

On the Weekly Celebration of Holy Communion

Adopted by the Consistory, May 31, 2005

Introduction

As Christians, our only comfort is that we belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1), whom we experience in faith by the power of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Holy Gospel and participation in the Holy Sacraments. As pilgrims in this age, we need to hear, see, touch, smell, and taste this Gospel through the Word and Sacraments, which create and confirm our faith (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65), lift up our hearts to our heavenly hope in the life of the world to come, and unite us in brotherly love. Thus, celebrating the Gospel in both the Word and Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as we assemble every week is best for our spiritual health.

From the time we began worshipping together as a community in June of 2000 until now, we have incrementally increased the frequency of our participation as Christ's body in his body and blood. From June 2000–October 2002 we partook of Holy Communion between 7–9 times a year, as we were a church plant of the Escondido URC. After we became a distinct congregation, we participated monthly from November 2002–July 2003. Then we increased this to twice a month from August 2003–November 2004 and most recently to three times a month from December 2004–May 2005. Now we move to celebrating the Gospel in Communion weekly for the following reasons.

The New Testament Scriptures

The Lord's Supper is an ordinary element of New Covenant worship. For instance, Acts 2:42–49 describes the worship life of the early church by saying several things were done “continually.” This means that whenever they met, they participated in these elements. In Acts 2:42 we read, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (ESV). These four basic elements of New Covenant worship were celebrated “daily” in the early days of the Church (Acts 2:46). This is why John Calvin argued for the Lord's Supper “at least weekly” (*Institutes*, 4.17.43), and also said,

Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper, and alms. We may gather from Paul that this was the order observed by the Corinthians, and it is certain that this was the practice many ages after (*Institutes*, 4.17.44).

We know that the “breaking of bread” was the Lord's Supper because St. Luke uses the definite article “the” before each of the four elements mentioned in Acts 2:42: *the* apostles' doctrine, *the* fellowship, *the* breaking of *the* bread, and *the* prayers. This is a definite article *par excellence*, meaning, it is not just any bread. The Supper was called “the breaking of the bread” because that was what Jesus did on the Passover night (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19, 24:30; 1 Cor. 10:16, 11:24). The Lord's Supper, then, was just as ordinary as preaching, prayer, and fellowship. This is why Calvin again said, “For there is not the least doubt that the Sacred Supper was in that era set before the believers every time they met together” (*Institutes*, 4.17.46).

Also, the New Testament describes the worship of the Christian community as “coming together” for the express purpose of “breaking bread.” In Acts 20:7 we read, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to [for the purpose of] break bread...” According to men such as Matthew Henry and John Stott, this text teaches us that this was the “normal, regular practice of the church in Troas” (Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 321; Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2154). And joined with the Supper was preaching (Acts 20:7, 8, 11). On this passage, John R. W. Stott eloquently commented:

Word and sacrament were combined in the ministry given to the church at Troas, and the universal church has followed suit ever since. For God speaks to his people through his Word both as it is read and expounded from Scripture and as it is dramatized in the two gospel sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper...What builds up the church more than anything else is the ministry of God’s word as it comes to us through Scripture and Sacrament (that is the right coupling), audibly and visibly, in declaration and drama (Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 321).

Paul uses this same terminology in 1 Corinthians (11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34, 14:23), describing the weekly worship service of the Corinthians as a “coming together,” for the purpose of preaching and partaking of the Supper (cf. Acts 20:7-11). This led Francis Turretin to write that “the practice of the apostolic church” was to “constantly retain[...] the breaking of the bread...which was customarily done on the Lord’s day when they assembled to hear the preaching and to perform the other public exercises of piety” (*Institutes*, 3:445).

This “coming together” was as the “church” (1 Cor. 14:23). The Greek word *ekklēsia* is the New Testament equivalent of the Hebrew *qahal*, which is a “covenant assembly.” So what was the purpose of “coming together” as the covenant assembly? To “eat” the Lord’s Supper (11:33). Paul, though, had to rebuke the Corinthians because they were not coming for that purpose but instead for their own purpose (11:17, 20). To this one commentator says, “It is no wonder that Paul could not call the gatherings of the church at Corinth ‘the Lord’s Supper’: they were not under the Lord’s authority; there was hardly any awareness of the Lord’s presence; the purpose behind them seemed to be scarcely directed towards remembering the Lord’s death” (David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, 187).

Hughes Oliphant Old, one of the great scholars of Reformed worship, says these texts lead us to conclude

that it is in the meeting together for the purpose of sharing the meal that these individuals become the church, the body of Christ. It is this supper which constitutes the church...the service is called “the Lord’s Supper...” The Lord’s Day is distinguished by the fact that it is the day for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper at the Lord’s Table, sharing all together the Lord’s Cup (*Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*, 110).

Therefore, the life of the early Church was marked by a participation in preaching and the Lord’s Supper, whether that was daily in Acts or weekly (“on the first day of the week;” 1 Cor 16:2) in Corinth. This is explicitly taught in our Heidelberg Catechism in question and answer 103, which explains the fourth Commandment. We are to “diligently attend church to learn the Word of God, to use the Holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms.” Notice that these four elements are those of Acts 2:42.

In his exposition of this Commandment, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83) said that besides preaching, prayer, and alms, we are “to use the Holy Sacraments,” and that, “...the use of the

sacraments is most intimately connected with a proper observance and sanctification of the Sabbath” (*Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 568).

The Old Testament and Covenant Renewal

Biblical worship is a covenant renewal ceremony. Every time we gather for worship we are renewing our vows of trust in the Lord, but more importantly, he is renewing his covenant of grace with us through the means of covenant signs and seals. What we are doing is participating in a covenant ceremony as did Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and the disciples in the Upper Room. And as we know, every covenant and every covenant ceremony is ratified by a sign. With Adam it was the animal skins (Gen. 3:21), with Noah it was the rainbow (Gen 9:13), with Abraham it was circumcision (Gen. 17:10), with Moses it was the blood of the covenant (Ex. 24:8), with Joshua it was circumcision of the second generation (Josh. 5:2), and with the disciples and us it is the Lord’s Supper, which is “the new covenant” (Luke 22:20) in visible form. And when a covenant is renewed in Scripture, a communal meal is celebrated in the presence of God (e.g. Neh. 8:9–12, 18; Ex. 24:11; Deut. 12:6–7, 14:26; John 6:53–58; 1 Cor. 5:7–8, 11:25–26; Rev. 3:20, 19:9).

The Holy Supper and Our Struggle With Sin

We need the Lord’s Supper because of our wretchedness. Our confession as a Reformed congregation is, “We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and weakness, has ordained sacraments” (Belgic Confession, Article 33). The sacraments are the gifts of God for the people of God, which we need to take advantage of as much as we are able in “this present evil age” (Gal 1:4). As those who are “insensitive” and obstinate in heart and will, our Father has given us bread and wine to fill us with his grace and move us to gratitude. They are also an accommodation to us, as our Father is “mindful” of our sin; “For he knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). God has given Christ’s body and blood in visible form to those who cry, “Lord I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24), and, “increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). Thus the Confession says that God gave the sacraments “to nourish and sustain our faith” (Belgic Confession, Article 33) while the Catechism says they are the means by which the Holy Spirit “confirms” our faith (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65).

God’s Works Among Us

God works through the elements, voices, water, bread and wine. Notice how our Confession speaks of the Supper, in terms of the personal pronouns used:

God...has ordained sacraments to seal *His* promises...to be pledges of *His* good will and grace...*He* did so to nourish and sustain our faith. *He* has added these to the Word...to represent better...what *He* declares...and what *He* does inwardly in our hearts. Thus *He* confirms to us the salvation which *He* imparts to us. Sacraments are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit... (Belgic Confession, Article 33)

Because we are Reformed we believe the Lord’s Supper is not a matter of our working, our receiving, our preparing, but of God’s work in us through these means. Most specifically, the Supper is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, as the aforementioned Confession says, “By means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.” Along with preaching, the primary way the

Spirit sanctifies us to be holy is through these means. He fills us with Himself and all His goodness that we might truly be “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 3:16). The Holy Spirit is among us not in tongues or exciting music, but in his Word and Sacraments.

The Clearest Proclamation of the Gospel

The sacraments are the clearest way the promises of God are given to us – not the preached Word; as the Confession says, “He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what He declares to us in His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts.” As Calvin said, “The sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life” (*Institutes*, 4.14.5); and, “It is indeed true that this same grace is offered us by the gospel, yet as in the Supper we have more ample certainty, and fuller enjoyment of it” (*Short Treatise on the Holy Supper*, 10). Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza, described this aspect of the sacraments in this way, saying,

The Word on its own strikes only one of our five natural senses, but the Sacraments touch more the sight and other bodily senses...It is therefore easy to recognize how much the aid of the Sacraments is necessary to us to support our faith. In a manner of speaking, they enable us to touch with our fingers and see with our eyes, and as to taste and feel Jesus Christ in Person, as if we already had and held Him (*The Christian Faith*, 55).

We can also say that the reason why the sacraments, especially the Lord’s Supper, most clearly proclaims the Gospel, is that does so in a dramatic way. Our services are too often considered dull, boring, and overly “teachy” because we have neglected drama – God’s drama of the holy Supper. Thus the Supper is to be festive, not overly-didactic, joyful not somber, celebratory not a drudgery, especially in a day when many evangelical Christians are joining Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Church because of their multi-sensory worship. We Protestants tend to present Christianity either through an overly rational presentation or via entertainment-based worship, neither of which sufficiently quench the spiritual thirst of most postmodern people. As well, because the Supper is to be enjoyed and celebrated, it is to be done so with a sense of holy mystery. As Calvin said,

Now, if anyone should ask me how this [Christ lifting believers up in the Supper to heaven to commune with him] takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it (*Institutes*, 4.17.32).

So how do we ascend to heaven to partake of Christ? By faith through the working of the Holy Spirit who uses the Word and Sacraments. Calvin said, “It is thus that the Holy Spirit condescends for our profit, and in accommodation to our infirmity, raising our thought to heavenly and divine things by these worldly elements” (*Commentary on the Psalms*, 5:150).

History of the Church’s Practice

Weekly communion follows the pattern of the most ancient churches. According to the *Didache*, a text written for Christian instruction probably between 60 and 80 A.D., we see instructions on how to perform communion, which was done every week, “On the Lord’s own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your

sacrifice may be pure” (Ch. 14). The early apologist, Justin Martyr, wrote his *First Apology* around 150 A.D. In this writing he described the routine worship of the early Christian Church, which included the following elements: Scripture Lessons, Sermon, Prayer, Presentation of the Bread and Wine, Prayer, Distribution of the Bread and Wine, and an Offering. He went on to describe the Lord’s Day worship service in second century Palestine in these words:

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 presiding officer 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 presiding officer 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 they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the presiding officer (Ch. 67).

In the late fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo spoke of the frequency of communion in his *First Epistle to Januarius*, in this way,

Some communicate daily in the body and blood of the Lord; others receive it on certain days: in some places, not a day intervenes on which it is not offered; in others, it is offered only on the Sabbath and the Lord’s day: in others, on the Lord’s day only. But since, as we have said, the people were sometimes remiss, holy men urged them with severe rebukes, that they might not seem to connive at their sluggishness.

Jerome also testifies that in Rome and Spain the church celebrated the eucharist daily (Letter 71). At the end of the fifth century, one of Augustine’s disciples in modern-day France, Gennadius Scholasticus (d. 496), spoke of the frequency of Holy Communion in these words: “Every day,” he says, “I neither praise nor blame to receive the communion of the Eucharist, however, I recommend and urge to communicate every Lord’s day.”

But sometime during the Medieval period of the church the innovation of less-than-weekly communion became normal. In fact, the Medieval Roman Church developed the non-Mass “prone” (Latin, *pronaus*) service with only preaching. Because of superstition Communion was eventually offered to the congregation only once a year. Of this practice Calvin said it was “an invention of the devil” (*Institutes*, 4.17.46). Infrequent communion, then, was an innovation in historic church practice, not the practice of frequent communion. It is not “Roman Catholic” to have the Supper weekly but Christian and Reformed.

Weekly communion, then, was a reform that was left for us to institute where able. As Calvin said at the end of his life, “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 more freely and easily.” Without the obstacles of the Genevan city council for Calvin or the obstacle of not having enough ministers for Knox in Scotland or the Reformed in the Netherlands, they would have instituted weekly communion and we would not have this debate today.

The people of God must learn, Calvin said in 1540, “the necessity of their frequent participation in the flesh and blood of the Lord as well as to its great benefits, which are received from this participation and mastication” (*Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice*, 165). He went on to say, in opposition to Papist infrequent communion, “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” (*Institutes*, 4.17.46).

There is a lengthy history in the Reformed tradition of advocacy of frequent Communion. Some, such as the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, have argued that the Lord’s Supper is a continual ordinance, like the preaching of the word and prayer, in which minimal requirements appear to be weekly rather than arbitrary, such as the quarterly, monthly, or bi-monthly celebrations of many Reformed churches (*Works*, 11:388–409). As Goodwin noted, since other continual ordinances such as preaching and prayer appear to be required during the church’s worship on the Lord’s Day and are characteristic of distinctly Christian worship, why is the Supper arbitrarily excluded from those things which characterize what is to transpire on the Lord’s Day when the church gathers?

Holy Communion and the Needy

The Supper has always been the occasion for diaconal offerings throughout the history of the Church. We are moved to care for the poor and needy as the one body of Christ. Throughout the history of the Church the poor have been cared for by the benevolence offering after the Supper. As we see the one bread broken we are reminded that all of us must pool our resources to care for each other in our times of need.

Holy Communion and Love

The Supper is also the way we grow together as the one body of Christ. As the Confession of Faith says, “In short, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love of God and our neighbors” (Belgic Confession, Article 35). As a joyful celebration we see each other come forward to receive the elements and partake together and we depart the service refreshed in grace and renewed in our love for each other.

Conclusion

As we can see, celebrating Communion every Lord’s Day is not only biblically, historically, and theologically sound, but of immense practical benefit to us; for, in Communion, the Holy Spirit feeds us with Christ, applying him to our souls in grace power. May we come to the Table with a hunger and thirst for righteousness. In doing so, the Lord will satisfy our hearts.

Taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8).