

Ordained Servant Online



Why Weekly Communion?

T. David Gordon

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.*"^[1]

Introduction

In the typical American evangelical church the Lord's Supper is observed quarterly or monthly. Because this practice is so common, many people might be surprised to know that both Luther and Calvin believed the Lord's Supper should be observed at least weekly, in contrast to the (then) practice of the Roman Church of observing the supper only once annually.

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. (John Calvin, Letter to the Magistrates of Berne, 1555)

Contemporary Protestants should not feel themselves obliged to follow Luther and Calvin, however, except where Luther and Calvin followed the Scriptures. The question before us, then, is whether Luther and Calvin (and others) were following the Scriptures in their concern to celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly.

Biblical Considerations in Favor of Weekly Communion

Biblical Christians do not always entirely agree on what it means to be "biblical." For some, a matter is only "biblical" if it is *expressly* biblical, or *clearly* biblical. For others, a matter is biblical if it is a good and necessary consequence (inference) from Scripture, as the Westminster Confession says: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture"

(WCF 1.6). Thus, consistent with the Westminster Confession, I believe weekly communion is biblical, not because there is an express or clear command that says: "Thou shalt observe communion weekly," but because I believe weekly communion is a good and necessary consequence of what Scripture teaches about the matter itself, and that it is a good and necessary consequence of what the Bible teaches about the relation between Word and Sacrament.

My understanding of "good and necessary consequence" goes beyond merely affirming that the Scriptures can teach something without doing so expressly or clearly. My understanding is this: when alternative views are proposed, the one that enjoys more biblical support than the other(s) is the one the Scripture teaches. So I frame the question differently than some. I do not ask, Do the Scriptures contain an airtight inferential argument for weekly communion? Rather, I ask this: "Is the inferential argument for weekly communion better than the inferential argument for monthly, quarterly, or annual communion?" Framed this way, the question is rather easily answered, because Jesus expressly commanded us to remember him in this rite (and when do we meet that we do not remember him?); because the apostolic practice appears to have been weekly (Acts 2:42, 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20-21); and because the nature of the relation between Word and Sacrament is such that there is no good reason to separate them. Do I wish there were more passages that address the matter? Sure, of course I do. But God in his wisdom has given us the Scriptures we have, and our duty is to raise and answer fairly the question: Is there any biblical evidence at all for any of the four positions (weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)? Framed this way, there is some evidence for weekly communion (though that evidence is neither explicit nor unambiguously clear), and zero evidence for the other practices. For me, by my understanding of what "good and necessary consequence" means, this is sufficient to settle the matter. For those, on the other hand, who begin with the assumption that they have "squatter's rights" to their current opinion, unless/until they are expressly or clearly proven wrong, the evidence is and always will be insufficient to persuade them.

The Lord's Supper was instituted directly by Christ, in the upper room with his disciples. While none would dispute this, the significance of Christ himself instituting the rite is frequently overlooked. To belittle the importance of what Christ has instituted is, at least indirectly, to belittle his wisdom or love in instituting it. If the reason for not observing the Lord's Supper more frequently is that we deem it less important or less significant than other parts of our worship, we need to reconsider the fact that Christ himself instituted this sacrament, whereas he did not personally institute preaching, or singing hymns, for instance.

Further (and closely related) is the fact that Christ instituted this meal as a means by which he wished to be remembered. "Do this in remembrance of me." If given the opportunity to instruct others in how we would wish to be remembered after we leave this world, we would choose a remembrance that was very important to us. Christ chose the Lord's Supper as that by which he wishes to be remembered. Yet what do we do each Lord's Day if not remember Christ, and his saving work on our behalf? Do we really believe we can choose a way of "remembering" this better than that which Christ himself has chosen?

The church under apostolic oversight appears to have observed the Lord's Supper each week. In their assemblies, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship (or, better translated "collection"), to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Since this text describes not what the early Christians *happened* to do on a particular occasion, but what they "devoted themselves to," Calvin and Bucer considered this instruction very significant for ordering the church's worship. The word translated "devote" is used also in Acts 6:4, when the apostles appoint deacons to oversee the daily distribution of the church's resources to the widows in the church. The apostles appoint others to do this, saying, "But we will *devote* ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." In each passage, it is evident

that the word means what it sounds like: the deliberate choice to do one thing rather than another. It is the language employed when one has distinguished that which is non-negotiable from that which is negotiable. Under direct apostolic supervision, these early assemblies deliberately chose to do certain things in their assemblies, and the Lord's Supper was one of the things to which they were devoted.

This is reflected also in Acts 20:7: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them ..." In this very brief comment Luke records something very significant, namely, that the "gathering" of the saints on "the first day of the week" was "to break bread." Today, we might refer to our Sunday gatherings as gathering "to hear the Word of God," or, possibly, "to pray," but I doubt we would describe our gathering as Luke describes this. The implication is not that they did nothing else on the Lord's Day, but that the Lord's Supper so *characterized* their assembly that it could accurately be designated as a gathering "to break bread."

Again, in 1 Corinthians 11:20, Paul refers to the ecclesiastical assembly of the Corinthians as being *characterized* by the observance of the Lord's Supper, even though in this case it is actually a mis-observance. "When you meet together, it is not the Lord's Supper which you eat ..." Although this text refers to a great abuse of the Lord's Supper, it nevertheless indicates that their "meeting together" could be characterized by this particular rite, even though they defiled it. With Acts 2:42 and 20:7, this passage suggests that the earliest assemblies of the Christian church on the Lord's Day were characterized by the observance of that supper by which Christ wished to be remembered.

Is There a Rationale for This Biblical Practice?

Although these particular passages describe the practice of the early church, they do not record a complete rationale for why they considered this rite so important. A full evaluation of all that the Bible teaches about the sacraments, and especially what it teaches about the Lord's Supper, would be necessary in order to reveal that rationale. I believe that rationale is accurately summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith, 29.1:

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.

These benefits are so numerous and so healthy that anyone who really believed that these benefits were found in the Lord's Supper would want to observe it as frequently as possible. Who would not want a perpetual reminder of the sacrifice of Christ? Who would not wish to have "all benefits" of his sacrifice sealed unto true believers? Who has such a sufficient amount of "spiritual nourishment," as not to desire more? Who among us does not need a bond and pledge of our communion with Christ and with each other?[2]

Even the reading and preaching of the Bible do not do some of these things, because both unbelievers and believers read the Bible. Thus, Bible-reading (or biblical preaching) 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). Indeed, the invention and widespread use of the "altar call" during the last 125 years is probably due to the absence of the Lord's Supper in Christian worship, which necessitated the church creating some other "pledge of their communion with him." Calvin greatly appreciated these benefits, and because of his appreciation for them, urged a return to the practice of the apostolic church.

Since the benefits of the Lord's Supper are so great, one wonders why we would not do it as frequently as possible. The apostolic church apparently understood and appreciated the great benefits associated with the Lord's Supper, and therefore observed it each Lord's Day when they gathered. We hardly need its benefits less than they, and we should consider again whether we are not obliged to remember Christ in the way that pleases him and assists us.

Why Do Some Protestants not Observe the Lord's Supper Weekly?

There appear to be four reasons why some people have chosen not to observe the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. We must examine these reasons, and determine whether they are better, sounder, more biblical reasons than those we have just considered.

Some Protestants have been influenced by Ulrich Zwingli, a reformer who denied that baptism and the Lord's Supper were true sacraments. Zwingli argued that the Lord's Supper was merely a memorial and that the sustaining, saving grace of Christ was not actually offered in this rite. Zwingli denied that the kinds of benefits recognized by the Westminster Assembly could be found in the Lord's Supper. Some Zwinglians may not consider the Lord's Supper sufficiently beneficial, then, to be frequently observed. Zwingli believed, however, that the memorial act of the Lord's Supper was very important, and several Zwinglian denominations today observe weekly communion.

Others choose not to observe the Lord's Supper frequently because of the logistical difficulties of preparing for it. Someone must purchase the elements, secure a clean tablecloth, etc., and this is a lot of trouble. While it is true that the observance of the Lord's Supper takes effort, it is also true that the preparation of a sermon takes a substantial amount of effort. The careful preparation of hymns and prayers also takes effort, but we do not hear anyone arguing that we should have sermons only four times annually, or prayers or hymns once a month. Similarly, it is also true that observance of the Lord's Supper would lengthen the service, but this is true of other elements of worship as well, yet we rarely if ever hear people argue that we omit prayers or preaching from the service, in order to shorten it. Every aspect of public worship requires energy and time in preparation. To us, the real issues are whether we perceive the *benefits* to be worthy of the preparation, and whether we wish to remember Christ as he wishes to be remembered.

Still others appear to believe that frequent communion will make unbelievers feel unwelcome, since they are not prepared to participate in communion as Paul commands in 1 Corinthians 11. Interestingly, the Westminster Assembly considered this "separation" of the believer from the unbeliever to be one of the *benefits* of the Lord's Supper:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, *to put a visible difference* between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word (WCF 27.1, emphasis mine).

The Westminster Assembly believed that the difference between those who belong to Christ and those who do not is the most significant difference that exists, a difference that has the grave consequences in and after this life. Therefore, it is helpful to remind people of this important difference as frequently as we can. Perhaps the greatest service the church can do for unbelievers is to remind them, gently and graciously, that they have not yet made peace with God through Christ. The celebration of the Lord's Supper, in which believers are invited to participate and unbelievers are warned not to, may be one of the most appropriate ways of reminding unbelievers of their condition.

Finally, there are some who argue that the frequent practice of communion will cause it to become less meaningful. To this, there are three responses. First, how does one know this, without having tried it? How can one who has never observed the Lord's supper frequently know that such observance would render it less meaningful? Second, if it is argued that anything done often loses its significance, then should we not "save" the significance of preaching by doing it less frequently? Should we not make prayers extremely meaningful by only praying annually? Should we not make the singing of praise more meaningful by singing only once a quarter? Third, unless we are willing to decrease the frequency of other elements of worship, what makes us think this *particular* element will become less meaningful if done frequently?

It is right to remember Jesus in the way that he has commanded us. It is wise to follow the example of the apostles who were trained by Jesus. The benefits of the Lord's Supper are so great, and some of them distinct from the benefits of other means of grace, that it is wisest to avail ourselves of this gift from Christ as frequently as did the apostolic church.

Is Weekly Communion a Panacea?

While I believe in weekly communion, in the sense earlier mentioned, as the best inference we can draw from the Scriptures as we have them, I do not believe weekly communion, of itself, will prove to be an unmitigated blessing if adopted in all congregations. Insofar as Calvin perceived the Supper to seal the Word preached, if the preaching is not Christ-centered, the transition to the Supper is extremely awkward. If Christ is effectively forgotten in the preaching, he cannot be well-remembered in the Supper. In some churches, the preaching would need to change drastically for the Supper to function as Calvin thought it should. Further, in some churches, the so-called "fencing of the table" militates against the very purposes for which the sacraments were instituted. WCF 27.1, for instance, says: "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to *confirm our interest in him...*" I have been present in services where the so-called "fencing of the table" seems to *question* our interest in him rather than *confirm* it; and in such churches, frequent communion would be of little benefit.^[3]

Weekly communion, therefore, is not merely or primarily weekly. I prefer to think of it as "integrated communion," integrated with other aspects of Reformed thought and liturgy. When it is not so integrated, when it is a tack-on, or when it creates an awkward transition from preaching, its frequency is comparatively insignificant. For those who do not grasp its relation to the other aspects of the Christian assembly, it is probably wiser for them to continue to commune less frequently rather than more.

I am aware that some claim that "our tradition" does not and has not believed in weekly communion. I disagree with this claim. To me, one must distinguish a "tradition" from a mere "habit." Humans are creatures of habit, and often do some things many times without ever developing an argument for the

practice. Has anyone, for instance, ever argued that watching television is a satisfying, uplifting, or humane use of our leisure? No. Do people watch television habitually? Yes. Something that is done commonly, yet without theological rationale, is different from something that is done commonly *with* a theological rationale. I am middle-aged and still have never encountered a theological or biblical argument for annual communion; I have never read such an argument for quarterly communion or monthly communion. There are annual, quarterly, or monthly habits; but no arguments. Therefore, insofar as theologians such as Calvin and Luther have studied and argued the matter, I believe our tradition favors weekly communion, even though the habits of many in our tradition differ from that tradition.

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Endnotes

[1] John Calvin, Articles presented to the Geneva Council in 1537, cited in Howard G. Hagemann, *Pulpit and Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond: John Knox, 1962), 25, emphasis mine.

[2] Sessions must take these rhetorical questions seriously, because the Supper is the only ordinary means of grace that they can withhold from their people.

[3] Indeed, I find the very language of "fencing the table" to be not only out of accord with the *language* of our standards (as a simple matter of fact, it occurs nowhere in Presbyterian confessional literature, and in no books of order), but out of accord with the *substance* of WCF 27.1 as well. The PCA Book of Church Order uses the verb "invite" to describe the minister's directions at the Table; it does not say he is to "fence," "guard," or "un-invite" (BCO 58-4).

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