

THE PROPER CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Lord's Day 30 gives further consideration of the Scriptural teaching on the Lord's Supper. In this sermon we deal with **THE PROPER CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER**.

1. Christ's sacrifice was necessary only once.

The reason for saying this is to make us realise that the Lord's Supper is not a repeat of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Christ's death on the cross was a once-off event and entirely sufficient to forgive all the sins of all those God has chosen to save. The letter to the Hebrews emphasises this many times. Let me quote from it:

"Unlike the other high priests [Old Testament priests are meant], he [Christ] does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of his people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself." [7:27].

"So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people . . ." [9:28]. "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." [10:10].

". . . this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins. . ." [10:12].

You can see what these verses are saying - ". . . our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ." [A.80]. Our Liturgical Form for the Lord's Supper has it correct when it says that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was given and His blood poured out "for a complete forgiveness of all our sins".

Sometimes we might think that all our sins except our worst ones are forgiven. We might think that Christ has to do something extra to forgive us our worst sins. But in actual fact Christ's death has wiped away all our sins, past, present and future. There is no barrier left standing between God and us. And not only our sins but all the sins of all God's people of all time are forgiven in that one sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

All that makes Christ the most important Person at the Lord's table. Our main attention is to be on Him. Not on that piece of bread we eat or that little bit of wine we drink. The focus has to be Christ. That's why the Form requires the minister to say just before we eat and drink in the Supper: "That we, then, may be nourished with Christ, the true Bread from heaven, let us lift our hearts to heaven where He is, our Mediator, at the right hand of the Father. " So don't pay too much attention to what's happening at the table. Like is everything is done properly, and who is and who isn't at the table? Concentrate instead on Christ who is on His throne in heaven. He is no longer on the cross. He is not in the bread or wine. What He did in His earthly ministry has been completed. He Himself said on the cross: "*It is finished!*" He has ascended to heaven.

How did it come about that we may see this so clearly? It's because of the Reformation's struggle with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. In a process that took place many years the Roman Catholic Church departed from the New Testament teaching and the practice of the early church. The Roman church had come to say that Christ only forgives your daily sins when the priest daily celebrates Mass for you. It held that every time the priest does this Christ is offered again on the altar for new sins that have been committed. Hence, for Roman Catholics participation in the Mass is very important for regular forgiveness of your sins. And if Christ has to be sacrificed every time again then it is necessary for the bread and the wine to become the body and blood of Christ. In the Roman Catholic Mass, therefore, the bread and the wine are not mere symbols. Once they have been consecrated, they are worshipped and adored. We throw the leftover bread of the Lord's Supper away and pour the leftover wine in the beaker back into the bottle. To the Roman Catholic mind that is just terrible.

The Reformers fought against the Mass with all their might and called it a form of idolatry. Because instead of worshipping the ascended Christ in heaven the Roman church worshipped a false Christ on the altar in the church. The Reformers said that the believer's sins do not have to be dealt with repeatedly as in the Mass. Instead, let us rejoice that Christ's death on the cross has wiped away all our sins once and for all, and that He is now on the throne in heaven victorious and glorious. Because of this whole struggle we now say before we eat the bread and drink the wine: 'Let us lift our hearts to heaven where He is, our Mediator, at the right hand of the Father.'

2. A personal confession.

The proper celebration of the Lord's Supper also requires a personal confession by those that take part. The Bible says: "*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" [1 Cor. 11:26]. When you take the bread and the cup, you are saying that you believe that Christ has also died

for you and that He is your Saviour because He has made you right with God. That's makes your Lord's Supper participation a personal confession of faith every time again. But in order for it to be a meaningful confession you need to have some knowledge of the Bible's teaching about Christ, as to who He is and what He has actually done as the Saviour from sin. And you need to know what the Bible teaches about faith. If you don't know about these things then your participation in the Lord's Supper becomes mechanical and mindless.

Furthermore, your participation also implies that you reject any other faith but the Christian faith and any other lord but Christ. You can't say that other religions can be as good and valid as the Christian religion and that they can have their Saviours whilst we stick with Christ. If you were to believe that then Christ does not want you at His table. Christ teaches in His Word that He is the only Saviour. In Old Testament times God insisted that Israel acknowledge that God is the only One and the gods of the nations roundabout are false. And God demands the same faith of the church in the New Testament.

Now we're still dealing with the question: who may come to the Lord's Supper? And so far we have said that this can never be an automatic or a routine coming. You must know who Jesus is and what He teaches about the Lord's Supper.

Simply put, those who may come to the Lord's table must hate sin, they must know and love Jesus, and they must want to do His will. And that is not a new teaching. These are not additional requirements. It is basic Christianity. You must know your sin, know the Saviour, and know how you should serve Him. It doesn't have to be more. But it can't be any less either.

The Catechism, when it answers the question as to who may come to the Lord's table puts it this way: "Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life." That is a beautiful Scriptural answer.

So how old do you have to be before you can make such a personal confession? Two years old, six years old, twelve, sixteen, twenty? I can remember a church member in a previous congregation who was nearly ninety when he finally came to make that profession of faith. That was unusual of course. For years it was customary for professions of faith to take place when a person was in his/her late teens or in their early twenties. But for the last twenty years or so Reformed Churches have struggled with the question about children's participation in the Lord's Supper. A study of Scriptural data on this subject has been helpful in many respects, yet differences remain as to what age children may go to the Lord's Supper. Most would agree, however, that a set age does not automatically enable someone to make a personal confession of faith. A person who turns 12, 14, 16, or 18 years of age, will not on his/her birthday all of a sudden become spiritually ready. The church member I referred to earlier was not spiritually ready until he nearly reached his ninetieth year. We do not recommend, of course, that you wait that long.

When we are talking about children at the Lord's Supper, then we are not thinking of any child. We are thinking of the children of the covenant, children of believing parents, who therefore already belong to the church. God has also said to them that He is their God and they belong to His people. Now when is such a child spiritually mature to be able to confess that he/she hates sin, loves Jesus, and wants to do God's will? Not just because they reflect the upbringing of their Christian home, but are wanting to hate sin, know and love Jesus, and wanting to do God's will, without pressure from parents whilst at home or away from home. Well, that brings us to our third point.

3. The implications for the church.

Many churches will say that Lord's Supper participation should be left up to the individual. All that the church needs to say is that it is only for believers. When that has been made clear, then people can decide for themselves. They say that the church has not the right to keep from the table anyone who confesses faith in Christ. It is not the church's table but the Lord's table.

What do we say to that? Well, individual responsibility is, of course, a very necessary requirement. When a church member of whatever age, young, old, or somewhere in between, wants to know when he/she can go to the Lord's Supper then the church should answer - when you are spiritually ready for it. But what that means has to be explained of course. So the church must say that those who are spiritually ready are those who hate sin, know and love Jesus, and want to do His will. That they want to do this from the heart in all kinds of situations.

Now at that point the church could leave it up to church members to make up their own mind as to whether or not they are spiritually ready to come to the Lord's Supper the next time it is held. And if the church allows its members, young and old, to make up their own mind, then the church would have to do the same with everyone else. Visitors too could also be made welcome to the Lord's table as long as they can indicate that they hate sin, love the Saviour, and want to serve Him. It is their personal responsibility and no one else's. In fact, if the church were to do it that way then it can actually do away with the distinction of professing and baptised membership.

But if the church were to do it that way, then what is left of the Lord's command to the elders of the church to keep watch over the flock? The Lord of the church has given to the elders the task of having spiritual supervision over the church. That includes the preaching, the sacrament of baptism and the life and doctrine of the church members. Not just anyone may preach, not just anyone may be baptised, and not just anyone can be a member of the church. In these matters it is not just left up to the individual to decide. Spiritual supervision means that the elders of the church also have to decide.

Now why exclude the Lord's Supper from all that? Surely that sacrament also comes under their supervision! This does not mean that the elders are making the Lord's table their table, inasmuch they do not make baptism their baptism, or the church their church. The task of the elders is to keep the church holy and that God's name is honoured by the church and in the church. Without this spiritual supervision the preaching of God's Word, the sacraments, the life and doctrine of the members, soon become what church members individually want them to be. And the history of the church has shown that to be the case many a time.

The Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to instruct the church in Corinth the God-honouring way of taking part in the Lord's Supper. They had to guard against an unworthy participation. For that meant sinning against the body and blood of the Lord [1 Cor.11:27]. To prevent that from happening "*A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.*" [v.28]. Unworthy participation invites judgment from God [v.29]. In fact, that's what happened in the Corinthian church. Some church members were weak and sick, some had died [v.30].

So here we have Christ, the Lord of the church, telling the church to do something about members of the church who participated unworthily. It was not left to the individual member's responsibility only. And the Lord's concerns were not just passed on to those who were dishonouring the Lord with their sinful behaviour but to the whole church. The Lord instructs elders to watch over the church. The church as a whole also bears a responsibility for how we individually obey the Lord.

When Paul instructed the church in Corinth about its responsibility regarding the Lord's Supper, then he began by saying, ". . . *when you come together as a church.*" [v.18]. The Lord's Supper is a church sacrament. It was not meant for get-togethers of Christian families or retreats for church leaders. The New Testament sacraments were specifically given for the church in its public worship of God where elders can exercise their spiritual supervision.

In our day and age someone, be it a church member or a visitor, can easily say that they believe the Bible and that Jesus is their Saviour but what do they really mean by that? Will there be true fellowship in the Lord and a unity in the faith around His table? Now that's not always so easy for the elders to find out, especially not at the last minute. Mistakes and misunderstandings can happen and have happened. But it is better to keep working with an imperfect system of supervision, than to have no supervision at all.

In all this we must also see that whilst the Lord's Supper replaced the Passover, the New Testament speaks quite differently about the Lord's Supper than the Old Testament does about the Passover. The first Passover in Egypt was a family affair with the children present and the parents had to answer the questions of their children about what was going on [Ex.12:26]. Therefore, some base their support for children at the Lord's Supper on the fact that they were present at the Passover. But Passover celebrations were quite different in character. They took place only once a year, and lasted a week. There is even a shift from a family celebration in the first Passover to the whole of Israel observing subsequent Passovers at the tabernacle and later the temple. Jesus celebrated the Passover just with His disciples.

Now are we, with all this, saying that there is no place for children at the Lord's table? In conclusion, let us briefly address that question.

4. Concluding remarks.

It has been rightly pointed out that the children of God's people are not the church of tomorrow but are part of the church of today. Covenant children also share in God's beautiful promises of salvation in Christ. Their baptism is a sign and seal of that. And they also share in the obligations of the covenant. All this is the same as for adults, namely, to hate and repent of sin, to love the Lord Jesus, and to follow that up with serving and obeying Him.

Now the Bible instructs parents to bring up their children in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and in the baptismal prayer the church prays for their conversion. What this really means is this - the task of parents and the church is to lead covenant children from their baptism to the Lord's table. Now how many years is that suppose to take? Somewhere in the years between the child's baptism and coming to the Lord's table, the covenant child must come to a personal faith in Christ. That is what all Christian parents pray for and it is the reason for the church helping parents teach the youth the Christian faith.

And now the question must not be – how long do children of the covenant have to wait before they are allowed to come to the Lord's table? The question has to be this - how soon can they take their place there? The Lord has promised them a place. The church and their believing parents must do everything to help them want to be there?

The teaching about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 calls for a participation that is done out of faith and with a heart that is born again. That is the only way to meaningfully understand why the body of the Lord was sacrificed on the cross. Without that basic understanding participation in the Lord's Supper would merely become mindless, mechanical, and dishonour the Lord. This is not passing judgment on children who don't as yet have such a faith. It is simply saying that it takes times for such a faith to grow in our children. In fact, it is quite normal when such spiritual maturity is not yet there in our children. It is simply letting children be children for as long as they are children. We must not demand or expect things from children when they are not spiritually ready for it.

Some say that the church should leave it to parents to decide when their children are spiritually ready. And if Johnny or Carolyn have sinned and are not repenting, or are unbelieving, then the parents can exercise their spiritual supervision and keep their children from the Lord's table. But we saw earlier on that the elders of the church have a task here with regard to supervision of the Lord's supper.

And however important Christian families are for God's church and the kingdom, Christ calls the individual believer and not the Christian family to come to the Lord's table. In the act of participation in the Lord's Supper the believer stands by him or herself. You come face to face with the Saviour Jesus Christ. The Lord looks at your heart and says, Christian, come and follow me. At the table you have to leave father or mother, son or daughter. The Lord's Supper is a matter between the Saviour and the one saved. It is like that when you decide to no longer follow the world but surrender to Christ. It is like that when you publicly professes faith in the Lord. And it is like that when you meets Christ the Redeemer and Judge on the day of your death.

We have looked then at the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper. We saw that Christ's sacrifice was necessary only once to wipe away all our sins. We stressed that a personal confession of faith is called for when coming to the Lord's table. We also saw that the church through the elders has a responsibility, as well as the person him or herself, in deciding who may come to the table. May the Lord continue to show us the way to celebrate His Supper with thanksgiving and rejoicing, in the unity of faith, and to the glory of God. Amen.

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