work towards a single federation of Reformed churches" are equally prepared to part with our long-established Reformed practices and replace them with a church polity determined by the fancies of individuals rather than the principles of God's Word.

Rev. VS states that "it may be beneficial in all our discussion to have a look at ourselves." We couldn't agree more. Perhaps a good place to start would be the recognition that also in our Reformed circles there are all kinds of phenomena which point to decline and regression. Indifference to the church, increased liberalism and conformity to the world, increased ignorance of what the Reformed Confessions say, and an uncertainty with regards to the "unchangeable truths." To be questioning and seeking seems to be regarded as a greater indication of earnestness than to be precise about one's confession. People lean toward the things we have in common with others instead of having an eye for what specifically characterizes our own Reformed standpoints.

Rev. VS speaks of "the need to be critical of some long-established practices." (close communion) What is really needed is the willingness to wrestle with what we as CanRC have said *confessionally* concerning "admission to the Lord's Supper" and so again come to a clear understanding of the reasons we have for doing things in certain established ways. That would eliminate a lot of confusion and also moderate and diminish the need to be critical of what members of other Reformed churches have described as "a Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasy." If as Reformed churches we envision the need to dispense with our "long-established (Reformed) practices" in order to move on quickly to visible church unity with other Reformed and even Presbyterian churches then we forfeit our claim to being Reformed, and ultimately we cease to be Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ron Dykstra

PS. In our next editorial we will continue our critique of Rev. Van Spronsen's article. We will then, DV., expand further on what we have said and also closely examine some more of the statements and assertions made by Rev. VS.

- a) *Readers Respond*, Rev. J. Tuininga, Christian Renewal, March 21/94
- b) *Admission of Guests to the Lord's Table*, Rev. G. Ph. van Popta, Clarion, Oct. 8/93
- c) d) e) *Readers Respond*, Rev. G. Wieske, Christian Renewal, Feb. 21/94

Childlike Obedience

A father takes great delight in giving gifts to his children. A child, though, when he receives a gift like a new box of crayons from his dad, does not think of his father right away. Instead his round eyes are focused solely on those shiny wax crayons wrapped in coloured paper with all their points intact. The child's first thought is to draw a picture with his crayons, so after a quick look up at his

dad he scampers off to a corner, finds some paper, and starts scribbling away. Perhaps the child has wandered in his imagination to a fairy-tale land and is drawing a fantastic castle. Or maybe he is dreaming of zooming racecars and trophies. The father knows that his child is not thinking of him at that moment, but he doesn't mind. He smiles to himself, picks up his book, and settles into his big armchair.

In his corner, the little boy marks his paper with a few last bits of green grass and adds some extra yellow rays to his vaguely round sun. He sits back on his heels to admire his choice work of art. And what is his first impulse? Sure enough, he takes the picture and runs off to show his dad. In doing so he shows his thanks for the crayons more clearly than he could have with a hundred thank-you's. The child's natural impulse is to seek his father's approval on the work which he has done with his father's gift.

You, like the child, have received gifts from your Heavenly Father. He has given you physical blessings like food, clothing, and shelter. He has also given you spiritual gifts like His Word, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the promises of the resurrection and life eternal. Even more basic than these are the gifts of your hands, your feet, your tongue, your eyes, and your ears. Everything that you have, everything that you are, is a gift from your Heavenly Father.

God is your Creator. I do not mean this in the sense that long ago in the faded eons of time when God moved his great power to fashion the cosmos he created mankind. You were not created then. You were created by the Hand of God in your mother's womb not so many years ago. *His* Hand gave form to *your* hands. He molded your face and crafted your tiny limbs. When He had finished His work to His satisfaction, He gave those hands, those features, and those limbs to you, as a gift. You may know, then, when you look at the fingers of your hand that God, your Creator and Father, is not so very distant. He is near you. His Hand has held your hands. There is no mysticism here. He, the Almighty God, shaped your hands; your hands have touched the Hand of God.

This is a matter of great wonder. Like the child who stares with huge eyes at his crayons and makes tentative lines on his paper with the new points, we may flex our fingers, blink our eyes, take our first tottering steps and marvel at the gifts of our Heavenly Father. We may tremble at the power that molded the very nails on our fingers and the lashes over our eyes. That the Almighty God, whose power the stars and the planets obey, should show the delicate care and attention which formed our tiny features is beyond understanding. We are in awe of our Father's generosity and care for His children. Truly we have received gifts of astonishing value, the more so for having been crafted by His own Hand.

Our gifts are meant to be used. Having received them, we, again like the child, go into our corner and put our gifts to work. We make things with our hands, we see things with our eyes, and we say things with our tongues. Here is a test of our thankfulness for the gifts of our Father.

The child who receives the crayons does not think to return his father's favour in kind. How could he do so? Besides, what need has his father for crayons? So we also make no thought of returning to God favour for favour. How could we do so? And what need has God for our gifts? Instead it should be our first impulse to use the gifts we have received as they are meant to be used and to seek our Father's approval for our work.

If the child had taken his crayons and used them to draw pictures on the walls, he would not have run to find his father but would have crept away in fear of his father's anger. The little boy knows what will please his father. When he does something he knows will make his father happy, he runs to show it to him, breathless in his excitement. We too know what pleases our Heavenly Father and what displeases Him. But when we fashion deeds, words, and thoughts with the hands, mouth, and mind which God gave us out of His Hand, do we lift these deeds, words, and thoughts heavenward, praying that God will approve them and take delight from them, just as the child pushes his picture into the hands of his father? Or do we try to hide our handiwork from His eyes, fearful and ashamed?

God has given us marvelous gifts of wonder from which we derive great pleasure. Now measure your deeds by this: is it your desire to use your gifts, your hands, your eyes, your mouth, and your mind for work and play which gains the approval of your God and brings delight to your Heavenly Father?

Dave de Boer – Calgary

The following article is taken from New Horizons, the official publication of the OPC. It is good to learn what lives among them. At the same time we may examine our own practices. PdB

Getting More Involved

In a previous article, we began a discussion of how deacons may be more involved in the ministry of the church. We began by recommending that the session use qualified deacons in the ministry. We also suggested that if, in the sessions' judgment, a deacon is not qualified, he should be removed from office. We challenged deacons to improve their qualifications by seeking earnestly to grow in grace. Finally, we challenged sessions not to limit unduly their deacons' job description.

What other factors limit a deacon's involvement in the ministry of the church? One factor is the unwillingness of deacons to be involved. It is one thing to complain about not being involved (doing nothing); it is another thing to be truly willing to do whatever tasks are placed before us.

Often tasks go undone, or at least undone by deacons, because no one sees them. It may be that jobs relating to the physical plant or meeting place are not getting done. If so, a deacon needs to look around, or even have his wife survey things for him. Often our wives see what needs to be done better than we do.

We meet in a gymnasium of a Christian school. This is certainly not the most attractive meeting place. In our congregation, the men more easily ignore the physical surroundings, while the women have been of tremendous help in decorating the gym with plants, certain coverings and hangings, etc. This talent that women have for making rooms more presentable and attractive can and should be used in enhancing the worship centre and other rooms where we meet.

Of course, when working with others, there is always the possibility that they will take over. I have had the experience of women and men trying to take over, but this has always been done with a true spirit of wanting to serve God, not with the intent of exercising rule in the church. If the latter occurs, then perhaps the session would be willing to help out. Above all, we should not be hesitant

to use the gifts that God has supplied in the church out of a concern to avoid possible unpleasantness.

Another way for deacons to discover how to be helpful is to ask the pastor what tasks need to be done. It has been my observation and experience that pastors do many mundane or everyday tasks that could be done by deacons. There are many jobs relating to opening and closing the building, preparing the meeting place for worship, etc., that a pastor does, and it would be very helpful if someone else were to do them. Every week someone has to see if the Hymn books and courtesy Bibles are where they are supposed to be. Periodically, someone should go through all these books to see if they are in proper repair. How long has it been since someone has thumbed through all the hymnals in your church to see if all the pages are there, if the binding is okay, etc.?

Who makes certain that there are enough hymnals? This, of course, involves taking some kind of a role for all services. Indeed, who take the role and makes certain that the pastor has a list of all the visitors, of all the absentees, etc.? Who sends out letters of greeting or letters expressing concern when someone is sick? Who sees to the cleaning of the church facilities, the lawn mowing, and snow removal? Who sets up the chairs when they are needed? Who sets up the Sunday school facilities?

One persistent problem in the church is the unwillingness of men to help. This may be due to a number of things. Certainly deacons, who are helpers by name, calling, and ordination, ought to develop an attitude of willingness to help. This involves being willing to do the less glorious tasks.

One of the truly wonderful experiences of my ministry has been that I have met so many deacons and other men who are willing to do whatever jobs need to be done. Nothing is below their dignity. They will mow lawns, clean the church, and visit the sick and elderly. They are always willing to try, even if they do not consider themselves qualified for the task.

Some men are unwilling to help because they lack the time. This may truly be so, but often it is said that if you want to get a job done, give it to a busy man. As officers of the church, we must make time to do the Lord's work. Perhaps we have to discipline ourselves better. How much time do we spend watching T.V. or fishing or hunting? Such activities may certainly be good and proper. However, as servants of Christ, should not His work come first?

Some people also seem to be unwilling to work because what they did in the past went without notice. I agree that we should show proper appreciation to those who volunteer their time and talents in the Lord's work, but, ultimately, we should work not for the praise of man, but for the praise of God. We may not receive His reward and praise in this life, but we will receive it in heaven. Let us work for the Lord and let us do it willingly without holding back.

Leonard J. Coppes