

The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

Chapter 9: Partaking of the Lord's Supper

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Frequency

The issue of how often the church ought to conduct the Lord's supper is one of wide disagreement within Reformed circles. Some believe that like the Passover the holy supper ought to be conducted only once a year. Some churches conduct communion only once every six months. Others argue that the eucharist should be given quarterly. This argument follows the seasons and certain Jewish feasts. Today, many Presbyterian churches have communion once a month.¹ The once a month view is often based on pragmatic considerations such as: We want communion to remain special so we should not do it too often; weekly communion would not be practical. It would be cumbersome; if we celebrate the Lord's supper too often it would be taken for granted, etc. There are a few Presbyterian churches which celebrate the Lord's supper every week.

One of the reasons there is a wide diversity of practice on this issue is that Scripture issues no specific instructions of the frequency of communion. The only inspired guidance we have on this issue is the inspired history of the church. If the apostolic church which was led by the specially guided apostleship practice communion frequently, then we ought to follow their example. What do the Scriptures say? Can we even ascertain frequency from the inspired record?

In Luke's account of the early church in Acts he notes "they [those who were baptized] continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (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" (2:46). If the expression "the breaking of bread" refers to the celebration of the Lord's supper or even the love feast that included communion, it would appear that the holy supper was celebrated frequently. In favor of the Eucharistic interpretation Kistemaker writes, "In the Greek, the definite article precedes the noun *bread* [v. 42] and thus specifies that the Christians partook of *the* bread set aside for the sacrament of communion.... The words *breaking of bread* appear within the

¹ The monthly celebration of the eucharist was the practice of Calvin at Geneva. The great reformer writes,

"We are very pleased that the Lord's Supper is being celebrated every month, provided that this more frequent observance does not produce carelessness. When a considerable part of the congregation stays away from Communion, the church somehow becomes fragmented. Nonetheless, we think it is better for a congregation to be invited [to take Communion] every month than only four times a year, as usually happens here.

"When I first came here, the Lord's Supper was observed only three times a year, and seven whole months intervened between the observance at Pentecost and a the Birthday of Christ. A monthly observance pleased me, but I could not persuade the people, and it seemed better to bear with their weaknesses than to continue arguing stubbornly. I took care to have it recorded in the public records, however, that our way was wrong, so that correcting it might be easier for future generations."

("To a Question About Certain Rites of the Church" in *Calvin's' Ecclesiastical Advice* [Louisville, KE: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991], 94.)

sequence of teaching, fellowship, and prayers in worship services. Therefore, we understand the term as an early description for the celebration of Holy Communion.”²

In Acts 20:7, 11 the church at Troas came together “on the first day of the week...to break bread.” In this section of Scripture there is no question that we have public worship service with teaching. On Sunday during the local worship service the word was preached and communion celebrated. John Calvin supports this interpretation. He writes, “Though the breaking of bread doth sometimes signify among the Hebrews a domestical banquet, yet do I expound the same of the Holy Supper in this place, being moved with two reasons. For seeing we may easily gather by that which followeth that there was no small multitude gathered together there, it is unlikely that there could any supper be prepared in a private house. Again, Luke will afterward declare that Paul took bread not at supper time, but after midnight. Hereunto is added, that he saith not that he took meat that he might eat, but that he might only taste. Therefore, I think thus, that they had appointed a solemn day for the celebrating of the Holy Supper of the Lord among themselves, which might be commodious for them all.”³

While the evidence gathered from Scripture points toward weekly communion, apparently the evidence is not strong enough to forge a uniform practice in Reformed Christendom. Perhaps the abuses of Rome and various high church opinions of the ordinance have influence Reformed practice. Some of the current objections one hears regarding the weekly celebration of communion are as follows.

(a) If the eucharist is celebrated weekly it will lose its special character and be taken for granted. While this may be a problem for some, we would hope that prayer, the singing of praise and the preached word are not taken for granted and abused for they are practiced weekly. Also, we hope that people do not pray less, or listen to less sermons to keep them special. Such an argument doesn't make a lot of sense.

(b) If communion is practiced weekly, it will detract from the preached Word and may even lead to high church views of the sacrament. The objection fails to take into account that any biblical ordinance and practice can be abused and perverted if the pastor and elders do not do their job and teach the people properly and diligently regarding the various ordinances. It is ignorance and poor teaching that leads to bad practices, not a humble submission to Scripture. Further, a very infrequent communion service is more likely (logically) to lead to an exaltation of the sacrament above the preached Word. The old Scottish practice of a communion season with fasting, sermons on Saturday before communion as well as sermons following communion on Monday has no warrant from Scripture. Because communion was so rarely celebrated, it's practice developed into a sort of an extra-special super celebration. With this type of a rare occurrence it is very easy for congregants to view the holy supper as a kind of special oasis in a desert. But the eucharist ought to strengthen our faith through the signs of bread and wine and focus our attention on *our continuous communion* with the living Savior. We are not visiting a Person who is far off, who rarely communes with us; but, with the living resurrected glorified redeemer who is always present with us, who is always strengthening us with His redemptive benefits and glorified life.

While we must diligently oppose those who are in favor of weekly communion because of high church sacramentalist views of the eucharist, we must not forget that: the apostolic church very frequently celebrated communion and, the Lord's supper is truly a means of grace

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 111.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:235-236.

and was given to us by Jesus Himself for our own benefit. Let us not throw out the baby with the bath water.

(c) But doesn't the practice of weekly eucharist contradict our heritage, our Presbyterian tradition of infrequent communion? In a certain sense it does. But what is important in this matter? Is it whether or not that tradition is based on a correct interpretation of Scripture or was it a result of unique historical circumstances? A study of Presbyterian church history indicates that historical circumstance and not biblical exegesis was the driving force behind infrequent communion. D. M. Murray writes,

The Reformers wished to restore the Lord's supper to the service for every Lord's day, following Calvin's Genevan ideal, but this was not achieved in practice. The *Book of Common Order* (1564) recommended a monthly celebration and the *First Book of Discipline* said that Communion should be celebrated quarterly in towns and twice-yearly in country areas. Although mass had been said frequently, the people had long been accustomed to communicate only once or twice a year at Christmas and Easter. There were also not enough ministers available to cover all the parishes of the land. Since the Christian year was no longer observed, the Lord's Supper was celebrated at times other than the main Christian festivals. The Sunday service in the *BCO*, however, was based on the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the norm, with the prayers of intercession and the Lord's Prayer coming after the sermon, as would be the case on a Communion Sunday. The Westminster Confession reiterated the "high" doctrine of the sacrament of the Reformers, and the order of service in the Westminster Directory was still based on the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the norm of Sunday worship. With the troubled times of the mid-seventeenth century, however, Communion was celebrated even less frequently than before for several years. The practice developed of parishes grouping together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, as did the observance of a fast day held beforehand to prepare for the sacrament. The "fencing of the tables" was a common feature of the service whereby a warning was given to those who might communicate unworthily. More elaborate arrangements were made for the celebration of the "season," with the emphasis on the minister's catechetical examination of the congregation and Communion tokens being given to those considered eligible to participate. Two sermons would be delivered on the fast day preceding the Sabbath, two on the Saturday, and then several "sittings" of Communion would be held on the Sunday, with the minister assisted by visiting clergymen. A thanksgiving service with two sermons would be held on the Monday.

Once we truly understand the reason why the practice of infrequent communion arose in Presbyterian circles, the appeal to the reformers and the Second Reformation becomes all the more inadequate as a proper guide to our current practice. Further, the tendency of some to lean on tradition as a reason for a practice or as a source of authority in matters of faith, doctrine or worship is romanizing, unbiblical and dangerous.

The Proper Recipients of the Lord's Supper

An important very practical matter relating to the holy supper regards the question of the proper recipients of the eucharist. As we consider this topic we will first consider the areas in which most Reformed churches agree and then proceed to more difficult areas.

(1) The Lord's supper should only be participated in by people who profess faith in Christ. While baptism is an initiatory rite, the holy supper is a continuing rite for believers in Christ. The receiving of the bread and wine is symbolic of our receiving of the Lord Jesus Christ

and His redemption by faith. The eucharist does not engender faith but strengthens the faith that Christians already have. Therefore, it is absurd and totally inappropriate to offer the elements to unbelievers. The elders of a church have a responsibility to fence the table from the heathen and scandalous sinners. (The issue of paedo-communion is dealt with in a separate chapter.)

(2) Communion should only be given to people who have been baptized into the name of the triune God. The eucharist is a means of sanctification for disciples of Jesus and baptism is the initiatory rite of Christian discipleship. Obviously anyone who truly trusts in the Savior will be happy to receive the sign and seal of the Mediator's ownership over their person and life. One of the things that baptism signifies is a person's membership and participation in the body of Christ. Since the Lord's supper and the partaking of the one loaf symbolizes and underlines our participation in the one body, baptism logically precedes communion. Further, since in the holy supper the believer feeds upon Christ to this spiritual nourishment, the initial sign of union with the Savior (baptism) must precede coming to communion. One must go through the door of baptism and become part of God's holy temple before he sits at the banquet table of the Prince.

(3) Communion must also be restricted to members of the local visible church. The Bible teaches that once someone believes and is baptized they have a responsibility to join themselves to a local body of believers (Ac. 2:41-47) and submit themselves to the elders of a particular church (Heb. 13:7, 17). Under normal circumstances, there is no such thing as being a member of the church abstractly or in the ethereal without a true covenantal commitment to an actual congregation. The sacraments are only to be dispensed by lawfully ordained ministers of the gospel (Mt. 28:16-20). The pastor and elders have a responsibility to fence the table and not distribute the elements to people who are unqualified for participation. Therefore, if someone wants to participate in communion who is not a member of *any* church, they must meet with the session or consistory of a local congregation, make a credible profession of faith and take a vow of church membership. This has been the teaching of all Reformed and Presbyterian churches from the very beginning. If anyone regardless of church membership or not can participate in the holy supper, then the judicial aspect of the eldership and church discipline are meaningless. A person who is not a member of the body should not receive the body of Christ. Diligent, competent sessions even fence the table by asking visitors a number of appropriate questions before they can participate in the eucharist.

(4) Another important qualification for communion is self-examination. Paul writes, "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" (1Cor. 11:27-31). Self-examination has a number of elements. First, it refers to an examination of our treatment of and attitude toward other believers before and at the holy supper; and, by way of application our relationship to other Christians outside of public worship. In our day when the love feast has been disengaged completely from communion one does not encounter professing Christians getting drunk and acting selfishly and inconsiderately at church. At church virtually everyone is on their best behavior. However, it is quite common for believers who are having problems with another's behavior, who have spoken unlovingly, who are still angry and unreconciled with each other to partake of the eucharist together. Such people are taking their unreconciled relationships and disunity to the eucharist which is a supreme display of unity, love and fellowship. This practice ought not to occur.

Jesus' words during the Sermon on the Mount are especially applicable to such a situation. "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 (Mt. 5:23-24). While this teaching applies to the whole Christian life, it should be even more carefully heeded as we examine our hearts before the Lord's table. Each and every Christian who thinks another believer has a just grievance or even a serious misunderstanding against him that has brought disharmony to the body needs to imitate Christ, regard the other person as more important than himself and seek a full reconciliation before partaking of the holy supper. "In a broad sense, then, 'Let a man examine himself' means that we ought to ask whether our relationships in the body of Christ are in fact reflecting the character of the Lord whom we meet there and whom we represent."⁴

Second, we must examine our faith in Christ. Are we trusting in Jesus as He has been revealed in the Scriptures or are we trusting in a Messiah created by our imagination? On any given Sunday most people throughout the world who receive the elements are heretics who are trusting in a false Christ (e.g., Modernists, Roman Catholics, Arminians) that is only partially defined by the Bible. Therefore, it is important that we have true saving faith or trust in the Savior as well as biblical knowledge regarding crucial doctrines. It is for this reason that Presbyterian churches historically have had communicant classes. Contrary to popular opinion, doctrine is important. Faith can never be divorced from its proper object. A perfect, comprehensive or exceedingly detailed knowledge is not to be demanded or expected due to our limited capacities and the different levels of knowledge and maturity in Christ's church. "There is, however, a degree of knowledge which is not only attainable, but necessary to our right engaging in this ordinance. This does not consist merely in our knowing that there is a God, or that he is to be worshiped, or that there was such a person as our Savior, who lived in the world, was crucified, rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, and shall come again to judge the quick and the dead. For, a person may have a general notion of all these things, and yet be unacquainted with the end and design of Christ's death, or with the claim which a person may lay by faith to them. But without being acquainted with these things, there is a sufficient knowledge, such as the apostle calls 'a discerning the Lord's body,' which we ought to have in this ordinance."⁵

The flesh and blood of the Mediator should never be given to heretics (e.g., Romanists, Socinians, Unitarians, full preterists, Arminians, Shepherdites and so on). "Further, we must inquire whether we have a great concern for his glory and interest in our own souls, and an earnest desire that his name be known and magnified in the world; and whether this desire be accompanied with using our utmost endeavors in our various stations and capacities in order to the attainment of that end."⁶ Remember, that the instrument of faith connects us to Christ and His merits. Without faith we cannot feed upon Jesus, but can only incur judgment for hypocrisy. As we partake of the glorious Savior and His benefits our faith, love and devotion toward Him is increased. What a blessed means of grace!

Third, as we come to the table we must examine the state of our repentance. Sincere repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior. We must not partake of the sacrament with impertinent hearts. In preparation for the eucharist we must not hold on to secret sins but cast them behind us. A genuine repentance is not partial, haphazard or surface only. All

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 997.

⁵ Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, 2:530-531.

⁶ *Ibid*, 2:528.

sin must be plucked out by the root and replaced with service and love toward God. “I thought about my ways, And turned my feet to Your testimonies” (Ps. 119:59).

Some questions we should ask ourselves are as follows.

“1. Have I turned from sin unto God, or am I yet living in my sins? Acts xxvi.18.

2. Have I turned from all sin, Ezek. Xiv. 6. from all gross sins in my practice, and from all sin simply, in my heart and affections? I my heart loosed from sin? And do I hate all sin? Psal. cxix.104.

3. If so, why have I done it? Is it only for the wrath annexed to it, or is it not because of the contrariety in it to God’s nature and will? Exek. xxxvi. 31.”⁷

Ridgeley writes,

We are also to take notice of our natural propensity and inclination to sin, and the various ways by which this has discovered itself in our actions. Accordingly, we are to inquire whether we have sinned knowingly willfully, presumptuously, and obstinately; or whether we have been surprised into sin, or ensnared by some sudden and unforeseen temptation, and have committed it without the full bent of our wills; whether we have striven against it, or have given way to it, and suffered ourselves to be prevailed upon without making resistance. We must also inquire whether we have continued in sin, or unfeignedly repented of it; whether sin sits light or heavy on our conscience; or if our consciences are burdened with it, whether we seek relief against it in that way which Christ had prescribed in the gospel. We must also inquire whether there are not some sins which more frequently and easily beset us; what they are, and whether we are daily watchful against them, and use our utmost endeavours to avoid them. We must also inquire whether we have not frequently relapsed into the same sin which we have resolved against at various times, and in particular, at the Lord’s table, and thus have broken our engagements; and if so, whether we did not rely too much on our own strength, when we made resolutions against sin.⁸

Fourth, in conjunction with all the preceding elements we need to meditate upon our love of Christ and how we may serve Him with a greater obedience. “Love to God is necessary in it, because therein is held forth the greatest display of God’s love in giving his own Son to the death for us. Here is that which of all things may warm the heart most, and make it burn with love to God and Christ.”⁹

Fifth, as we consider self-examination it is important to note that professing Christians who are ignorant and deficient in doctrine, and/or scandalous in behavior must be excluded from the Lord’s supper.¹⁰

⁷ Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism*, (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival, 1993), 2:494.

⁸ Thomas Ridgeley, 2:528-529.

⁹ Thomas Boston, 2:495.

¹⁰ Some people who argue for a completely open communion where virtually anyone can partake of the eucharist appeal to Judas at the last supper for support. This argument is destroyed by the Puritan theologian Thomas Ridgeley. He writes, “It is further objected, that Judas was the Lord’s supper when it was instituted by our Savior, though he knew that he was a hypocrite and a traitor, and that he would speedily execute what he had designed against his life. It is hence inferred that all ought to be admitted to this ordinance. The reason generally assigned for believing that Judas was presented at the institution of the ordinance is, that it is said, ‘When the hour was come, he sat down, and his twelve apostles with him.’ We likewise read afterwards that ‘he took bread and brake it, &c. and also the cup after the supper, &c.; and then it is said, ‘Behold the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table.’ This is supposed by the objectors, to have been spoken by Christ when they were eating the Lord’s supper; and they hence conclude that Judas was there. We reply however, that it seems much more probable that he was not present when the Lord’s supper was administered, though he joined with Christ and the other apostles in eating the Passover. The

Given the fact that many ignorant, heretical, foolish and scandalous persons are not aware of their own deficiencies, the local church session is responsible to fence the table from people that are clearly unworthy to participate. Any people who visit the church must meet with the session and answer certain questions before they are invited to the table. Some questions that need to be asked relate to church membership, a credible profession of faith, orthodoxy is essential in doctrinal matters and scandalous behavior. People who are not members of a church, who are living unrepentant lives or who hold heretical opinions (e.g., Romanists, Armenians, Pentecostals, open theists, full preterists, Shepherdites, etc.) must be excluded from the table.

Sixth, although self-examination is important and must not be neglected, it is important that weak and doubting believers understand that they should not exclude themselves from the Lord's supper. While those who doubt and even struggle with sin must bewail their state and pray for an increase of faith and sanctification, the holy supper is given to us to strengthen our faith and increase our holiness. Weak believers should come to the table in order to be strengthened by Christ. The eucharist *is* a means of grace.

All serious Christians are aware that they are deficient in many ways and do not serve the Lord as they ought to, as they would like. Nevertheless, we must avoid morbid introspection, or a legalistic mind set, or a kind of perfectionist attitude that would keep us from feeding on Christ. We must always keep in mind that it is *only* because of the Savior's sacrificial death and perfect sinless life (that we receive by faith alone) that enables us as God's adopted sons to eat at His banquet table. If we ever take our minds off of the righteousness of Christ and dwell on ourselves we will neglect this blessed ordinance.

How to Receive the Lord's Supper

During the administration of the holy supper believers need to reverently pay close attention to what is going on. We should be focusing our mind on the elements and the actions while we are meditating on the suffering and death of Jesus. During the eucharist we are not only to think upon our Lord's sacrificial death but also our union with Him and how this union nourishes us spiritually. As we partake of the holy supper we ought to be judged ourselves; "sorrowing for sin; in earnest hungering and thirsting after Christ, feeding on him by faith, receiving of his fullness, trusting in his merits, rejoicing in his life, [and] giving thanks for his grace" (Larger Catechism 174). As we share the elements with the brethren we must also keep in mind the unity of the body and our love and dedication to God's saints. The eucharist is a means of personal and corporate sanctification.

Passover and the Lord's supper were celebrated, the one immediately after the other, at the same table, or sitting; so that the hand of Judas might be with Christ on the table, in the former, though not in the latter. Hence, though these words, 'the hand of him that betrayeth me, is with me on the table,' are inserted after the account of both these ordinances being concluded; yet we have ground to suppose that they were spoken while they were eating the Passover, when Judas was present. Moreover, it appears yet more probable that he was not present at the Lord's supper, from the account which John gives of the matter. According to that account, our Savior tells the disciples that 'one of them should betray him;' and he then discovered that he meant Judas, by giving him the sop; and it is said, that 'having received the sop, he went immediately out.' Now it is certain there was no sop in the Lord's supper, as there was in the Passover, inasmuch as there was no flesh used in it. Hence, Judas went out when they were eating the Passover, before they began to partake of the Lord's supper; being, as we may reasonably suppose, in a rage that his hypocrisy should be detected, and that he should be marked out as a traitor, who was previously reckoned as good a man as any of them. We have not sufficient ground, therefore, to conclude, from the case of Judas, that wicked men ought to be admitted to partake of the Lord's supper."

The Lord's supper is a very rich means of grace that proclaims the Savior's substitutionary death, our salvation by Christ's merits, our union and communion with Him and the spiritual nourishment that we receive from His redemptive work. It also shows us the unity and love we have with each other. It gives us a taste of heaven on earth. Our King is with us and He feeds us from his own banquet table. May God enable us to grow in grace and love as we behold our precious Savior. Amen.

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