



"The bread which we break"- what does that mean?

Question

Writing about the re-enactment of Christ's sufferings in Mel Gibson's film, I suddenly had to think about the sentences in our Form for the Lord's Supper which read:

(When he breaks the bread, the minister shall say:) The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ.

For a few moments I was thinking: Aren't we as Reformed churches doing fundamentally the same as the Church of Rome does in the Mass: re-enacting Christ's sufferings and death?

I was also thinking about ministers who, when administering the Lord's Supper, take a strip of bread — into which the sexton or the sexton's wife has cut a loaf of bread — breaks a piece off in a clearly ceremonial way, showing it to the whole congregation, and then handing it over to one of the brothers or sisters sitting close to him. I wondered: Has not this something in common with Rome's re-enactment of Christ's sufferings in the Mass?

Origin

First of all: it may strike us that in the Form nothing is said about pouring out the wine as a kind of symbolic reminder of Christ having shed His blood for us. This already must warn us: Why is there something about breaking bread only? May we perhaps misunderstand and misinterpret that sentence?

Now it would be very interesting to know the origin of these sentences in our Form.

Something of that origin becomes already clear when in older church services books used in the Dutch churches that sentence appears to be a bit longer. It says: *When breaking and distributing the bread, the minister shall say: ...*

To my surprise I saw that our present Dutch sister churches still have the same sentence in their recently renewed service book.¹

So mark that the Form used in our churches and within The Canadian (and American) Reformed Churches has left out the act of distributing the bread. It is no wonder, therefore, that one could suggest that all these churches do the same as the Church of Rome is doing: re-enacting Christ's sufferings.

However, let us take a step further. It may be a well known fact that our Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper has been adopted from the sixteenth century liturgy of the Palatinate, from where we also have received the Heidelberg Catechism. In that original Form we find this line: *Here the minister shall for everyone break (a piece) of the bread of the Lord and, when handing them out, say: The bread which we break, is the communion ...*²

So, in the churches of the Palatinate no gesture of breaking a strip of bread into small pieces was made. Doing so was even impossible, because when the minister said: *The bread which we break...*, his hands were doing something different: distributing the bread.

It would be wise to replace the sentence which we find in *Book of Praise* by a translation of that original sentence. This would prevent misunderstanding and misinterpreting, as if, indeed, we would follow 'Rome' in a kind of symbolic re-enacting Christ's sufferings and death.

Scriptural meaning

Please, mark the pair *breaking and distributing*. This does not mean that the minister is supposed to "break" Christ's body again in a symbolic way. Indeed, that would have much in common with the Roman-Catholic re-enacting Christ's body being broken.

As far as the understanding of this line is concerned, we must come down to earth: The Bible teaches us that having a meal was called: breaking bread. In particular when it regarded a joint meal, this act had a clear symbolic meaning: The host — in the family circle the father — took a bread, broke pieces off it, and distributed them to his guests — or wife and children. The Lord Jesus did the same when the men of Emmaus had invited Him to stay with them. He must have had a special way of breaking the bread and giving it to others (Luke 24:30).

We can also read several times about this custom in the book of Acts, where it sometimes can also refer to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.³

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians this expression is used for the Lord's Supper. There the symbolic aspect of having a common meal and sharing the same food is applied to the holy meal instituted by Christ in commemoration of His atoning death at Calvary's cross.⁴

The twin-set of breaking the bread and distributing, as we find it in the original text of the Form, refers to the New Testament expression for having a common meal.

Therefore, the gesture of breaking bread by the minister during the administration of the Lord's Supper has nothing to do with a kind of re-enacting of Christ's body being broken.

Conclusion

To prevent the congregational members from getting the idea as if Christ's body, in a symbolic way, is broken again, my colleagues would do wise to break more than one piece from that strip of bread and distribute them one by one to those who are sitting close to him. Even better it is just to hand the plates containing the bread to the participating brothers and sisters.

Such a gesture would underline what the apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:17: *We all partake of that one bread.*

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¹ For those who can read Dutch we quote the sentence concerned. It reads: (*Bij het breken en uitdelen van het brood spreekt de voorganger*.)

² In 16th century German it reads: Hie soll der Kirchendiener einem jeden vom brodt des Herrn brechen/vnd jm darreichen/ sprechen: Das brodt das wir brechen...

³ Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7; 27:35.

⁴ Read 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17; 11:23, 26, 27, 28.