

11

The Reformation of the Supper

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THE FIRST PERSON I recall hearing speak about the benefits of weekly communion was Bob Godfrey. As a novice to the Reformed faith and while still a student at Westminster Seminary California, I was beginning to learn about Calvin and his distinctive view of the sacraments when Dr. Godfrey mentioned Calvin's preference for the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper and the restrictions placed upon him by the consistory of Geneva. Dr. Godfrey's comments piqued my interest in the subject. That, in turn, eventually led to the institution of weekly communion at Christ Reformed Church in Anaheim (URCNA), a congregation which Michael Horton and I planted in 1996.

Not only is Dr. Godfrey an outstanding professor (a man of great wit and Solomonic wisdom), his passion for the gospel has left an indelible stamp on both his students and the seminary which he has so faithfully served. It is a privilege and a joy to contribute to this *Festschrift* in his honor.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a rationale for the frequent (weekly) celebration of the Lord's Supper. To accomplish this purpose, I will address the biblical evidence which speaks to the frequency of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and then consider supporting evidence from the Ante-Nicene Fathers as well as from various Reformed writers who champion frequent observation of the Lord's Supper. I conclude this essay by discussing a number of the theological and pastoral implications of the frequent celebration of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood.

The Biblical Evidence for the Frequent Celebration of the Lord's Supper

Perhaps the most important passage in this discussion is Acts 2:42. This passage is not only important for what it states about the Lord's Supper, it also gives us the earliest picture of the Christian church, "rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit."¹ Luke describes how the first Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (ESV).

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 73.

As we know from the context of Acts 2, the church in Jerusalem was founded on apostolic teaching. Its members enjoyed the fellowship of those who likewise had come to trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus to save them from the wrath of God, and who together had very recently experienced the events of Pentecost. According to Calvin, this passage is significant for any discussion of the frequency of the Lord's Supper because in it Luke establishes "that this was the practice of the apostolic church.... Thus it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper and almsgiving."²

There are a number of reasons why Calvin's understanding of this passage is correct. For one thing, the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship among believers culminates in the "breaking of the bread and the prayers." The "breaking of bread" is almost certainly a reference to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which was a distinct activity within the context of the fellowship meal ("table fellowship") shared by those present. Had Luke been referring to the "fellowship" meal (the ancient equivalent of the modern "pot-luck") and not the Lord's Supper, such a fact would hardly have been worth mentioning.³

Furthermore, a good case can be made that Luke's use of the term "breaking of bread" is but another way of referring to what Paul calls the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11:20), and that Luke's terminology is an early Palestinian name for the sacramental portion of the fellowship meal, not the larger meal in general.⁴ This is supported by the fact that in Judaism "breaking of bread" refers to the act of tearing of bread which marks the beginning of a celebratory meal, never to the whole meal itself.⁵

Joachim Jeremias calls attention to the fact that the participle προσηκάρτεροῦντες ("devoted themselves") is used in at least one ancient source to refer to synagogue worship, which points to a formal (or intentional) activity as opposed to a more casual occasion. The verb προσηκάρτερέω appears several times in Acts and often means "to attend worship regularly" (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:26; 6:4).⁶ This would seem to indicate that the four elements mentioned by Luke (the apostle's teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers) are dependent upon the act of the participants in "devoting themselves" to what likely amounts to a particular sequence of events—that the breaking of bread and the prayers followed the sermon (or teaching) and table fellowship.⁷

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4:17-44.

3. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 73.

4. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 83.

5. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 120-21.

6. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 118-19.

7. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 118-19.

As for the “breaking of bread,” John Murray points out,

This term κλάσις occurs only once elsewhere (Luke 24:35) of Jesus’ breaking of bread with the two who had been on the way to Emmaus, yet the corresponding verb occurs frequently with reference to the Lord’s supper (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 10:16), and the context indicates that the breaking of bread belonged specifically to religious exercise—the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship and the prayers. Acts 2:46 indicates that the breaking of bread from house to house refers to ordinary eating. It was from house to house, and is interpreted as receiving their food with gladness and singleness of heart. The co-ordination in Acts 2:42 implies that the supper was an integral part of the worship of the early church, practiced by those who received the Word, were baptized, and were added to the disciples (cf. vs. 41).⁸

The evidence, therefore, clearly points to the term “breaking of bread” as a technical term used by Luke to speak of the Lord’s Supper as a distinct element of worship, not just the fellowship meal.

The celebration of the Last Supper as a Passover meal,⁹ along with the specific instructions given by Jesus, provides an important theological and redemptive historical context for the institution of the Lord’s Supper as one of the prescribed elements of worship after Pentecost in direct fulfillment of Jesus’s command to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The early church, no doubt, drew upon the disciple’s vivid memories of their final hours with our Lord in framing the manner of celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20). As Jesus transformed the Jewish Passover by pointing to his own future actions in fulfilling what the Passover symbolized (Luke 22:16), so too every bit of data we possess points us in the direction that the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper whenever they assembled for worship as Jesus had instructed them to do.

One line of evidence which implies that the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated frequently is the notion that the Lord’s Supper is a ratification meal associated with covenant renewal. Not only are there deep roots for the celebration of a meal of covenant renewal throughout Israel’s own history (e.g., Exod 24:11; Deut 12:6–7; 14:26; Neh 8:9–12), in the very words of institution Jesus speaks of his cross and the supper which commemorates it as a covenantal transaction—“the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin” (cf. Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20).¹⁰ Although the Passover was an annual event, Jesus affirms that the new

8. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976–82), 2:380.

9. I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord’s Supper* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 21.

10. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 185–86.

covenant in his blood was to be celebrated frequently by his people, an understanding confirmed by the practice of the apostolic church.

Yet another indication that the Lord's Supper is tied to covenant renewal—in this case, as a foretaste of the eschatological messianic meal (cf. Matt 8:11–12; Rev 19:9)—can be found in Revelation 3:20, where our Lord says to the church in Philadelphia, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” The imagery used in Revelation 3:20 not only invokes images of a returning bridegroom entering the chamber of his bride, it also alludes to the celebration of the Lord's Supper in anticipation of the future parousia.¹¹ Through this act of eating with his people, Jesus is present with his disciples in anticipation of the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, and reflects the sense of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:26, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”¹² At the very least, this implies a frequent celebration of the sacrament in fulfillment of our Lord's command, and in anticipation of his hoped-for return.

Based upon this brief survey, it is quite natural to understand “the breaking of bread” as but another way of speaking of the Lord's Supper, and that this activity was an integral element on those occasions (presumably Lord's Day worship, if not more often) when the people of God assembled to hear the apostle's teaching, participate in the fellowship around the table, before “breaking bread” and offering to the Lord “the prayers.”

Another passage which speaks to the frequency of the Lord's Supper is Acts 20:7. Luke writes, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.” Since Luke mentions that this meeting occurred on the first day of the week (which is the first time in Acts we read that the church worshiped on Sunday), this seems to indicate that this is a reference to a Lord's Day worship service at Troas (“when we gathered together to break bread”). Paul spoke in a formal manner (the apostle's teaching) and the service went late into the night (v. 11). Paul may have spoken informally to those present after the “official service” had ended.¹³

There is no reason that we should understand Luke's use of the term “breaking of bread” in a different sense here than in Acts 2:42, where the breaking of bread is part of the prescribed order of worship on the Lord's Day. But there are questions about whether this meeting was held on

11. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The Greek International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 308–09.

12. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (London: A & C Black, 1966), 58.

13. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 425–26.

Saturday evening (after sundown) or on Sunday evening, which seems much more likely.¹⁴ Although the question is raised as to whether or not Luke is referring to the fellowship meal, or the sacrament of the Lord's Supper which takes place within the context of the fellowship meal, here too the evidence seems to indicate that the Lord's Supper was celebrated after the fellowship meal and that it was an integral part of Christian worship.

That this is a reference to the Lord's Supper becomes clear in verse 11, when Luke adds, "And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed." Luke seems to distinguish between Paul's participation in the "breaking of bread" and the fellowship meal when he adds that Paul had eaten (taken food).¹⁵ This would indicate that the Lord's Supper was celebrated after the fellowship meal had concluded (or as part of the fellowship meal), as is prescribed in Acts 2:42 and as we see in 1 Corinthians 11, to which we will turn shortly. As Dennis Johnson points out, the sequence of events in Acts 20:7–12 indicates that believers assembled to eat a meal, followed by worship, and Paul—who was leaving the next morning—spoke for a long time before the assembly celebrated the Lord's Supper.¹⁶ Paul may have talked on into the night (informally) after the service had concluded. We are told that Paul talked so long that a certain Eutychus fell soundly asleep, then fell out of the window to his death, only to be raised to life by Paul (Acts 20:11).

Although there is no order of service prescribed here and while it is certainly possible that this church meeting was called specifically for the occasion of hearing from Paul before his departure, given the use of the language of "breaking of bread" in the context of "gathering together" on the first day of the week, the evidence tilts in the direction that Luke is describing the ordinary practice of the apostolic church as it meets on the Lord's Day. Luke mentions the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship meal, and the "breaking of bread," marked off from the fellowship meal as the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In light of this, the burden of proof falls squarely upon those who would argue that Acts 20:7 refers to a special service called for the occasion of Paul's departure (not the regular Lord's Day service) and that Luke is referring to a fellowship meal only, not to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I think it much more likely that Paul delayed his departure until after the Lord's Day, and it seems rather obvious that when the church assembled on the Lord's Day this included the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Another important passage is 1 Corinthians 11:17–22 and 33–34, where some five times Paul describes the Corinthians "as coming together as a

14. Marshall, *Acts*, 325–26.

15. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 426.

16. Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1997), 84.

church” (v. 18) for the purpose of worship, which includes the celebration of the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood (vv. 23–26). In verse 17, Paul speaks of not being able to commend the Corinthians because “when they come together” it is not for the better. Although they “come together” as a church, there are still divisions among them, so that when they “come together” it is not the Lord’s Supper that they eat (v. 20). In verse 33, Paul instructs the Corinthians that “when you come together to eat” the members of the church are to wait for one another (v. 33). Instead of abusing the fellowship meal, the Corinthians should eat at home before “they come together,” so that they do not come under God’s judgment.

The verb Paul uses, *συνέρχομαι*, is a semi-technical term for the assembly of God’s people for worship.¹⁷ Because it is repeated throughout this section (and means the same thing in Acts 14:23, 26), it serves to bolster Paul’s primary point that when the Corinthians assembled for worship, they were not celebrating the Lord’s Supper as had been instituted by Christ, and as they had been instructed by Paul (v. 23). Although the abuses of the Supper were so severe that Paul comes very close to forbidding the Corinthians from serving the fellowship meal as part of their worship, the Apostle does take the occasion to remind them of the importance of celebrating the Lord’s Supper properly so as to avoid the judgment of God, while indicating that more instructions are to come (v. 34).

Since Paul reminds the Corinthians that in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper they “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (v. 26) and since the Supper was linked to the “coming together” of the congregation for worship (as in Acts 2:42), we should interpret 1 Corinthians 11:20 to mean that when the church met in Corinth for public worship, the preaching of the word and the observance of the Supper were central, and as Calvin concludes this “was the established order.”¹⁸

The cumulative evidence from Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17–22, 33–34, indicates that frequent (weekly) communion was the universal apostolic practice. According to Francis Turretin:

The practice of the apostolic church...constantly retained the breaking of bread. Hence the disciples are said to have continued in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42). Christians are said to have come together upon the first day of the week to break bread (Acts 20:7), i.e., to celebrate the holy Supper, which was consistently done on the Lord’s day when they assembled to hear preaching and perform the other public exercises of piety. Hence the whole action is wont to be described by the breaking of bread. To say that this rite was indeed used here, but not as necessary, is to beg the question and take for granted what is to be proved. For on the contrary, we solidly gather the

17. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 536.

18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.44.

necessity of this rite [the breaking of bread] from the practice because the church could do nothing here, nor prescribe it to others, except what she had received from the Lord and to which she felt herself bound by the command of Christ.¹⁹

The critical questions then are whether or not contemporary Reformed/Presbyterian practice matches the apostolic pattern, and if not, why?

The Historical Evidence for Frequent Celebration of the Lord's Supper

Additional evidence that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper frequently is found in those post-apostolic sources in which Christian worship is described. The first of these sources is the *Didache*, a manual of catechetical instruction perhaps written as early as A.D. 70.²⁰

In chapter 14:1–3, we find the following:

'On every Lord's Day—his special day—come together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. ²Anyone at variance with his neighbor must not join you, until they are reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled. ³For it was of this sacrifice that the Lord said, "Always and everywhere offer me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is marveled at by the nations."²¹

Chapters 9–10 of the *Didache* contain instructions as to how the Eucharist is to be administered. Oddly enough, the cup was to be given first, then the bread, and only to those baptized.

Perhaps the most significant reference to the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Ante-Nicene church is found in the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr written between 150–55. In chapter 67, Justin writes,

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities 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 these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in

19. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1997), 3:445–46.

20. Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 159.

21. Cyril Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 178.

want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly.²²

Reflecting the apostolic prescription of Acts 2:42, Christian worship as described by Justin consisted of a sermon (the “memoirs of the apostles” or the “writings of the prophets”), the prayers, then the sacrament of the Eucharist (bread and wine “which is blessed by the prayer of his word, and from which our flesh and blood... are nourished”—chapter 66), followed by prayers of thanksgiving and then the collection of an offering (for care of widows and orphans).

Another important source which indicates that the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper frequently is found in the “Liturgy” of Hippolytus. Often dated about 215, Hippolytus set out to record the established apostolic practice in the churches regarding a number of things, including the liturgy used in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.²³ Hippolytus’ liturgy presupposes that the Lord’s Supper is celebrated every Sunday and demonstrates great similarity to the earlier account of Justin (in his *First Apology*). Yet, when bread and wine are brought to the bishop, Hippolytus states that they are identified as an “offering” or “oblation.” The elements of the Supper have become a sacrifice of some sort, although how is not made clear. From this point on, the Eucharistic prayer will take on an increasing greater role in the liturgy because the bread and wine are described as a sacrifice to God, all of which lays the groundwork for those restrictions applied to receiving both elements of bread and wine as well the frequency with which the faithful participated.²⁴ But Hippolytus’ “Liturgy” does indicate that earlier practice (which he is “recording”) did include frequent celebration of the Supper.

One more illustration of the practice of the early church is found in the writings of Tertullian. In Tertullian’s *Apology* written in 197, we read the following.

Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it agape, i.e., affection. Whatever it costs, our outlay in the name of piety is gain, since with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy; not as it is with you, do parasites aspire to the glory of satisfying their licentious propensities, selling themselves for a belly-feast to all disgraceful treatment,—but as it is with God himself, a peculiar respect is shown to the lowly. If the object of our feast be good, in the light of that consider its further regulations.

22. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 1, 185 (hereafter, ANF).

23. See the discussion in Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1945), 110 ff., and Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols. (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1990), 2:186–94. Quasten includes the key sections from the text of Hippolytus’ liturgy.

24. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 120–21.

As it is an act of religious service, it permits no vileness or immodesty. The participants, before reclining, taste first of prayer to God. As much is eaten as satisfies the cravings of hunger; as much is drunk as befits the chaste. They say it is enough, as those who remember that even during the night they have to worship God; they talk as those who know that the Lord is one of their auditors. After manual ablution, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing,—a proof of the measure of our drinking. As the feast commenced with prayer, so with prayer it is closed. We go from it, not like troops of mischief-doers, nor bands of vagabonds, nor to break out into licentious acts, but to have as much care of our modesty and chastity as if we had been at a school of virtue rather than a banquet.²⁵

In Tertullian's polemical remarks, we see that the celebration of the Lord's Supper (the "feast" or "agape meal") is not incidental nor occasional, but is central to Christian worship.

Since the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required that the faithful partake of the sacrament once a year, ordinarily on Easter (Canon 21), by the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper—which had been the practice of the early church—had given way to infrequent (annual) communion in the actual practice of the Roman church. Various efforts were made to reform the practice so as to encourage more frequent participation by the laity, but this was not achieved in any great measure until Vatican II in 1965.

John Calvin's desire to see the Reformed churches celebrate the Lord's Supper frequently is well known. Calvin spoke of the decision of the Fourth Lateran Council to celebrate the Supper annually as "a veritable invention of the devil." Calvin says "it should have been done far differently: the Lord's Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually."²⁶ Calvin's insistence that the Lord's Supper is a "bounteous repast" means it should be celebrated whenever the church assembled for public worship.

Calvin believes that our souls "are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ" in the Supper,²⁷ that "it is expedient to grasp the nature of this testament in Christ's body and blood. For a covenant ratified by the sacrifice of his death would not benefit us unless there was joined to it the secret communication by which we grow into one with Christ" and that the Spirit ensures that we are lifted up to Christ in heaven,²⁸ so that "in the Sacred

25. Tertullian, *First Apology*, chapter 39 in ANF, 3.47.

26. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.46. He reaffirms this point in the face of criticism by the Lutheran theologian Tileman Heshusius, *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper*, in Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 310.

27. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

28. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20.

Supper he bids me to take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them.”²⁹

The nature of the Sacrament leads Calvin to affirm that “the right administering of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the Word.”³⁰ Because of the essential tie between the preached word and the sacraments, Calvin can affirm that the Supper should be set apart for the church, “very often, and at least once a week.”³¹ The administration of the Supper should be preceded by prayers and a sermon. Bread and wine should be placed on the table and the words of institution should be read. The promises should be recited, and after partaking, a prayer of thanksgiving should be offered, a psalm sung, before Christians are reminded to live a life of thankfulness and obedience.³²

Calvin goes on to contend that the Supper was intended “to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ’s Passion,” and as such, “sustain and strengthen their faith,” to nourish “mutual love” among the body of Christ whose members are bound together through the Lord’s own mystical body.³³ As we have seen, Calvin affirms that both Luke (Acts 2:42) and Paul (1 Cor 11:20) prescribe that “no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving.”³⁴

Yet, Calvin did not see his desire realized. When the consistory of Geneva insisted that the Supper be celebrated four times a year, Calvin was greatly disappointed and wrote, “I have taken care to record publicly that our custom is defective, so that those who come after me may be able to correct it the more freely and easily.”³⁵ Because the Reformed churches were so reluctant to celebrate the Supper weekly and because Calvin was concerned that if forced to do so, this “excellent mystery might be brought into contempt...it has seemed good to us that the Holy Supper be celebrated once a month.”³⁶

Calvin was not alone in desiring frequent celebration of communion. The practice of the Reformed churches in the Palatinate reflects the same desire for more frequent celebrations of the Supper. In the *Kirchenordnung*

29. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32.

30. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.39.

31. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

32. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

33. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.44.

34. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.44.

35. *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. C. G. Bretschneider, 101 vols. (Halle: C. A Schwetschke et Filium, 1834), 38.1. 213; Cited in David T. Koyzis, “The Lord’s Supper: How Often?” *Reformed Worship* 15 (March 1990). http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=277 (accessed 29 June, 2010).

36. Cited in Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 253.

of 1563 we read, “The Lord’s Supper shall be observed at least once a month in the towns; once every two months in the villages; and on Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas in both places. Yet where the edification, custom, or need of the churches may necessitate, it is Christian and proper to observe it more often.”³⁷

Zacharius Ursinus, the principal author of the Heidelberg Catechism, agrees. In his discussion of the proper observance of the fourth commandment, Ursinus makes a number of points, but the most significant for our discussion is his point number four. Under the heading “To use the sacraments according to their divine appointment,” Ursinus goes on to say “upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them,” citing Acts 20:7 as a proof-text. He adds,

And as God will have his word publicly preached and heard, so he will also have the true and lawful use of the sacraments observed and seen in the public assemblies of the church, inasmuch as both are marks by which the true church may be known and distinguished from all other religions and people. The sacraments, also, just as the word, constitute a part of the public worship of God in the church, and are means to stir up and cherish faith and godliness in the faithful. Hence the use of sacraments is most intimately connected with a proper observance and sanctification of the Sabbath.³⁸

Although neither the church order of the churches of the Palatinate nor Ursinus himself prescribe weekly communion, it is clear that a frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper was desirable because this was the apostolic practice and because the sacraments confirm and strengthen faith (cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 65).

Two prominent Puritan writers likewise followed Calvin in desiring that the Lord’s Supper be celebrated weekly. In John Owen’s work, *Brief Instruction in the Worship of God* (1667), he writes, “How often is that ordinance to be administered? Every first day of the week, or at least as often as opportunity and conveniency may be obtained.”³⁹ For the most part, however, the Supper was administered once a month where Owen ministered.

Similarly, when discussing Acts 2:42 and how often the Supper should be administered, Thomas Goodwin writes, “another point of interest concerns ‘. . . the papists, who alone bore the face of the church many hundred years. . . because they thought the institution thereof every week to be apostolical (being sounder in the point than many of our divines), therefore they

37. Cited in Bard Thompson, “The Reformed Church in the Palatinate” in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, eds. Bard Thompson, Hendrikus Berkhof, Eduard Schweizer, and Howard G. Hageman, (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1963), 41.

38. Zacharius Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (reprint Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, n.d.), 568.

39. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 15, 512.

have transmitted the observation of it every week, down unto our times.”⁴⁰ Goodwin is concerned that Christians not neglect apostolic practice because “there would be nothing to determine and call for ordinances, so as to oblige the conscience. And so such ordinances...should have become the most uncertain.” Goodwin goes on to describe the Supper as that in which “God hath laid up all spiritual provisions for us; and to be sure you have Christ himself for one standing dish continually served up to you...a dish that fills all, and serves all tastes.... Many things in a sermon thou understandest not...but here in the sacrament is all thou canst expect.” He concludes, “the fruit of their assuming power you may see in the Lord’s Supper, which is absolutely by them [the papists] commanded to be received at some certain times of the year, no oftener than necessary to be received, which is their poor allowance for that ordinance.”⁴¹ As with Calvin, Goodwin affirms that the nature of the sacrament as a feeding upon Christ through faith determines the frequency which it should be celebrated—on the Lord’s Day as prescribed in Acts 2:42.

Some Pastoral and Theological Implications of Frequent Celebration

In light of the biblical evidence just considered, which clearly demonstrates that the apostolic church celebrated the Lord’s Supper weekly as an essential element of worship (cf. Acts 2:42, 20:7, 1 Cor 11:17 ff), and in light of the additional evidence that this was the practice of the early church and the desire of Calvin; it is rather ironic that after Vatican II the Roman Catholic faithful are able to partake in the Eucharist whenever they attend a worship service while many Reformed and Presbyterian congregations observe the Lord’s Supper only four to six times a year.

Although a good anecdotal case can be made that more frequent observance of the Lord’s Supper seems to be a definite trend in Reformed and Presbyterian circles, it is a shame that our theology of the Supper does not always match our practice.⁴² Since we are “really partakers of His true body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 79), surely this points us in the direction of more frequent (weekly) observance of the sacrament. The great benefit derived from feeding upon Christ in our hearts through faith—an act which is a wonderful consolation for God’s people who are dissatisfied with their progress in the Christian life

40. Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1855), II.398.

41. Goodwin, *Works*, II.408.

42. It is important for me to say that I affirm the right of the local consistory or session to determine how often a particular congregation celebrates the Lord’s Supper. That said, it seems to me that a consistory or session must make this determination on the basis of the biblical practice (which, I have argued, points in the direction of frequent communion) and not because of practical considerations and objections (which often give rise to the infrequent observance of the sacrament).

(*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 81)—is either not duly considered or not truly appreciated as a means of strengthening weak faith. Though we are right to be confident that the preached word creates faith, it is easy to overlook the importance of strengthening that faith once created. As Ursinus reminds us, “whatever the word promises concerning our salvation through Christ, that the sacraments, as signs, and seals annexed thereto, confirm unto us more and more for the purpose of helping our infirmity.”⁴³

When people learn that I am the pastor of a church which practices weekly communion, they often respond with the same sort of objection. “If you celebrate the Lord’s Supper every week, doesn’t it get old?” “Doesn’t weekly communion turn the sacrament into an empty ritual?” These sorts of objections are easily answered by reminding those raising them that the same thing could be said of any of the prescribed elements of worship, including the preaching of the word, the fellowship and the prayers.

And then there are the more nit-picky objections, such as that weekly communion adds too much time to the service or that this requires a significant effort to prepare on a weekly basis—both true, perhaps, but irrelevant to the point at hand. Some object because weekly communion sounds “too Catholic,” but this objection is based upon an ignorance of the Reformed doctrine of the Supper which not only strengthens faith because Christ “works in us all that he represents to us by these Holy signs” but which requires self-examination and moves us to “a fervent love of God and our neighbor” (*Belgic Confession*, Article 35).

The most significant objection to weekly communion is that the New Testament nowhere prescribes it. As we have seen, this argument assumes that the apostolic practice is descriptive only, not prescriptive. Even if Acts 2:42 is descriptive and not prescriptive, the burden of proof falls upon those who would argue that apostolic practice should not be followed by churches today because of practical considerations or ill-founded objections.

There can be little doubt that how one understands the nature of the Lord’s Supper will determine how frequently one observes it. Those who argue for infrequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper often tend to focus upon the subjective state of the sinner in preparing themselves to partake. In this regard, Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11:28–30 certainly needs to be heeded. “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” If the primary focus of the observance of the Lord’s Supper is that this is a memorial meal which is centered upon sufficient introspection and self-examination on the part of the participant so as to be worthy to partake, then, of course, the tendency will be to celebrate the Supper infrequently because the requirements to partake seem

43. Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 340.

so lofty, the warning to discern Christ's body seems so severe, and the honest believers know themselves to be completely unworthy.

And yet it is Calvin who reminds us, "if you are serious in your intention to aspire to the righteousness of God, and if, humbled by the knowledge of your own wretchedness, you fall back upon the grace of Christ, and rest upon it, be assured that you are a guest worthy of approaching this table.... For faith, even if imperfect, makes the unworthy worthy."⁴⁴ When Calvin discusses how the Supper is to be administered, he reminds us of the importance of a properly ordered liturgy which prepares us to come to the table with the confidence of knowing that we are justified sinners, who through faith possess the merits of Christ. Such a liturgy, Calvin believes, includes prayer, a sermon (in which the gospel has been announced), the words of institution (including the promises of the gospel and the fencing of the table to unbelievers), instruction to receive the Supper in faith and thankfulness, the singing of a Psalm, followed by the reception of the bread and wine. Once the bread and wine have been received, there should be a confession of faith, an exhortation to live appropriately, followed by the giving of thanks and praises unto God.⁴⁵

Though the Supper is to be observed in remembrance of Christ's saving work and though believers are to examine themselves before they partake, the focus should not fall upon our subjective condition (and how well we have prepared ourselves to come) but on what is objectively promised us in the bread and wine. If one's theology of the Lord's Supper is grounded in what is promised to those who partake (spiritual food and drink), then the tendency will quite naturally be toward a more frequent celebration. After all, Jesus gives himself to us in the Supper. John records Jesus speaking of himself by saying, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). That gospel promise never gets old, or at least it should not, if we consider the guilt of our sins, confess them, and then are promised pardon as part of our personal preparation to receive Christ's body and blood. After all, the Lord's Supper is a gospel sacrament in which "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

This is precisely what is affirmed in Q & A 79 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

Q 79. Why then does Christ call the bread His body, and the cup His blood, or the new covenant in His blood; and the apostle Paul, the communion of the body and the blood of Christ?

A. Christ speaks thus with great cause, namely, not only to teach us thereby, that like as the bread and wine sustain this temporal life, so also His crucified body and shed blood are the true meat and drink of our souls unto

44. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 253.

45. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

life eternal; but much more, by this visible sign and pledge to assure us that we are as really partakers of His true body and blood by the working of the Holy Spirit, as we receive by the mouth of the body these holy tokens in remembrance of Him; and that all His sufferings and obedience are as certainly our own, as if we ourselves had suffered and done all in our own person.

All of this is to say that the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper is directly tied to the preaching of the gospel. It is certainly not an oversight when the *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks to the matter of the creation of faith in Q & A 65, when it affirms that faith is created by the preaching of the gospel in particular, not the "word" in general. This is because the catechism assumes that the word has two parts, the law and the gospel (Q & A 3–5), and that the preaching of the former does not create faith, serving rather as the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude (Q & A 86, 114–15).

As we see in the apostolic pattern set forth in Acts 2:42, the apostle's teaching and the fellowship seems to culminate in the "breaking of bread" and "the prayers." Because the observance of the Lord's Supper is the logical (and liturgical) culmination of the preaching of the word, the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper provides the fitting, natural and, dare I say, "biblical" culmination of the worship service. The gospel promises are proclaimed from the word, and then ratified in the Supper. We are reminded not only of Christ's presence with us ("this is my body") but of his favor towards us because through his sacrificial death our sins are forgiven (Matt 26:28). Since believers partake together (as seen in the apostolic emphasis upon the fellowship meal), those who have heard the gospel promise see the fruits of that promise manifest in their midst. As Paul reminded the Corinthians "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Supper not only strengthens our faith, but it reminds us that all believers are members of Christ's one body. Not only this, in the Supper we are continually pointed ahead to the great messianic feast when Christ's kingdom is finally and gloriously consummated (cf. Rev 19:7–9). In light of this, it is proper to conclude that the preached word naturally leads to (and culminates in) the celebration of the Lord's Supper, as seen in the apostolic pattern.

In the absence of frequent observance of the Lord's Supper, the gap created in the apostolic order of worship becomes rather noticeable. There is a reason why those fundamentalists who stand in the revivalist tradition place the "altar call" or an appeal to make some sort of re-dedication or re-commitment to Christ at the end of the service, after the sermon. When God's word is proclaimed, we are called to act upon what we have just heard. But the absence of the Supper creates what seems to be a rather abrupt ending to worship, and the sense that something is missing gives impetus to those who want to see the preached word culminate in some

sort of a call to action, which then takes on a more formal role in closing out the worship service. Since this same tension exists in many Pentecostal and charismatic churches, there is likewise a tendency to see the worship service culminate in the exercise of the charismatic manifestation of the Spirit, which not only brings the service to a more dramatic ending but serves to connect the worshiper to the church in the Book of Acts.

This sense that Christians should see themselves as part of that church founded by the apostles and that concluding worship immediately after the sermon is too abrupt (as though something were missing) is not necessarily a bad thing. But this tension can lead to bad things if we seek to fill the gap with humanly-devised ceremonies (such as the “altar call”) or distorted views of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper not only fulfills the apostolic prescription and brings the service to a well-defined end, it ties contemporary believers to the apostolic church. After all, we hear the same gospel Jesus proclaimed to his disciples and which they, in turn, proclaim to us. We then take in our hands the very same elements (the bread and wine) which Jesus gave to his disciples on that fateful night in which he was betrayed, and which the members of the churches in Jerusalem, Troas, and Corinth took in their hands. And through the work of the same Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised to send to his disciples, our faith is both strengthened and confirmed. As Calvin reminds us, Christ “nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments, whose one function is to set his promises before our eyes to be looked upon, indeed, to be guarantees of them to us.”⁴⁶

And since this is the case, why should we not take advantage of such a good and gracious gift passed down to us by the apostles, so that when we come together as a church on the Lord’s day, we too devote ourselves to “the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”?

46. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.12.