

Encountering the Reformation: Close Communion

Coming to the Reformed Church from a *non*-Reformed background gave me quite a few episodes of “culture shock.” During my first year in the pews of College Hill Reformed Presbyterian Church, it was not uncommon for me to be surprised and a bit distracted by practices that I had never seen before.

I welcomed some of those surprises immediately. Preaching that focused on the meaning of Scripture (rather than a bunch of cute stories) was the practice I loved the most. Another was the way folks were expected to learn what the Church believed and why. Believe it or not, teaching meaty doctrine (even to children!) was foreign to my Methodist experience – and I loved it.

But some of the differences I encountered were harder to accept. Oddly enough, those tended to be the changes that I came to appreciate the most.

Over the next few weeks, I hope to recount a few of those harder-to-accept practices, noting the great value I (eventually) found in them. Because over time, I also began to notice something else: the practices with which we are raised are the ones we most easily despise and dismiss – despite their value.

So I want to tell you about some of the things that took surprised me when I encountered the Reformed faith. I want to tell you why they surprised me and explain how I came to value them. Because sometimes we can't see how rich we are until we see our lives through the eyes of someone who grew up poor.

It's fitting to share with you today (when we're scheduled to have the Lord's Supper) the practice that caused me the greatest offense during my introduction to the Reformed Churches: close communion.

There are essentially three ways of serving the Lord's Supper.

- *Open communion* is the practice of allowing anyone to partake of the sacrament. There are variations to this practice, ranging from having the minister offer a verbal warning against partaking without having faith in Christ; to welcoming everyone present without qualification.
- *Closed communion* is at the other end of the spectrum. In this practice, *no one* is permitted to partake except for those who are professing members of the congregation – period. (Some will permit a guest to partake if they are from a Church in their own or a sister federation, but only if they have a written statement of membership from their elders.)
- *Close communion* is the middle road. Guests are welcome to partake, but only after meeting with the elders to affirm their faith in Christ, their understanding of the Lord's Supper, and their professing membership at a faithful Christian Church.

I met the Reformed faith at a friendly, busy, welcoming congregation that meets right on the campus of Geneva College, where I was a student. The preaching was meaty, the fellowship was friendly, the singing was ... different, but in a good way. It was a Church I appreciated and was growing to love.

But then came the Sunday when they celebrated communion.

The practice at College Hill RP was to announce the Lord's Supper a week before, asking visitors who would like to partake to meet with the elders (much as we do). Just before worship on the day when the sacrament was served, the presiding elder reminded us that we were to celebrate the sacrament. He read 1 Cor. 11:27 and noted the seriousness of partaking of the Lord's Supper without due regard. Finally, he requested that visitors not partake of the bread and wine unless they had met with the elders and were granted permission.

The first time I heard this, I had been absent the week before, missing the preparatory announcement. Therefore, I was being asked to not partake of the Lord's Supper.

I was not happy.

Grace can probably still remember how not happy I was.

Remember: I grew up in a tradition that would give the bread and “wine” (grape juice) to anyone. I mean *anyone*. You could be a Muslim wearing a Jewish prayer shawl and carrying a Book of Mormon; no Methodist minister would stop you. “After all,” the thinking went, “it's *the* Lord's Supper – not ours.”

So my response to the pre-worship warning (which I managed to keep to myself until after the service) was: “How *dare* you?!? You have *no right!*”

Grace recommended asking one of the elders about the practice. And I did.

That's when I learned how weighty a responsibility elders have. I learned that they are called to guard carefully those who come under their care (Acts 20:28-31); that they are entrusted with the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18-20), and they must answer for the watch they have kept over the souls entrusted to them (Heb. 13:17).

In “guarding” the Lord's Table, they were fulfilling two major responsibilities. First and foremost, they were guarding God's honor by ensuring that no one partook of the Lord's Supper without understanding its significance. They did not want anyone to take lightly such a precious gift. And second, they were guarding their

visitors by ensuring that those who lacked faith in Christ or understanding of the sacrament were kept from “sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” by partaking “in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor. 11:27).

On top of that, their practice gave the elders an opportunity to meet with spiritually immature visitors to help guide them to faith in Christ and His Word.

A surprising thing happened. What I had perceived as an unthinkable presumptuous act began to transform into an act of tender love.

I soon met with the elders to ask permission to partake of communion. To my shock, they didn't pummel me with hard questions or make me feel foolish. They were friendly. They asked me to describe what it meant to me to say I was a Christian; where I was a member; and whether I was under discipline. (*Discipline? In Church?*) They asked what the Lord's Supper meant to me, and they helped me to better understand the sacrament. Then they welcomed me to join with the congregation in partaking of Christ's body and blood, in faith.

That's not common in modern American Churches. In fact, the practice is so rare as to be noteworthy.

But it shouldn't be. Because it emphasizes the import of this sacrament Jesus gave us, and it shows the love of Christ Himself for His sheep.

May our elders always care enough about the well-being of our visitors to practice close communion. And may the Lord be glorified as they guard the honor of Him who gave this sacrament to strengthen His Church.