

## *Holy Communion—Should We Offer it More Frequently?*

At our last Synodical (LC-MS) Convention in St. Louis,<sup>1</sup> the convention resolved to encourage pastors and congregations to “study the scriptural, confessional, and historical witness to every Sunday communion with a view to recovering the opportunity for receiving the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s Day.” Since few study materials are readily available to help pastors and congregations do this,<sup>2</sup> perhaps the following will be helpful.

Since the national convention of the Synod is “the principal legislative assembly, which . . . establishes general synodical positions and policies,”<sup>3</sup> last summer’s resolution (#2-08A) is a good place for us to begin. It reads:

WHEREAS, The opportunity to receive the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s Day was a reality cherished by Luther and set forth clearly with high esteem by our Lutheran Confessions (Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession and of the Apology); and

WHEREAS, Our Synod’s 1983 CTCR document on the Lord’s Supper (p. 28) and our Synod’s 1986 translation of Luther’s Catechism both remind us that the Scriptures place the Lord’s Supper at the center of worship (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 33), and not as an appendage or an occasional extra; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in convention encourage its pastors and congregations to study the scriptural, confessional, and historical witness to every Sunday communion with a view to recovering the opportunity for receiving the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s Day.

Since the Synod has asked us to “study the scriptural, confessional, and historical witness to every Sunday communion,” let’s look at this question from those three perspectives.

### **THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS TO EVERY SUNDAY COMMUNION**

Synod reminds us that Holy Scripture places the Lord’s Supper at the center of Christian worship. Jesus did not intend it to be regarded as an option. It is at the heart and core of New Testament worship just as the tabernacle, and later the temple, were at the heart and core of worship in the Old Testament. In fact, His Supper is the very foundation of the New Testament, for Jesus instituted the New Testament by giving us this sacrament. Jesus said, “*This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is poured out for you*” (Lk 22:20). So we see that the Lord has given His church both the Word [which we are to publicly read and preach (Rev. 1:3; 1 Cor 1:18)] and the Sacrament of the Altar [which we are to publicly administer (Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26)].

We see this theology of the sacrament reflected in the practice of the New Testament church.<sup>4</sup> Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost, the Christians “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*” (Acts 2:42). The first Christians’ worship looked remarkably similar to ours in basic structure. It included God’s Word (the living voice of Jesus), the offering (*koinonia* in the sense of “sharing in something” - the hands of Jesus in action), the Sacrament of the Altar (the living Jesus Himself, according to both His human and divine natures), and prayer to the living Lord in their presence. This reflects the daily worship of the first Jerusalem church.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in the July, 1998 issue of *Concordia Journal* (vol. 24:3). The reference is to the 59<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention of the LC-MS held at St. Louis, Missouri on July 15-21, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> One helpful piece is A. N. Bougher’s Ten Questions and Answers on the Weekly Eucharist, available for 75 cents from Lutheran Liturgical Renewal, PO Box 125, Oxford, Michigan 48371.

<sup>3</sup> Handbook of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, (St. Louis: LCMS, 1995) 33.

<sup>4</sup> Some might be uncomfortable with the lack of a specific command from our Lord as to the number of times the sacrament should be offered or received. Here we rely on the principle of “Scripture interprets Scripture,” which teaches that less clear passages are to be clarified by clear ones. In this case we see how the Apostles interpreted Jesus command “*This do . . .*”

Later St. Paul, on the mission field of Macedonia, followed the same practice of offering both Word and sacrament to the believers in the Troas and Corinth mission churches (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). This type of weekly Sunday worship, which always included both the Word and the Lord's Supper, was universally observed even before any books of the New Testament were written.<sup>5</sup> Paul reflects this weekly Sunday communion practice in 1 Corinthians 11, noting that Holy Communion is the very reason they are meeting in the first place. "*When you meet together [as a congregation] it is impossible for you to eat the Lord's Supper*" (v 20). Hence our Synodical catechism states, "In the New Testament, the sacrament was a regular and major feature of congregational worship, not an occasional extra" (Small Catechism, p. 233).

Oscar Cullmann examines Acts 2:42 and 20:7 and concludes:

We have found a convincing argument for the view that as a rule there was no gathering of the community without the breaking of bread and that, even if there had been a service which was exclusively a service of the Word, it would have been in any case an exception. . . The Lord's Supper is thus the basis and goal of every gathering. . . Two main features of the purpose of all early Christian gatherings for worship must still be stressed. First, the Lord's Supper is the natural climax towards which the service thus understood moves and without which it is not thinkable, since here Christ unites himself with his community as crucified and risen and makes it in this way one with himself, actually builds it up as his body (1 Cor. 10:17)."<sup>6</sup>

### **THE HISTORICAL WITNESS**

In any decision involving doctrine or practice in the Lutheran church, we are bound to the authority of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. Though we may also receive guidance from men of God in previous generations, such as the early church fathers, Luther and the reformers, as well as gifted theologians of our own day, they too are subject to the Scriptures as the final rule and norm of faith.

#### ***How Did The Church Understand The Lord's Teaching?***

Holy Communion continued to be the chief Sunday Service in all nonheretical churches of East and West throughout the entire history of Christendom to the early 16th century, and then only was omitted in certain non-Lutheran protestant sects and denominations.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Didache, an early Christian document dated as early as A.D. 50-70 says, "On the Lord's Day, His special day, come together and break bread and give thanks."<sup>8</sup>

Justin Martyr (ca. 100-Ca. 165), whose writings are among the most important that have come down to us from the second century, gives a detailed description of the weekly worship of Christians. In it he explains how on every Sunday the Word is read and expounded ("the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets") and how bread and wine are used to celebrate the sacrament.<sup>9</sup>

The church's historic liturgies serve as a witness to what she has always believed, confessed and taught.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that these early liturgies are communion liturgies. The consistent inclusion of both Word and sacrament in these liturgies reminds us of the centrality of both in early Christian worship.

<sup>5</sup>Kurt Marquart, "The 'Who' of the Sacrament," (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary), study 4, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Early Christian Worship, trans. A. Stewart Todd and James B. Torrance (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953) 29, 34.

<sup>7</sup>Aubrey N. Bougher, Ten Questions and Answers on the Weekly Eucharist, (Lutheran Liturgical Renewal, 1985), 13.

<sup>8</sup>The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., The Ante-Nicene Fathers with prefaces and notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (Edinburgh; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 7, p. 381.

<sup>9</sup>Justin Martyr, Apology, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., The Ante-Nicene Fathers with prefaces and notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (Edinburgh; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 1, p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>These can be divided into four major regional families: (1) The Syrian liturgies, centered in Antioch, which was probably the origin of the earliest complete communion rite that has come down to us, the *Apostolic Constitutions*. A further distinction is made between East Syrian liturgies from the Mesopotamia-Persia and West Syrian liturgies

By the time of the middle ages things had changed. People were afraid to partake of the sacrament because of excessive mystery surrounding the sacrament and because Christ was portrayed as an angry Judge. In an attempt to remedy the deteriorating piety of its people the church in 1215 (Lateran Council IV) ruled that all Christians *must* commune at least once a year. This was the condition of the Roman church at the time of Martin Luther.

### **THE CONFSSIONAL WITNESS**

#### ***What Did Martin Luther Do and Say About Communion?***

Luther championed a balance between Word and sacrament in every chief Sunday service. Luther restored preaching to the communion service (it had been made optional years before),<sup>11</sup> and restored the Word—sacrament unity of the service.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore Luther championed the return of the sacrament to the laity, and in both kinds (both Body and Blood). Seeing the reconciliation of God and man in the forgiveness of sins, Luther stressed the forgiveness received in the sacrament, and man's constant need to receive God's grace. Speaking to the pastors of people who had gone to communion only once per year or less, he wrote in the introduction to the Small Catechism:

Our preaching should... be such that of their own accord and without our command, people will desire the sacrament and, as it were, press us pastors to administer it to them... For Christ did not say, "Omit this" or "despise this," but "This do, as often as you drink it," etc. He most certainly wants it done and does not want it left undone and despised. "This do," He says... Only emphasize clearly the benefit, need, usefulness, and blessing connected with the sacrament, and also the harm and danger of neglecting it... But if you fail to urge these things... then the fault will be yours if they despise the sacrament. Why should they not be lazy if you are asleep and silent?

And, in his Large Catechism he wrote:

While it is true that through Baptism we are first born anew, our human flesh and blood have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint, at times, even stumble. The Lord's Supper is given as a *daily* food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger... These and no other, we say, are the treasure through which forgiveness is obtained. This treasure is conveyed and communicated to us in no other way than through the words, "given and poured out for you"... In conclusion, now that we have the right interpretation and doctrine of the sacrament, there is a great need also of an admonition and entreaty that so great a treasure, which is *daily* administered and distributed among Christians, may not be heedlessly passed by. What I mean is that those who claim to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently. For we see that men are becoming listless and lazy about its observance.

Luther never suspended Sunday or festival services at which people could commune, and (as we see above) urged people to come to communion often at these celebrations. It is evident from this and Pastor Luther's own parish

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from Syria-Palestine, of which the Liturgy of St. James is the prime example. (2) The liturgy of Alexandria, used in Egypt and the neighboring countries, of which the Liturgy of St. Mark is best known. (3) the Western type of liturgy, of which the Roman rite is the prime example. (4) The Byzantine liturgy, centered in Constantinople and derived from the West Syrian tradition. Cheslyn Jones et al., eds., The Study of the Liturgy, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 230-244, 252-263.

<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther, "Concerning the Order of Public Worship," (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) v. 53, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>"For properly speaking, the mass consists in using the Gospel and communing at the table of the Lord. . . For among Christians the whole service should center in the Word and sacrament" Martin Luther, "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg," (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) v. 53, p. 25, 90. Luther even emphasized this unity liturgically, prescribing in his *German Mass* that the words of the Gospel lesson and the Words of Institution by sung in the same musical tone. It is noteworthy that when Luther, the Champion of the Word, finally put his hand to reforming the liturgy, it was a service that included both Word and sacrament.

experience at Wittenberg,<sup>13</sup> that he desired Lutheran congregations to continue publicly offering the sacrament on at least a weekly basis, and more often in larger parishes.

“Other Lutheran Reformers (with Philip Melancthon, author of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology) all agreed with this view, thinking that it was a continuation of Biblical teaching. And so, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, we find a clear statement of Lutheran practice, in answer to the Roman charges that Lutherans had abandoned the Christian faith and sacraments:”<sup>14</sup>

In our churches Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved (Article XXIV).

This article is quoted with approval in our present Synodical Catechism.<sup>15</sup>

So we see that the Lutheran Reformers continued to celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday, restoring and teaching its meaning, and inviting their people to commune more and more. Wrote John Gerhard, one of Lutheranism's great theologians:

Because therefore it has been accepted as a practice in the Christian Church that in the public assemblies of the Church after the preaching and hearing of the Word, this sacrament is celebrated, therefore this custom must not be departed from without urgent necessity . . . it is . . . clear from Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 11:20, 33, that when the Christians did gather at one place, they were accustomed to celebrate the eucharist (Martin Chemnitz, Polycarp Leyser, John Gerhard, Harmoniae Quatuor Evangelistarum/Frankfurt and Hamburg, 1652 Vol. II, p. 1085).<sup>16</sup>

So successful was this effort among early Lutherans to enable more people to commune, that the Roman church copied it.

### ***Why Did Lutherans Give Up Weekly Communion?***

Many Lutherans never did give it up. Pastor A. B. Bougher<sup>17</sup> describes some of the contributing factors among those who did:

#### **Rationalism**

"Rationalism was a belief that the mind was the supreme organ of the human being. Only the ignorant needed signs and symbols, actions and ceremonies, went this view. Humanity, enlightened now, needed only to hear and read and thus be aware of God and "Providence". . . Vestments and symbols of history were lost. Arguments took the place of devotion, doctrine the place of piety. This, the popular "fad" of the cultured and clergy of the mid-late 18th century, destroyed the church's practice of weekly Sunday communion single-handedly. In America and the German-English countries of Protestantism, Communion only was administered once or twice a year in many places by the turn of the 19th century. Man didn't need anything, in their view, but his **mind** to reach God. Christ's Communion Command went unheeded."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>In Luther's own Wittenberg parish the sacrament was offered every Sunday morning at eight or nine o'clock along with Matins at five or six o'clock and Vespers in the afternoon, as well as on every festival day and every Wednesday. Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) v. 53, p. 68 and Dennis Marzolf, "A Sermon for Michaelmas I" (Mankato, Minnesota: Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, October 7, 1990).

<sup>14</sup>Ten Questions and Answers, 16.

<sup>15</sup>Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 233.

<sup>16</sup>For an exposition of the early Lutheran theology underlying this practice see Martin Chemnitz, The Lord's Supper, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979).

<sup>17</sup>Ten Questions and Answers, 20-21.

<sup>18</sup>Werner Elert provides a helpful discussion of Neo-Protestantism's misguided effort to be "the church of the Word only" in The Lord's Supper Today, trns. Martin Bertram and Robert F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 5-7.

### War and Frontier Conditions

"During the 17th century, European wars destroyed many cities; churches were in ruins, pastors were dead or drafted, and therefore were not able to celebrate communion on the old schedule in many places. Some people were not able to receive the sacrament for long periods of time. And, those emigrating to the new world found no pastors to give them the sacrament. Thus, Christians devoid of weekly opportunities for Communion became accustomed to infrequent reception of Communion."

### Pietism

"... pietism stressed inward religion. Later on, it became opposed to the "outward" or "formal" worship. Its effects are still felt today. Both the preached Word and the administered sacrament were put in subjection to one's "heart" and Christianity became for many Lutherans a sentimentalized religion with the *right emotions* being more important than the right belief, or the proper hearing of God's Word and the receiving of His sacraments. With this attitude, a person through his or her own belief and religiosity made himself or herself right and didn't need God's means of forgiveness in the sacrament. Pietism became, in fact, a new "works-righteousness" which Luther had tried to get rid of two centuries earlier."

### FACTORS WHICH MAY CAUSE US CONCERN

As you discuss offering Holy Communion more frequently in your congregation, you may hear sincere people raise concerns about the wisdom of such a practice.

**"We've never done it that way before."** Our congregations are composed of people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Certainly we will want to be respectful and thankful for the rich diversity of experiences which God's people bring to our parish. However, this parish will never be able to duplicate those experiences for every (any?) member. We are a unique congregation with a unique mission.

And while my own personal tradition is important, I must also be mindful of the tradition of the church. Lutherans teach that unbroken Christian tradition is to be respected (Augsburg Confession XV and Apology XV). This doesn't mean the majority or the past is always right, but it does mean we must be sure it is wrong before we take a different stance. Weekly Sunday communion is the historic tradition of the church from the beginning, and the tradition of Lutheran doctrine and practice.

**"Receiving communion too often may make it seem less special."** Yes, our human emotions do fluctuate, but we must remember that the efficacy of the means of grace does not depend upon our feelings, but upon God's promise. Even if our emotions feel nothing, God still gives what He has promised and that gift is powerful and effective.

**"I do not feel the need to communion that often."** That may be true. Our feelings are unreliable gauges of spiritual need. In the catechism, "Christian Questions with Their Answers," Luther reminds us to commune first because of Christ's command and promise. And, he continues, though we may not feel any need, we should still believe the Scriptures which declare our need.

"... no better advice can be given than this: first, he should touch his body to see if he still has flesh and blood. Then he should believe what the Scriptures say of it in Galatians 5 and Romans 7.

Second, he should look around to see whether he is still in the world, and remember that there will be no lack of sin and trouble, as the Scriptures say in John 15-16 and in 1 John 2 and 5.

Third, he will certainly have the devil also around him, who with his lying and murdering day and night will let him have no peace, within or without, as the Scriptures picture him in John 8 and 16; 1 Peter 5; Ephesians 6; and 2 Timothy 2."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, though I may not desire to commune on a particular day, there may be others who very much need and want the strengthening power of the sacrament. Should my lack of perceived need, determine the need of my brother or sister? Christian charity offers a clear answer.

<sup>19</sup> Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation, 42.

**"Are we forcing people to commune?"** We are in no way demanding that people must come to communion each time it is offered. Each person is free to decide in good conscience when to commune. Yet that decision cannot be made if the sacrament is not even offered on a particular day. Then they can only decide to attend another church which may offer it that day. So the church can **offer** it, purely for the purpose that the hungry soul can feed on the Bread of Life. By offering the opportunity, the church at least does its part. Each individual decides for himself or herself when to commune. A pastor or council doesn't decide for everyone else. The sacrament is there, and if a Christian desires to receive the Lord's gift, it is available. There are people in our parish who hunger for the Bread of Life in this sacrament—if only the church would provide the opportunity to receive.

**"Isn't it too 'Catholic' to have communion so much?"** The above discussion should assure us that our proposal is thoroughly Lutheran. Yes the Roman church does offer frequent communion to its people. But they also have sermons, sing "A Mighty Fortress," read the Bible, pray the Lord's Prayer, and use much of the same liturgy we do. Our concern is not to copy them, but to be true to our own Biblical teaching and practice.

**"Celebrating Holy Communion will make the service too long."** If your Sunday schedule forces you to take Jesus' words to Peter literally (Matthew 26:40a), your pastor will be able to suggest other ways to abbreviate the service without depriving you of this gift which Jesus so desires to give.

**"What's in it for me?"** Luther would answer, "Why, God's greatest treasure! The holy Body and Blood of Christ, and with it the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation!" This side of eternity's curtain, God offers no greater gift. It is given *"for you"* (Lk 22:19-20).

On a typical Sunday, the pews are filled with people who would commune that day if they could. Often that person may be you:

- The person mourning the death of a loved one.
- The person who after a long separation from God finally answers His call and comes to church.
- The child of a divorced family who can commune only with the parent attending that day.
- The person diagnosed with cancer, heart congestion, Parkinson's, or another serious illness.
- The teen or adult whose work schedule prevents them from worshipping most Sundays.
- The mother or father who couldn't hear most of the sermon because of their squirming child.
- The person who struggled with their family budget Saturday night and needs to be reminded the most precious gift was and still is free.
- The person living with an alcoholic.
- The abused person.
- The unemployed person.
- The person fighting demonic temptation or oppression.
- The person who is dying and desires this seal of resurrection.
- The person struggling with guilt.
- The person who hungers for the sacrament.

Writes Pastor Bougher, "God's grace is not to be held back as a treasure in a box, but freely given to all who are able to receive Him. He wants to give. This is the very nature of His love. It is the Gospel of freely-given grace, not grace restricted by human traditions of times and seasons, such as "the first Sunday of the month."<sup>20</sup>

Our concern in making the sacrament available to our people is one of spiritual care and growth. When Jesus restored Peter after his denial, Jesus had only one command for him, "*Feed my lambs.*" Since God has promised that His Spirit is at work through the Means of Grace and only through these Means,<sup>21</sup> we desire to make these Means

<sup>20</sup>Ten Questions and Answers, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup>"We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil" (Smalcald Articles, Pt. III, Art. VIII, 10).

readily available to God's people for their spiritual strengthening and nourishment. Offering the sacrament frequently is a vital way for our parish to "feed the Lord's sheep" whom He has graciously placed in our care.

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