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The Meaning of the Lord's Supper - Dr. N.H. Gootjes

The beginning of the Reformed view

Guido de Bres

When Guido de Bres, the author of our Belgic Confession, after years of having eluded the persecution finally was caught, he was put into prison. Many people came to see him there. Some just came to make fun of him and his friend and colleague, Peregrin de la Grange. But others came for a serious reason: they wanted to convert him. Among these was the bishop of Atrecht, Francois Richardot.

After they had exchanged some pleasantries, they went down to business: a theological discussion. The bishop asked Guido de Bres what subject they should discuss. "Whatever you like," answered Guido de Bres. "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." But this text speaks only about the unforgivable sins. For all other sins the sacrifice of Christ is useful. The bishop undoubtedly was on his way to prove that the forgivable daily sins need a daily sacrifice of Christ: the Mass.

But Guido de Bres answered: Should we not begin with the institution of the Mass, who instituted it and when? I do not find a word about that in Scripture. But I have read what Luke wrote in Acts 2:42. He describes the situation of the first congregation. But this text says that the congregation devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. The "breaking of bread" refers to the (Lord's) Supper. If there would have been a sacrifice in the church at that time, Luke would have mentioned it." [\[1\]](#)

This was the beginning of a lengthy debate between the bishop and Guido de Bres. The debate focused all the time on this issue: Is the Mass a sacrifice, as the Roman Catholics say, or a meal, as the Protestants say. In this debate many texts and many quotations from church fathers were discussed. And it was in the context of this discussion that the question whether bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ, was also debated (transubstantiation). However, throughout the debate the main issue remained the character of this sacrament: Is it a sacrifice or a meal?

This discussion shows us what the fundamental issue was in the controversy concerning the second sacrament. If you would ask anyone today what the main difference was between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant view, he will probably answer: transubstantiation. The Roman Catholics taught that bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ and the Reformation denied this. It cannot be denied that transubstantiation was an important issue. But it was not the center of the debate. The real issue was the meaning of this sacrament. Is it a meal, or is it a sacrifice? And 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. Both the Roman Catholics and the Reformed use the same name of baptism for the first sacrament. But the Roman Catholics spoke of "Mass" or "Eucharist" but the Protestants changed the name and called it "the Lord's Supper." In this name they summarized the Reformed position: it is not a sacrifice to God, but a meal for God's people. [2]

The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper

The true meaning of the Lord's Supper was not just a topic for theologians to debate about, it was important for all members of the church. The church members had to know what the Lord's Supper signifies to benefit from it. Therefore Forms for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper were made in the Reformed Churches. Different forms were in use. Our form was made for the Reformed Churches of the Palatinate by Olevianus, a student of Calvin. He derived the first part, about the Institution, 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 Wurtemberg. [3] An explanation of the meaning of this sacrament is given in this second part. Originally two distinct meanings are given.

In the first place we find here the emphasis on the meal character of this sacrament. The Form does not say: We sacrifice Christ, but: Christ's sacrifice is the food on which we live. "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."

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 significance of the wine. The bread sustains: Christ nourishes the hungry soul with His crucified body. But the wine does something different: Christ 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."

But the Form does not restrict the meaning of the Lord's Supper to a meal at which the believers receive food and drink. A second meaning is given: 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."

The original form mentioned only two meanings of the Lord's Supper, but according to the Form we use today, the Lord's Supper has a third meaning. After having spoken of the nourishment and the fellowship it mentions the expectation of Christ's coming. "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." This part was inserted by Synod Smithville 1980. [4]

So now the Form points out 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 glorious future. The three seem to be without relation. 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 Catholics is made visible 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 and eaten, meaning that we receive in faith the work of Christ for us and our salvation;

the bread sustains and the wine refreshes us, meaning that Christ's work for us keeps us alive and gives renewed strength.

Concerning the second meaning, the unity, this 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 Cor. 10:17:

"Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." It should be noted that Paul speaks here only about the bread, not about the wine.

Sometimes the unity finds liturgical expression. Then the bread, even though it is already cut, is placed in the form of a loaf to symbolize the unity. The unity is also seen 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.

This Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper, however, has come under attack from three quarters. Changes have been proposed for exegetical, dogmatical and for practical reasons. In the next issue we hope to present some of these criticisms and their results for the celebration of this sacrament

that is so central in the life of the church of Christ.

We have seen that the fundamental Reformed position concerning the second sacrament is that it is a meal, not a sacrifice. But two other meanings are added to this: the unity of the church and the expectation of Christ's return. The actual celebration of this sacrament reflects some of this. But the Reformed understanding and celebration of the Lord's Supper is now under attack for exegetical, dogmatic and practical reasons.

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*.^[5] The Bible indicates that the Lord's Supper was instituted at a passover meal as prescribed in Ex. 12 and 13. This is very important for the understanding of the Lord's Supper, says Ridderbos, it leads to the question how exactly the Lord's Supper is related to the passover. Did Jesus Christ present Himself here as the true passover lamb? This is maintained by many scholars, 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). The bread and the wine do not represent the sacrifice of Christ, says Ridderbos.

The true background for the Lord's Supper is the sacrifice meal. That means that the Lord's Supper is a meal similar to the meals 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. In the sacrifice meal the sacrifice is not represented in the meal. The meal is the result of the sacrifice (426ff.). This means that the Lord's Supper does not set before us the death of Jesus Christ, but only the beneficial results of His death.

At first sight this does not seem to be a very important change. But this impression changes when we see how Ridderbos applies this to the elements of the Supper. The breaking of the bread does not belong to the symbolism according to him. When Jesus said: "This is my body," He did not refer to His sacrifice, but to what He is distributing.

The breaking itself does not have any particular meaning. Breaking bread was a customary action: the father of the family did this at every meal (429).

Ridderbos has even stronger objections against the pouring of the wine as a symbol of the shedding of Christ's blood. The verb "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 been standing ready for some time, when Jesus spoke these words (429ff.).

Ridderbos concludes that not the acquisition but only the application of salvation is represented in the Lord's Supper. This means: Christ's death is not represented in (broken) bread and (poured) wine. The

point of the bread and the wine is, that they are there to be eaten and drunk. The participants in their believing act of eating and drinking will receive the virtue of Christ's expiatory death (437ff.).

This is undoubtedly a reduction compared to the traditional Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper. Of the meanings we found: the meal, the communion and the eschatology, only the first is emphasized by Ridderbos. [6] From this first meaning every reference to the sacrifice is removed. The Lord's Supper should be conducted without the breaking of bread or the pouring out of wine. No distinction is indicated between bread and wine. The meaning of the Lord's Supper can, in Ridderbos' view, 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.

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. [7] 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 (pp. 1123ff.).

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

Then it strikes us that Erickson characterized the Lord's Supper as a reminder. From 1 Cor. 11 :26 Erickson draws the conclusion that the rite is basically commemorative (1122). The Lord's Supper is essentially a memorial (1123). We have to realize what this means: Erickson does not see the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. It is not God who shares out 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 the fact that the meal character is not mentioned as a meaning of the Supper. For if it is taken as a meal, then the fact that Christ shares it out becomes important. But for Erickson the important thing is that we receive it.

The fact that Erickson sees the Lord's Supper as a memorial instead of 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 strive, not for duplication, but for bringing out the symbolism. The Lord's Supper

must be celebrated in such a way that it inspires the believer to faith and love.

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

If I may interrupt Erickson here for a moment, this is somewhat confusing to me. The bread has here within the same context two distinct meanings. The bread is first (in its oneness) is a symbol of the church, next (in its brokenness) a symbol of Christ. I wonder if it is possible to see the bread within the one action of the Lord's Supper, first as representing the church, and then Christ. But I realize that if this critical remark is correct, we may have to criticize our own tradition, too. We will have to come back to this in a future article, but first we go back to Erickson.

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 amore suitable symbol than bread. He does not give the reason for this statement. My guess is that fish is a good substitute because it is a traditional symbol for Christ. But bizarre substitutes, such as potato chips, should be avoided. The reason is, that we then would focus our attention on the mechanics instead of on Christ's atoning work (p. 1125).

Concerning the wine Erickson says: if we want to duplicate the original institution, wine has to be used, probably diluted with water. But if our concern is representation of the blood of Christ, then grape juice will do equally well. But again, bizarre substitutes such as cola, bear little resemblance to the original and should not be used (p. 1125).[\[8\]](#)

We have a general disagreement with Erickson concerning the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. But we are also faced with more specific questions. Do the bread and the wine itself contribute to the meaning of the sacrament? Or can they easily be replaced, as long as we maintain the symbolism in general?

Practical criticisms: two movements from the 19th Century

Two movements that came up in the 19th century did have an impact on the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the first place there is the movement for total abstinence, often called the Temperance Movement. This movement began within the churches. The Scriptures were often seen as the strongest bulwark to defend the doctrine of total abstinence. Then the Lord's Supper became an embarrassment: there wine was used. This led to the attempt to understand the word for "wine" in the New Testament as meaning grape juice.

In our century the discussion is no longer as fierce as it was during the last century, but churches are still faced with 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?

All this leads to questions concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Does the wine 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 makes a remark in his dogmatics, that recently a movement has come up in many churches to replace the one cup by individual cups. [9] It was feared that the use of a communal cup could lead to the spreading of contagious diseases.

This movement seems now to be gaining in strength because of the fear of AIDS. This, too, leads to a question concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Is the communal cup part of the meaning, or not?

The center of the Lord's Supper

The traditional reformed understanding of the meaning of the Lord's Supper is being questioned from several sides. This means that we have to go back to Scripture. The church did not invent this ceremony, it only followed the instructions of the Lord Jesus Christ, who made the Lord's Supper an institution in the church, 1 Cor. 11:25.

But where shall we begin, now that the meaning of the Lord's Supper is no longer obvious to many? Studying the passages in the Bible that speak about the Lord's Supper, it can easily be seen that this sacrament has its center in the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. We should therefore first investigate the meaning of eating Christ's body and of drinking Christ's blood. Later we can study how these are represented in the sacrament.

The body

The traditional Reformed position is that the word "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 "body" refers not 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." [10] We have to reject this kind of exegesis. Whether the Lord Jesus said these words in Aramaic or not, is a debated question. But we do not have an Aramaic version, and we do therefore 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 "My body" as meaning no more than "I" was given by J.P. Versteeg. The word "body" refers according to him first of all to a person as creature of God, see Rom. 12:1. It is used as equivalent for "oneself" in Eph. 5:28. "Body" 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." [11]

Even this brief summary makes clear that the meaning of the word "body" is continually shifting. Versteeg gives no reason for his translations. But the most important criticism that must be brought in against Lane as well as Versteeg is, that they do not explain the word "body" in the context. [12]

From the several meanings of "body" [13] only the first: either living or dead body, can be considered. Within the context of the institution of the Lord's Supper the word "body" is used in combination with the word "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?

The combination "body and blood" is used only once in the New Testament; Heb. 13:11 says: "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp." The word "body" in combination with "blood" here refers to a dead body. Would this meaning also fit Christ's Word at the institution of the Lord's Supper: "This is My body"? Before rejecting this interpretation as impossible let us see whether this would fit the context of the Lord's Supper.

The blood

In the words of institution the "blood" is almost always (the exception is 1 Cor. 11 :25) connected with the verb: "to pour out." To quote the gospel according to Mark: "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). What does the Greek expression "to pour out blood" mean? A survey of the New Testament shows that this expression in all instances means: "to murder." A clear example is Matt. 23:35: "Upon you may come the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you *murdered* between the sanctuary and the altar. [14]

We may conclude that Christ's Word: "This is My blood which is poured out" refers to the violent death which He was about to die. This supports the opinion we stated above, that the word "body" refers to Jesus' dead body.

This is confirmed by 1 Cor. 11 :26: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the 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 a dead body; the cup by the comparison between the wine and the blood which was shed.

This leads to the conclusion that both the body and the blood refer to the death of Jesus Christ. We have to disagree with Ridderbos' opinion, stated in the second article, that the death of Jesus Christ is certainly in the background but it is not present in the Lord's Supper itself. Our investigation led to a

different conclusion. The sayings about body and blood refer directly to Christ's death. The traditional reformed conviction that Christ's 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. The disciples have to accept it out of Christ's hand and use it. Bread is meant to be used as food. The expression: "This is My body, eat," can only mean that the death of Christ should be accepted in faith as food. This food will keep them alive.

In the gospel of Luke we do not find the words "take (and eat)." But in this gospel another expression is used which points into the same direction: "This is my body which is 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. The words "take and eat" are, in effect, the same in meaning as "this body is given to your benefit."

...and drink

The emphasis on receiving and using 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 Matt. 26:27ff. we find both the commandment to drink from the cup, and the explanation that the blood is poured out for many. But this passage is especially important because it also explains in what respect that blood of Christ will benefit the participants: the blood "is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Here we hear in what sense the death of Christ benefits the many: Christ died His violent death that the sins of many would be forgiven.

Drinking the wine means nothing less than through Jesus receiving the forgiveness of sins. The manner in which Christ's death brings forgiveness is not explained in the Lord's Supper, but 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." In 1Cor. 11:25 is spoken of the "new covenant."

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. But many texts of the New Testament speak of a contrast between the Old and the New Covenant. Then the "Old Covenant" refers to the Mosaic covenant, with its laws and institutions. 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 separated from them through the sacrifices. These sacrifices could not really take away the sins of the people. But through the violent death of the Jesus Christ the new covenant is established. His death lays the final basis why the people can live in communion with God.

The center of the Lord's Supper

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

Body and blood symbolize the death of Jesus 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 Jesus Christ.

When Jesus Christ, in the institution of the Lord's Supper, spoke of His body and blood, He referred to His death. He would not die for Himself, however, for He had no sins. The central message of the Lord's Supper is that Jesus Christ would die for His people, that they could live in communion with God.

Let us from this vantage point look at the way in which this is represented in the symbolical language of the sacrament.

The bread

Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper at the passover meal. This meal consisted of several elements: the meat of the passover lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, green herbs, mashed fruit and wine. Out of these elements Jesus takes the bread as an element in His new sacrament. Why?

Bread was in Israel the common staple. The Old Testament speaks of the staff of bread (Lev. 26:26, Ezek. 5:16, 14:13), a clear indication that bread was their life support. In the Lord's Prayer it represents the food man daily needs: "Give us this day our daily bread," Matt. 6:11. Jesus Christ uses this daily food in His sacrament. By making this 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? Unleavened bread had to be used at the passover meal, we can therefore 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 used as 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. For there the idea of food has disappeared. [\[15\]](#)

Another question that could come up is, what this bread should be made of. 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.

The function of the bread in the Lord's Supper is to show that we need Christ's death as the daily food on 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 Cor. 11:24 these words are mentioned in a number of manuscripts, but not in 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 a bone of Him shall be broken." The breaking of the bread mentioned in the gospels is no more than the customary act of a father at every meal. [\[16\]](#)

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 said in answer to this that the words "body" and "blood" directly refer to Christ's death. Within this context, does the breaking of the bread have a specific meaning? Reviewing the evidence we will see that the breaking has a prominent place in the institution.

1. All three gospels mention it. Matthew 26:26 says: "As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the 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 "blessed" and "gave." All three actions were customary; the father of the family blessed, broke and handed out. Ridderbos would not deny that it has special significance that Christ Himself distributed the elements under 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 summarizingly be called "the breaking of the bread." Acts 2:42 says about the congregation of Jerusalem: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Within this context of the liturgy of the church, the "breaking of the bread" must refer to the Lord's Supper. This name will not have been derived from an unimportant detail, but from a meaningful symbol.

3. In 1 Cor. 11:24 we are confronted with a text critical problem. Does the text say: "This is my body for you," or: "This is my body broken for you"? The evidence of the manuscripts suggests that the word "broken" is original. We can then explain the omission in a few manuscripts 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 a part of every meal, into a meaningful part of the Lord's Supper. Just as He did with the whole sacrament. Even taking bread and eating it are customary actions, and yet Christ gives important meaning to these actions in the sacrament.

What does the breaking mean within the whole sacrament? According to the gospels Jesus Christ breaks the bread and says that this bread is His (dead) body. The breaking shows that His death will not be the result of natural causes, but that it will be a violent death. The same applies to 1 Cor. 11:24, where the word "broken" is connected directly with the "body." The sentence that Christ's body is "broken for you" means that Christ is put to death to their benefit.

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 Cor. 10:17 yet another element of the Lord's Supper is emphasized: the unity. "Because there is one bread we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same bread." 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 one bread. In the instructions for the celebration of the Lord's Supper we read: "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." [17] The comparison 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 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." [18] 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, but something for today, and the unity is threatened by quarrels.

In the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper 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." [19]

There are, however, several problems connected with these elaborations on 1 Cor. 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.

In the second place, 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, and does not take into consideration 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 has said so clearly, represents His body as it was given up to death. But in this application the comparison suddenly goes into a completely different direction. The bread is no longer Christ, it represents the congregation.

This brings us back to the question how the unity is expressed in 1 Cor. 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, many are one body, because we all partake of the one bread. This bread is the bread of the Lord's Supper, mentioned in v. 16, the bread which symbolizes 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 Cor. 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 Cor. 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 in one loaf? There is no need for that. Paul, in 1 Cor. 10 does not emphasize that the Corinthians share one bread, not 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 loaf.

But I would like to emphasize that Paul says: "Because we partake of one bread, we many are one *body*." This word "body" reminds us of what Paul says in 1 Cor. 12: "For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say..., " v. 14ff. "Body" 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 is 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.

We now begin with discussing the wine as element. As we saw earlier, there is a movement that rejects the use of wine in the sacrament. Other people are not so rigorous as to deny that wine was used at the institution, but they think that wine can just as well be replaced by something else.

The wine

To begin with that first objection, it cannot be denied that Jesus Christ used wine when He instituted this sacrament. At the passover meal wine was drunk, and Jesus used this wine. 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? Can grape juice not be a good substitute? Why wine?

It is sometimes thought that the choice for wine was determined by the colour. The red colour is to remind the people of Christ's blood. Now wine can have another colour than red, but it seems that the passover ritual required red wine. The Bible, however, does nowhere give any attention to the colour. Just as there is no similarity between the bread and the body of Christ (then the meat of the passover lamb would have been used), so also the use of the 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 (see Is. 3:1). This holds true in New Testament times, otherwise Paul need not have said to Timothy: "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine" (1 Tim. 5:23). Wine is exceptional.

Wine belongs to special occasions, and particularly to festivities. Wine was drunk during the festivities at the sanctuary (Deut. 14:26). 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 (Is. 25:6). God has given wine "to gladden the heart of man" (Ps. 104:15).

The function of the wine in the celebration of the Lord's Supper is, to give a festive character to 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 especially the drinking looks forward to the drinking with Christ in His Kingdom (Mark 14:25).

Here we detect the reason why the Lord used two elements in the sacrament. The Roman Catholics withhold the wine from the congregation. They think that there is no need for the laymen to drink the wine, since the grace of the sacrificed Christ is received fully through the bread. To be sure, both the bread and the wine refer to the same death of Christ (1 Cor. 11:26). But they represent Christ's death in a different way. In the bread He is presented as the bread of life: we can only stay alive through Him. In the wine He is presented as the cause of our joy. When we think of the death of Jesus Christ we will become sad, for we realize that our sins made his death necessary. But the wine shows that to our sadness great joy should be added. Through His death Christ has worked salvation for us, and that is joy indeed. We express this joy in songs of praise to God (Acts 2:47).

Wine belongs to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. What then to do for those brothers and sisters who for some reason cannot drink wine? They should not be forced to drink the wine. But since it is an individual problem, individual solutions should be found. [\[20\]](#)

The cup

We have the custom to pour 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, before 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 even once is the pouring of wine mentioned. The verb "to pour out" 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). The custom to pour out the wine at the table is probably the result of a 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 said 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. It is impossible that Jesus Christ means that the cup changes into his blood. But then the first word cannot mean that the bread changes into the body of Christ.

But after the Roman Catholic theory was rejected, not much was done with the cup. There was also no special need to discuss the cup since everywhere one or more communal cups were used. But now that the communal cup has been questioned for hygienic reasons, we have to investigate whether a specific meaning is connected with the cup.

About the cup which Jesus made into the cup of the Lord's Supper, we read: "And He took a cup..., gave it to them, and they all drank from it" (Mark 14:23). "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 Matt. 26:27: "And He took a cup, ...gave it to them saying: 'Drink of it, all of you.'" The receivers of the cup together share in the blessings of Christ's death.

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 so 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. The church already in 1581 decided on special rules for a celebration where lepers were present. Synod Leeuwarden 1920 did the same for other contagious diseases. [21] Yet the general rule is that communal cups reflect best the intention of the Lord in the institution of the Lord's Supper. [22]

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 by a table. The table was placed in full view of the people. But there was no unity in the way they used 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, and received there the elements and ate and drank standing. The third was that the people went forward and sat at the table, and there partook of bread and wine. [23]

All three can be traced back to the 16th 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, as far as we know. This shows that even in the first century they did not just copy the first celebration. Since the Lord's Supper is a meal, it is probable that it was celebrated at a table, but this is not mentioned in 1 Corinthians. Nowhere in the institution is special attention given to the fact that the Lord's Supper was celebrated at a table. The table is indirectly important, to emphasize the meal character of this sacrament. Therefore we can use the table in such a way that it contributes most to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, given the local opportunities. [24]

But on one occasion the word "table" in connection with the Lord's Supper receives special attention. In 1 Cor. 10:21 is said: "You can not partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." This text must be explained in the context. Paul is discussing the question whether Christians can participate in a sacrificial meal for heathen gods.

Paul has already stated that idols do not exist (1 Cor. 8:4). But this statement cannot be used as an argument to participate in heathen sacrificial meals. Even though the idols do not exist, the demons do.

They are the ones who in fact have prepared these sacrifice 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 a behaviour is very dangerous. It would provoke the Lord to jealousy (vv. 22) and they know what happened when the Lord is provoked (vv. 7-10).

This command not to partake in a sacrifice meal was a hard one for the Corinthians. It meant that they could no longer be a member of social societies. These societies were very important for the social contacts. They offered assistance to their members when 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 as protector and held their gatherings and meals under the auspices of that god. Therefore Christians were not allowed to participate in these social activities. This meant a serious restriction 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. This in turn led for some to their death, when under Nero the Christians were forced to eat food sacrificed to the emperor.

The Lord's Supper is the table of the Lord, and shows the communion with God and with Jesus Christ. This communion requires that one stay away from participation in any festivity of the social societies. The Lord's Supper requires staying away from everything that is tainted with other religions.

Gifts from the table

Yet another meaning of the Lord's Supper can be seen when we consider that it was first celebrated as a part of a communal meal, as is indicated in 1 Cor. 11. The members of the congregation brought food, each according to his means. These meals served not only the communication 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 "love (meals)." [25]

This combination of a celebration before the Lord and support for the needy already had a long history behind it in the first century. When Israel appeared before the Lord at the harvest feasts, they had to come, not only with their families and dependents, but also with those who had no fields and therefore no harvest. They were the Levite who was living within the town, the sojourner, 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 custom is present in 1 Cor. 11. When Paul discusses it, he has no problem with the fact that the Lord's Supper was combined with a meal for the whole congregation. But he does have a problem with the way it went in Corinth. For the rich; who had brought much, began to eat on their own. And so they got drunk, and the poor remained hungry (1 Cor. 11:21).

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 Supper does not only direct our love towards 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. This is certainly not meant as a kind of admission fee to the Lord's Supper. The meaning is that God's people, in gratitude for the grace for poor sinners shown at the table of the Lord, now express this gratitude by caring for the poor. The collection at the table should be for the work of the deacons.

Eschatological perspective

The Lord's Supper has one more important meaning, indicated right at the moment of its institution. Probably before the Lord's Supper was celebrated by the disciples, Jesus Christ said: "I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 22:16). [26] The Lord's Supper looks forward to the time when the Kingdom of God has come on the earth. Then Jesus Christ is again in their midst. He will participate in the great celebration of which the Lord's Supper is only a foretaste. That will be the fulfillment of the joy of the Lord's Supper.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper today, we should feel that our joy is not complete: Jesus Christ is not yet there to celebrate it with us. The Lord's Supper should make us long for the time when He will join us.

Conclusion

We can conclude that the Lord's Supper is full of meaning. The sacrament is celebrated regularly in the congregations. This is according to Christ's ordinance. But the repetition and our inattentiveness can easily lead to a shallow and individualistic celebration of it. A clearer understanding of the richness of this institution can contribute to a richer experience of our Christian faith.

Footnotes

[1] See the Dutch Book of Martyrs, *Waerachtige Historie der vromer Martelaren en getrouwe Bloedtgetuygen 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).

[2] C. Trimp has summarized the same opposition as one between 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 Zwijgerstichting, 1979).

[3] See for the form: B. Wielenga, *Ons avondmaalsformulier* (Kampen-. Kok, 19131, esp. pp. 19ff.; 283ff. 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, p. 27.

[4] See the Acts of Synod Smithville, 1980, Art. 136, pp. 102ff., and pp. 158ff. The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands have made the same change in the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper.

[5] H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (tr. H. de Jongste; ed. R.O. Zorn; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), ch. 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* (tr. J. R. De Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) pp. 414ff.; but for the meaning Ridderbos refers back to his *The Coming of the Kingdom*.

[6] In his *The Coming of the Kingdom* Ridderbos does speak extensively about the eschatological perspective. Eschatology is very important for Ridderbos, but he does not see it as a meaning of the Supper. In his book *Paul* Ridderbos does pay attention to the unity expressed in the Lord's Supper (pp. 423 ff.). By 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.

[7] M.J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 1107ff.

[8] The examples of potato chips and cola are probably not so 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 Koolaid 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.

[9] H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. IV (4th ed. Kampen: Kok, 1930) p. 548.

[10] W.L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p. 506. Lane refers to the article on sooma by J. Behm in *TDNT* vol. 3, p. 736. J. Jeremias says about the origin: "Most authors join G. Dalman, who, in 1922, proposed guph as the equivalent of sooma," *The Eucharist Words of Jesus*, p. 198.

[11] J.P. Versteeg, "Het avondmaal volgens het Nieuwe Testament" in W. Van 't Spijker, among others ed., *Bij brood en beker* (Goudriaan: De Groot, 1980) pp. 42ff.

[12] See J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, p. 200; "But then we must again reject guph as an equivalent of "body," because its complement is nowhere "blood."

[13] The dictionary for New Testament 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. overagainst skia: the thing itself, Col. 2:17; 5. the Christian community; see W. Bauer, W.A. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1979) pp. 799ff.

[14] See W. Bauer, among others, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 22, s.v. aima, 2.a.; see also the article of J. Behm, in *TDNT*, vol. 1, pp. 173ff. In the Septuagint the expression "to pour out blood" is also used, in connection with the sacrifice, for the blood which is poured out at the foot of the altar (Ex. 29:12, Lev.

4:7 etc.) but this meaning does not fit in the Lord's Supper. If this was the intended meaning, the words "at the foot of the altar" should have to be mentioned.

[15] See e.g. *W. à Brakel, Redelijke godsdienst* (repr. by J.H. Donner; Leiden: Donner, 1882) vol. 1, p. 997.

[16] H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 429.

[17] *Didache*, IX.4. Hymn 46:2 has taken up this very old expression: 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.

[18] *Institutes IV, 17, 38.*

[19] The expression used in the revised Form, is simplified, but essentially the same.

[20] This is a traditional reformed position, in place as early as 1565, see W.F. Dankbaar, *Communiegebruiken in de eeuw der Reformatie* (2. ed.; Groningen: Instituut voor liturgiewetenschap, 1987) 83; see also J. Van Bruggen, 'Drinkt daaruit allen, maar hoe?' (*De Reformatie* 66 (1991), 22-24).

[21] See for these decisions F.L. Bos, *De orde der kerk* ('s Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Guido de Bres, 1950) pp. 230ff.

[22] At this point I would like to add 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 local church they belonged to and established another because in their former church individual cups had been introduced. Schilder does not think that the church that had introduced individual cups had through that fact become a false church, and that this is a good reason to establish another church, see *De Kerk* (ed. J. Kamphuis; Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1960) vol. 1; pp. 369 ff.

[23] See the illustrations in W. van 't Spijker, *Bij brood en beker*, resp. pp. 174; 139; 222.

[24] I prefer the sitting 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 the opportunities in large congregations. Repetition of the formula and having many "tables" does not contribute to an attentive participation.

[25] The name occurs in the epistle of Jude, v. 12. See the article "Love Feast," written by D.H. Wheaton, in W.A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 660ff.

[26] Mark records as word after the drinking of the cup: "I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God," Mark 14:25. So Jesus Christ said this more than once during the hours of celebrating the Passover. The expectation of Christ is also mentioned in Matt. 26:29 and 1 Cor. 11 :26.