**B. Holwerda - Lord’s Day 28**

Read: Hebrews 10: 19-39

Psalm 23: 1

Psalm 23: 3

Psalm 103: 2, 3

Psalm 119: 24, 25

Psalm 138; 3

Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ,

Starting in Lord‘s Day 25, and continuing until Lord’s Day 31,we, as Christian church, make a confession of God the Holy Spirit and His means of grace. But then I want to repeat emphatically: we are making a confession of God the Holy Spirit and His means of grace. For when it says above Lord’s Day 25: Word and Sacrament, this does not mean even for a moment that those means of grace are independent; that these means in themselves have the power to strengthen faith; that they work automatically. Rome teaches that. Luther teaches it too. But that is not Reformed. Rome and Luther say that divine grace is contained in the Word and Sacraments. Then those means work just like that, completely independently. And then we come to trust those means and to give those means divine honor.

But we have confessed that we believe in God; in God alone; that we believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. You know that from Lord’s Day 8: we confess God the Father and our creation; God the Son and our redemption; God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. We do not trust in creation, but in God the Father, the Creator; similarly: we do not believe in redemption, but in God, the Son who delivers; and then again: we do not believe in sanctification, but we trust in God, the Holy Spirit who sanctifies. We do not believe in the works as such, but we believe in God who works. So we do not believe in the sacraments, but in God, the Holy Spirit, who works through the sacraments.

You must maintain this diligently, that we never confess the means of grace as such; but that we make confessions of God, who gave those means and works through them. If you forget this, even for a moment, and give the means a power of their own, then you will no longer know how to proceed.

We have seen this for some Lord’s Days regarding the preaching of the Word as a means of grace. People make it independent, and they think that the Word, and the preaching, is separate from the Spirit. Then the significance of the preaching immediately becomes a very dubious thing. I will know when I come to church that I will hear a sermon, but then the question is whether that Word will do anything to me; I don't see the Spirit standing behind the Word; I do not see the Word as the sword of the Spirit, with which God himself fights and overcomes. Yes, then I can learn all kinds of right doctrines about the Word and also about the Spirit; I can say of the Word that it is infallible and that God wants there to be preaching; I can say of the Spirit that He must ultimately do it. But I no longer confess the Word as the **sword** of the Spirit; I do not confess with faithful trust, that the Spirit uses the Word as His sword, as often as it is preached.

Yet: I do believe in God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification; that is, I trust in the Spirit who makes the Word His sword. I know by faith the activity of the Spirit after every sermon; and that's why the church is so important. It is not the minister's workplace, but the Holy Spirit's workplace. And only for that reason does any unnecessary absence of a church service become sin; for going to church is never done to give the minister patronage, as you do in the week with the baker and the greengrocer, and therefore go to their stores. Going to church is always that you put yourself under the dominion of the Spirit, that He might reign with the Word. Our church life is immediately Reformed again if we come to understand this; no one would want to take a walk on a summer Sunday (for any other reason) than going to church; and no one will behave inappropriately in church. Because we are dealing with the Spirit in the church.

And I want to proceed with that same thought this afternoon in regard to the Holy Supper. You don’t see the Holy Supper as something independent do you, as something mysterious in itself; as something that works automatically? Even in your thoughts you must not separate the Supper from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Supper is an instrument of the Spirit. And so I cannot say anything about this instrument if I do not maintain that the Spirit (Himself) has chosen this instrument to work with.

The question is not: what is the Holy Supper in itself? But: what does the Spirit do through the Holy Supper?

So I administer to you the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Supper.

I say to you that the Holy Spirit uses this instrument*:*

*1. on the basis of faith.*

*2. to confirm faith.*

*3. for the communion of faith.*

**ONE**

I said a moment ago that the Holy Spirit uses the Holy Supper as His instrument on the basis of faith. After all, we confess here that Christ commanded me and all believers to eat this bread and drink from this cup. And we also find the same thought in the Lord’s Supper Form, when it mentions there that Christ has ordained this food only for His believers. That is why we are constantly urged to examine ourselves, whether we believe this sure promise of God that all our sins have been forgiven on account of Christ's sacrifice.

So the Lord’s Supper is only for believers. And that makes it very difficult for many in the church. They would like to participate in the Supper, if there was not the condition that it is only for believers. They are left with the question: Am I a believer?

They are the people who simply make the decision. They say: I don't know yet if I am a believer. And as long as I don't know this, I'm not coming to the Supper. That is very simple: "better not". And they have a hard time putting up with it when, in the sermon, the minister urges participation in the Supper. They think the man is riding his hobby horse. And the elders should not speak about the sacrament at every home visit. Then people say: you start talking about that every year. There are also those who cannot tolerate the demand of the Lord’s Supper being made without ceasing. Please talk about something else. Isn't the Holy Supper only for believers? But there are others, too, who are having a hard time with it, who would like to come to the Lord's Supper, if only they knew that they were believers.

Beloved, we must look at this carefully this afternoon, and that means that this commandment applies to all believers.

Christ has given this commandment, and by His Spirit He gives this commandment in the preaching of the Word. We may read it in such a way as to understand that the Holy Spirit gives us this commandment, for God causes all His laws to be proclaimed in the church through the proclamation of the Holy Gospel, that is through His Spirit.

The Spirit sets out this demand very emphatically in the church this afternoon. To all believers. Now I want to ask this: does He also make this requirement of you when you do not know if you are a believer? What does the catechism mean here? Does this requirement apply here to only a part of the church, only to those people who know for themselves; and does that demand not apply to those other members of the church?

I purposely ask the question so that we may see what our views are based on. If this commandment only applies to believers in the church, to a certain group in the church, and not to others, then we are gone astray. Whoever puts things this way does not only do much damage to one individual or another in the church, to a wandering soul, but he has thoroughly spoiled the whole church. What is the church? Now, I think of Lord’s Day 21: Christ is assembling a church in the unity of true faith. The church as such is the fellowship of believers. And there is no room in the church for the unbeliever.

And you must not let go of our confession of Lord’s Day 21. Me and all believers, that means: the whole church, without one exception. Christ commands every member of the church (of course that is when they come to the age of discernment , I don't need to talk about that further for now) - by His Spirit Christ commands His death to be proclaimed to every member of the church. And whoever refuses to celebrate the Holy Supper withdraws from the communion of the church.

I know this is said very severely; I also know that not everyone who has stayed home from the Supper so far has seen the consequences; but it remains true: this commandment is addressed to every member of the church, and whoever disobeys it plays with their church membership. They are disobedient to the commandment of Christ; they oppose the Holy Spirit. Everyone of us is driven by this law, and there is not one of us who has a chance to escape Christ’s grasp, and still quietly keep their place in the church.

But is this commandment, in essence, not a terrible thing? Is this not something to tremble for? That would be so if this commandment were not given to us by Christ in the Holy Spirit. But now you have to remember what I just said about the sacraments, that they are never independent, but that the Holy Spirit always stands behind them. When you see that, you are driven into narrow confines by this inexorable command, but at the same time you are placed in the open by the Lord himself. Not in your self-chosen space, but in the open space of the Holy Spirit Himself. Many choose a solution themselves: "rather not". But the Holy Spirit Himself brings you His solution, that you should not only celebrate Supper, but you also can. After all, it is the Holy Spirit who demands faith who also gives faith. And He asks faith only from the church, because He gives it faith. All He wants is that we accept His gift. You must see that, and then you come into the open: the Holy Spirit makes this claim to you, only because He gave you the grace of faith; and He does not require this demand to crush you and make you desperate, but to strengthen you in faith. He wants to be acknowledged as the Worker to faith. Every member of the church that comes to the age of discernment must celebrate the Supper. For the church is the church that Christ gathers in the unity of the true faith. That is why this Lord’s Supper demand is addressed to the entire church.

Now I can imagine that an objection can be raised against this or another. The objection that in this way too many will come to the Supper; that self examination will be jeopardized: "it doesn‘t happen just like that?" If there is someone in the congregation who holds on to his sinful life, who does not fight against his sin, but cherishes it, can he also come to the Holy Supper? Now, if there is anybody who is a member of the church superficially, who fulfills his ecclesiastical duties without really believing, does he also have access to the Lord's Supper? What then remains of the self-examination?

Yet I persist: every member of the church must proclaim the death of Christ by faith; there is no one in the church to whom this requirement does not apply. Is it then made too easy for people? Is self examination not taken seriously?

I would deliberately reverse it: that is how self examination is preached with the greatest emphasis. Now it becomes very difficult for everyone. The opinion mentioned above, on the other hand, makes it far too easy, and those who think this back it up with this self examination. Naturally, if there is someone who won't break with his sin, who doesn't really believe, he can't come to the Supper; but he cannot remain a member of the church either. That is precisely my major objection to making strict demands for Lord‘s Supper attendance, yet leaving membership of the church open to everyone. They want the unbeliever who is not serious about daily conversion to remain as a member of the church. They are not allowed to come to the Holy Supper, but they are allowed to keep their place in the church.

What remains of the church? May the church have a mixed group of believers and unbelievers? But then the pagan can also be a church member. And then one gets a separate church of believing people in the church who may celebrate the Lord's Supper. But the Scripture does not want that. The Holy Supper requires self-examination. That is, the Spirit puts the knife to our throat. He sets us before a choice: do you want to believe or not, celebrate communion or not, break with sin or not, stay in church or not? And everyone must choose. We can't escape it: celebrate the Lord’s Supper or not. In the church or out. The Holy Spirit gives only two possibilities: to be a member of the Church, but then to celebrate the Lord's Supper, or not to want to celebrate the Lord's Supper and not to remain a member of the Church. In practice we always offer three options. One group celebrates the Lord's Supper, i.e., the true believers; one group is pagan; and in between we have a third circle of those who do not want to be unbelievers completely, but who also do not believe wholeheartedly. And whoever lives in such a way so that he does not dare to come or can not come to the Supper, will find a place of refuge there, an asylum, in the circle that limps on two thoughts; that is neither positively right, nor completely left. We have an intermediate group of undecided between the true believers and the unbelievers. Thatis very easy: if one is too far left for me and the other too far right for me, then I will keep the golden middle, and remain an undecided member of the church. But the Holy Spirit does not want that. He says: one of two: either right or left, and there is no intermediate position. You convert or not, you believe or not; but you can never be 'half' in the church: participate a little and never participate fully. You are a member of the Church, but you must also participate fully, also at the Supper; or you do not participate, but then you cannot stay in the church.

When are the hypocrites lulled to sleep? When we allow a group of undecided into the church. Then they are not completely part of it, but they are not completely out of it either. But that messes up the church. And so if there is someone among you who does not heartily believe yet, and does not want to go in the ways of the Lord. They cannot avoid the dance when the Lord‘s Supper does come. Yes, if there is a circle of undecided in the church, they can join it. But that doesn't exist. So now the Lord’s Supper comes, and they must choose. The Holy Spirit now says to them: you must know what you want. Do you want to celebrate Supper, do you want to stay in the church, good: but then really believe, and deal seriously with membership of the church; but if you do not want to repent, draw the consequence: there is no room for you in the church.

Beloved, what do you want to do? Believe or not? Walking in the ways of the Lords or not? Whoever wants to believe, even though still very weak, whoever wants to repent, even if they still stumble, must celebrate the Lord's Supper. Whoever does not want to believe, he must also no longer pretend; perhaps the consistory cannot apply censorship to him, because his unbelief cannot be established. But he must hear it: there is no room for him in the church. It does not exist that someone would be unbeliever and still belong to the church in one way or another. He must not have any illusions. For in every sermon and every sacrament, the Holy Spirit says to him: you must know what you are doing; what you do, do it hastily.

One or the other. It is good for the hypocrites that the Holy Supper demands a definite choice. They can now never resort to an asylum for the undecided.

It is also good for doubting souls that the Supper says: one or the other. For them, too, there is no way out to a place where they can persist for years and years in their attitude of doubt. That is so easy: not at the Supper, but nevertheless in the church, And so one remains stuck in doubt: one never gets over it. But the Holy Spirit brings the crisis into the church, saying: believe or not. What do you want? In this way the Holy Spirit also forces them to come to certainty. The Holy Spirit knows only two ways, and so He also helps those doubters over the dead end. Then it becomes very simple. What do you want: to belong to Jesus Christ or not?

**TWO**

And what you have to hold on to is that the Holy Spirit gives the Holy Supper for the strengthening of faith. Many people have such strangely remarkable ideas of ‌‌the sacrament. People no longer see it as a means of strengthening for the weak, nor as a means of affirmation for doubters, but as a reward for good behavior, as a premium for good faith, as a medal of merit. It is so bad in some churches that the Supper table is opened to only a few, to special pious people. The fewer the number of members that come to Supper, the better it is. It is considered proof that the non-comers take the Lord's Supper very close to heart; that although not believers, they are gracious members of the church because they are anxious and stay away.

And that anxiety consists of the fact that it is not easy to believe that one can just accept the sure promises of God. This is also an invention of the devil, he learns to use that scriptural word "anxious" to indicate ungodly doubt, stubborn unbelief. You must see it this way: Christ requires faith. God gives certain promises and says: this is the work of God that pleases Him, that you believe in Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. And in another place: His commandment is that you believe. God commands faith. Faith is the only good property of the church. But many find it a virtue if people deny God's promises. God demands faith. But many of the "weighty " demand unbelief, even though they call it "concerned" for convenience.

And so they turn everything upside down. Is the Holy Supper for the best in the church, for the most devout; a kind of spiritual knighthood for guided souls; an “cup of honor” for the strongest?

But God gives the Supper precisely because of the weakness of our faith. People say: if you want to celebrate Supper, you must first be far advanced spiritually. But God says: you must celebrate the Lord's Supper, because you are only at the beginning, because you are not far at all and otherwise you will never get further. If the doctor prescribes rejuvenating drugs for the weak, then the patient does not say: but, doctor, I dare not use those drugs because I am still so weak? Are they not prescribed for exactly that? But why do we do it differently with God? If God in the greatness of His grace takes care of our weaknesses and gives us the sacraments in addition to the Word, which should have been enough, because we are so weak in faith, should we then make an argument by that weakness to forsake God's reinforcing means of grace? If we were firmly established in faith, we would not need sacraments, then we would have had enough by the Word. But we are so weak, that is why God takes care of us. People often see God at the Supper table only as a strict Judge. They do not see Him as the Father, moved with love, who knows the weakness of His children and heals in His love. They do not see Him as the great Physician of our souls. When will we ever understand the love of God and no longer despise Him because of His merciless mercy? Yes, people, they judge hard. When we live close to each other and know a lot about each other, then we sit down in the judgment seat: “are they also at the Supper table? Do they qualify? They shouldn't come. "

But God, who is a very strict Judge, is at the same time a very merciful Father for all who call upon His Name and flee to His grace. And if a brother's brothers say: "He shouldn't come, he is not nearly ready", then God says about that child: "How weak it still is! How it still needs the Lord’s Supper”. The brothers in the church immediately raise objections, and so do the sisters, and they make a repelling gesture: stay away! But the Father stands with outstretched hands, and He invites all His weak children: Come all to Me.

Do you think that God is a God who wants us to perish in our faith, who wants us to suffer agonizing doubt? But then you don't know God, because God is love. What father, when his child prays for bread, gives them a stones? Would the heavenly Father exclude His child, who yearns for faith and certainty, who prays for the grace of the Holy Spirit, from the Lord's Supper to let it perish in doubt and surrender to the devil? If you do not give stones for bread to your children, how much less does your Father.

You set the table before me, You make my head fat with oil, my cup is overflowing.

God pours that cup full time and again. Did you think that God sets up a table, but does not invite His children to it, but repels them? No, God is love!

**THREE**

And about that beautiful gift He gives us here. He not only strengthens faith, but He establishes the communion of faith. The catechism says this about it in Q & A 76: second, to be more and more...

United with the holy body of Christ so that we are bone of Christ's bone and flesh of His flesh. You know this from Eve's creation story. Adam rejoices when he awakens: this time it is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh; she will be called Women, because she has been taken from the man. He is delighted about the marriage communion with his wife: bone of his bones, that is the most intimate communion. And as intimate as it was between Adam and Eve, so intimate it is between Christ and us. Our fathers liked to speak of a "mystical union" on this point regarding the hidden communion of life between Christ and us. The word is somewhat dangerous, because the term mysticism contains many heresies. But you can maintain the use of this word, as long as you clearly understand what it means.

What is this mystical union? Is that a hidden fellowship of the soul? Something like the "hour of love" in mysticism? Is that an emotional blessedness? A immersion into Christ, where you no longer think, but only delight? Is it a union with Christ, where your mind is eliminated, and your activities also, a state of delight and ecstasy?

No. I want to see that term "flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones" in the light of the Scriptures. Paul takes those words from the unity of marriage when he talks about the intimate communion between Christ and His church. You know it: “a great mystery, but I say it, looking at Christ and the church. Something like the union between Adam and Eve, only infinitely more wonderful."

Ultimately it is no different here, Paul uses this term of mystical Union in the letter to the Ephesians. That is the letter about the church. Now this is a very important consideration. Mystical Union is only possible in communion with the church. Only the church can say as a bride: bone of His bones, we are His body. But that is why each person can only profess the mystical Union as a member of the Church. Yes, now it is a shame that we have worked out so many distinctions, and have torn apart what God has united. We speak of church as organism and church as institute, of visible and invisible church. And gradually it has become in fashion to swear (allegiance to) the invisible church. People tend to be embarrassed about the visible church, but they want to call themselves members of that invisible church. And people do not understand that they are actually sitting on God‘s throne.

For us there is no other church than the visible one, and that is exactly the same as the invisible one. This church, with its defects and misery, as we see it, is the same church that God sees, that He sees perfectly, also in its beauty and purity in Christ.

And then the issue of organism and institute. I will not speak about those terms. But the fact is, many don't want much from the institute. They are broad minded, they look beyond the church walls, and the offices they delegate to secondary importance.

But, beloved, we no longer understand anything of the mystical Union as Paul pictures it for us. That church which he writes to, which he calls the body of Christ, bone of His bones and flesh of His flesh, is not the invisible, but the visible church. That church in Ephesus is the body of Christ.

And that is not just the church as an organism, but this is very much the church as an institution. For Christ gave apostles and prophets and shepherds and teachers to build up His body. It is the church with a particular pastor and particular elders and deacons, and so, as a church. gathered by office bearers, is the body of Christ and has this mystical union.

The catechism confesses what Paul proclaims. We are united by the Spirit to Christ's body, that is, to His church, and as a result we are ruled by one spirit, like the members of the body by one soul. This again is the church, as it manifests itself in the world and is officially convened, the institution where the believers are registered with their children as 'members'. "So, Paul says, we (members of the Corinthian church) who are many are one body."

Now, beloved, we receive this benefit at the Holy Supper. Just say "mystical Union," with confidence, but thinking of your own church. We are becoming more and more united with Christ. With his body. That is with the church here, with this particular church consistory, with the brothers and sisters next to me in the bench. That is the mystical Union. That is the communion of saints, according to Lord’s Day 21.

Sometimes I have heard of an opinion defended that you could safely celebrate the Lord's Supper in another church. The whole matter of the instituted Church can then be disregarded when it comes to the Lord’s Supper. That it was purely a matter of common faith, not a matter of the same church council. But the mystical union is a matter of the church instituted. That is why I can never ignore church walls at the Lord’s Supper, at that festival of the mystical Union. I cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper with those who do not want to practice the communion of the church with me.

There are many outside the (Liberated) Reformed church(es), with whom I would like to celebrate Supper. But first a common fellowship in the church must exist. And celebrating the Lord’s Supper at (synods and ) conferences and the like is playing with the church, playing games with the mystical Union, is a violation of the law of the Lord’s Supper itself.

Many say: if you only have one faith, then you can sit at the Supper together. But the confession says: wait a minute. The church is not a bagatelle, a trifle. One faith? Yes, but then also one consistory!

And that is why the Holy Supper is one of the arguments for insisting on, and actively contributing to, the unity of all believers. For unity, not by neglecting the offices, but for a unity under the same office. The splintering of the believers contradicts the Holy Supper as being an instrument of mystical union. So at every Supper table prayer must be must for the unity of the church. “0h God, we are sitting here at Your table now, we have fellowship with Christ and with each other; but also bring those others here who belong here and who are not yet here today. That is those who have trivialized or misrepresented the matter of the church as institution. Rule us through one Spirit, make us one body, under one church consistory”.

This is mystical Union. Mystical Union: it is hidden; our life is hidden with Christ in God; we are ruled by Christ unseen. 'We don't see much of it at all. It is hidden, yet very public. It is the church, invisible and always visible at the same time. It is the church, organism and always an institution!

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Of course, that includes peace with God, and joy of heart about reconciliation. But it does not limit itself to that. It is not primarily passive enjoyment, but active work. To be ruled by the Spirit is to obey His law. It is: working with Christ’s one work, administering His one office. It is: confessing God's name, offering ourselves to Him; it is: fighting against sin in all relationships, in every respect.

I believe the Holy Supper as an instrument of the mystical Union. That is I believe in the building up of the church as institute. I believe that the Holy Spirit units us there to Christ and to each other, so that we might work His work together in the world, and in working fellowship with Christ, and also to know the joy of the fellowship of life with Christ and with each other, the joy of the principles of eternal life, in the united battle against the Antichrist.

**Amen.**