

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO STUDY THE METHOD OF ADMISSION TO
THE LORD'S SUPPER

I BACKGROUND AND ACTIVITY

The Committee was erected and its members (Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Robert D. Knudsen, and Thomas E. Tyson) elected by the 58th GA, on recommendation by the Committee On Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (Minutes, pp. 37-38,48-49). This recommendation came as a result of challenges to the prevailing method(s) of admission to the Lord's supper in the OPC by the Committee on Contact with the OPC of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CCOPC) and was in the interests of reaching unity on this matter.

From the outset the Committee has been uncertain as to how it ought to proceed, in particular as to how its work might advance and not simply repeat what is already being done by the CEIR in its discussions with the CCOPC. (Two members of the Committee, Gaffin and Tyson, are also members of the subcommittee of the CEIR consulting with the CCOPC.) Eventually we have decided that under the existing circumstances our work would be redundant. In our judgment, OPC responsibility to the Canadian Reformed Churches and their concerns is already being adequately discharged by the CEIR. As our report, then, we offer as information the following brief statement prepared for CEIR discussions with the CCOPC, slightly modified:

THE OPC AND SUPERVISION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER
A BRIEF STATEMENT

1. Pertinent materials in the subordinate standards

1.1 Confession of Faith. In chapter 29, "Of the Lord's Supper," section 7 refers to "worthy receivers." Such persons are those who partake "inwardly by faith"; they are "true believers" (sec. 1).

In contrast, section 8 says that "ignorant and wicked men" ("all ignorant and ungodly persons") are "unworthy of the Lord's table" and "cannot, without great sin against Christ,... be admitted thereunto."

Beyond this proviso for exclusion, the only explicit administrative prohibition in this chapter, with respect to recipients, concerns private communion; those who minister the Supper are to do so "to none who are not then present in the congregation" (sec. 3).

Chapter 30, "Of Church Censures," stipulates among the disciplinary actions at the disposal of church officers, "suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season" (sec. 4).

1.2 Larger Catechism. Q. & A. 168-177 deal with the meaning of, administration of, and participation in the Lord's Supper. Explicit reference to those "that worthily communicate" is found in A. 168 and in Q. & A. 170, and much of what is found in these nine answers explains what worthy communication involves, particularly the self-examination and discernment requisite for such communication.

Q. 173 asks, "May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, be kept from it?" The answer is that "Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church,..."

1.3 Shorter Catechism. Q. and A. 96-97 deal with the Lord's Supper. Q. 97 asks "What is required to the worthy receiving of the Lord's supper?" The answer focuses on the requirement "that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, . . ." and then warns against the danger of "coming unworthily,..."

1.4 Form of Government. Chapter 13, "The Local Church and Its Session," section 7 states: "The session is charged with maintaining the government of the congregation. It shall oversee all matters concerning the conduct of public worship; . . ."

1.5 Directory for Public Worship. Chapter 4, "The Celebration of the Sacraments," section 3 stipulates: "Since the sacraments are ordinances of the visible church, they are not to be administered except under the oversight of the government of the church. Moreover, in ordinary circumstances they are properly administered only in a gathering of the congregation for the public worship of God, . . ."

Section C-2, the form to be read by the minister before the distribution of the elements in administering the Lord's Supper, declares:

It is my solemn duty to warn the uninstructed, the profane, the scandalous, and those who secretly and impenitently live in any sin, not to approach the holy table lest they partake unworthily, not discerning the Lord's body, and so eat and drink condemnation to themselves. (The form then goes on in detail to assure that "this warning is not designed to keep the humble and contrite from the table of the Lord, as if the supper were for those who might be free from sin..." and concludes as follows:) Let us therefore, in accordance with the admonition of the apostle Paul, examine our minds and hearts to determine whether such discernment is ours, to the end that we may partake to the glory of God and to our own growth in the grace of Christ.

Earlier, Section A-5 states that the minister "is not required to use the exact language of the indented forms, which are suggested as appropriate. He may employ these or similar forms, using his own liberty and godly wisdom as the edification of the people shall require."

2. Observations and Commentary

2.1 Our subordinate standards have a manifest and sustained concern for worthy participation in the Lord's Supper, a concern defined, in part, by antithesis to unworthy participation. This two-sided, antithetical concern—to promote worthy and to prevent unworthy receiving, that is, to "fence" the Supper—is evidently based on the apostolic /covenantal concern expressed most explicitly in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34.

2.2 Administering the Supper, including fencing, is ordinarily the responsibility of the local session.

2.3 The most explicit directive concerning fencing, on its negative side, appears to be LC, A.173, which states that the "ignorant or scandalous,..., may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, —"

Crucial is the notion of ecclesiastical power expressed here. What is such authority? In brief, it is the exercise of "the keys of the kingdom," entrusted by the risen Christ to the church through his apostles, and ministered subsequently by those set apart to ruling office. Specifically — as the Reformation has made perennially clear, especially in opposing the clericalism of Rome — the authority of office is the authority of the (inscripturated) Word, no more, no less; church authority, in that sense, is ministerial or declarative.

Fencing the Supper, then, is a particular exercise of this declarative power.

2.4 How, specifically, is that power to be exercised? Notably, our standards do not stipulate a set procedure to be followed by the session. It seems fair to say that, so far as good order and spiritual welfare are concerned, the Supper is adequately fenced by using the form quoted above (DW 4.C.2), or an equivalent. **That** the Supper is to be fenced is mandatory. **How** that is to take place is, in large part, an *adiaphoron*; not even the form provided need be used verbatim. Each session has a measure of discretionary freedom and flexibility.

2.4.1 In fact, there is no uniform procedure for fencing the Supper in the OPC. A very few congregations may practice a form of "closed" communion, requiring visitors who wish to participate to be examined by the session in advance. Fairly typical is the practice where the minister supplements the reading of the form (1) by inviting to the Table those who (a) have been baptized, (b) have publicly professed their faith before the church, and (c) are currently members in good standing of an "evangelical" church, and (2) by warning those who do not meet these requirements not to participate. (There is a growing perception in some quarters of the church that (c) is less and less useful in view of the devaluation of the term *evangelical* in recent years.)

2.4.2 The OPC practice falls within the spectrum of fencing procedure that, historically, has been present in the mainstreams of the Reformed tradition; in both Continental and British-American churches, some have followed a more regulated (e.g., use of tokens, attestation letters, consistorial/sessional examination of visitors), others a less regulated policy (instruction and warning from the pulpit to both congregation and visitors). This spectrum, we believe, is legitimate and reflects the latitude allowed by Scripture. Again, that the Supper must be fenced is plain; how that is to be done is a matter of (biblically informed) judgment with room for differences.

2.5 What are the wider implications of the OPC position and practice for the doctrine of the church?

2.5.1 Does this approach reflect an "individualism," presumably bound up somehow with the invisible-visible church distinction? We think not. Admittedly, an unbiblical individualism is a real and pervasive threat to the life and integrity of the church, particularly in North America, and is not to be dismissed lightly. But, at the same time, it needs to be appreciated that in the most directly pertinent biblical passage (I Cor. 11:27ff.) — a passage, it should be noted, marked by

the apostle's concern to provide quite specific directives—the focus, so far as worthy participation is concerned, is not on those who administer and their responsibility to safeguard the Supper, but on the recipients and their need, individually, for self-examination; the accent here is on "individual" responsibility.

On a more general note, surely we must guard against polarizing or forcing a choice between the individual and the corporate (an unbiblical "corporatism," by the way, is by no means an imaginary danger, as church history makes plain). In God's covenant, surely, that choice represents a false dichotomy; only covenantal religion is able to hold the two considerations in balance and give each its due.

2.5.2 It is the conviction of the OPC that there are other churches, including non-Reformed churches, that are true churches, and that members in good standing in such churches do, however defectively, make a credible profession of faith in Christ and so ought to be welcomed to his Table in OPC congregations. There is, after all, only one Christian church (I Cor. 1:13; Eph. 4:4), and to that one church, by implication, comes the command to partake of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:26). A controlling conviction of the OPC is that while the Supper must be rigorously exclusive so far as the world is concerned, for the church—subject to the provisions already noted—it must be as inclusive as possible.

II Recommendation: That the committee be dissolved.