

A HOLY, VISIBLE SIGN AND SEAL

In the April 28 issue of *Clarion* this year there was a letter to the editor, submitted by John Vantil. At that time, I promised to interact with his questions within the framework of a closer look at Article 61 of the Church Order, which regulates “Admission to the Lord’s Supper.” In his letter, Vantil responded to a column I had written earlier, with the title “The spirit of the Church Order,” and he was puzzled by my statement that “it [i.e. Art. 61] does not say anything about guests who might come from other denominations, or perhaps from no church at all.”

But there is no need to be puzzled here. I used the reference to Article 61 to illustrate that the Church Order does not always answer all our questions—in this case, the question of how to respond to the request of a visitor who is not a member of a sister church and who asks to be admitted to the Holy Supper. It was simply an observation that Article 61 says nothing about this.

Of course, that does not mean that we cannot have a closer look at this issue and see if we can find out more about why this is the case and what the implications are. Vantil does exactly that when he asks: “Would it not be helpful to refer to the original wording of Article 61 of the Church Order?”

The issue of admitting guests or visitors to the Lord’s Supper celebration, and the responsibility of the elders in this, is often a matter of discussion. We see a variety of practices, not only

between the CanRC and its sister churches, like the OPC and the URC, but also within the federation of CanRCs.

DOES ARTICLE 61 MENTION GUESTS?

Article 61 has two parts. The first describes the responsibility of the consistory when it comes to admitting people to the Lord’s Supper. The condition to be met is twofold: (1) public profession of the Reformed faith, and (2) a godly lifestyle. This is in line with what we confess in Q/A 82 of the Catechism: “Are those to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?” The answer is: “No.”

The second part stipulates that those who come from a sister church can partake in the Lord’s Supper celebration, without making profession of faith again, provided they can show written evidence that they meet the conditions in the first part of this CO article.

This second part is usually interpreted as referring to what we have come to call “travel attestations” for guests. But that is questionable. The word “guest” is never mentioned—neither from sister churches nor from non-sister churches. Perhaps it doesn’t even refer to guests.

Here it becomes interesting to follow the suggestion of Vantil’s letter to the editor, mentioned before: how does the current wording of Article 61 compare to the previous version (before the revision of 1983)?¹ It says this:

None shall be admitted to the Lord’s Supper except those who, according to the usage of the church with which they unite

Readers are invited to send questions regarding church polity and the Church Order to Jan DeGelder (jdegelder@cogeco.ca).

¹ Acts GS Orangeville 1968, p. 124

themselves, have made a profession of the Reformed Religion, besides being reputed to be of a godly conduct, without which also those who come from other churches shall not be admitted.

Here also the last part of the sentence does not speak about “guests,” who are visiting when the Lord’s Supper is being celebrated. The words “coming from other churches” have always been interpreted as referring to people who move from one church to another in the federation. They don’t need to profess their faith again to become communicant members, with the right to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper in their new congregation, as long as they can prove that they have made profession of the Reformed Religion and are reputed to be of godly conduct.

How will they be able to prove that? Here church order commentaries make the connection with the old Article 82 (which has become Article 62 in our current CO): “To those who depart from the congregation, an attestation or testimony concerning their profession and conduct shall be given by the consistory.”² This is about the attestation or testimony given to those who move to another town and thus join the Reformed church in that place. Again—the words “guest” and “travel attestation” are nowhere to be found.

Of course, this does not prove that there were never any guests at the Lord’s Supper anywhere. But it makes clear that the Church Order does not regulate it. What we would call today a “travel attestation” came up in the nineteenth century as a document for “boatmen” or “bargemen” (Dutch: *schippers*), who travelled with their barges over the rivers and canals in Holland, transporting cargo from town to town. They usually had their family on board, and, since they were perhaps once or only a few times per year in their hometown and home church, they carried a document with them to declare that they were church members in A, so that wherever they came they would be received in the local Reformed church, got pastoral care, had a baby baptized, and—yes—could attend the Lord’s Supper.³

AN ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE

What are the implications of the conclusion that our Church Order’s Article 61 does not mention “guests” or “visitors” when it speaks about “Admission to the Lord’s Supper”?

Some would say that therefore it is entirely up to the local consistory how to admit those visitors to the Holy Supper celebrations. This may sound reasonable, but it is an argument based on what the Church Order does not say, an argument from silence.

Such an argument is always weak. It would make just as much sense to say that, since Article 61 does not mention any guests, guests should simply not be part of the celebration at all.

There is actually more that points in the direction that the Lord’s Supper is for the local congregation and that guests are not in the picture. For instance, Article 35 of the Belgic Confession says that “we receive this holy sacrament in the congregation of the people of God with humility and reverence as we together commemorate the death of Christ our Saviour.” And in Q/A 82 of the Catechism we confess that, when the unbelieving and ungodly are admitted to the Lord’s Supper, God’s wrath is kindled against the whole congregation. Furthermore, the Form for the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper instructs us that “for the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds.” You will exercise and experience this fellowship in your own local church community (cf. 1 Cor 12).

However, historically speaking, the exclusion of all guests would be a step too far. Dutch ecclesiastical assemblies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dealt already with questions about guests at the Lord’s Supper. They stressed the responsibility of consistories to insist (!) on a written testimony that those who would like to partake had been admitted to the Lord’s Supper in their home (Reformed) church.⁴

All this still leaves the question: how do you make a decision about admitting guests, when Article 61 does not say anything about it? Think of what we saw in a previous column about “the spirit of the church order.” What is not written can never be interpreted as the opposite of what has been written. In other words: the freedom of the consistory of the local church to admit guests to the Lord’s Supper cannot be a freedom that contradicts what has been stipulated already about admission to the Lord’s table.

After all—would it not be strange and inconsistent if an entirely different standard would apply for guests from non-sister churches than for members of our own churches or from sister churches? 



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² Acts GS Orangeville 1968, p. 126

³ Acts GS Dordrecht 1893, Art. 189

⁴ J. Reitsma and S. D. Van Veen, *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, Vol. 1 [1892], Enchuysen, 1573, Art. 21, p. 19, and Vol. 7 [1898], Groningen, 1613, p. 214.