

## **The Lord's Supper: How Often?**

*Lessons from the Past, No. 4*

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Extracted from *Ordained Servant* vol. 6, no. 4 (October 1997)

The Directory for Worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church seems to give two very different instructions about the Lord's Supper. On the one hand, it describes the Lord's Supper, along with Baptism, as an "occasional" element of the public worship of God. On the other hand, it directs congregations to celebrate the Lord's Supper "frequently." So which is it, a literalist might ask: occasional or frequent? In good Presbyterian fashion, the Directory leaves that for sessions to determine: "the frequency may be determined by each session as it may judge most conducive to edification" (IV:A:2).

When the OPC was founded in 1936, it inherited a pattern of quarterly observance of the Lord's Supper that was well-established in American Presbyterianism. Many OP churches have increased observance to bimonthly or monthly rates, but even that leaves some ministers and elders dissatisfied. Should churches celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly? As sessions wrestle with the issue of frequency, a look at how Presbyterians have practiced communion in the past might be instructive.

Most students of Calvin are aware that it was his desire that churches practice weekly communion. Calvin believed that this frequency could be found in both apostolic teaching and example, and that weekly observance was also the practice of the church fathers. Moreover, Calvin saw weekly observance as necessary for uniting the ministry of Word and sacrament. By sealing the promises proclaimed in the preaching of the Word, weekly communion enabled Christians frequently to return in memory to Christ's work, and "by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith."

Infrequent communion, Calvin claimed, was a superstitious horror, "a most evident contrivance of the devil," and he considered it among the worst of the many abuses of worship in medieval Catholicism. For Calvin, weekly communion was no less

important than other reforms he sought, such as the use of the cup by the laity and worship in the language of the vernacular. So Calvin came to the conclusion that “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.”

Students of Calvin also know that he did not have his way on the matter of communion frequency. The Geneva Town Council never approved this element of Calvin’s reform program. Nor have his Presbyterian descendants adopted Calvin’s desire. The blame for this is usually placed upon another Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, and his memorial view of the Supper. If the sacrament is not a means of grace, and if the bread and wine merely symbolize and do not embrace the body and blood of Christ, there is little urgency for frequent celebration. Zwingli himself suggested quarterly observance: once in the autumn and on Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. While the OPC in her confessional standards officially rejects a Zwinglian view of the sacraments, we would do well to ask if we have become Zwinglians in practice, when the supper becomes an infrequent addition to the ministry of the Word. As Donald MacLeod has suggested, “there are more Zwinglians among Presbyterians today than one would hazard to guess.”

But contemporary Presbyterian practice may owe less to the legacy of Zwingli than to generally overlooked developments in Scottish Presbyterianism. Although John Knox’s *Order of Geneva* (1556) advocated monthly communion, the *First Book of Discipline* adopted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1562) advised quarterly observance in the towns, and twice a year in rural parishes.

By the eighteenth century, Scottish practice gradually became even less frequent, to the point where communion was generally celebrated annually. The reasons for this decline included hostility toward episcopacy, poverty (that made bread scarce), and a lack of qualified ministers. As historian Leigh Eric Schmidt tells the story in his *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (1989), the result was a triumph of festivity over frequency. These annual rites developed into elaborate week-long festivals, called “Communion Seasons,” that typically included a Thursday fast day, a Saturday preparatory service (where communion tokens were distributed), and a Thanksgiving service on the Monday following Sunday observance.

The effect of these seasons was a subtle redefinition of Presbyterian spirituality. Popular piety began to revolve around these massive outdoor gatherings. As these occasions frequently resulted in religious revival, they became the forerunner of the camp meeting and the sawdust trail of American revivalism. And ironically, their spectacular services would exceed in pageantry the medieval Catholicism that Presbyterians had sought to reform.

The Scottish communion season was transplanted into the new world with the 1787 Directory of Worship for American Presbyterianism. But the practice came under attack from the pen of a Scottish-trained New York pastor, John Mitchell Mason. In his 1798 book, *Letters on Frequent Communion* Mason hoped that the reinstatement of frequency would restore simplicity and reorient the rhythm of Presbyterian piety. Because the Bible sanctioned no holy days and no festivities beyond the weekly Sabbath, churches should cultivate piety not through big shows with itinerant evangelists but through the steady and unpretentious observance of all of the outward and ordinary means of grace. This continual and sustained devotion, Mason argued, could be nurtured only through weekly communion, Sabbath after Sabbath.

Mason's critique of Scottish festivity found favor with J. W. Alexander. Writing in the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* in 1840, Alexander saw the Scottish innovation of a Communion season as "pernicious" and without Scriptural warrant. By adding to the length and number of services connected with the sacrament, the church was taxing the strength of the "feebler members of the flock." While the practice did heighten the "gravity" of the celebration, it also added "an unscriptural mystery or awfulness....Instead of being an attractive and delightful ordinance, it thus becomes fearful and repulsive." Alexander concluded with Calvin and Mason that "ecclesiastical history affords the strongest presumption that the Lord's Supper was celebrated every Lord's day."

To be sure, mere frequency will not rid our churches of Zwinglianism or other false beliefs and practices of the Lord's Supper. And we should be wary of how weekly communion might tempt partakers toward a deadening familiarity with the

sacrament (a warning, of course, that applies to other means of grace that churches rightly observe weekly).

Still, Orthodox Presbyterian pastors and elders who are striving for greater faithfulness in the observance of both the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper ought to consider Mason and Alexander's suggestion that the two must work together, and not at cross-purposes. When sessions offer two different rhythms for devotional life, the outward and ordinary cadence of Sabbath observance and the infrequent and extraordinary habit of occasional communion practice, it is any wonder that corporate devotional life seems off-key? The efficacious power of the sacrament is compromised if it falls to the margins of the public worship of God. Weekly observance, Mason maintained, restores the Lord's Supper to the heart, and away from the circumference, of Christian worship.

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