

From the Pages of History

Home visiting is a well-known custom in Reformed Churches. In the history of the church, however, there is no real trace of such visits until the time of the Reformation of the 16th century. For many centuries the sacrament of auricular confession was the means by which individuals were given counsel, care and guidance. The confession made to the priest was not only a request for pardon and removal of sin but a request for pastoral assistance.

The Reformers of the 16th century condemned this practice and deemed it unscriptural. Whereas Luther wanted to maintain a ‘purified’ auricular confession, Calvin did away with the practice entirely. Instead, he introduced a format for pastoral care whereby the elders would be sent out to the members of the congregation. Where auricular confession is practiced, the members of the congregation go to the minister and the office of the elder falls into disuse. But with the home visits the opposite order is in place. The elders and the minister go and meet the members in their homes. We need to be careful that we do not fall back into the practices of Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism by allowing ministers to take over the bulk of pastoral visitations and counseling in their study. Also when there are difficulties, members of the congregation should be encouraged to call the elders rather than visit (or be visited) by the minister alone (James 5:13-15).

In Calvin’s *Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques* (1561), the church order of the church of Geneva, the nature of home visits is spelled out in some detail. From it we learn that a home visit was done by the minister accompanied by an elder. Home visits were placed in the setting of worthy participation at the Lord’s Supper.

Several Dutch synods and assemblies addressed the matter of home visits. The Convent of Wessel of 1568 included it as one of the duties of the elders. It instructed elders to take proper care of those placed in their ward. Visits were to be made prior to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

They shall faithfully investigate whether they [the church members] manifest themselves uprightly in walk and conduct,

in the duties of godliness, in the faithful instruction of their households, in the matter of family prayers (morning and evening prayers), and such like matters; they shall also admonish them to these duties with consideration, but also in all seriousness and according to the conditions and circumstances; they shall admonish them to steadfastness, or strengthen them to patience, or spur them on to a serious minded fear of God; such as need comfort and admonition they shall comfort and admonish, and if need be they shall report a matter to their fellow elders, who together with them are appointed to exercise discipline; and besides these matters they shall correct that which can be corrected, according to the gravity of the sin committed; nor shall they neglect, each one in his own district, to encourage them to send their children to catechism.

The connection between home visits and the Lord's Supper was maintained throughout the first decades of the reformation in the Netherlands. As time passed, however, the connection became less obvious. Although the element of the Lord's Supper did not disappear entirely, the home visit concentrated on the life of the congregation in general. Elders, today, should be made aware of the historical background of home visits and the strong tie it had to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. They should not be silent about the significance of the preaching and of the sacraments since these are the means of grace provided by the Holy Spirit.

The Lord's Supper visualizes the communion the congregation experiences with Christ and with one another. It is a highlight of congregational life. Therefore the elders on their visits should remind the individual members of the church that they continue to use this sacrament as Christ intended it. Although the churches of the Reformation were correct in seeing home visits in the broader context of congregational life, elders should ask pertinent questions that relate to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For example, "Is time taken for preparation and self-examination? Do you celebrate the Lord's Supper in anticipation of the marriage feast of the Lamb?"