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Lord's Supper: Cause for Division?

There is always something quite comfortable about those old ways to which we have become accustomed over time.

"The cup of blessing, for which we give thanks, is the communion of the blood of Christ". Those words had hardly left my lips during the service last Lord's Day (November 14, 2004). As the elders passed the cups through the church, the joy of the occasion was mixed with a feeling of dread as the thought occurred to me: "How terrible it must be when members of the body refuse to participate in the Lord's Supper because of one or the other objection to the way in which it is administered." Thankfully, there were no such objectors here, but I know of them elsewhere throughout the federation. How that must be hurtful to themselves, to their families, as well as to the body!

Upon further reflection, it occurred to me that perhaps I should write about it and attempt to convince them to do otherwise. When later a request came for me to write a guest editorial, I thought "Well, that's it then. I guess I will write it." So here it is: an open letter to all those who are inclined to refuse to partake of the Lord's Supper. Controversial, maybe. Helpful, may it be so.

Understandable objections

To a certain degree, objections are understandable. After all, we are all creatures of habit. Change does not come easily. As far back as I can recall, in the churches I was a member of, and in the churches I pastored, it was done the same way: a table, with about four beakers, and people would walk up, take a seat, and return to their pews as others took their turn. It seemed to work, so why change?

Two factors seem to have particularly come to the fore. While pastoring a congregation of 700 people not that long ago, I recall having five or six tables in a row in a single service. Not all were happy that the sacrament which is meant to underline the preaching of the Word had forced the preaching out of the service. And then there were those who, because of health issues (which includes alcohol addiction), would pass the cup altogether. If I have it right, these concerns in particular

have led several consistories to judge that it would be in the best interests of the church community either to use individual cups at the table or in the pew.

Principle or preference?

Honestly, I cannot say that I have been a big promoter of doing it this new way. There is always something quite comfortable about those old ways to which we have become accustomed over time.

I recall at one point also searching the Gospels to see to what degree indications could be found therein. Did the Lord Jesus cause the one cup to go around? Or did He indicate to the disciples that they should each take the cup that was before them as He did? Matthew (26:26) and Mark (14:23) seem to suggest that it was one cup ("He gave it to them, and said 'Drink from it...']"). So that would mean that we should have one cup for the whole church. But one cup for two or four hundred people is not really very feasible, is it? At that point, I concluded that the words of the gospel are *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. That is, they describe what the Lord Jesus did. They do not necessarily prescribe how the church has to do it through the ages. It makes good sense. After all, if what our Lord did is *prescriptive*, where does this stop? Should we then not be attempting to imitate more closely the way in which He broke the bread and gave it to the disciples? And what about the Lord's Supper table itself? The present practice of having a long table is not due to the Scriptures but to the influence of medieval paintings; Jewish sources tell us that the table was probably U shaped. That's the difficulty. If it's *prescriptive*, where exactly does the prescription begin and where does it end?

My conclusion to all this was: it is a matter of *preference* rather than *principle*. At home, we also prefer to eat at a table with family and guests; but sometimes the large number of guests does not allow for what we prefer. How many of us would set the table three or four times for a gathering of

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young people, for instance? Similarly in church: it was feasible for the Lord Jesus to celebrate as He did with the twelve others in his company. It may still be feasible in many of our small churches. But does not the larger company of people we have in many of our churches necessitate other ways? It's preference rather than principle.

And did you know that it has been a matter of preference for quite some time in Reformed churches? Many Reformation churches actually celebrated in an ambulatory manner; that is, they formed a long line and walked up to the minister one by one and then returned to their seats. That's why answer 75 of the Heidelberg Catechism says: "As surely as I receive from the hand of the minister... the bread and the cup of the Lord." It is along those lines then that many consistories have decided that it is *preferable* to alter a longstanding tradition.

It is a matter of preference rather than principle.

What should we do if we do not like it? Should we refuse to participate? Or, in the case of ministers, refuse to administer the Lord's Supper? That, however, would make it a matter of principle, which is extremely problematic. Where is the data that would allow us to make it a principial issue? The Lord's Supper cuts right to the heart of the believer's faith life and the church's communal life. Are the Scriptures so clear on this point that you would stake everything on this? You say that it is a matter of conscience? But think about that: is your conscience really more clear than the Word of God? We need to be very careful lest phrases about our conscience become easy excuses for our own stubbornness or resistance to change.

That is the first problem, my brother or sister: when you refuse to participate, you have made it into a matter of *principle*. And you lack the basis to do so.

Protest in the church?

That leads me to another concern. It is the fact that many of those who object to the manner in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated refuse to participate. Whether it is intentional or not, it really is a form of protest. And there is no room in the church of Jesus Christ for protests.

Allow me to clarify. Is it not true that every one of us is obligated to submit to the instruction and discipline of the church? Did we not agree to do so on the occasion of our profession of faith? Not that we may never disagree. But article 31 of the Church Order also tells us what we are to do if we

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believe we are wronged by the decisions of councils or consistories. You then have the right and the duty to appeal. If we do not agree with the words or the tune of a certain song, should we protest and refuse to sing? If we do not agree with a certain cause, should we protest and pass the collection bag? Is this the Christian way? Certainly not! For the sake of harmony in the church, you participate even if your heart is not behind that tune or that cause. And if you feel strongly enough that something is contrary to Scripture and/or confession, you appeal to the appropriate assemblies.

And really, there is something very good about doing this. For you see, when you protest by refusing to participate, you are actually rendering your voice ineffective. For what contribution does the protesting person then make? The consistory soon becomes annoyed with this approach, and any discussion quickly becomes inflamed. But when you participate even as you continue to appeal to them and others, you display a more appropriate attitude and you allow the arguments that you bring forth to be heard in a better way. And in the church of Jesus Christ, it is not about counting the heads of the protestors or the dissenters. It is about the strength of the arguments presented.

The person who appeals and participates honours the God-given authority structure and can be an effective part of the process.

You have to realize that decisions about how exactly the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated are necessarily corporate. They are not just up to you or me, but they are up to the governing body. The assemblies need to decide on the basis of arguments provided. I recall my Church Polity instructor, the late Rev. H. Scholten, telling us that we should even help those who write appeals against us. "Help them write it," he would say, "so that the arguments come on the table and decisions are properly made rather than dismissed on technicalities." The person who does no more than protest takes himself out of the decision-making process and balks against it. The person who protests even as he appeals undermines the very system that he is attempting to use. But the person who appeals and participates honours the God-given authority structure and can be an effective part of the process.

Let me make my point in a different way. We all know and detest today the method of terrorism and we laud the efforts to eradicate it from the face of the earth. Why? Because a terrorist fails to make use of the political process, but attempts instead to bring about change by causing havoc. Lest they encourage more such terrorism, the only answer that responsible governments can possibly give is to refuse to

negotiate with terrorists. There are, of course, a great many differences here, but there is one similarity. Those who refuse to participate despite the decisions of the assemblies are failing to make use of the appropriate process, and are creating havoc as well. The ecclesiastical assemblies, while wanting to reach out to such brothers and sisters, will not want to give in to their improper protest approaches, lest they encourage more of the same.

I see only trouble and hardship for you if you choose to go down this path. Think about it. What do you really hope to accomplish? Do you really think the church will change its approach because of your refusal to participate? And what does this say to the children? What will it mean for them on the day when they profess their faith? What kind of ideas will they have about the authority structures of the church? It does not take much for the train that goes down this track to spin out of control and head for disaster.

A better way

And now, you also have to realize this. When, instead, you go ahead and participate and allow your voice to be heard by council or classis or synod, the responsibility for what happens in the church is with those assemblies to whom God has granted authority and who have heard your concerns. That means the responsibility no longer rests with you on this issue! It may be difficult for you to participate, and you may have your misgivings as you do so, but is it not comforting to know that then the Lord does not hold you responsible?

When you protest and fail to participate, the Lord will hold you responsible for that. It rests with you and you alone. But when you have allowed your voice to be heard in a Christian manner and to the best of your ability, then I am sure the responsibility is no longer yours. Doesn't that lighten the load?

You have to see that there is a better way. The church of our Lord Jesus Christ must know of the higher way of love (1 Cor 13:13). All of us need to seek unity, not division (Rom 16:17, Titus 3:10). Yes, a consistory must do that as well. They should have the unity of the whole body in mind when they make their decisions. But so must you and I. That means a willingness to accept things that I really do not prefer, a willingness to seek change for things to which I object, and always seeking change through the appropriate means and the right channels.

So this is my appeal to you, my brother or sister. Do you struggle with the way in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated in your church? You are not alone. But precisely therefore, let it be what it is supposed to be: a collective decision. Eat. Drink. The Lord Jesus commands you to do that. Ultimately, it's not about the manner. It's not about the external symbols. It's about what they point to, even if that pointing be feeble: his body, his blood. That's strong, for you and for your children.

