

NOTATIONES

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WHAT DOES THE LORD'S SUPPER TEACH? AN ASSESSMENT OF HISTORIC REFORMED PRACTICES¹

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IN 1998, CLASSIS LAKE ERIE asked the Christian Reformed Church's (CRC) synod to remove Q&A 80, which deals with the Roman Catholic Mass from the text of the Heidelberg Catechism as confessed by the CRC. The classis said that the phrase "condemnable idolatry" should be reserved for those who "do not believe in justification by faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior."² Classis Kalamazoo countered that Classis Lake Erie's overture was "misleading" because it cited only dialogue between Roman Catholics in North America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on the subject of justification. It did not cite official Roman Catholic doctrine.³ Synod 1998 asked the denomination's Interchurch Relations Committee to dialogue with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church "to clarify the official doctrine of that church concerning the Mass."⁴

From that dialogue, the CRC's Interchurch Relations Committee concluded that Q&A 80 "must be regarded as wrong . . . if it is taken as describing and evaluating official Roman Catholic teaching." However, Q&A 80 does not refer to what the Roman Catholic Church teaches; it refers to what the Mass teaches. Accordingly, the committee "struggled to discern whether Q&A 80 was written in response to official Roman Catholic teaching, to the practice of Roman Catholics in sixteenth-century Europe, or to a combination of both." The committee concluded that it was both. As a response to official Roman Catholic teaching, Q&A 80 was wrong, but as a

1. This article is adapted from Ryan L. Faber, "*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: A Church Juridical Inquiry into the Sacramental Liturgies of the Christian Reformed Church in North America*" (PhD diss: Stellenbosch University, 2019). <https://scholar.sun.ac.za:443/handle/10019.1/107143>.

2. *Agenda for Synod 1998* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1998), 235.

3. *Agenda for Synod 1998*, 312.

4. *Acts of Synod 1998* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1998), 427.

“description and evaluation of what is taught or communicated to certain people by a certain way of conducting the Mass, it may yet apply,” particularly in places where the Mass is not celebrated in accordance with official Roman Catholic teaching.⁵

This discussion about Q&A 80 raises important self-reflective questions for Reformed churches regarding the Lord’s Supper. What does the Lord’s Supper teach? That is, what does the way in which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated communicate about the supper? Does it accord with official Reformed teaching expressed in the doctrinal standards? This article addresses those questions. It examines the theology of the Lord’s Supper articulated in the Reformed confessions—the Belgic Confession (BC), Heidelberg Catechism (HC), and Canons of Dordt (CD)—and the historic practices of Reformed churches, specifically the frequency with which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated and the liturgical formulary prescribed for those celebrations.⁶ It concludes that the Reformed church’s historic practice of the Lord’s Supper teaches a Zwinglian understanding of the sacrament as a commemoration of Christ contra the Reformed confessions, which teach a Calvinist understanding of the sacrament as a communion with Christ.

1. The Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Confessions

The Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) adopted a Form of Subscription in which office-bearers declare that they “heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the [Belgic] Confession and [Heidelberg] Catechism . . . agree in everything with the Word of God.” This section examines the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in those documents, which office-bearers promise to “diligently teach.” The Form of Subscription describes the CD as “an explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1619.”⁷ The Canons are not a comprehensive statement of faith; they do not include a specific doctrine of the sacraments. Even so, their single mention of the sacraments should be noted:

5. *Agenda for Synod 2004* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2004), 299–303. Synod 2006 decided to bracket the final three sentences of Q&A 80 “to indicate that they do not accurately reflect the official teaching and practice of today’s Roman Catholic Church and are no longer confessionally binding on members of the Christian Reformed Church” (*Acts of Synod 2006* [Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2006], 711). See Cornelis P. Venema, “The Lord’s Supper and the ‘Popish Mass’: An Historical and Theological Analysis of Question and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24 (2013): 31–72, for a critique of these decisions.

6. The liturgical formulary examined is that of the Netherlands Liturgy, adopted by the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619). It is the common heritage of Dutch Reformed churches, including the Christian Reformed Church, the United Reformed Churches, the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Protestant Reformed Churches, and the Free Reformed Churches.

7. P. Biesterveld & H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, trans. R.R. DeRidder (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 188.

And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.⁸
(CD IV/14)

The Canons describe the sacraments as an important means by which God “preserves, continues, and completes” the work of grace begun by the preaching of the Word (CD V/14). God is the primary actor in the sacraments, not the believer. The sacraments are not a token of the believer's faith; they are a means of God's grace.

1.1. The Belgic Confession (1561)

Brian Gerrish has identified three doctrines of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed tradition: (1) Symbolic memorialism: the view, often associated with Zwingli, that “the elements call to mind something that has happened;”⁹ (2) Symbolic parallelism: the view, often associated with Bullinger, that the symbolic action, outward eating, parallels an inward event, feeding upon Christ. Though these two events are simultaneous, “the outward event does not convey or cause or give rise to the inward event, but merely indicates that it is going on.”¹⁰ (3) Symbolic instrumentalism: the view, often associated with Calvin, that “holds that the signs or elements of a sacrament are the instruments through which or by which God's Spirit conveys the spiritual reality that they symbolize.” Thus, the “sacraments are, in the strictest sense of the term, ‘means of grace.’”¹¹ In his seminal essay on the Lord's Supper in the Reformed confessions, Gerrish asks “whether their central thought on the Lord's Supper is commemorative [symbolic memorialism] or communication [symbolic parallelism or symbolic instrumentalism].”¹²

The central thought of the BC's article on the Lord's Supper (Art. 35) is clearly communication. Guido de Brès modeled his Confession after the Gallican Confession of 1559,¹³ a preliminary draft of which John Calvin likely authored.¹⁴

8. All quotations of the Reformed confessions in this article are from *Ecumenical Creeds & Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

9. Brian A. Gerrish, “Sign and Reality: The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 124.

10. Gerrish, “Sign and Reality,” 124.

11. Lyle D. Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 76.

12. Gerrish, “Sign and Reality,” 118–130.

13. Jelle Faber, “De Brès Versus Calvin? Early History of the Belgic Confession,” *Clarion* 28, no. 17 (1979): 355; Peter Y. De Jong, *The Church's Witness to the World* (St. Catherines:

Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper resonates in the Belgic Confession, which frequently echoes the language of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹⁵ The BC describes the Lord's Supper as "a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits" (Art. 35). Calvin called the sacrament "a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality."¹⁶

For both Calvin and the Confession, it is not only the merits of Christ's suffering and death but also Christ himself that believers enjoy at the Lord's table.¹⁷ Though Christians "engage together, with thanksgiving, in a holy remembrance of the death of Christ," remembrance does not exhaust the meaning of the Lord's Supper in the BC. Rather, the supper was ordained by Christ "to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and grafted into this family." Thus, at the Lord's table, Christ "nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood" (Art. 35).

Here the Confession alludes to Jesus' discourse in John 6, where the Reformed found "solid ground for their convictions concerning the reality of Christ's presence and our partaking of him" in the Lord's Supper.¹⁸ Calvin referred to the sacrament as "nothing but a visible witnessing of that promise contained in the sixth chapter of John, namely, that Christ is the bread of life come down from heaven."¹⁹ On John 6, Calvin wrote: "I acknowledge that there is nothing said here that is not figuratively

Paideia Press, 1980), 30; Cornelis P. Venema, "The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 12 (2001):153.

14. Faber, "De Brès Versus Calvin," 355; Venema, "Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 142.

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20-21 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960).

16. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

17. In his nineteenth-century debate with Nevin, Hodge advanced the view that only "the virtues or effects of the sacrifice of the body of the Redeemer and the cross are made present and are actually conveyed in the sacrament," not the body of the Redeemer itself. The influence of Hodge's doctrine—which stops short of affirming all that the BC affirms about the Lord's Supper—in Reformed circles is evident in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 654, which quotes Hodge approvingly.

Contra Hodge, Calvin taught that in the sacrament "there is still deeper communion, 'a communion not only with the benefits, but with the person of Christ himself, with his own flesh and blood'" (G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. H. Bekker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 226). Berkouwer contends that there is an "unbreakable relationship between communion with Christ's benefits and with himself" (Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 227). There is no communion with Christ's benefits apart from communion with Christ; it is only in union with Christ that one receives his benefits.

18. De Jong, *The Church's Witness*, 380.

19. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.14.

represented, and actually bestowed on believers, in the Lord's Supper." Calvin called the Lord's Supper "a seal and confirmation of this sermon" in John 6.²⁰

The BC describes the Lord's Supper as an objective means of grace. The sacraments "are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us" (Art. 33). Rather "the sacrament and the things signified are joined together" (Art. 35). As Calvin argued, the sacramental signs do "not symbolize the things that it has been consecrated to represent as bare and empty tokens," but they "truly exhibit it."²¹ *Exhibere* does not simply mean "to present," as in "to show," as the English implies, but "to offer," "to proffer," or "to hand over."²²

Yet Art. 35 also says that not all receive Christ in the sacrament. Christ is truly offered to all, but he is only received by faith.²³ An unbeliever "does not receive the truth of the sacrament." Christ "is communicated only to believers," because "the manner in which we eat it [Christ's own natural body and his own blood] is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith," which the Confession calls "the hand and mouth of our souls" (Art. 35).

This manner of eating is essential to rightly understanding how Christ is communicated in the sacrament. This communication ("by the Spirit") is sometimes described—misleadingly—as "spiritual." But, as Billings points out, to say that this eating happens "spiritually" should not be (mis)understood to mean that it happens "in one's own head" or that it is simply "the product of one's own faith." It happens "by the Spirit," and the Spirit "communicates far more than a mental remembrance of Christ or a mental sense of Christ's presence."²⁴ Here, too, the Confession follows Calvin, for whom "spiritual" "did not intend to say that something other than Christ's true body and blood [are] communicated, but simply that such communication happens by the Spirit."²⁵ "The Spirit of Christ working through the sacrament grants its efficacy, and accounts for the miracle of Christ's presence."²⁶

The BC affirms, "more emphatically than any of the standard symbols of the Reformed churches," "the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the

20. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. W. Pringle (1847; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 1:266. (Note: these are comments on John 6:54.)

21. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.21.

22. Sue Rozeboom, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception*, ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 152.

23. On this distinction between what is offered and what is received in the sacrament, see Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.33, and Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 250–253.

24. J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel of the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 76.

25. John W. Riggs, *The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 92.

26. Venema, "Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 144.

sacrament.”²⁷ “We do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood” (Art. 35).²⁸ In the BC, “the bread and wine are the means by which the Holy Spirit mysteriously communicates Christ to his people.”²⁹ The Lord’s Supper is not only a commemoration of Christ, it is also—and especially—communion with Christ.

1.2. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The HC’s explanation of the Lord’s Supper is longer than that of the BC. The HC gives more attention to the Lord’s Supper than to any other subject, due largely to the historical context in which it was commissioned and written. Although the Reformation was firmly established in the Palatinate when Frederick III succeeded Otto Henry as Elector in 1559, the church was seriously divided, particularly on the manner of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. Convinced that the controversy between Lutheran and Calvinist theologians need to be settled for peace to prevail in the church, Frederick III appointed a commission to draft a new confession. This new confession, the HC, was written to end the theological fighting that had plagued the churches in the Palatinate.³⁰

Lyle Bierma describes the HC as “a Reformation synthesis.” Particularly in its doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, its authors “seem[ed] to have tried especially hard to reflect what Verboom has called ‘maximal consensus’ and ‘minimal dissensus.’”³¹ The HC “was designed in such a way as to allow latitude on such controversial sacramental matters as the relation of sign and signified.”³² The HC admits a Calvinist interpretation, corresponding to Gerrish’s symbolic instrumentalism; a neo-

27. Venema, “Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper,” 153.

28. De Jong admits that these words can sound like “a concession to the Romanists” (*The Church’s Witness*, 386). Venema confesses: “The strength of this affirmation of Christ’s real presence in the sacrament was impressed upon me a number of years ago when, to my embarrassment, I identified this language as Roman Catholic during an oral examination . . . at Calvin Theological Seminary” (Venema, “The Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper,” 154 n.21).

29. Daniel Hyde, *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2008), 467.

30. The Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s human nature is explicitly excluded. The divine attribute of omnipresence is communicated to the person of Christ, but his human nature does not thereby become omnipresent (see HC Q&A 47–48). Thus, the presence of Christ in the sacrament, while real, cannot be located “in, with, or under” the elements as it is in the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. The risen and ascended Christ remains in heaven. Believing communicants feast on Christ as, through the Spirit who lives both in them and him, they are united more and more to his blessed body (HC Q&A 79).

31. Bierma, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 72. Bierma cites W. Verboom, *Theologie van de Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum, 1996), 215.

32. Lyle D. Bierma, *The Doctrine of the Sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism: Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39.

Zwinglian or Bullingerian interpretation, corresponding to Gerrish's symbolic parallelism; and a blend of the two interpretations.³³

The HC defines the sacraments as "holy signs and seals for us to see." As signs, they help "us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel" (Q&A 66). The Lord's Supper "reminds [us] ... that [we] share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross." "As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me, and his blood poured out for me on the cross" (Q&A 75). One might suspect a Zwinglian symbolic memorialist view here because the sacramental signs remind communicants of Christ's one sacrifice on the cross.

Unlike the BC, which describes the Lord's Supper as a "spiritual banquet" (Art. 35), the HC focuses the communicant's attention on Christ's suffering and death on the cross. It emphasizes the sacrament's commemorative aspect more than the BC does, but it does not present the sacrament as exclusively a memorial. The Lord's Supper is not only a sign; it is also a seal. Contra Zwingli, "the sacraments are much more than visual aids, for no visual aid can seal or guarantee."³⁴ The Lord's Supper is thus more than a commemoration; it is also a communication.

As a seal, the Lord's Supper "assures [us] . . . that [we] share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross." "As surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood." (Q&A 75) Based on its "as surely as . . . so surely . . ." structure, Gerrish argues that the HC teaches a symbolic parallelism doctrine of the Lord's Supper.³⁵

However, as Bierma argues, the HC does not necessarily exclude a symbolic instrumentalist interpretation: "Where Calvin and Bullinger parted ways was not on whether the sign and signified are parallel but on whether they are merely parallel. . . . This is a question the HC does not address. It neither affirms nor denies one position or the other." "Followers of Calvin and Bullinger could all affirm [the] HC's parallelism . . . and still hold to different understandings of the union between sign and signified."³⁶

However HC Q&A 75 is interpreted, both views—symbolic parallelism and symbolic instrumentalism—affirm that in and through the sacrament, believers are nourished and refreshed with Christ's crucified body and poured-out blood. The two views do not dispute *that* a communication of Christ occurs in the Lord's Supper.

33. Bierma, *The Doctrine of the Sacraments*, 3; Bierma, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 71.

34. Fred Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001), 827.

35. Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 126.

36. Bierma, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 79–81. Emphasis original.

What they dispute is *how* that communication occurs. Like the BC, the HC affirms that the Lord's Supper is a communion with Christ, as Q&A 76 explains:

Q. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his poured-out blood?

A. It means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and by believing to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But it means more. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body. And so, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. And we forever live on and are governed by one Spirit, as members of our body are governed by one soul.

While the first part of the answer affirms Zwingli's position, the second part distances the HC from a purely Zwinglian position. Here the HC sounds like Calvin, who also affirmed common ground with the Zwinglians before taking his own position a step beyond it.³⁷ To eat and drink means "to accept with a believing heart," but that is not all that it means. It means more. Thus, P. Y. De Jong concludes: "It cannot be denied that the HC . . . teaches that we receive something in and through the proper use of the sacrament by the operation of the Holy Spirit . . . namely, 'a communion with the body and blood of Christ.'"³⁸

Venema concludes that the Reformed confessions "speak of the sacrament as a *memorial* of Christ's death and sacrifice upon the cross," but never as "merely a memorial or occasion for thanksgiving to God." In the Reformed confessions, "the Zwinglian doctrine of the sacrament is uniformly . . . repudiated as inadequate."³⁹ As Gerrish acknowledges, some of the confessions, including the HC, "reflect a certain shyness toward the idea of the means of grace." But, "the real division in the Reformed confessions is not between Zwingli and Calvin, but between Calvin and Bullinger," between symbolic instrumentalism and symbolic parallelism. The question is not whether there is a communication of Christ in the sacrament, but whether that communication happens "*simultaneously with* the elements [Bullinger] or *through* the elements [Calvin]." "All of the leading Reformed confessions place the emphasis on communication rather than commemoration . . . Communion with

37. Bierma, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 84. "For there are some who define the eating of Christ's flesh and the drinking of his blood as, in one word, nothing but to believe in Christ. But it seems to me that Christ meant to teach something more definite, and more elevated . . . in that noble discourse in which he commends to us the eating of his flesh. . . . We admit indeed, meanwhile, that this is no other eating than that of faith. . . . But here is the difference between my words and theirs: for them to eat is only to believe; I say that we eat Christ's flesh in believing" (*Institutes*, 4.17.5).

38. Peter Y. De Jong, "The Catechism on the Lord's Supper," *The Banner* 85 (August 25, 1950): 1036.

39. Venema, "Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 187.

Christ actually takes place in the Lord's Supper and is the focal point."⁴⁰ That is what the confessions teach about the Lord's Supper. But what does the Lord's Supper teach? What is communicated about the Lord's Supper by the way in which the supper is celebrated in Reformed churches?

2. Historic Reformed Practices

This section examines two aspects of historic Reformed communion celebrations: the frequency with which the sacrament is celebrated and the liturgical formulary prescribed for those celebrations. Other aspects of the church's sacramental practices could also be considered. Horton notes that "the one-sided statement from the words of institution, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' engraved on the front of the Communion table" indicates that "the Supper is in many of our churches regarded chiefly as a memorial of Christ's death." He wonders: "What might be the response if one were to replace these words with another part of the words of institution, such as 'This is my body . . . This is my blood'?"⁴¹

How the sacrament is distributed also reflects and reinforces a particular understanding of the sacrament. Some churches maintain a common cup and loaf, but many do not. Nicholas Wolterstorff laments the loss of a common cup and loaf: "The symbolic import of serving communion in trays preloaded with cubes of bread and individual 'shot glasses' of juice or wine is not the unity of Christ's people but their separateness."⁴² In some churches, the congregation gathers around the table, but in many, they remain seated in the pews as elders distribute the bread and cup(s). The latter method, introduced by Zwingli, "cultivates a [memorialist] attitude of interiority and personal reflection."⁴³ During the Reformation era, "virtually no one else adopted this custom" because it did "not at all resemble a meal."⁴⁴

Horton rightly argues that "one's view of the nature of the Supper plays no small part in determining frequency."⁴⁵ The historic practice of quarterly communion services in Reformed churches owes more to Zwingli than Calvin.⁴⁶ It "illustrates in

40. Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 128. Emphasis original.

41. Michael S. Horton, "At Least Weekly: The Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper and of Its Frequent Celebration," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 156.

42. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Many fields, one loaf," *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 11 (November 1978): 2.

43. Martha L. Moore-Keish, *Do This In Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to Reformed Eucharistic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 126.

44. Harry Boonstra, "Old-Fashioned Innovations," *Reformed Worship* 22 (December 1991): 37.

45. Horton, "At Least Weekly," 156.

46. Billings, *Communion, Remembrance, and Hope*, 21.

a rather striking way the distance between the affirmations of the Reformed confessions and the practice of many Reformed churches.”⁴⁷

2.1. The Frequency of Communion

Calvin advocated for frequent, even weekly, celebrations of the Lord’s Supper.⁴⁸ This advocacy “stems from his understanding of the nature of the sacrament as a genuine means of grace. . . . Since the sacrament is a means of imparting Christ’s life to us, celebration should be very frequent. It should be frequent because we all need the grace of Christ so badly.”⁴⁹ Despite Calvin’s best efforts, he was unable to convince the Genevan city council to permit weekly communion celebrations. His “Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541)” provided for the Lord’s Supper to “be always administered in the city once a month, in such a way that every three months it takes place in each parish. Besides, it should take place three times a year generally, that is to say at Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas.”⁵⁰

The Palatinate church order required that the Lord’s Supper be celebrated “at least monthly in the cities and bimonthly in the villages, and always on Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas.”⁵¹ But the earliest Dutch Reformed churches celebrated the sacrament less frequently. The first recorded regulation regarding the frequency of communion, from the provincial Synod of Dordrecht (1574), required that: “The churches shall strive to celebrate the Lord’s Supper every two months as much as possible” (Art. LXIX).⁵² The national Synods of Dordrecht (1578)⁵³ and Middelburg (1581)⁵⁴ affirmed this rule. The Synod of ‘s-Gravenhage (1586) added to these bimonthly celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, “wherever the circumstances allow, the [administration of the Lord’s Supper] shall be done on Easter, Pentecost, and

47. Venema, “The Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper,” 194.

48. In his “Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva (1537),” Calvin wrote: “It is certain that a church cannot be said to be well-ordered and regulated unless in it the Holy Supper of our Lord is always being celebrated and frequently.” Similarly, in his *Institutes* (4.17.46), Calvin argued that the Lord’s table should be spread before believers “at least once a week.”

49. Lewis B. Smedes, “Calvin and the Lord’s Supper,” *Reformed Journal* 4, no. 7 (July/August 1954): 5.

50. John Calvin, “Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541),” in *Theological Treatises*, ed. and trans. J.K.S. Reid, LCC 22 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1954), 58-72.

51. Daniel J. Meeter, “*Bless the Lord, O My Soul*”: *The New York Liturgy of the Dutch Reformed Church, 1767* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 240.

52. Quotations from early Dutch Reformed church orders, including the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), are taken from P. Biesterveld and H.H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, trans. Richard R. DeRidder (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982).

53. The Lord’s Supper “shall be celebrated in the well-established churches every two months as much as possible” (Art. XXI).

54. “The Lord’s Supper shall be administered once every two months, as much as possible; but in places where as yet no church has been organized, elders and deacons shall first be installed” (Art. XLV).

Christmas" (Art. LVI). The Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) maintained the requirement that "the Lord's Supper shall be administered once every two months," but softened the requirement that "the same be done on Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas," stating that, while "it shall be edifying," the matter was left to the discretion of the consistories (Art. LXIII).

In 1905, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) Synod of Utrecht amended the Church Order of Dordt. In 1914, the CRC adopted many of the GKN's amendments. Rather than require that the Lord's Supper be celebrated "once every two months," the amended church order required that it be celebrated "every two or three months" (Art. 63). In 1965, the CRC adopted a Revised Church Order, which simply stated that "the Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every three months" (Art. 60). Similar provisions prevail in the church orders of the United Reformed Churches (URC),⁵⁵ the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC),⁵⁶ and the Free Reformed Churches (FRC).⁵⁷ The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) still require: "The Lord's Supper shall be administered every two or three months" (Art. 63).

These church orders establish quarterly communion services as a minimum, not a maximum. They require that the Lord's Supper be celebrated at least every three months; they do not say that churches may not celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently. Yet quarterly communion services have been the historic practice of Reformed churches. Even when the CRC's church order required that the Lord's Supper be celebrated "every two or three months," its official guide for church visiting asked: "Is the Lord's Supper celebrated at least four times a year?" James Daane wondered what response church visitors would receive if they asked, "Why only four times a year?"⁵⁸

Daane suggests that the answer would reflect a Zwinglian understanding of the Lord's Supper: "After hasty reflection there comes with predictable regularity this answer: 'If we had it more than four times a year the sacrament would become commonplace and lose its effectiveness.'"⁵⁹ That is, in fact, the answer given in Van Dellen and Monsma's influential church order commentaries. Van Dellen and Monsma considered quarterly communion services "a well-timed arrangement." They wrote, "to celebrate the Lord's Supper very frequently might detract somewhat from its sacredness and effectiveness."⁶⁰ Roger Faber suggests that behind this

55. "The consistory shall ordinarily administer the Lord's Supper at least every three months" (Art. 46).

56. "The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months" (Art. 60).

57. "The Lord's Supper shall at least be observed once every three months" (Art. 63).

58. James Daane, "At Least Four Times a Year," *Reformed Journal* 5, no. 5 (May 1955): 11.

59. Daane, "At Least Four Times," 11.

60. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1949), 265. In their *Revised Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids:

“widely-held opinion expressed in the *Church Order Commentary*,” is “the Zwinglian doctrine that the sacraments are ‘empty signs;’ that is, the Lord’s Supper does no more than depict Christ’s broken body and shed blood and has no power of conveying the blessing that it signifies.”⁶¹

Billings concurs: “If ‘remembrance’ is the primary or exclusive meaning of the Supper, then one is likely to face the objection: if we celebrate more often, it will lose its significance.”⁶² “The sentiment ‘If we celebrate weekly, the Supper will no longer be special,’ might be true if the Supper were simply a mental act of remembrance. But what if it is a meal of nourishment?”⁶³ Such an understanding of the sacrament would certainly promote more frequent celebrations.

As Daane wrote, “to argue that greater frequency would reduce the sacrament to something ordinary and ineffective is to deny the nature and power of the sacrament.”⁶⁴ If, as both the BC and the HC teach, the Holy Spirit is the cause of the sacrament’s efficacy, it is not clear why or how more frequent celebrations of the Lord’s Supper would hinder the sacrament’s effectiveness. More frequent celebrations of the Lord’s Supper can only hinder the sacrament’s effectiveness if its effectiveness is understood, contra the Reformed confessions, in a purely subjective manner—that is, if, as Zwingli taught, the effectiveness of the sacrament is in the communicant’s remembrance or experience, rather than in the communication of Christ by the Holy Spirit. The historic Reformed practice of less frequent (quarterly) celebrations of the Lord’s Supper reflects and reinforces an understanding of the sacrament as primarily a commemoration, contra the theology of the Reformed confessions.

2.2. The Liturgical Formulary

The Church Order of Dordt (1618–1619) required that when churches celebrate the Lord’s Supper, “the form for the Lord’s Supper, together with the prayer pertaining to it, shall be read” (Art. LXII). The URC,⁶⁵ CanRC,⁶⁶ FRC,⁶⁷ and PRC⁶⁸ retain this

Zondervan, 1967), 240, they grant: “Yet if any church should decide to celebrate Holy Communion bi-monthly we would not object. Neither would we seek to dissuade any church from celebrating the Lord’s Supper on Good Friday or Easter, if the consistory judges this advisable, and our CO reading certainly leaves room for such more frequent and special administrations.”

61. Roger Faber, “In Defense of the Lord’s Supper,” *Reformed Journal* 13, no. 6 (July/August 1963): 12.

62. Billings, *Communion, Remembrance, and Hope*, 17.

63. Billings, *Communion, Remembrance, and Hope*, 182.

64. Daane, “At Least Four Times,” 11.

65. “The consistory shall administer the Lord’s Supper . . . with the use of the appropriate liturgical form” (Art. 46).

66. “The sacraments shall be administered . . . with the use of the adopted forms” (Art. 56).

67. “The Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, together with the prayers for that purpose, shall be read” (Art. 62).

requirement. The CRC allows for adaption of the approved forms.⁶⁹ The Netherlands Liturgy, approved by the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619), is the common heritage of these churches. Its formulary for the Lord's Supper continues to be used by the CanRC, FRC, PRC, and URC. The URC also uses "Form 2" adopted by Synod 1964 of the Christian Reformed Church. Because this formulary follows the Netherlands Liturgy in structure and content, it has been described as a "restatement of the original,"⁷⁰ an "updated revision"⁷¹ of the Netherlands Liturgy. Few CRC congregations continue to use the Netherlands Liturgy; it has largely been displaced in that denomination by new formularies adopted by Synods 1981 and 1994.

The Netherlands Liturgy was first published in 1566 by Peter Datheen for his Dutch Reformed refugee congregation in the Palatinate. Datheen's main project was to provide his congregation with a psalter. Though the Genevan Psalter, the source of Datheen's metrical Psalms, included both Calvin's "Form for Church Prayers" and the Geneva Catechism, out of respect for the Elector and his desire that peace would prevail in the church, Datheen included the Palatinate Liturgy and Heidelberg Catechism in his Psalter.

The commission Frederick III appointed to draft a new confession of faith, the HC, was also appointed to draft a new liturgy. Because the Catechism was intended to be the standard for doctrine, discipline, and worship in the church, it is not surprising that these liturgical formularies "bear the stamp of the HC in their structure, theological content, and even in their wording."⁷² Like the HC, the formulary directs the communicant's attention to Christ's suffering and death on the cross. It emphasizes communicant's remembrance of Christ more than their communion with him in the sacrament.

The formulary begins with the Words of Institution "as they are delivered by the holy Apostle Paul."⁷³ The Words of Institution serve as a biblical warrant for the celebration: "Just as the biblical text precedes the sermon, so that there is no question that the minister proclaims the word under the authority of the Lord, so too the

68. "The form for the administration of the Lord's Supper, together with the prayers for that purposes, shall be read" (Art. 62).

69. "The sacraments shall be administered . . . with the use of the prescribed forms or adaptations of them that conform to synodical guidelines" (Art. 55).

70. "Symposium: Which of the three forms for communion now in use among us do I prefer and why?" *Torch and Trumpet* 11, no. 9 (September 1961): 21.

71. Elco H. Oostendorp, "Is Our Communion Form Zwinglian?" *The Banner* 108, no. 18 (May 4, 1974): 14.

72. Christopher Dorn, *The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 24.

73. All quotations of the communion formulary in this article are from the CRC's 1932 English translation found in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of the CRC, 1934), 90–94.

institution narrative precedes the entire celebration.”⁷⁴ Institution by Christ was a significant concern of the HC.⁷⁵ The formulary quotes 1 Corinthians 11:23–29, which includes both the Words of Institution proper, cited by the HC (1 Cor. 11:23–26; HC Q&A 77), and Paul’s warning against partaking of the sacrament “in an unworthy manner” and his call to self-examination (1 Cor. 11:27–29).

The admonitions, exhortations, and doctrinal statements that follow can be read as an extensive exegesis of the Pauline text, resulting in the Lord’s Supper becoming “a paranetic and didactic exhortation addressed to the community in the name of God.”⁷⁶ One minister described the formulary as “the best conceivable brief and complete sermon on the sacrament.”⁷⁷ Indeed, some Reformed churches in the Netherlands omitted the sermon at the communion service because the formulary served that purpose.⁷⁸ A Christian Reformed synodical study committee once described the formulary as “in effect administration of the Word in explanation of the sacrament.”⁷⁹

Lewis Smedes argued that the Netherland Liturgy does not provide “a form for the communion service,” but “a formulary for instruction in the proper understanding and celebration of the sacrament.”⁸⁰ “Our liturgy has promoted the notion that truth about a thing is of equal importance to the thing itself.”⁸¹ The formulary’s didactic nature promotes a Zwinglian understanding of the sacrament’s efficacy as primarily subjective. It depends on the communicant’s understanding, rather than the operation of God’s Spirit, which is the BC describes as “hidden and incomprehensible,” “beyond our understanding” (Art. 35). Contra the formulary’s didactic character, Calvin wrote about the communication of Christ in the sacrament: “It is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.”⁸²

The formulary’s call to self-examination follows the threefold structure of the HC. It includes a list of “gross sins.” All who “know themselves to be defiled by these sins” are admonished “to abstain from the table of the Lord.” The presiding minister excommunicates such persons, declaring “to them that they have no part in the kingdom of Christ.” George Stob suggests that the formulary’s list of “gross

74. Dorn, *The Lord’s Supper*, 5.

75. Contra the Roman church, the HC insists that Christ only instituted two sacraments in the New Testament (HC Q&A 68). It quotes the same Pauline text (1 Cor. 11:23–26) as “the institution of the Lord’s Supper” (HC Q&A 77).

76. Dorn, *The Lord’s Supper*, 5.

77. Jan Karel Van Baalen, “Toward a Better Communion Service: a response to Dr. Lewis Smedes,” *Reformed Journal* 10, no. 7 (September 1960): 19.

78. Lewis B. Smedes, “The Form for Holy Communion,” *Reformed Journal* 7, no.2 (February 1957): 10.

79. *Acts of Synod 1953* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Publishing House, 1953), 416.

80. Smedes, “The Form,” 9–10.

81. Lewis B. Smedes, “Toward a Better Communion Service: a response to Rev. J. K. Van Baalen,” *Reformed Journal* 10, no. 9 (October 1960): 22.

82. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32.

sins” has “become our Reformed list of ‘mortal sins. Sometimes it is more than broadly hinted that there is cause for discipline because a man is guilty of one of the things mentioned in the Form for the Lord’s Supper.”⁸³ Indeed, the Synod of ‘s-Gravenhage (1568) did not think it necessary to specify “the sins for which excommunication should apply,” because “the outstanding [sins] are mentioned in the form for the Lord’s Supper.”⁸⁴

But, as Stob argued, only “the willful persistence in living consciously in any sin makes one unfit and unworthy.”⁸⁵ “We are never disciplined by reason of our sins alone, in and of themselves . . . nor are we disciplined in degrees according to the severity of our sin. Rather, we are always and only disciplined by reason of our not wishing to repent.”⁸⁶ The only thing for which a person may be excommunicated is a lack of repentance. The HC itself teaches that the officers of the church may only withhold the sacraments from those who “refuse to abandon their error and wickedness,” those who do not respond to the admonition of the church (Q&A 85). “What qualifies us to gather around the table of the Lord is not that we are perfected but that we acknowledge our total dependence on our Savior and look to him alone.”⁸⁷

The formulary claims that its list of gross sins and statement of excommunication was “not designed . . . to dissuade the contrite hearts of the believers, as if none might come to the supper of the Lord but he that is without sin.” Yet “it has often been the case that many Dutch Reformed believers have not dared come forward to partake.”⁸⁸ As Leonard Vander Zee writes: “For too many Reformed folks the idea of worthiness became predominant, and as in the case of my own mother, Holy Communion often became a dread trial of faith rather than a gracious gift of assurance.”⁸⁹ They heard “most forcefully Paul’s warnings that the ‘unworthy’ ‘eat and drink to their damnation.’”⁹⁰ The Lord’s Supper did not “comfort [their] poor and desolate souls,” as the BC taught (Art. 35).

83. George Stob, “Revision of the form for the Lord’s Supper,” *Reformed Journal* 4, no. 4 (April 1954): 15.

84. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, 155.

85. Stob, “Revision,” 15.

86. Henry De Moor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010), 413.

87. De Moor, *Church Order Commentary*, 413–414.

88. Meeter, “*Bless the Lord, O My Soul*”, 245.

89. Leonard J. Vander Zee, “The Loss and Renewal of Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology in Reformed Churches,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 55, no. 1 (2020): 82.

90. Meeter, “*Bless the Lord, O My Soul*”, 245. In many Reformed churches, the error of confusing the judgment of which Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11 with eternal judgment or condemnation persists. But, in the context of 1 Corinthians 11, it should be clear that the judgment of which Paul writes is divine discipline, aimed specifically at preventing eternal judgment or condemnation: “When we are judged (κρίνω) in this way by the Lord, we are

Contra the BC, which says that “Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain those who are already born again” (Art. 35), the formulary describes “the end for which Christ has ordained and instituted” the sacrament as “that we should do it in remembrance of him.” In Calvin’s liturgy, which emphasized what Christ accomplishes in the sacrament, communicants are exhorted to: “Above all . . . believe those promises which Jesus Christ . . . has spoken with his own lips: He is truly willing to make us partakers of his body and blood, in order that we may possess him wholly and in such wise that he may live in us and we in him.”⁹¹ By contrast, the Netherlands Liturgy exhorts communicants to “be fully persuaded in our hearts that our Lord Jesus Christ . . . was sent of the Father into this world; that he assumed our flesh and blood; [and] that he has borne for us the wrath of God, under which we should have perished everlastingly,”⁹² emphasizing a commemoration of Christ rather than communion with him.

The formulary’s exposition continues with a description of the sacrament as “a sure remembrance and pledge.” In the Lutheran Pfalz liturgy (1557) from which those words were taken,⁹³ the sacrament is described as a sure remembrance and pledge “that we abide in the Lord Jesus Christ and he in us.”⁹⁴ The sacrament is a communication of Christ. However, in the Netherlands Liturgy the bread and cup are a sure remembrance and pledge that Christ gave his body “on the tree of the cross.” Through his death, Christ removes the cause of our spiritual hunger, our sin. It is not the sacrament itself that feeds our hunger, but that of which the sacrament is a reminder, Christ’s death on the cross. Howard Hageman concludes: “It takes little theological insight to perceive that here we are dealing with the basic idea of Zwinglianism, the notion that the only value in the Supper is in making us remember the atoning death of Christ on Calvary.”⁹⁵

However, as Hageman concedes, the prayer that follows is “the finest and most complete of any of the eucharistic prayers produced in the Reformed churches during the Reformation period.” It is “a more faithful expositor of Calvin’s

being disciplined (παιδεύω) so that we will not be finally condemned (κατακρίνω) with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32).

91. *The Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1961), 207.

92. This paragraph draws heavily upon the HC Q&A 37, 38, and 44.

93. Along with the HC, those who composed the Palatinate liturgy, whence came the Netherlands Liturgy, also made use of the German editions of Micron’s *Christian Ordinances*, à Lasco’s *Forma ac Ratio*, Poullain’s *Liturgia Sacra*, and the Lutheran Pfalz liturgy (1557) (Bryan D. Spinks, *From the Lord and “The Best Reformed Churches:” A study of the eucharistic liturgy in the English Puritan and Separatist traditions 1550–1633* [Roma: C.L.V. Edizioni Liturgiche, 1984], 136).

94. Gregg A. Mast, *In Remembrance and Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 112.

95. Howard G. Hageman, “The Liturgical Origins of the Reformed Churches” in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. J. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 131–132.

eucharistic theology than was Calvin himself,⁹⁶ because this prayer expands on a similar prayer in Calvin's liturgy.⁹⁷ The prayer asks God to "in this supper . . . work in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that we . . . through the power of the Holy Spirit, may be nourished and refreshed with his true body and blood, yea with him, true God and man."⁹⁸ The prayer in Calvin's liturgy does not contain such an explicit reference to the Holy Spirit's work as essential to the sacrament's efficacy.

A similar emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work is also found in the *sursum corda* that immediately precedes the words of distribution. The *sursum corda*,⁹⁹ which alludes to HC Q&A 75 and reflects its "as surely as . . . so surely" structure in the words "as truly as," admits a Bullingerian symbolic parallelism interpretation but stops short of requiring a Calvinist symbolic instrumentalism interpretation.

The Netherlands Liturgy does not deny that the Lord's Supper includes a communication of Christ, but it clearly emphasizes the sacrament's commemorative aspect. This is especially evident in the words prescribed for the distribution of the elements. "It is telling that at the point of actually partaking of the Eucharist, the key words of Jesus, 'This is my body . . . This is my blood' are not spoken."¹⁰⁰ Instead, the Palatinate formulary prescribed Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 10:16 for the distribution of the elements.¹⁰¹ The Netherlands Liturgy adds the *Londonse*

96. Howard G. Hageman, "The Eucharistic Prayer in the Reformed Church in America," *Reformed Review* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 171, 169.

97. Because the Palatinate formulary "betrays a close dependence on the liturgical scheme that John Calvin had drawn up," some have suggested that its authors also made use of Calvin's Form for Prayer (Dorn, *The Lord's Supper*, 27). But the first German edition of Calvin's liturgy was not published until 1563, the same year that the Palatinate liturgy appeared. It is more likely, then, that influence of Calvin's liturgy came via Poullain's *Liturgia Sacra*, of which German editions had been published in 1554 and 1555 (Spinks, *From the Lord*, 136). Poullain succeeded Calvin at Strasbourg, and his work was "nothing more than the same liturgy which Calvin had drafted for use of the congregation in Strasbourg" (Mast, *In Remembrance*, 97).

98. The prayer reflects HC Q&A 75, which speaks of being "nourished and refreshed . . . with Christ's crucified body and poured-out blood." HC Q&A 76 points to the work of the Holy Spirit in its explanation of what it means to eat Christ's crucified body and poured-out blood.

99. "That we, then, may be nourished with Christ, the true heavenly bread, let us not cling with our hearts unto the external bread and wine but lift them up on high in heaven, where Christ Jesus is, our Advocate, at the right hand of his heavenly Father, whither also the articles of our Christian faith direct us; not doubting that we shall be nourished and refreshed in our souls, with his body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit, as truly as we receive the holy bread and drink in remembrance of him."

100. Vander Zee, "Loss and Renewal," 83.

101. "The bread which we break is a communion of the body of Christ." "The cup of blessing which we bless is a communion of the blood of Christ."

aenhangsel, words unique to the Dutch Reformed tradition.¹⁰² No other Christian tradition uses them.

The *Londonse aenhangsel* originally came from à Lasco's pen. In his *Forma ac Ratio*, it reads: "Take, eat, and remember that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was for us given to death on the beam of the cross for the remission of all our sins." "Take, eat and remember that the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ was poured out on the beam of the cross for the remission of all our sins."¹⁰³ The Netherlands Liturgy employs the expanded version found in Micron's *Christian Ordinances*: "Take, eat, remember and believe."¹⁰⁴ Micron's addition "and believe" makes no difference to the formula's Zwinglian theology. Whatever the communion-of-the-body-and-blood-of-Christ language of 1 Corinthians 10:16 gave, the *Londonse aenhangsel* takes away.

Calvin's liturgy instructed communicants to "take, eat, the body of Jesus which has been delivered unto you,"¹⁰⁵ suggesting that what communicants eat and drink in the Lord's Supper is indeed the body and blood of Christ, as the BC teaches: "We do not go wrong to say that what is eaten is Christ's own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood" (Art. 35). In contrast, the *Londonse aenhangsel* dissociates the body and blood of Christ from the communion elements. Communicants do not take and eat the body of Christ. They take and eat the sacramental signs—bread and cup. As they do, they are exhorted to remember and believe that Christ's body was given for them.

Christ's body is not given in the sacrament; it was given on the cross. In "typical Zwinglian fashion," the *Londonse aenhangsel* presents the sacramental signs as "a mental reminder of the atonement on Calvary."¹⁰⁶ They are not the means by which Christ "nourishes, strengthens, and comforts, our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood" (BC Art. 35), but a means by which communicants remember and believe. The *Londonse aenhangsel* and the formulary as a whole "succeed in conveying that the Supper is the 'remembrance of the atoning death of Jesus Christ,'" but they "do not spell out clearly enough that it is also a communion with the present Lord."¹⁰⁷

Indeed, as Smedes notes, in the formulary, "the real participation in Christ by means of the sacrament is touched upon almost incidentally." Instead, "the commemorative aspect is emphasized." "The theological emphasis of the Form is

102. The provincial Synod first required the use of the *Londonse aenhangsel* of Dordrecht (1574) (Art. LXXVII), a decision endorsed by the national Synod of Dordrecht (1578), and the Synod of Middelburg (1581) (Biesterveld & Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, 94, 124).

103. Quoted in Spinks, *From the Lord*, 108.

104. Spinks, *From the Lord*, 112.

105. *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 208.

106. Spinks, *From the Lord*, 112.

107. Dorn, *The Lord's Supper*, 120.

not the same as that of the creeds or of Calvin.”¹⁰⁸ “This is a matter of emphasis, not theological error. But in the Form for celebration emphasis is crucial. In the Form, the real nature of the sacrament should be quite clear to all.”¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, it is not. The fruit of the formulary's theological imbalance is evident in the church's (infrequent) celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

3. Conclusion

Calvin's “Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541)” prescribed the celebration of the Lord's Supper on Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas. The Palatinate Church Order prescribed the same, as did the Synod of 's-Gravenhage (1586) (Art. LVI). The Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) said that it would “be edifying” if the Lord's Supper was celebrated on those three holy days (Art. LXIII). But, *contra* these traditions, Dutch Reformed churches tend to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Good Friday, rather than Easter Sunday.

Venema characterizes this tendency as “symptomatic” of “an overemphasis [in Reformed churches] upon [the sacrament's] commemorative purpose.”¹¹⁰ Meeter attributes that overemphasis to the liturgical formulary, which “virtually demands that the Lord's Supper be celebrated on Good Friday rather than on Easter.”¹¹¹ But “only on the Zwinglian basis of the Lord's Supper as a bare memorial of the death of Christ can it be celebrated on Good Friday,”¹¹² rather than on Easter Sunday, as Kuyper commended.¹¹³

Van der Leeuw, who “subjected not only the practice but also the form for the Reformed Supper to criticism,” concluded: “In the Reformed churches there has been an ‘almost exclusive relation between the Lord's Supper and the death of the Lord, with a total neglect of his resurrection.’ For this reason, the Lord's Supper resembled more of a ‘funerary ceremony’ than a ‘joyful feast.’”¹¹⁴

In the 1970s, Bert Polman bemoaned “the dirge-like character of our [CRC] communion celebration,” which were “obsessed with a narrow concern about

108. “A reading of both the HC and the BC as compared with the Form for celebration shows that they are much more concerned to say that the sacrament is a real means of grace than the Form” (Smedes, “Calvin and the Lord's Supper,” 5).

109. Smedes, “Calvin and the Lord's Supper,” 5.

110. Venema, “The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper,” 194 n.50.

111. Meeter, “*Bless the Lord, O My Soul*,” 259–260.

112. Carroll E. Keegstra, “The Lord's Supper on Good Friday—popular but not proper,” *The Banner* 100, no. 20 (May 14, 1965): 4–5.

113. When we rightly understand the sacrament, “we do not, as many foolishly do, celebrate the Lord's Supper on Good Friday as a kind of commemorative meal . . . [but] we prepare the table of the Lord on Easter Sunday” (Abraham Kuyper, *The Death and Resurrection of Christ*, trans. H. Zylstra [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960], 101).

114. In Dorn, *The Lord's Supper*, 102.

Christ's death."¹¹⁵ "The traditional formulary does not encourage any sense of joy or gratitude in its solemnity."¹¹⁶ Indeed, Lester De Koster argued that the church should commemorate, not celebrate, the Lord's Supper.¹¹⁷ Venema notes that the somber mood that prevails in the communion services of many Reformed churches "may reflect not a proper reverence in the remembrance of Christ's great sacrifice for our sins, but also a largely commemorative focus to the service."¹¹⁸ "If our communion is a Zwinglian memorialism, it is not surprising that it is commemorated so infrequently and with such sorrowful solemnity."¹¹⁹ After all, who wants to attend a funeral every Sunday?

But the Lord's Supper is not a funeral. "Our Savior Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain" us, to "nourish, strengthen, and comfort our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieve and renew them by the drinking of his blood." The Lord's Supper is "a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us" (BC, Art. 35). How can Reformed churches celebrate the Lord's Supper in ways that better communicate this understanding of the sacrament? This is our challenge.

115. Bert F. Polman, "Rite & Right of Holy Communion," *The Banner* 108, no. 10 (March 9, 1973): 10–11.

116. Bert F. Polman, "Church Music & Liturgy in the Christian Reformed Church in North America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1980), 207.

117. Lester Ronald De Koster, "Celebrate or commemorate?" *The Banner* 110. No. 49 (December 5, 1975): 6–7.

118. Venema, "The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 194 n.50.

119. Polman, "Rite & Right," 11.