

Considerations Regarding Weekly Communion

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The following brief sketch includes four parts: historical considerations, theological and exegetical considerations, arguments adduced against weekly communion, and practical considerations. Far more could be said about each of these areas, but I have attempted to raise the matters which I believe are most germane.

I. Historical Considerations.

While not binding, or holding any divine authority, the history of the Church can be instructive in a positive way, in demonstrating that a particular practice is not idiosyncratic.

A. The Ancient Church.

The practice of the early sub-apostolic church appears to have been one of weekly (or more frequent) communion.

“In the book of Acts instruction, preaching, prayer, and breaking of bread are mentioned, and mentioned in such a way as clearly to show that these elements were, from the beginning, the foundation of all the worship life of the Christian community. . . We know now the basis of early Christian worship; sermon, prayer, and supper.” (Cullmann, 1953, pp.12, 20. Also Martin, 1964, p. 131).

B. The Medieval Church.

After the development of the Mass in the Roman Church, the Lord’s Supper was only administered to the people once annually.

C. The Reformation.

Within the Reformed (as opposed to the Lutheran, which of course believes in weekly communion) branch of the Reformation, there were two major streams; the Zwinglian and the Calvinist.

Zwingli. Zwingli rejected the notion that the Lord’s Supper is a true sacrament, and consequently did not care to see communion integrated into the normal worship of the church. Indeed, there were in Zwingli’s services (as in Farel’s) two separate services,

a preaching service and a eucharistic service (Hagemann, 20, 21, 26). Zwingli was satisfied with quarterly observance of the Lord' Supper.

Calvin. By contrast, Calvin from the outset understood the close relation between Word and Sacrament, and viewed them together as appropriate and normative in the worship experience of the Church.

As bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of the body, so Christ's body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set forth. . . we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's blood. *ICR IV. xvii. 3*

. . .an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men. . .these definitions. . .in meaning differ not from that of Augustine, which defines a sacrament to be a visible sign of a sacred thing, or a visible form of an invisible grace. *ICR IV. xvii. 1.*

. . .From the definition which we have given, we perceive that there never is a sacrament without an antecedent promise, the sacrament being added as a kind of appendix, with the view of confirming and sealing the promise, and giving a better attestation, or rather, in a manner, confirming it. In this way, God provides first for our ignorance and sluggishness, and, secondly, for our infirmity, and yet, properly speaking, it does not so much confirm his word as establish us in the faith of it. For the truth of God is in itself sufficiently stable and certain, and cannot receive a better confirmation from any quarter than from itself. But as our faith is slender and weak, so if it be not propped up on every side, and supported by all kinds of means, it is forthwith shaken and tossed to and fro, wavers, and even falls. *IV. xvii. 3.*

. . .It is certain, therefore, that the Lord offers us his mercy, and a pledge of his grace, both in his sacred word and in the sacraments; but it is not apprehended save by those who receive the word and sacraments with firm faith. . *IV. xvii.7*

Not surprisingly, then, Calvin favored frequent, at least weekly, communion:

“No assembly of the Church should be held without the word being preached, prayers being offered, the Lord's supper administered, and alms given.” *ICR IV. xvii.44.*

“There is another matter, though not a new one, namely, that we celebrate the Lord's Supper four times a year, and you three times. Please God, gentlemen,

that both you and we may be able to establish a more frequent usage. For it is evident from St. Luke in the Book of Acts that communion was much more frequently celebrated in the primitive Church, until this abomination of the mass was set up by Satan, who so caused it that people received communion only once or twice a year. Wherefore, we must acknowledge that it is a defect in us that we do not follow the example of the Apostles.” Letter to the Magistrates of Berne, 1555.

“It would be desirable that the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be in use at least once every Sunday when the congregation is assembled, in view of the great comfort which the faithful receive from it as well as the fruit of all sorts which it produces--the promises which are there presented to our faith, that truly we are partakers of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, His death, His life, His Spirit, and all His benefits, and the exhortations which are there made to us to acknowledge and by a confession of praise to magnify those wonderful things, the graces of God bestowed upon us, and finally to live as Christians, joined together in peace and brotherhood as members of the same body. In fact, our Lord did not institute it to be commemorated two or three times a year, but for a frequent exercise of our faith and love which the Christian congregation is to use whenever it is assembled.” Articles presented to the Geneva Council in 1537, cited in Hageman, p.25.

D. The Puritans and non-conformists.

In England, the rise of an entirely fixed liturgy in the Anglican Church produced the reaction of the Puritans and nonconformists, who rejected such an approach to worship as an undue limitation upon the Spirit’s work in worship. With their rejection of fixed liturgies there occasionally came a rejection of any fixed element, save that of preaching, although Horton Davies has argued that the earliest Puritans observed communion weekly (*Worship of the English Puritans*, 1948, p. 43). Puritans such as John Owen believed the Lord’s Supper should be observed: “Every first day of the week, or at least as often as opportunity and conveniency may be obtained” (“A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God,” *Works*, xv: 512). Despite the influence of the English Puritans, the rejection of liturgy and infrequent observation of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper became a common feature of Puritan and Presbyterian worship in America.

E. Revivalism.

The evangelical revivals of the early to middle nineteenth century (to be distinguished from the so-called “Great Awakening of nearly a century earlier) were low church with a small “l.” The evangelical gatherings were designed to make the unbeliever feel at home, in the hopes that the individual would stay around long enough to hear the gospel message. Not originally designed to replace or influence the regular weekly worship of believers, the influence of the revivals has been profound on American worship. The influence of revivalism in worship manifests itself in worship being voluntary (as opposed to planned), lay-oriented (as opposed to clerically officiated), and “numbers”-oriented (as opposed to biblically directed).

In the revivals, conversion was the goal, the standard, and the focus, and virtually any means were acceptable if they would work toward the goal. Revival meetings, therefore, were not at all like the earlier worship meetings of both continental or American Protestantism. However, the revival meeting became the pattern to which American worship increasingly has conformed. Large platforms on which speakers could be seen by crowds; musical performances (whether vocal or instrumental) to attract the unconverted; populist and popular tunes and sentiments to make the unconverted feel at home; testimonies of individuals who have been recently converted; hymns written not about God’s character or saving deeds, but about the individual experience of conversion; these and many other elements of revival have influenced American worship to the root.

Put generally, evangelistic effectiveness became the criterion by which worship was evaluated (Melton, pp. 52-54). Since “fencing the table” would obviously exclude the non-believer, even perhaps offend him, the Lord’s Supper was obviously out of place in such an endeavor.

F. Re-discovery of reformation liturgies in 19th century.

The Reformation tradition in America was transmitted primarily by Puritans and nonconformists. The American Presbyterian tradition had its roots almost exclusively in Puritanism. The Puritan worship, non-liturgical, somewhat non-sacramental, and

generally austere, *was* the Presbyterian experience until the middle of the 19th century (Melton, 11-27).

In 1855, Charles Baird published *Eutaxia, or the Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches*. In this work, Baird discovered and translated (where necessary) into English, the liturgical materials of the early Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Among others, Baird included the liturgies of Calvin, the French Huguenots, John Knox, Richard Baxter, and the Dutch Reformed Church. For the first time, American Presbyterians had access to material that demonstrated the presence of a more sacramental and more liturgical tradition that was genuinely Presbyterian *prior* to the reduction of the service to a preaching service. Among other things, Baird's work made evident the importance and frequency of communion in the earlier Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. Several generations after Baird's publication, it is not at all unusual to find Presbyterian churches considering weekly communion, and not especially unusual to find monthly or weekly communion.

II. Theological and Exegetical Considerations.

Time and space do not permit a full expression and defense of the following six points. They will be stated as succinctly as they can, without adducing bibliographic support. Most, if not all, are arguments which have been repeated since the Reformation.

A. The Lord's Supper Instituted by Christ.

Since no one has given more for the Church than the one who died for it; since no one has purer motives than Christ, since no one is more concerned than Christ to edify the Church; those things instituted by Him must be perceived as flowing from Him, in all His redemptive love. Churches routinely and weekly do many things which Christ Himself never instituted nor even mentioned (announcements, preludes/postludes, testimonies, children's sermons, choral anthems, etc.). Some of these practices may find some warrant from some biblical or theological consideration. However, as the Church

wrestles with the question of what is to be included in or excluded from the public worship of God, honor for Christ requires us to recognize that the one thing which He has instituted as the way by which he *wishes* to be remembered by His Church, is to be considered differently than every other thing. Put negatively, we, as those who are ourselves in need of Christ's redeeming work, can hardly consider ourselves better judges than Christ of what honors our Lord and edifies us.

Indeed, there is no parallel command regarding any other aspect of worship to the dominical injunction: "Do this in remembrance of me." Preaching is not so ordered; prayer is not ordered this way. The only element of worship that is placed before us as a command from Christ himself, regarding how he is to be remembered, is the Supper. Since Christ himself not only permits this edifying ordinance, but commands that it be done in his remembrance, how can it be that other lawful elements of worship (and, sometimes, *unlawful* elements) have come to be perceived as more important than this? The apostolic church, with a more-recent memory of Christ and his instruction, undoubtedly considered the Supper to be the central, organizing element of their worship; otherwise, Luke's simple comment would be unintelligible: "On the first day of the week, when *we were gathered together to break bread*, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight" (Acts 20:7). Note that while this meeting did not consist *exclusively* of the Supper, but also of preaching, nonetheless the central purpose of the meeting can be referred to, almost in passing, as "to break bread."

B. The Practice of the Apostolic Church.

While the early Church, under apostolic direction, may have done many more things than we are aware of, we are certain that the celebration of the Lord's Supper (with prayer, preaching and/or teaching, and offerings for the poor) characterized its gatherings, as we see from Acts 2.42, Acts 20.7, and 1 Corinthians 11.20ff. While not in itself as

important as the previous consideration (that our Lord himself instituted the supper), it demonstrates that the very apostles, whom our Lord appointed as the foundation of His Church (Eph. 2.20), exercised their apostolic authority in such a way that the Lord's supper was both practiced and regulated. Would we build on a different foundation than the apostolic one?

C. Relation of Word and Sacrament.

Surely there can be no better way of demonstrating the close relationship between the Word and the Sacrament, than to perform them together, each complementing the other. If we believe that God offers us Christ in all His saving grace in the Lord's Supper, just as He does in the Word proclaimed, would we withhold the one or the other? This is especially so if we agree with Calvin that the sacrament confirms and seals our faith subjectively in a way the Word does not (For a full treatment of the relation of Word and Sacrament in Calvin's theology, cf. Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*).

Frequent observance of the Lord's Supper places the central message of the Word of God before the congregation every week. Preachers sometimes fall into moralizing, scolding, or trivial self-help preaching. Regrettably, the pulpit is not always the place from which Christ is preached as the sure Redeemer of God's elect people. But even the sorriest preacher, with the worst possible view of preaching, cannot help but say something about Christ when he administers the Lord's Supper. And, with good preachers, the entire sermon moves every week towards its sealing conclusion at the table. The table draws the sermon towards a christological focus. For those who believe that preaching should always have a christo-centric focus, there is almost nothing that will accomplish this better than frequent communion (Indeed, I have become personally persuaded that resistance to frequent communion by preachers is almost always due to the fact that some preachers prefer to moralize or scold, and they really don't know how

to preach about Christ. The preachers I personally know who oppose frequent communion almost never preach about Christ as the fundamental, organizing point of a sermon. They moralize, they scold, they advise Congress and the President, but they almost never preach an entire sermon about Christ as Redeemer, uniquely fitted by his person and/or work to save to the uttermost those who believe in him. Frequent communion is problematic for them, because it is difficult for them to make the transition from such non-christocentric preaching to something as christocentric as the Lord's Supper).

D. The Clear Preference of Calvin.

In and of itself, apart from biblical considerations, the preference of Calvin is only enough to make us *consider* weekly communion; not enough to make us *adopt* it. His arguments are considerable, and are to be considered seriously.

E. The Many Benefits as Described in our Confession.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, 29.1, understands the Lord's Supper to have certain profound benefits:

Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in His Church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.

It is hard to imagine anything which has so many salutary benefits. Even the Bible does not do some of these things, because both unbelievers and believers read the Bible. Thus, Bible-reading does not function as "a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body." Nor does the Bible "put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world," WCF

27.1. Since the benefits of the Lord's Supper are so great, one wonders why we would not do it as frequently as possible.

F. The Only Means of Grace the Church Can Withhold.

As a final consideration, particularly important for those who rule the Church, we must face squarely that our tradition recognizes only three ordinary means of grace: the Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments. Although we may not teach or preach faultlessly, even if we were to fail miserably at these tasks, our people could still read their Bibles, read books about the Bible, or listen to tapes and lectures about it. And, although our public prayers may not be all that they can be, even if we fail miserably at our public prayers, we cannot prevent people from praying in private. The only means of grace that we can withhold from our people entirely, are the sacraments. By their very nature and institution the sacraments are public, ecclesiastical rites, which cannot be performed in their essential integrity in private. Since we believe that the sacraments are means of grace, instituted by God, and since we can withhold this means by infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, we must only do so on the most important grounds.

III. Arguments Adduced Against Weekly Communion

It is almost unfair to attempt to present or defend a position with which one has no particular sympathies. Nevertheless, I believe we may consider the three most frequently voiced objections to frequent communion.

A. Zwingli's view of sacraments.

This, the only theological argument, resides in Zwingli's belief that the sacraments are *only* memorials, that God's grace is not truly offered therein. Our Confession expressly and intentionally denies this, arguing that the sacraments are not only signs but also "seals" of the covenant of grace (27.1; 29.1), and that worthy receivers of the elements of the Lord's Supper do "really and indeed, yet not carnally and

corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death,” 29.7. Ironically, there are some Zwinglian communions that favor weekly observance of the Supper, while Calvinist communions, with an ostensibly higher view of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, observe it less frequently.

B. Logistical Difficulties.

It is argued that it is logistically difficult to prepare the elements for the Table every week. This is true; it is difficult, and we should remember those who so prepare the elements, and encourage and thank them. It is also difficult for the minister to prepare a service and a sermon, for the pianists or organists to rehearse, for the heat to be turned on, for the flowers to be purchased, etc. This is in fact no argument that communion should be celebrated infrequently, only that we must be willing to pay the costs. It takes far more time to prepare a responsible sermon than it does to prepare for the Lord’s Supper, yet I know of no church that excludes preaching on that ground.

C. Familiarity Breeds Contempt.

It is frequently argued that anything done frequently (except making this argument, apparently) loses its significance. To this, there are three objections. First, there is the theological objection. Would not Jesus have thought about this, when He ordered us to remember Him this way? Can we really believe that we are better judges of this matter than our Lord and His apostles? Second, there is the “put up or shut up” objection. Why do we pray every week? Are we not sometimes bored or distracted in prayer? Of course, but we don’t therefore stop praying. Why do we have a sermon every week, or hymns every week, or an offering every week (apparently we aren’t as concerned about the offering becoming “less meaningful” by its weekly observance)? If we only do that which we can guarantee will prove scintillating, we are out of luck. The weariness of life in a fallen world, coupled with our own worldliness and preoccupation

with things that are not divine, means only that *all* divine matters *may* become lifeless to us. But there is no reason to believe that the Lord's Supper is any more subject to this than any other aspect of worship. Third, there is a psychological objection. People are simply not all alike. Some people are more easily bored than others. Some have a much higher toleration for routine or ritual than others. Some people kiss their spouse every day, yet never with contempt. We know from the testimony of many who celebrate communion weekly, that they would never do otherwise. We are simply incapable of judging *whether* or *for whom* greater frequency of communion might render it less significant. What we can be sure of, however, is this: On those given Sundays when the Supper is not observed, it is impossible, on those particular Sundays, for it to be meaningful to anyone. At least if it is celebrated weekly, there is the *possibility* that it will be meaningful to someone.

IV. Practical Considerations

It is important for us to realize that people do not always accommodate change easily. Whereas the question of *what* we ought to do is to be answered solely by biblical and theological considerations, the question of *how* and *when* we do it must be informed by an awareness of people, their needs, capacities, fears, and weakness. In my judgment, since we inherit an impoverished recent history on this point, we must be willing to teach and instruct our people in the importance of the Lord's Table, if we can expect a more frequent observance of the sacrament to have its most salutary effect. That is to say, even though I believe that weekly communion corresponds to the biblical norm more than any other frequency, and though I believe that more frequent communion would be an improvement for us, I believe that the greater sacramental problem in our congregation (true of most congregations) is that our people have little proper understanding of the sacraments. Frequent participation in a misunderstood sacrament is but a small improvement over less frequent participation in a misunderstood sacrament.

I would recommend, therefore, that Sessions consider moving to weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, but that they also consider how to prepare their congregations in such a way that such a move would profit them the most.

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† indicates work is on microfilm.