



Collections at the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper celebrations we're accustomed to in Smithville include four collection bowls, located strategically where those attending the table (or perhaps leaving) can deposit a contribution for the deacons to use in their care for the needy. I understand this practice has existed in Smithville ever since this church was instituted back in 1952. Must be a good tradition!

Why?

I also understand that this practice became a point of discussion in the congregation during Rev deGelder's time as minister here in the 1990s. To help the congregation understand this practice, an article written by Dr C Trimp (at the time professor at the Theological College in Kampen, the Netherlands) was translated into English and made available to the congregation. Trimp's explanation for this practice was as follows:

- The feasts Israel was to celebrate in the Old Testament repeatedly included a need to share of one's abundance with those who had less. As Israel had been slaves in Egypt but were made rich through God's grace, so the redeemed were in gratitude for God's grace to give freely to the poor in their midst (see Deut. 14:28,29; 16:11,14). So it became good Jewish practice to remember the poor on the evening of the Passover (see John 13:29).
- In step with this Old Testament instruction, the Pentecost congregation connected the "breaking of bread" (understood to be the sacrament of Lord's Supper) with the care for the poor (see Acts 2:42-47). In the church of Corinth it was specifically the abuse of caring for the poor at their Lord's Supper celebration that prompted the apostle to charge that "it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat" (1 Cor. 11:20) – for they were not expressing their love for one another.
- In the early years of church history, Christians would bring food with them to church to share with the needy in their midst, be it bread, wine, cheese, fruits, birds, etc. These gifts were collected and distributed by the deacons to those in need, be it in the church or in the wider community. With the passage of time these physical gifts were replaced by coins, which in turn were again collected and distributed. The point, of course, was that those redeemed by God's undeserved grace in Jesus Christ generously shared of their abundance for another's benefit.
- Through this sharing –with its focus particularly on Lord's Supper– the task of the deacons was also highlighted to deacons and congregation alike. For the deacons get their task of distributing to the needy from Christ's own example of self-emptying, and the congregation gets her impetus to give generously again from the wealth each member receives through Christ's sacrifice – and it's specifically at the Lord's Supper that the wealth of the gospel becomes so evident.

For these reasons, Trimp pleaded that collections bowls be maintained at the Lord's Supper table.

About a year ago a question arose in Consistory about why we have these collection bowls at the Lord's Supper. To explain the practice reference was made to the Trimp article. Given that many years had passed since that explanation was shared with the congregation, it was thought prudent to redistribute that article for the congregation's instruction. As a result, each mailbox in the foyer received copy for reading and reflection. Perhaps some discussions about the merits and demerits of this tradition occurred also.

Valid?

In all the years of my life and ministry in various corners of the globe, I have never encountered collection bowls at the Lord's Table anywhere else than in Smithville (though I know a couple other churches in our classis also maintain the practice – might I suggest as “daughter” churches from Smithville). So encountering this tradition in Smithville has indeed given me cause to reflect.

I do not for a moment doubt the link between the glorious message of the Lord's Supper celebration and the need to be generous to the needy. The Lord's Supper most certainly drives home to us very strongly how rich we are through Jesus' self-emptying; because of his sacrifice on the cross we may eat and drink as the Lord's friends in his presence. That's the gospel in all its glory! So we most definitely want to echo that wealth in generous giving. The question for me, though, is whether that generous giving is best done through depositing into a collection bowl at the table itself. I personally don't think so. The following factors play a role in my thinking:

- Those who observe our Lord's Supper custom (and maybe some who participate) could be forgiven for thinking that we're paying for the privilege of eating and drinking at the table. Face it: that's what the unschooled eye sees. But if there is any moment where the gospel of free *grace* is driven home powerfully and clearly, it is at the celebration of the Lord's Supper!
- Perhaps years ago when coins sufficed as a proper expression of gratitude, the collections bowls we use could do the job. But now that more and more contribute paper (perhaps in part because paper isn't as noisy), the bowl too soon overflows – and that gets a tad embarrassing for those who want to add another bill to the pile without displaying their generosity to the watching eye.
- From my place at the table, I observe a number of participants faithfully donating to the bowls. I also observe a number of participants who do not. They don't tell me why. But I have no doubt that self-consciousness is part of the explanation – even as self-consciousness is part of the explanation the other way too; what will they think if they see that I *don't* contribute. Either way, self-consciousness pushes aside the right motive for giving. Further, those who use the pew need to walk around the row of chairs to get to the bowl on the table, then need to back up against the flow to enter the pew. I can imagine that some might choose to avoid that little moment of awkwardness (even if someone has moved the bowl to the center table).
- But perhaps the biggest argument in my mind is the question of whether the thanksgiving collection for the poor needs to happen *at* the Lord's Supper table. As I just wrote, it's self-evident that generosity for the poor belongs to the gospel, and hence to the Lord's Supper celebration. But I do not see that this generosity must receive expression *at* the table instead of *before* or *after* the table. From all the passages mentioned in the Trimp material (or anywhere else in the Bible), I nowhere find an instruction that generosity for the poor must be specifically displayed *at* the table.

To be clear, none of these arguments lead me to think that collection bowls at the table is principally wrong. Since it's not a matter of right or wrong, but rather a question of what's wise and practical, there were, in my opinion, more important things to do than agitate on this issue. So I've kept my thoughts to myself....

Latest development

As the Press Release of the recent Council meeting shows, a letter from a member of the congregation appeared on Council table last week, asking that the practice of collection bowls at the Lord's Supper table be discontinued. The letter included some grounds as to why this would be the preferred way to go. I don't mind sharing these grounds with you:

- Not the entire congregation attends the celebration of the Lord's death. This is specifically true of the children (and also of some visitors). Though they may be encouraged by observing the celebration of the Supper, they cannot give the thank offering at the table. Would it not be better, then, this writer argued, to let the entire congregation participate in the thanksgiving collection for the needy *after* the celebration? It isn't that we need a second collection to ensure we get enough funds for the poor. Let us simply mark the post-Lord's Supper collection as the opportunity to give generously for the support of the needy, in response to the wealth we've received by grace at the Table.
- Of the three tables we commonly see in front of the church at the Lord's Supper celebration, the small central table is used for the elements of bread and wine, while the two long tables are used for the celebrants to sit around to eat the meal. The collection bowls have commonly been placed at the two ends of the long tables. But of late two of those collection bowls have, for practical and understandable reasons (too awkward for too many to reach), migrated to the central table. That leaves the message that they are somehow vital to the sacrament itself. Since that latter message is not true, perhaps the solution is simply to discontinue the practice.

Council discussed the letter's arguments and concluded that the force of those arguments was sufficiently strong to decide to discontinue the practice of having collection bowls at the Lord's Supper table. Council also decided that someone should write a *Bit to Read* to explain the thing. The latter decision was made without a reference to any name. Some 20 pairs of eyes, however, glared as so many daggers in one direction – and I was duly intimidated.

Conclusion

So there it is. From now on Smithville will join the many churches across the Federation (and yes, in Australia too) who have no collection bowls at the Lord's Supper celebration. We will not, however, drive a wedge between the wealth received at the table and our desire to share of the wealth we've received (also materially) with those who have less. The collection after the Lord's Supper will be for the deacons to distribute to the needy.

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