

# Celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Netherlands

## A Study of Liturgical Ritual Practice in Dutch Reformed Churches

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### 1 Introduction

The main research question of this study asked *how the celebration of the Lord's Supper in local CRC and RCL churches is performed, perceived, and valued, and what can be learned from this*. The question originated from the observation that little empirical research has been conducted to date on the Lord's Supper in the Reformed tradition, especially within the Dutch context. This study seeks to fill this void by describing and analyzing the performance, perception, and valuation of the Lord's Supper within two Reformed denominations in the Netherlands from four different perspectives. These perspectives are derived from the Theology in Four Voices model, a research instrument developed by the *Action Research: Church and Society* (ARCS) project in the United Kingdom. Each 'voice' is fully theological and represents one possible perspective on the same reality.

In this study, the Lord's Supper is first described from an *Operant Voice* perspective. This includes what is enacted in the liturgical services where the Lord's Supper is administered (i.e., the theology embedded within the actual practices of the congregations). Secondly, the Lord's Supper is described from an *Espoused Voice* perspective. The espoused voice embodies the opinion of professing members of the studied congregations (excluding ministers, elders, and deacons). They were interviewed either in focus groups or individually and were asked about their personal experiences of the Lord's Supper. Thirdly, a *Formal Voice* perspective is described on the basis of two different sources: namely, individual interviews with the local ministers of the congregations studied and a literature review of theological writings produced by theologians affiliated with the respective denominations. Lastly, a *Normative Voice* perspective is investigated through the analysis of relevant sections in the confessions, church orders, and liturgical forms that are adhered to by the denominations involved. All these sources were studied in the form of a literature review.

Following the outline of the four perspectives in chapters 3–6, a 'conversation' between them is constructed in chapter 7, in order to describe and analyze the similarities and differences between them. Possible lessons from this conversation have been formulated in chapter 8.

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The results of this inquiry may contribute to our understanding of what happens in the Lord's Supper from an empirical perspective. Moreover, it can serve to bolster the valuation of concrete liturgical ritual practice both within and outside the Dutch Reformed context by enabling congregations to assess and foster the celebration of the Lord's Supper from a fourfold perspective.

## 2 Research design

For the description of the four perspectives on the Lord's Supper, I opted for a qualitative research methodology. This choice made it possible to study and interpret the personal experiences of the interviewees without being restricted to predefined categories. The latter was especially important given the explorative nature of this study.

To limit the scope of this research, I decided to select six congregations across two denominations. The following two denominations were selected: the *Christian Reformed Churches* (CRC) and the *Reformed Churches Liberated* (RCL), both located in the Netherlands. The latter was included because both my institution and myself are affiliated with the RCL; the former was chosen because it shares a significant part of its history with the RCL, is roughly equal in size, shares the same synodal-presbyterial church model, and uses a similar church order. Furthermore, congregations of both denominations use largely similar liturgical forms.

Three CRC and three RCL congregations were selected for participation: CRC-A, CRC-B, CRC-C, RCL-D, RCL-E, and RCL-F. These differed in membership statistics, geographical location, and theological position. First, a worship service of these congregations in which the Lord's Supper was administered was observed to describe the *operant* perspective. Next, to investigate the *espoused* perspective, various congregants from different age groups were randomly invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews per congregation. In one congregation (CRC-C), only individual interviews could be conducted. Following two focus group interviews (or multiple individual interviews), a second church service was observed, after which a third focus group interview was conducted. Afterwards, the local ministers were interviewed individually with a view to describing the *formal* perspective. Furthermore, a literature review was conducted to describe the relevant theological corpus written by CRC and RCL theologians (again, *formal* perspective) as well as the relevant normative documents adhered to by both denominations (*normative* perspective).

The topic list used in this research was designed on the basis of a ritual studies perspective consisting of six items: style, meaning, conduct, space, experience of the self related to others, and experience of the self related to God. The data collection was conducted between October 2016 and February 2018. I personally conducted all of the interviews. In total, one hundred congregants and six ministers were interviewed. The data analysis was performed in consultation with the research team as a whole (Hans Schaeffer, Marcel Barnard, and myself). The transcripts were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis.

### 3 Operant voice

In chapter 3, the *operant voice* is described based on the participatory observations I conducted. Two church services in which the Lord's Supper was administered are described per congregation. When these services were visited, special attention was paid to the aspects of ritual action as defined by Ronald Grimes. In total, twelve church services are described. The descriptions show that there is room for considerable variety both within a denomination and even within a single congregation.

The greatest continuity between the two observed services could be observed in CRC-C, a congregation in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated four times per year, seated at a table. In the other congregations, less continuity was observed. The RCL churches in particular used alternating styles of celebration (e.g., sitting at a table, sitting in the pews, or ambulatory), leading to slight differences in *Ritual Actions*, *Ritual Times*, and/or *Ritual Places* in each celebration.

What remained constant across all six congregations were the *Ritual Actors*, *Ritual Objects*, and *Ritual Groups*, although even there some differences existed on a micro level. With regard to the ritual actors, in all churches it was the minister who administered the Lord's Supper, but the task of the elders and deacons did vary from congregation to congregation (depending on the style of celebration). Secondly, the ritual objects were more or less similar in all congregations, although there was variation in the size of the tables. Thirdly, the ritual groups were comparable, although some congregations were still more 'open' to visitors than the others were.

Other ritual aspects did sometimes differ between and within the two denominations, as well as within the congregations themselves. This suggests that there is not just one CRC or RCL 'operant theology', nor six local 'operant theologies', but that there may be multiple theological practices co-existing within the different congregations and maybe even alternating on the local level.

### 4 Espoused voice

The *espoused voice* is described in chapter 4. The analysis reveals that there are many different perceptions of and opinions on the Lord's Supper within the population of this study. These have been summarized using the themes that emerged from the interview data: (1) *Lord's Supper as communion*; (2) *Attributed meanings*; (3) *Opinions and feelings*; (4) *Style, ambiance, and liturgy*; (5) *Personal developments*; and (6) *Personal desires*.

#### Lord's Supper as communion

The Lord's Supper was powerfully associated with *mutual communion* and to a lesser degree with *communion with God*. In the interviews with congregants, communion with God was mentioned less frequently than communion with fellow communicants was. In one congregation, some congregants paid special attention to the work of the Holy Spirit.

## Attributed meanings

Other meanings associated with the Lord's Supper included *grace and forgiveness*, the Lord's Supper as a *profession of faith*, a *commemoration*, a *feast to celebrate*, a moment of *personal reflection*, a moment of *looking forward* (eschatological), and *sacrament*. Most attention was paid to the aspects of grace and forgiveness as well as commemoration, while there was less emphasis on the other themes.

## Opinions and feelings

Various opinions and feelings were shared by the interviewees: tensions when celebrating, the desire to celebrate consciously, the experience of 'holiness', opinions on participating in and admission to the Lord's Supper, on preparation (or *zelfbeproeving*), the effects of participating in the celebrations, and the spiritual reflection (*nabetrachting*) following the celebrations.

Some participants indicated that they had at times temporarily withdrawn from the celebration of the sacrament in their own congregation, while a number of participants in CRC-C spoke of their past or even present abstinence from the Lord's Supper table (*avondmaalsmijding*). In RCL-D and F, some participants questioned the exclusion of children from the Lord's Supper in their congregation, as it is customarily practiced in almost all CRC and RCL congregations.

## Style, ambiance, and liturgy

With regard to the different styles of celebration, congregants shared multiple (sometimes contradicting) preferences. Overall, participants were satisfied with the current style in use in their congregation. The congregants who were most convinced or enthusiastic about changing the status quo were those who at an earlier time had experienced a different style elsewhere (mostly RCL members).

The ambiance during the celebrations was given positive characterizations by some, like joyful, quiet, and silent, while others indicated that they found it excessively emotionally charged. Some disliked the tense or solemn faces they saw during the celebrations.

Regarding the liturgy used during the celebrations, participants were predominantly positive regarding the selection of Psalms or hymns. Some RCL members were critical of the practice of singing many – that is, too many – verses during ambulatory celebrations. The reading of the liturgical forms prior to communion was discussed in RCL congregations, both by its proponents and opponents, but it was not raised in CRC churches.

## Personal developments

Various participants reported celebrating the Lord's Supper more consciously and intensely than before. This accumulation of meaning was reported to some degree among all age groups. A number of other participants reported an up-and-down development or denied any personal development at all.

## Personal desires

Personal desires regarding the Lord's Supper revolved for the most part around two positions: some participants were satisfied with the current practice and experience of the Lord's Supper in their congregation, while others longed for more festive celebrations and/or a more conscious experience. Other desires mentioned include a longing for celebrating the Lord's Supper with Jesus Himself and/or in combination with a common meal.

## 5 Formal voice

The *formal voice* in this study is described in chapter 5 and consists of two parts: six individual interviews and a review of theological literature.

### 5.1 Interviews with ministers

In the interviews with the local ministers, different meanings were attributed to the Lord's Supper. Both *communion with Christ* and *mutual communion* were mentioned, as were the themes of *reconciliation* and *forgiveness*.

Ministers did not hesitate to call the Lord's Supper a *sacrament* and/or a *sign and seal*. The sacrament was characterized both as a *commemoration* and as a *feast to celebrate*. Aspects such as *eschatological expectation*, *command of Christ*, *moment of reflection*, and *gift of God* were also mentioned. Some ministers called it a *source of comfort and peace* or a symbolization of the core of the Christian faith. None of the ministers questioned the admission policy in their local church, although one did emphasize that participation demands a positive personal choice on the part of all participants.

As regards their personal development, various ministers reported currently experiencing less stress when administering the sacrament than they had at the beginning of their careers. Various personal desires were also shared, including the wish to experience more joyful celebrations or the use of multiple celebration styles.

### 5.2 Review of theological literature

The theological books published after 1944 by CRC and RCL theologians are discussed in the second part of chapter 5. What emerged is that CRC theologians closely align themselves with Scripture and the text of the confessions in their explanation of the Lord's Supper. In their publications, they emphasized the themes of *reconciliation*, *sin and guilt*, *commemoration*, *proclamation* (of 'the death of Christ' by the celebration of the Lord's Supper), and the *expectation* of Christ's return.

Recent developments reported in CRC literature included two explanations of the classical liturgical form (composed by Dathenus in 1566) and a plea for the fundamental unity of Word (sermon)



and sacrament – thereby criticizing the low frequency of celebrations, but at the same time also warning that a higher frequency requires true conversion on the part of the participants.

The views of RCL theologians on the Lord’s Supper are discussed separately. They too closely aligned themselves with Scripture and confession, although some did stress the importance of a correct interpretation of certain passages more than their CRC colleagues did. Consequently, the *festive character* of the meal was given more attention. Emphasis was also placed on themes like *reconciliation*, *commemoration*, *proclamation*, and *expectation*. There was less attention than there was in CRC literature to *sin and guilt* and *self-examination* (although these themes were still discussed).

Recent developments in RCL literature include greater openness to liturgical renewal (since the 1990s) and more attention to the relationship between the sacrament and the worship service. As early as the 1970s, pleas could be heard for a higher frequency of celebration; these have been repeated by others from the 1990s up until the present day.

## 6 Normative voice

In chapter 6, the *normative voice* is characterized on the basis of three different sources: confessions, church orders, and liturgical forms.

First, the relevant passages in the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1619) are summarized. Both the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism draw a close parallel between physical experience and the trustworthiness of God’s acts. Both documents also stress that the sacrament is instituted by Christ Himself and that by eating and drinking bread and wine, believers are united more and more with Christ’s body through the Holy Spirit. In the Canons of Dort, the sacraments are considered one of the means that God may use to exercise His power. They are thus characterized as means of grace that are given by God and may be used by believers.

Next, all regulations concerning the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the CRC and RCL church orders are analyzed. In CRC congregations, the sacrament is to be held at least once every three months, after preparation (self-examination and *censura morum*). According to the RCL regulations, the sacrament is to be celebrated ‘regularly’. No instructions on preparation are included in them. RCL ministers may even introduce their own ‘variations’ in the teaching part of the liturgical forms, provided that they obtain prior permission from the local church council. In the CRC, the liturgical forms are to be used at all times.

Lastly, the history and content of the different liturgical forms for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper are summarized.

## 7 Conversation

In chapter 7, the four theological voices described in the previous four chapters are brought into conversation with each other. Seven conversation topics are formulated following a comparison of the similarities and differences between two or more different voices.

### The role of experience

A first topic of conversation is the role of experience (*beleving*) in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. According to various ministers, the Lord's Supper allows believers to experience something that cannot be experienced in 'regular' church services. Nevertheless, CRC and RCL theological literature on the Lord's Supper included virtually no reflection on the value of corporeality and bodily experiences, even though the interviewed congregants expressed various desires to foster their sacramental experiences (espoused voice). Similarly, the normative voice demands attention for the physicality of the celebration, while at the same time warning against the overvaluation of that corporeality.

### Lord's Supper as communion

A second topic involves a tension between greater emphasis on either communion with God or mutual communion with fellow believers. In general, congregants tended to be more focused on the aspect of mutual communion, while ministers tried to maintain a balance between the two. This difference between ministers and congregants calls for a conversation between the espoused and formal voices. Furthermore, it raises questions about how mutual communion affects the communicants' daily life, given both the positive and the negative experiences shared by some interviewees.

Additionally, admission to the Lord's Supper was a subject of debate among some congregants, especially in RCL congregations. In the interviews, some of the RCL congregants raised new questions about the welcoming of children to the Lord's Supper and the exclusion of those who are under church discipline. Other questions, raised not by congregants but by some ministers, related to the admission of asylum seekers and people with disabilities.

### Divine and human agency

Thirdly, another difference between congregants and ministers revolved around the question of liturgical agency: while congregants spoke more about the role of human actors, ministers sought greater attention for the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the administration of the sacrament. Some congregants, however, also stressed the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit (RCL-E). In practice, all observed celebrations were performed primarily by the local minister. This raised the question of whether the liturgical role of the communicants might be able to take another shape.

## Preparation and spiritual reflection

Fourthly, the preceding chapters noted how self-examination is deemed necessary for those who would like to participate in the Lord's Supper within CRC and RCL congregations. However, while some congregants stressed the need for personal and communal preparation, others indicated that they found it less important than in the past or not important at all. In general, CRC-B and RCL congregants regarded preparation as a more personal matter. One CRC minister doubted that the current practice for the midweek preparation meetings in his congregation would continue for long. Similarly, some RCL ministers questioned the effectiveness and functioning of the practice of self-examination in their congregations. All of this raises questions about how strong the requirement for self-preparation really is. The same applies to the spiritual reflection following the celebration.

## Sin and forgiveness

A fifth topic revolved around the connection between the Lord's Supper and the theme of sin and forgiveness. The confessions and liturgical forms state that Christ died for the sins of believers and that the Lord's Supper refers to that sacrifice through the signs of bread and wine. Although many congregants and all ministers generously agreed, some congregants also indicated experiencing forgiveness *during* the celebrations or feeling cleansed afterwards. Other congregants placed greater emphasis on other aspects of meaning such as 'mutual communion' or else interpreted the celebrations as a moment of personal reflection. This raises the question as to how 'forgiveness of sins' is to be ritualized and experienced during the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

## Holiness and stress

The Lord's Supper is called 'holy' in various normative documents of both denominations, although not consistently so. During the interviews, some congregants mentioned 'holy' as a keyword when naming their first associations with the sacrament. For some of them, this word had a negative connotation, as if the Lord's Supper had become excessively holy in their congregation (RCL-E and F). Some ministers recognized this development, and yet none of them used the adjective in a negative sense. The existence of feelings of stress among congregants with regard to sacramental participation may be related to their interpretation of holiness (espoused voice). However, feelings of stress and 'negative' holiness were not extensively covered in the other theological voices, raising the question of how such feelings might best be managed during the celebrations.

## Feast and commemoration

Lastly, some RCL congregants proposed characterizing the Lord's Supper as a feast rather than a commemoration. The latter correlates with new accents in RCL theology published beginning in the 1980s.



In the CRC, these accents are absent or play a less prominent role. In general, congregants and ministers in CRC-A and C did not express a longing for more cheerful celebrations, whereas various RCL members and some members of CRC-B did. Taken together, this yields the following questions: Should the celebrations in CRC and RCL congregations be given a more cheerful character, and, if so, how could this be accomplished?

Following the treatment of the seven conversation topics, chapter 7 includes a separate section on contextual aspects that may have influenced the findings in this study. These aspects include secularization, ‘intensification’, embodiment, and ‘approaching God and the other’.

## 8 Conclusion and discussion

Chapter 8 offers an answer to the main research question of this study. Following the description of the performance, perception, and valuation of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in local CRC and RCL churches in the preceding chapters, this final chapter formulates three concluding statements: (1) *Experience (believing) is important with regard to the Lord’s Supper*; (2) *Communion is central in the perception of the Lord’s Supper*; and (3) *In the Lord’s Supper, both sin and forgiveness, feast and commemoration, are symbolized*. Additionally, several practical recommendations have been formulated to inspire others to come up with answers tailored to their local ecclesial context.

In the ‘Discussion’ section, the findings and recommendations of this study are then connected to ongoing reflection on the Lord’s Supper in contemporary Reformed theology, using the three concluding statements above.

The study closes with two final considerations with regard to the meaning of holiness and a renewed Reformed theology of the Lord’s Supper (especially with regard to the connection between the signs and the signified). These considerations are accompanied by three questions for further thought: (1) *Where does the Lord’s Supper really belong?* (e.g., within or outside church services); (2) *Is the Lord’s Supper primarily an act of ‘looking back’ or is it more than that?*; and (3) *How might congregations in their practice respond to the findings presented in this study?*