

WEEKLY COMMUNION

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Those in the Reformed tradition are committed to the concept of perpetual reformation, which means a continual openness to re-evaluating all doctrines and practices in the light of Scripture. Yes, one must have a proper respect for the illuminating work of the Spirit among our fathers in the faith and one must resist being blown about by every wind of doctrine. But one must also keep in mind that the Bible alone is our only infallible rule of faith and practice. No doctrine or practice, no matter how dear or traditional, is above subjection to a remeasurement against the platinum rod of truth which we call Scripture.

Our church's Session is in the process of Scripturally remeasuring its practice on the frequency of communion. The Session in its oversight of worship has much freedom in this area, the only stipulation in the Book of Church Order being that communion must be served "frequently". Out of the many possibilities this allows, which is the wisest and the best? As a result of my own study on this issue, I have become increasingly convinced that weekly communion each Lord's Day is the more Scriptural practice and the practice more conducive to our Lord's glory and to His church's spiritual health.

Those who prefer less frequent communion will immediately point out that there is no Scripture passage which directly instructs the elders to serve communion to the covenant people every Lord's Day. This is true, but there is another way to look at the issue. Practically every Reformed congregation engages in Bible reading (1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13), prayer (1 Tim. 2:1,8), preaching (2 Tim. 4:2), singing (Ephesians 5:19) and the collection of an offering (Acts 4:36-37) as a part of its weekly Lord's Day worship. These are all Biblically authorized elements of worship, and I agree that they should be practiced every Lord's Day. Of course, we do not have baptism or ordination every Sunday because these are initiatory rituals such that there is not always someone in need of baptism or ordination. But we tend to utilize every other Biblically sanctioned element of worship on a weekly basis -- except communion. The unbiased question is, Why is the Lord's Supper the only Biblically authorized and repeatable element of worship that Reformed churches in general do not utilize every Lord's Day?

There is Scriptural evidence for an offering every Lord's Day (1 Cor. 16:2), but where is the direct Scriptural evidence that practices such as Bible reading, preaching and singing should be a part of our corporate worship every Lord's Day? We generally acknowledge that a direct statement of Biblical authorization for their weekly practice is not needed. We universally deduce from Scripture that, with the exception of communion, every repeatable Scripturally authorized element of worship should be taken advantage of every Lord's Day. Why is communion the exception to this general principle? That is the question.

Although there are no direct Scriptural statements on the frequency of communion issue, there is a good amount of Scriptural evidence on this subject. For example, the only historical account of a Lord's Day worship service in the New Testament offers us some insight. We read about a Lord's Day service at the church in Troas in Acts 20:7-12. There "the disciples came together to break bread" and Paul "spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." This Lord's Day worship service at Troas included both the preached word and the sacramental word. The service is not said to have been a special communion service on the occasion of Paul's visit. The passage says that the disciples came together for the purpose of partaking of the Lord's Supper and that Paul was their preacher that Lord's Day. Was this use of both the preached word and the sacramental word their normal weekly practice or was Paul there one of the few Sundays each year on which this was done? Probability alone would point to the

former, and this conclusion is even more evident when we consider that the Holy Spirit gave us this unique account of a Lord's Day worship service in the book of Acts to guide us, not to confuse us. The burden of proof is on those who argue that the worship service described in Acts 20 was exceptional and not the normal weekly practice of the church at Troas.

Earlier in the book of Acts, we learn that the early Jerusalem church had communion very frequently:

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Acts 2:42

"So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people." Acts 2:46-47a

Although the breaking of bread can refer to a common meal (Acts 27:35), this general phraseology is also used to refer to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23-24). In Acts 2:42, the "breaking of bread" is in a list of essential religious activities associated with worship. This context indicates that the "breaking of bread" here refers to the sacramental meal. In Acts 2:46, however, the "breaking of bread" is associated with a common partaking of nourishment: "breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart." The best explanation for this apparently diverse usage in such close proximity is that the early church combined the sacramental meal with a fellowship meal or love feast. Both the fellowship meal and the sacramental meal are mentioned in Luke's account of the Lord's Day service at Troas where we learn that the church both broke bread and ate (Acts 20:7). Paul later makes clear that only the sacramental meal was established by our Lord as an essential element of worship (1 Cor. 11:23-26). At Corinth, the fellowship meal had become characterized by selfishness and cliquishness instead of Christian unity and love. Paul hinted that the Corinthians would be better off eating for nourishment in the privacy of their homes than making a travesty of the fellowship meal/love feast (1 Cor. 11:22,34). Combining all this data, the evidence indicates that the early church regularly partook of communion in the context of a fellowship meal but that only the sacramental meal was an act of worship.

Acts chapter two gives evidence for not only weekly but daily communion. We must keep in mind that the situation of the Jerusalem church in the weeks following Pentecost was more like life at a Bible conference or religious retreat than normal life. Many of the recent converts were from the Jewish dispersion and were away from home. Common to all would have been the enthusiasm associated with the continuing conversion of multitudes in a time of genuine revival and the excitement of participation in the ushering in of a new age. In this context, there was unusual generosity and sharing, and corporate worship was experienced on a daily basis. They met for worship at the temple and then met in houses for a combination fellowship meal and worship service that included the Lord's Supper. There is no evidence that the early church at Jerusalem had any concern about too frequent participation robbing the communion meal of its special character or power.

We get insight into worship in more normal times in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Corporate worship was no longer a daily experience but a weekly experience on the Lord's Day (1 Cor. 16:2; cf. Acts 20:7). Here we find additional evidence that the early church normally partook of the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day.

As Paul begins his section on the Lord's Supper, he refers three times to the church's assembling for worship:

Now in giving these instructions, I do not praise you, since YOU COME TOGETHER not

for the better but for the worse. For first of all when YOU COME TOGETHER AS A CHURCH, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. Therefore when YOU COME TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper."

1 Corinthians 11:17-20

Very similar language is used in 1 Corinthians 14:26:

How is it then, brethren? Whenever YOU COME TOGETHER, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification."

All of the above four uses of the verb translated "come together" are in the present tense and refer to habitually recurring action. Most acknowledge that the verse in chapter fourteen refers to the normal weekly worship experience of the church at Corinth during the apostolic age. Why should this not also be true of the verses in chapter eleven which use such similar language? The church at Corinth every Lord's Day partook of the Lord's Supper in conjunction with a fellowship meal.

Paul points out that the Corinthian fellowship meals were characterized by selfishness, cliquishness, gluttony and drunkenness. The Lord's Supper was served in conjunction with these fellowship meals, but the Corinthians were not assembling for the purpose of partaking of the Lord's Supper as evidenced by their mad rush to see who could "dig in" first:

Therefore when YOU COME TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. 1 Corinthians 11:20-21

For the Corinthians, the Lord's Supper had taken a distant second place to a fellowship meal that was conducted in a disgraceful manner. They did not treat the Lord's Table with the honor and respect due to it as the sacramental sign and seal of our Lord's body and blood. As Paul said elsewhere in this letter,

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?
1 Corinthians 10:16

The Corinthians were not "discerning the Lord's body" (11:29; cf. v.27) in their partaking of the Lord's Supper and therefore were partaking in an unworthy manner.

The Lord's Supper obviously had lost much of its specialness for the church at Corinth. Notice that Paul did not advise them to partake less frequently as a solution to this problem. His counsel was that they satisfy their hunger at home apart from the sacramental meal (11:22,34), that they examine themselves for sinful motives and attitudes before partaking (11:28), that they discern the Lord's body, distinguishing the Lord's Table from an ordinary meal (11:29), and that they recognize that severe chastisement would come (indeed, had already come) upon those who partook of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (11:30-32).

Paul reminded the Corinthians that every time they partook of the Lord's Supper, they were proclaiming the Lord's death until He returns (11:26). Should we not be proclaiming the Lord's death every Lord's Day? Paul told the Corinthians, "For I determined not to know

anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

I do not doubt that the reading and preaching of the Word together with worshipful singing was a part of the weekly Lord's Day worship of the early church. I also now have no doubt but that communion also was a part of the weekly Lord's Day worship in the early church. As we have seen, there is much evidence for this in the New Testament. We also know that this was the practice of the early church after the age of the apostles. Justin Martyr, who lived from approximately A.D. 100 to 165, gave the following account of Sunday worship in his day:

On the day of the Sun [Sunday] all who live in towns or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then when the reader has ceased the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of the good examples cited. Then all rise together and prayers are offered. At length ... prayer being ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president offers prayer and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the people assent by saying Amen: and the distribution is made to each one of his share of the elements which have been blessed, and to those who are not present it is sent by the ministry of the deacons.

Even if there were no statements in the New Testament suggesting weekly communion or historical evidence for weekly communion in the early church, I would still regard weekly communion as a wiser and more responsible practice than quarterly communion. Preaching and communion are Biblically authorized means of grace which each have distinctive contributions and which complement each other. The church should take full advantage of them both every Lord's Day.

There is a sense in which the preached word has priority over the sacramental word. The sacraments are the signs and seals of God's promise. One can have a meaningful promise without the sign and seal, but one cannot have a meaningful sign and seal without the promise. The preached word alone is preferable to the sacramental word alone. But why limit ourselves to these two choices? Why not choose the best instead? Why not worship through the preached word and the sacramental word combined?

There are several ways in which the preached word and the sacramental word complement each other. To begin with, the Lord's Supper helps the preached word to maintain its proper focus. Ideally every sermon should focus on Jesus Christ and Him crucified. On our church's pulpit positioned for the preacher to see is a plaque with the statement: "Sir, we would see Jesus" (John 12:21). What better way to insure this focus than to climax every Lord's Day sermon with the Lord's Supper? Through the Lord's Supper, we proclaim our Lord's death.

Second, the Lord's Supper as a sign or symbol helps to communicate the gospel message. The human is not a logic machine that responds only to abstract language. The human is a complex personality who can experience many degrees of knowledge. The human can hear without hearing and see without seeing. God in His wisdom has chosen to communicate His message to His people visually as well verbally in order to more profoundly impress His truth upon the human heart. In Genesis 15, God revealed to Abram that his seed would eventually be beyond numbering. God chose to communicate this message not merely in words. He said to Abram, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." ... "So shall your descendants be." This visual object lesson impressed the significance and reality of God's promise on Abram's heart with an impact beyond that of the naked word. And we read that Abram "believed the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." God uses the vivid communication of the sight, feel and taste of the sacrament to increase the faith of His people.

Third, the Lord's Supper helps to assure God's people that His gospel promise is true. It serves as a guarantee or seal. God has no one beyond Himself to swear by and His word is inviolable, but our faith is weak. And so God confirms the verbal Gospel with the sacramental seal to give us added assurance.

Fourth, the Lord's Supper personalizes the promises of the Gospel. Jesus said, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." The Christian in partaking of the Lord's Supper is reminded that this promise applies to him personally and individually through faith.

Fifth, the Lord's Supper gives the Christian an opportunity to publicly testify to his faith in Christ. By freely and gladly partaking of God's sacramental seal in a public assembly, the Christian has the regular opportunity to testify openly to his faith in Christ and His saving work.

Sixth, the Lord's Supper gives the Christian an opportunity to publicly identify with God's covenant people. As the covenant people voluntarily partake of the one bread and drink, they reaffirm that they are one people united by their common faith in Christ.

Seventh, the Lord's Supper reminds us of our duty to promote peace and goodwill within the church. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord said,

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

We no longer come to an altar, but we come to the Table of our Lord. There we are reminded of our duty to seek to be at peace with God's people. If God through Christ so loved us, ought we not to love one another (1 John 4:11)? If God through Christ forgave us, ought we not to forgive one another (Matt. 6:12; 18:15; 19:21-22,33)?

Eighth, the Lord's Supper allows the Christian to publicly rededicate his life to God's service. He remembers his great debt to Jesus Christ the Savior. He is reminded that he is not his own, for he has been bought with a price. By commemorating the sacrificial death that made him a servant of righteousness, the Christian is publicly presenting his body to God as a living sacrifice, which is his reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

Ninth, the Lord's Supper marks the Christian off from the world. The sacraments are a seal not only in the sense of a guarantee but also in the sense of a mark of ownership. The world has the mark of the beast, and the church has the inner seal of the Spirit and the outer seal of the sacraments. By partaking, the convert proclaims that he has left the pagan world and can no longer participate in it, for "you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:21).

Tenth, the Lord's Supper distinguishes the church from all other religious organizations. When I was in college, I often attended Campus Crusade College Life meetings. We sang spiritual songs and prayed and heard the reading of the Word and preaching. I have attended church worship services that differed very little from these College Life meetings. This cannot be said of a worship service that includes the Lord's Supper. The church is the only religious organization that can validly serve Christ's Table.

Eleventh, the Lord's Supper presents an evangelical challenge to the non-Christian. When a non-Christian visits a worship service, he can listen to the sermon, give an offering, sing the songs, and bow his head during the prayer. In all of this, there is nothing to outwardly distinguish the non-Christian from the people of God. The Lord's Supper, however, is limited to Christians. The sacrament reminds the non-Christian that he has made no public commitment to Christ, that he has not covenanted together with God's people. He may have visited the worship service out of curiosity or for entertainment, but the Lord's Supper presents him with the moral challenge of the Gospel.

Twelfth, the Lord's Supper challenges the Christian to examine himself. The Christian is to make his calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10; cf. 2 Corinthians 13:5). He is challenged to examine his relationship to Christ as he prepares for the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:28).

Thirteenth, the Lord's Supper reminds the elders that they are responsible for shepherding the flock and overseeing worship. The elders, as a means of discipline, may be obligated to deny the Lord's Supper to one whom they had previously served. The church's responsibility toward the sinning church member who refuses to repent in response to the discipline process is to "let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17). In the PCA, this final step is taken in two stages: first suspension from the Lord's Table and then excommunication from church membership.

Paul rebuked the Corinthians when they gloried in their "broad-minded" tolerance of an outrageous sinner in their fellowship (1 Cor. 5:1-2,6). Paul compared this to tolerating leaven in the unleaven bread of Passover (5:6). We are to "purge out the old leaven" that we may "keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (5:7,8). Every time the elders administer the new covenant feast of the Lord's Supper, they are reminded of their responsibility for the purity of Christ's church. The church is not to eat with the person under discipline (5:11), and the elders must enforce this rule when the Lord's Supper is served.

Fourteenth, the Lord's Supper challenges the Christian living in sin to repent and be reconciled to the church. In many evangelical churches today, there is no public reminder for the straying sheep that he is under the church's discipline except on the four Sundays each year the Lord's Supper is served. There is no public reminder because on almost every Sunday the elders treat all the church as if they under discipline by administratively denying them access to the Lord's Table.

Fifteenth, the Lord's Supper reminds the church that Jesus is coming again. The localized human body of Jesus is not in the communion elements but is at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Every time we partake of the elements, we are reminded that one day Jesus will bodily return to earth in glory. In the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the Lord's death TILL HE COMES.

As I was compiling this list of benefits, the thought occurred to me that as a general rule only churches that serve the Lord's Table infrequently have adopted the altar call or the invitation system. This system has no Scriptural basis and is built on bad theology. Why have Bible believing churches adopted it? Is it because they have denied themselves weekly communion and are trying to fill the resulting vacuum with a man-made system? "Walking the aisle" has become the weekly sign and seal of coming to Christ in faith or for rededication. Many pastors attempt to get someone to do it every Lord's Day. "Walking the aisle" is the only regular opportunity for public testimony and rededication given to many Christians today. What is sad is that this man-made system implies that Christian rededication and testimony is needed

only periodically and only by a few Christians each Sunday. The implication of weekly communion is that regular rededication and public testimony is the norm for all true followers of Christ. It is also interesting that some Christians who are deprived of the weekly opportunity to sacramentally identify with God's people develop a tendency to doubt their salvation and to periodically rewalk the aisle. Are these people seeking in repeated baptisms the assurance that they could properly obtain through weekly communion?

The Lord's Supper has many benefits, and it seems strange that God's people choose not to partake of them on a regular weekly basis. Practically the only reason ever given for this is the fear that frequent participation will make communion less meaningful. Since this objection is so commonly used, I must examine it in detail.

Those who use this objection to weekly communion never quote any verses as a basis for their fear of frequent communion. They have no Scriptural basis. And there are verses that point in the opposite direction. As I have already pointed out, the early Christians at Jerusalem partook of the Lord's Table more than once a week. The Scriptural account does not criticize this practice and gives no evidence of any negative spiritual repercussions. Also, many Christians at Corinth did come to treat the Lord's Supper as a common meal. The sacrament had lost its specialness and become less meaningful for them. Paul gave several recommendations to remedy the situation, but I am interested here in the recommendation Paul did not give. As I have already pointed out, Paul did not recommend that the Corinthian church try partaking of the Lord's Supper on an infrequent basis to make the sacramental meal more special.

In what sense does infrequent communion make the service more special and meaningful? It does so in the same way that a famine makes a man more appreciative of food. Deprivation of life's necessities does make one more appreciative of them. Does this mean that we are ever justified in voluntarily depriving ourselves of that which is necessary for our health as a means of enhancing our appreciation? Of course not. Such action is foolish in the physical realm, and it is also foolish in the spiritual realm.

Imagine yourself in an evangelical congregation with some unusual visitors. One is a true Christian from a country where all the churches are dominated by liberalism. Some are daydreaming during the sermon, but not this man. How he appreciates the sermon! How he rejoices to hear the Word preached without compromise! How he appreciates the preaching! Another visitor is a recent Christian immigrant from a communist country. How appreciative he is of the public reading of the Scripture. He has had no Bible for years and has had access to the Word only through foreign radio broadcasts that survived jamming efforts. Also present that Lord's Day is an elderly lady who is able to attend church only rarely because of physical limitations. And she so appreciates the morning prayer. What if some member of the church noticed the enhanced appreciation these three people had for the service and then suggested that the church limit the frequency of Bible reading and preaching and public prayer so that these would become more special to all in the congregation? One cannot deny that the deprivation would enhance appreciation, but we all see the folly of the suggestion. But why do some of us accept this same line of reasoning in regard to the Lord's Supper?

Let us imagine another hypothetical church. This church has a tradition of serving the Lord's Supper once a month. A new minister comes and asks that the church have weekly communion. The elders deny this request on the basis that the communion service would no longer be special if it were held on a weekly basis. If this is true, then why have communion monthly? Would not a quarterly communion service be more meaningful than a monthly communion service? Would not a yearly communion service be more meaningful still? And if

we want communion to be really meaningful, why not limit the service to once every generation? How about limiting communion services to one for each pass of Halley's Comet? Such a service would be so well attended and so appreciated and so long remembered. One cannot deny that such a once in a generation communion service would be more meaningful than a quarterly communion service. When one takes the "special because infrequent" principle to this extreme, the invalidity of the principle becomes rather obvious.

There are some events in life that must be kept infrequent if they are to remain special, events such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries. The Mad Hatter truly is mad to celebrate his unbirthdays, for these occur every day of the year but one. Unbirthdays are common and mundane, no occasion for a party. But notice that events that must be kept infrequent in order to preserve their specialness do not involve life necessities. Birthdays and anniversaries are icing on the cake of life, not life essentials. Eating is a common event but eating is still special. Eating is special in an inherent sense because without eating, we will die. Is communion special like a birthday, an event whose specialness is based upon its infrequency? Or is communion more like a meal, a frequent event that is special because of its necessity? Admittedly, the Lord's Supper, like a birthday celebration, is a memorial. Perhaps infrequent communion would be justified if the Lord's Supper were only a memorial. The Lord's Supper, however, is more than a mere memorial. God uses the Lord's Supper as an instrument for spiritually nourishing His people and strengthening their faith. The Lord's Supper is a means of grace, and we should take frequent advantage of it. The crucified Christ should be both publicly proclaimed (the preached word) and portrayed (the sacramental word; cf. Gal. 3:1).

What will we say when our Lord asks us why we deliberately neglected a primary means of grace in most Lord's Day worship services? Do we really believe He will be impressed with our "special because infrequent" rationalization? Is it truly good stewardship to hide the communion cup more Sundays than we use it?

Allow me to close with a quotation taken from a letter John Calvin wrote to the magistrates of Berne in March 1555:

"We celebrate the Lord's supper four times a year, and you thrice. Now would to God, messeigneurs, that both you and we had a more frequent use of it. For we see in the Acts of the Apostles by Saint Luke that in the primitive church they communicated much oftener. And that custom continued in the ancient church during a long space of time, til the abomination of the mass was devised by Satan, and was the cause why people communicated but once or twice a year. Wherefore we must confess that it is a defect in us not to follow the example of the Apostles."