

A CANADIAN REFORMED IDIOSYNCRASY? (2)

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

In our last editorial we “engaged in a true wrestling with what we have said *confessionally*” concerning “admission to the Lord’s Supper” (LS). In response to Rev. Van Spronsen’s (Rev. VS) reflections “on a variety of questions pertaining to guests at the Lord’s Table” we said that 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 (CO). We have agreed that “members of sister-Churches shall be admitted on the grounds of a good attestation concerning their doctrine *and* conduct.” Traditionally the Reformed churches have not entertained the notion of admitting to the Lord’s table members of non-sister churches or members of sister-churches who do not provide the agreed upon attestation. This long-established Reformed practice of close(d) communion has been attacked by some as narrow-minded, judgmental and sectarian. It has even been described as “a Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasy.”

When we read Rev. VS’s article we at times get the impression that also Rev. VS has joined the ranks of those who consider this practice to be “a Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasy.” His reflections on “a variety of questions pertaining to guests at the Lord’s Table” leave us with a number of questions of our own. It is therefore important that we continue our discussion on this matter. “Indeed, to reject polemics is to refuse to fight for the unity of the true faith.”^(a) We continue our critique of Rev. Van Spronsen’s (Rev. VS) article “Visitors at the Lord’s Table”^(b) with the following observations:

1) Rev. VS writes: “Perhaps we even need to be critical of some long-established practices... If we have criticism, we shall have to support this with scriptural grounds.” If, as Rev. VS says, he has “a variety of questions” about our long-established Reformed practice of close(d) communion then he as the “questioner” bears the burden of proof. He is a minister in a federation of churches which has always practiced close(d) communion. The onus is on him to prove that Article 61 of our CO and Questions and Answers 81-85 of the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) conflict with Scripture and/or Confessions. It should not be necessary for *us* to prove the validity of our long-established Reformed practices time and again.

2) Rev. VS states that “while Art. 61 expresses our general, agreed-upon practice within the federation, this method is not necessarily the *only* mode of exercising supervision over the Table.” Basically Rev. VS states that there is more than one way to exercising supervision over the table. Rev. J. Vermeer, in addressing the assertion that “there is more than one way to worship” notes that these kind of statements reveal “the dialect of confessional indifference.”^(c) We have within the federation of the CanRC what Rev. VS correctly calls “our general, agreed-upon practice” of exercising supervision over the Lord’s Table. There are, no doubt, many different methods and practices in a variety of federations and denomination, methods and practices which are in varying degrees different from our long-established Reformed practice of close(d) communion. However, “if one is of the opinion that these differences involve Scripture and confession then you will ask others to do as you do. That is not a matter of making your tradition normative, or of arrogance, but of wanting to be obedient to the Word of God.”^(d)

3) According to Rev. VS “we ought to be careful not to institutionalize our way of deciding admission to the Table. We may find ourselves in situations which seem contrary to the intent of the Lord’s commandments.” This rather general statement is of little value unless we are given some indication of what exactly Rev. VS means by the use of the word “institutionalize” and unless he also supplies us with some concrete examples of “situations” in the CanRC which, as the result of such “institutionalizing” *are* (not “seem” RD) “contrary to the intent of the Lord’s commandments.” We can paraphrase Rev. VS by stating that “we ought to be careful not to *trivialize* or *minimize* our way of deciding admission to the Table.” Let us learn our lesson from the developments in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in this particular matter. Our long-established practice of close(d) communion has a long and respected history. We stand in the historical tradition, whereas the others such as the CRC (1975) have deviated from it. When we propose changes such as Rev. VS’s “restricted communion” and “protocol” for “visitors from *outside* the federation,” we should clearly understand that we are consciously departing from the historic Reformed position. That understanding should make us more than cautious and it should give us plenty of reason for further reflection.

4) Rev. VS writes: “You may find the invitation in another church (outside the federation, RD) too open, but would that be a reason for you as visitor not to attend?” (The celebration of the Lord’s Supper, RD) We must answer this question with some questions of our own. On what do we base our assessment that we find the invitation in “another church outside the federation” too open? Is this assessment based on personal preferences or scriptural principles? If it is based on nothing more than our own subjective feelings and personal preferences then further discussion becomes frivolous and futile. We all have our likes and dislikes. However, if our assessment is solidly based on the norms and principles as found in Scripture and Confessions then “too open” or “less strict” is simply a polite (dishonest?) way of saying that this practice is not in agreement with what we, based on Scripture and Confessions, believe and confess. Then we have a very good reason to “*not sit at the same Table with them as a visiting guest*” lest also *we* share the responsibility for the fact that the covenant of God is profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation. (HC. Q&A 82, 1 Cor. 11:17-24) Then “the difference in practice” which we may find in another church is not simply “one of *degree*” or “different historical situations,” as Rev. VS suggests, but a matter of obedience and complete submission to the Word of God. Therefore we answer Rev VS’s question of whether “we can not sit at the same Table with them as a visiting guest” with an unequivocal, “No, we cannot!” Obedience to the Word of God is far more important than being a “visiting guest in another church” outside our federation.

5) According to Rev. VS “our present practice” of admitting to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper visitors from a church with whom we either have ecclesiastical fellowship or other forms of contact “is unique in Reformed and Presbyterian circles.” We need to ask a few questions: Since Gen. Synod 1995 has not yet formalized a relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship what does Rev. VS envision as “our present practice?” Has he already forgotten that “our present (Reformed) practice” with regard to the admission to the Lord’s Supper remains one of the reasons why we still have not been able to come to visible church unity with the OPC? It is in fact the very reason that a number of churches, particularly the Church at Laurel (Maryland), have seceded from this Presbyterian church and were subsequently accepted in our federation as sister-churches. The “too open” and

“less strict” current Presbyterian practice of “fencing of the Lord’s Table” has little in common with “our present (uniquely Reformed / long-established) practice” of “close(d) communion” and a “closed table.”

6) Rev. VS’s statement that “our present practice is unique in Reformed *and* Presbyterian circles” completely ignores the statement of Synod 1995 that we still need “to arrive at an agreement with the OPC on the matters of fencing of the Lord’s Table and confessional membership.” (Art. 106, page 75) We still need to “discuss the differences.”

“These differences,” says Rev. B.R. Hofford, “are often obscured (trivialized and minimized RD) by saying that they are only administrative or matters of degree (the C/ARC is more strict than the OPC).”^(e) That is precisely what Rev. VS does when he says: “The difference in practice is therefore one of degree.” However, Rev. Hofford - a former minister in the OPC - came to the conviction that the OPC’s policy on fencing of the Lord’s Table was not in accord with the Bible. He rightly notes that “although there are some superficial similarities between the two approaches, there are in fact some important differences. And these differences are more than merely administrative; they are principal.”^(e) They are matters of Scripture and Confession. When we are inclined to sacrificing the truth for the sake of visible unity with other Reformed and also Presbyterian churches, we forfeit our claim to being Reformed.

7) Under the heading “Word and sacrament” Rev. VS stresses that these two go together and that “these address all who attend and participate in the worship service.” We agree, but what is completely overlooked is that the worship services are public. The use of the sacraments (Lord’s Supper and Baptism) is *not* for the general public, or for all kinds of visitors and guests. With regard to baptism “visitors can not just walk in on the basis of a verbal statement or a signed card and be administered this sacrament, or expect the same for an infant.”^(f) So why would we conclude that simply listening to the Word in a public worship service gives someone the option or obligation to partake of the Lord’s Supper?

8) “After all, the communion at the Table is in the first place a communion with the Lord.” With this statement Rev. VS introduces us to this rather frequently used argument. We quote Klaas Runia’s summary of this argument: “It is the Lord’s table, not ours. We are not the hosts, but He is, and it is He who has invited us. Since He, our Lord, has invited us to sup with Him, we cannot presume to bar from the table for any reason those, who, like ourselves, have accepted his invitation to partake.”^(g) This argument is not new, nor is it an argument of substance. “We certainly believe that the table is the Lord’s, but that does not mean that it is not also the church’s. The Lord gave the sacraments to His church to administer and to keep holy.”^(h)

9) Rev. VS writes about “visitors who voluntarily refrain from attending” the Lord’s Table “either because they have no travel attestation with them or because they consider that they will celebrate only in their own congregation.” That is indeed as it ought to be. The *norm* is that we celebrate the Lord’s Supper “at home,” in our *own* congregation; where we *belong*; where we are under the elder’s supervision and where we are *known* to them; where the elders (consistory) can give “a good attestation concerning our doctrine *and* conduct” (Art. 61 CO), or vouch for the fact that we are “sound in faith and godly in conduct.” When communicant members do not (or are unable to RD) exercise their responsibility of providing the elders with the agreed upon attestation then the

elders must refuse them admission to the Lord's Table. The elders may never rely on *personal* testimonies, *subjective* self-attestations, and verbal warnings.

Furthermore, we must "not use our own subjective feelings and convictions when it comes to who we may invite to the Lord's Table. Let's neither conclude that those who can not attend this table in the Can. Ref. Churches are therefore unbelievers. But let's apply the principles of scripture, where God wants all things done decently and in good order; and where attestations or commendations are already in place. (Just look up: Acts 18:27; Romans 16; 1-2; 1 Cor. 16:10; 2 Cor. 8: 22-24; Phil. 2:29; Col. 4:10; Philemon; 17). Apparently even Paul did not deem it sufficient when someone came to another church and claimed to be a believer." ⁽ⁱ⁾

In conclusion, much more could, should (and hopefully will) be said in response to Rev. VS's article. Our problem is not first and foremost that Article 61 of the CO is confusing or that the questions we are dealing with are "simply beyond the scope of the Church Order", but rather that we no longer agree that our long-established Reformed practice of close(d) communion *is* and *should remain* the position of the CanRC. As Can. Ref. Reformed people we are gradually losing our common consensus on these matters. It should, then, not surprise us that our Reformed practices are considered "Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasies" by some, and that our Church Order adopted by common consent is, at times, deemed to be inadequate and confusing.

Ron Dykstra

- a) *The Polemics of Love*, Clarence Stam, Reformed Perspective, June/89.
- b) *Visitors at the Lord's Table*, Rev. C. Van Spronsen, Clarion, year-end 1996 edition.
- c) *The Dialect of Confessional Indifference*, John Vermeer, The Outlook, March 1996.
(see also Reformed Polemics, Jan 4/97)
- d) *On Church Unity*, Rev. D.G. Agema, Clarion, Jan. 10/97.
- e) *Admitting Guests to the Lord's Supper - OPC VS C/ARC*, Rev. B.R. Hofford, Oct./92.
- f) *Readers Respond*, Rev. T. Hoogsteen, Christian Renewal, March 21/94.
- g) *Is Open Communion Right?* Klaas Runia, Trowel and Sword, October 1982.
- (h) *Again, The Invisible Church and Open Communion*, Rev. J. Moesker, unpublished.
- i) *Readers Respond*, Rev. G. Wieske, Christian Renewal, Feb. 21/94

The Family and Our Conversations

Is there still time for conversations; conversations of parents with their children, and vice versa? Are there still opportunities for them? Surely it is important that such conversations take place! Children must be aware of opportunities to speak with their parents - when they're small, but also when they become older. When they come home from school there ought to be an attentive ear. Mom should be there. That should be the rule. If Mom is hardly ever home when the children come back from school, or if she hasn't got time when they want to tell of their day's experience - ("Just go play outside, I haven't got time right now"), then such children will eventually irreversibly clam up. And when they continue to grow and encounter difficulties they will not come to Mom and Dad for help at all anymore. But then they will rather seek solutions with others who did have time for them when they were little. And are those others always trustworthy -

trustworthy in the sense of scriptural? In other words, will those conversations be according to the Word of God.

Even when children are fully grown, parents ought to have time for them; till the wee hours of the night we should be willing to speak with them. Then we should be thankful and glad that we have opportunity to let our words shine in the light of the Word for their benefit. Such mindfulness of our children can be a blessing for them for the rest of their lives. We must be available to them and speak with them in a scriptural manner.

It is extremely important that such conversations take place; conversations in which children learn to be the willing to converse with their parents. It has happened - don't be shocked - that parents, when asking their children when they plan to return home from an evening out, get to hear: "Oh, if it's boring, around midnight; but if it's fun I'll be home around three or four." Sometimes parents don't even know where their children are going. The children don't believe it is necessary to give such information, after all that's their own business, isn't it? Well such an attitude just won't do, you see. Parents are placed over their children by the LORD. He has clothed them with authority over the children. Therefore the children ought to show honour and respect for their parents. Indeed, in as much as the parents continue in the ways of the LORD. Not when the parents embitter the children, but when they bring them up in the fear and discipline of the ways of the Lord (Eph.6:4). It is un-natural and unacceptable when children do not esteem their parents highly, even if they have not had as much schooling as their children. Then I'd rather have that professor who always considered the opinions of his parents very highly even though his father had only been a shoe maker. For at home he had shown himself to be familiar with the Scriptures and displayed scriptural wisdom and piety.

Our Children, Their Bible Knowledge and Their Activities

We must be available to our children. That also counts for their catechism and society life. Are we aware of the questions and answers as well as the other topics that are being dealt with at the catechism classes? Are we in tune with the subjects that are being discussed at the societies? Do we show interest in their lives when it comes to these matters? Do we think along with them about these issues? And do we take the time to listen to their questions and give them suitable answers, as much as we are able? The same applies to their school work. We are equally interested in that, aren't we? Don't we continually remain aware of their results? And we do help and encourage them when they come across difficulties, or when things don't work out the way we and they expected, don't we? And we don't force them to attain that which is beyond their capacity, do we?

If they are 'general' students we don't force them to follow academic courses, do we? And if they have aptitude for a trade we don't force them to get as much head learning as possible, do we? Just so that they can get further up the ladder than we managed? We do give them the proper scriptural instruction, do we not? For it is far more important that our children are eager in the service of the Lord and active in His Church than that they reach a higher rung on the social ladder.

We parents aren't too busy with our hobbies or TV to have conversations with our children, are we? Just like those parents that spent all their free time ogling that thing and never had any time for a good, in-depth conversation with their children. That's how it was with a young man of

twenty who waited for me after a catechism class and said, “Reverend, “I just don’t like it at home, anymore! Every evening my Mom and Dad are glued to the TV and there is never opportunity for a conversation with us” (there were two children - JMG). That’s terrible! Things did turn out well with those two young men, but in ten cases versus one things end up going terribly wrong in the lives of such children. Parents have a tremendous responsibility when they are blessed with children.

Parents - Examples!

One of the most important elements of our relationship with our children is our own attitude toward the Lord, how we conduct ourselves in our communion with Him. In other words, how we live our own lives as children of our God and Father. We have experienced it that when our brother was laying on his death bed in the hospital, and we were visiting him as his minister, that we suddenly discovered that he was a Christian. The reaction of others was to be expected. “Hey, are you a believer? We never noticed. Why didn’t you tell us?” That was terrible! But it is equally terrible when our children can hardly notice that their parents are believers, that we belong to Jesus Christ, bought and paid for by His precious blood. All these impressions start to form because we do not live as children of our heavenly Father. If others see us involved in all kinds of things except in the service and the communion with the Lord they will start to draw conclusions we would not want them to draw. If they see that we do not live by, according to, and out of the Word of our covenant God; if they see us live a life that conflicts with His covenant Word; if they see us live as if that Word is not important to us at all, that its directions are meaningless to us. If they see us live without placing our trust in the Lord and depending on Him for everything in our lives. If these are the impressions we leave while the Lord says that we are to walk before His face and that we must live blamelessly. That is to say that our walk of life must be pure and undefiled before His face. In other words, we must serve him with a resolute and consequent life style. He tells us that we may not be double minded; trying to live on both sides of the fence, trying to serve two masters - a part for the Lord and a part for the world. That is impossible! That is not allowed! That is an abomination to the Lord. For our life in Him, according to His word, and the life in the world, in sin, are radical opposites. If we do not differentiate ourselves from non-Christian, non-believing parents then our children will surely receive a very wrong example. Our living with the Lord must be so inherent in our lives, so attached, so completely part of, so completely unified with every other part of our lives that it is without question that we belong to Christ, that we are children of the Father, and so brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, for that is what He, Himself, calls those who are His own. We should be able to speak just as easily about the Lord, His communion of saints, His service, and His Church as we can about our daily affairs. It should not be a special occasion when we speak about the Lord and His work for us. It shouldn’t sound special - like something that doesn’t belong with us. Because it is something people don’t normally hear from us, that people don’t normally see us busy with - for He means everything to us. He is involved in all the aspects of our lives. He is our Head and gives leadership in our lives. Not only should this be evident in our speech, but our whole life. Then it will become plain that in all circumstances of life we depend upon Him. In the life of Job in the Bible it was so clear that his children remarked about it. The same goes for Timothy’s life; and the lives of the Philippians. Our children should be allowed to witness such living with the Lord in us as well. On our part we ought to work on it that our

children, who are, after all, also children of the Lord, will live in the same way; due, in part, to our examples.

J.M.Goedhart

(Translated from Reformanda of Jan.15, 1997 by PdB)