

**AT LEAST WEEKLY:  
THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S  
SUPPER AND OF ITS FREQUENT  
CELEBRATION**

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ONLY A YEAR after the city of Geneva officially embraced the Reformation, John Calvin drew up *Articles for Organization of the Church and Worship at Geneva* (1537). Even this early in his career as a reformer he asserted in the Articles, “[I]t is certain that a Church cannot be said to be well ordered and regulated unless in it the Holy Supper of our Lord is always being celebrated and frequented...”<sup>1</sup> For Calvin, Holy Communion was integral to the ordinary ministry of Christ’s church. Rather than thinking of the Supper as an occasional add-on to the regular service, Calvin’s liturgy was a service of word and sacrament. As John T. McNeill reminds us, even discipline was related to the Eucharist: “The ‘reason’ for the Calvinist discipline is not, as is often supposed, to be discovered in premises of ethical or scriptural legalism, but in the sense of ‘the Holy’ and in reverence for the sacrament as the meeting of Christ and his people, and of the people as one body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> But what does “always being celebrated and frequented” mean? As is well known to readers of this journal,

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, “Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva proposed by the Ministers at the Council, January 16, 1537,” *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, ed. and trans. J. K. L. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 48.

<sup>2</sup>John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 138-9.

Calvin understood it as “whenever the word is preached, at least every Sunday” — a directive that we will consider below.

Our purpose in this article is threefold: (1) to trace the broad contours of Calvin’s eucharistic theology, particularly in contrast to Zwingli’s doctrine; (2) to explore the general devaluation of the Calvinian and confessional doctrine of the Supper within later Reformed theology; and (3) to offer an exegetical rationale for frequent communion and respond to common objections, with some concluding observations.

## Contours of Reformed Eucharistic Theology

Contrary to what we might expect, there was no frequent communion for the laity in the Middle Ages. Once or twice a year, perhaps, the laity in a given parish would receive communion—and then only the bread. While mass would be said more frequently, the multiplication of ceremonies and superstition separated the people from the communion of Christ. Thus, the typical medieval liturgy was the so-called *prone* service, structured around the preaching of the word rather than both word and sacrament. It is a complete service (*pronaus*); but it is not a mass. Purged of a few offensive aspects, Zwingli’s liturgy was essentially the medieval prone service and this was followed by other Reformed churches—at least until Calvin arrived.<sup>3</sup>

Like Martin Bucer, Calvin was not satisfied with this preaching service and labored to construct a moderate, purified liturgy of word and sacrament. Even when all hopes of weekly communion were dashed, Calvin insisted on retaining the word-and-sacrament pattern—with or without the Supper itself. In Strasbourg, Calvin was able to develop and enact his liturgy, *The Form of Prayers and Manner of Ministering the Sacrament according to the Use of the Ancient Church* (1540). Appending an essay on the Supper to the 1542 and 1545 editions of the service, Calvin begins, “The Eucharist is the communion of the body and blood of the Lord.”

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<sup>3</sup>See Gordon S. Wakefield, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1998), 72ff., and James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 58-69.

Consequently, the people must learn “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.”<sup>4</sup>

As in Geneva, the Strasbourg city council refused to grant weekly communion, despite the pleas of both Calvin and Bucer. Ironically, Calvin met resistance on this point not because he was too “high church” (a common allegation today), but because of what at that time was the common and familiar medieval practice. After all, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in canon 21, required Communion to be an annual rite, which led to a restricted annual use of the sacrament. The conservatism of the city council at this point makes the council rather than Calvin more congenial to Rome. In polemical moments, Calvin could even on occasion fire a shot across the council’s bow under the guise of attacking Rome. For instance, in the *Institutes* he writes, “Plainly this custom which enjoins us to take communion once a year is a veritable invention of the devil, whoever was instrumental in introducing it” (4.17.46). It clearly cannot be derived from ancient custom any more than from Scripture: “For there is not the least doubt that the Sacred Supper was in that era set before the believers every time they met together....” (4.17.46). Instead, the medieval church should never have kept Christ’s flock from their nourishment: “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.... All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast.” And he cites Chrysostom’s own lamentation that in his day “in vain we stand before the altar; there is no one who will partake along with us” (4.17.46). “What we have so far said of the Sacrament abundantly shows that it was not ordained to be received only once a year—and that, too, perfunctorily, as now is the usual custom. Rather, it was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians...” (4.17.44).

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<sup>4</sup>Mary Beaty and Benjamin W. Farley, ed., *Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 165.

Calvin urges frequency for two reasons particularly: first, for what God does through the Supper for believers (*viz.*, feeding them with Christ and all his benefits); second, for that unity and charity that the Holy Spirit creates among his people through it. Furthermore, Acts 2:42 indicates, says Calvin, that “the breaking of bread and the prayers” was part of the regular service of the Lord’s day and he cites ancient church orders for secondary support. Innovation arose not with Calvin, but with the medieval church which had, along with so much else, abandoned the sufficiency of Scripture in regulating worship. The innovation was *infrequent* communion among the laity.

As the breaking of bread was to be frequent, so too “the prayers,” as Acts 2:42 indicates. When we note the presence of the article in Greek, it is not too great a step to the earliest liturgies of word and sacrament. As for Calvin’s form, writes John T. McNeill:

The prayer of confession is followed by a declaration by the minister of absolution from sin for all who truly repent. This is followed by the singing of the First Table of the Decalogue, each Commandment being followed by the *Kyrie Eleison* [“Lord, have mercy”]. After a short prayer the Commandments of the Second Table are sung... The sermon, the collection of alms, and a long paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer lead to the communion rite... Calvin’s plan that the Lord’s Supper be celebrated in one of the three parishes each month and in all thrice a year was altered to provide for a communion in all churches four times a year, at Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and on the first Sunday in September.<sup>5</sup>

When it came to assurance, Calvin directed bruised reeds to Christ as he is objectively held out in the preached gospel and in the sacraments.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis finds expression in answer sixty-five of the Heidelberg Catechism: “The Holy Spirit produces [faith] in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and

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<sup>5</sup>McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 150, 164-65.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 274.

confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.” If, however, assurance is to be attained chiefly by introspection, it easily follows that the sacraments will be regarded as testimonies to our piety rather as God’s objective ministry of the gospel.

The foregoing points up the importance of one’s convictions concerning the nature of the sacrament itself. For instance, we know that Zwingli did not affirm the true feeding on Christ and his benefits through the Supper. In fact, he preferred the term “Eucharist” (thanksgiving) for obvious reasons: “We therefore now understand from the very name what the Eucharist, that is, the Lord’s Supper, is: namely, the thanksgiving and common rejoicing of those who declare the death of Christ, that is, trumpet, praise, confess, and exalt his name above all others.”<sup>7</sup> Zwingli’s errors on this point may be summarized in the following manner. First, revealing his enormous debt to Platonism, Zwingli could not see how the invisible and the visible, the spiritual and the incarnate, the holy and the common, faith and tangible props could stand together. For him, it was either the one or the other, and this is seen most clearly in his exposition of John 6, where Jesus offers his flesh and blood as true food and drink. “The food he bids us see is, therefore, belief on the Son. Faith, therefore, is the food of which he talks so impressively all through this chapter.”<sup>8</sup>

One’s view of the Supper reflects one’s Christology, and if the Lutheran doctrine of ubiquity can justly be regarded as verging on Eutychianism, then it is just as certain that Zwingli’s verges on Nestorianism. While the former error confuses the two natures of Christ, the latter virtually separates them: the spirit corresponds to the divine nature, while the flesh corresponds to the human nature. Zwingli almost makes the humanity of Christ a mere accessory: “We must note in passing that Christ is our salvation by virtue of that part of his nature by which he came down from heaven, not of that by which he was born of an

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<sup>7</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, eds., Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller, trans. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), 200.

<sup>8</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 201.

immaculate virgin, though he “had to suffer and die by this part....”<sup>9</sup> Although Zwingli defends himself successfully against charges of Nestorianism or docetism,<sup>10</sup> the christological dualism is key for his estimate of physical means:

For faith springs not from things accessible to sense nor are they objects of faith. Nor do I think we have to listen to those who, seeing that the view mentioned is not only crude but even frivolous and impious, make this pronouncement: ‘We eat, to be sure, the true and bodily flesh of Christ, but spiritually’; for they do not yet see that the two statements cannot stand, ‘It is body’ and ‘It is eaten spiritually.’ For body and spirit are such essentially different things that whichever one you take it cannot be the other...Hence, to eat bodily flesh spiritually is simply to assert that to be body which is spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Faith “draws us to the invisible and fixes all our hopes on that. For it dwelleth not amidst the sensible and bodily, and hath nothing in common therewith.”<sup>12</sup> The Calvinian understanding of faith as supported by tangible props was as uncongenial to the Zwinglians as the former’s emphasis on the weakness of the believer’s faith throughout this pilgrimage. The view that Zwingli here does not even think he ought to hear out is the position that would be confessed by all the Reformed churches—even by Zurich itself, after the Second Helvetic Confession and the Consensus Tigurinus. Not even with 1 Corinthians 10:16 is there anything beyond the subjective attestation to our already victorious faith: “The bread which we break,’ with one another, namely, ‘is it not the partaking of the body of Christ?’ That is, when we break the bread with each other, do we not all, as many as are the body of Christ, mutually disclose and show to one

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<sup>9</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 204.

<sup>10</sup>He does save himself from the full charge: “For as Christ is God and man in one, it comes about that, albeit he was slain in the flesh (for who could kill God?) and his death was made life for us, yet on account of the unity and community of his natures that is sometimes attributed to one of the natures which belongs to the whole Christ” (ibid., 205).

<sup>11</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 214.

<sup>12</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 214.

another that we are of the number of those who trust in Christ?”<sup>13</sup> “We eat spiritually when through the grace of God we come to Christ. To eat the body of Christ spiritually, then, what is it but to trust in Christ?”<sup>14</sup>

Not only did Zwingli alienate the Lutherans at Marburg; his position threatened to divide the Reformed cause itself. The five principal German Reformed cities, including Strasbourg, drew up the Tetrapolitan Confession which rejected Zwinglianism and refused to enter into an alliance with the Swiss, preferring instead to enter the Lutheran Smalkaldic League. Not only the nature, but the frequency, of Holy Communion was made a matter of confession, as we see in Chapter 18 of this Tetrapolitan symbol:

[T]o all those who sincerely have given their names among his disciples and receive this Supper according to his institution, [Christ] deigns to give his true body and true blood to be truly eaten and drunk for the food and drink of souls, for their nourishment unto life eternal, so that now he may live and abide in them, and they in him, to be raised up by him at the last day to new and immortal life, according to his words of eternal... Hence indeed it occurs that the divine sacraments, the Most Holy Supper of Christ, are administered and received among us very religiously and with singular reverence...; as it is generally done now among us *more frequently and devoutly than heretofore.*

Bucer, Melanchthon, and the considerably younger Calvin increasingly regarded themselves as closing the Lutheran-Reformed divide, but at the expense of Reformed unity. Returning to England to become Elizabeth’s bishops, the Marian exiles (most of whom had been guests in Zurich) experienced this growing tension as well. At first, Archbishop Cranmer himself had moved from a Roman Catholic to a Zwinglian position. Leading up to his execution, however, he was increasingly influenced by Calvin’s view of the Supper and the pre-Mary 1552 Prayer Book secured this consensus.

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<sup>13</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 231.

<sup>14</sup>Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 250.

Calvin, it is recalled, signed the unaltered Augsburg Confession, as had Bucer and other Reformed churchmen, but Melanchthon was willing to change this confession which he himself drafted, to comprehend the Reformed (Calvinian) interpretation. As a result, most German Reformed churches embraced the Augsburg Confession along with the Heidelberg Catechism. While Melanchthon and Calvin became friends and grew in their confidence that a Lutheran-Reformed reconciliation could be reached, the so-called Gnesio-Lutherans accused Luther's associate of being at least too concessive and at worst, a "Crypto-Calvinist." The Book of Concord (1580), which includes the unaltered Augsburg Confession, added statements clarifying the Lutheran view. After 1580, despite repeated attempts, the Lutheran-Reformed divide was apparently impossible to cross.

As for Reformed divisions, there was better news. Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor, was moving toward a Calvinian understanding not only through reading Calvin, but through an extensive period of research in the church fathers. And yet, Bullinger was growing impatient with the strides that their sister churches seemed to be taking to distance themselves from Zurich. Over two decades of labor between Bullinger and Calvin yielded the Consensus Tigurinus (1549), an agreement that reflects some degree of capitulation on both sides. The Consensus, however, identified Zurich as rejecting the memorialist view of the Supper and embracing the wider Reformed consensus. Furthermore, after the Consensus a distinctively Zwinglian position was never formally tolerated and was eventually pinpointed in Reformed confessions as specifically rejected. Not even our unbelief can invalidate a sacrament, explains Calvin's Confession of Faith of 1562, "for let us be what we may, God is ever like himself, and the virtue of the sacraments depends not on our faith, as if by our ingratitude we could derogate from their nature or quality" (Art. 32).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>In *Calvin's Selected Works, Volume 2: Tracts, Part 2*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 158. The Consensus Tigurinus, also authored by Calvin (1549) states: "It is indeed certain that Christ and His gifts (*dona*) are offered to all alike, and that the verity of God is



Despite the consensus reached in Zurich, these two poles continued to exist, at least in terms of tendencies. Ever since the Consensus, the Reformed tradition has lived with two tendencies, the one anxious to distinguish the sign from the thing signified, the other concerned also to unite them. Related is the tendency of Zurich to emphasize the conditional and human side of the covenant, while Bucer and Calvin emphasize the unconditional and divine side of the covenant. Timothy George correctly notes, “It is no coincidence that divergent interpretations of the Consensus stood at the center of the heated exchange between Charles Hodge of Princeton and John Nevin of Mercersberg over the proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>16</sup>

This tension is largely responsible for the different tendencies in contemporary Reformed practice down to our own day. It is a matter not only of how one understands the Supper itself, but of Christology and covenant. Granted that the covenant of grace has two sides, is the human or divine side to be emphasized? Is the tenor of the preaching and ministry to be chiefly conditional and imperative or chiefly unconditional and indicative?<sup>17</sup> The Consensus played an enormous role in preserving the unity of the

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not so impaired by the unbelief of men that the Sacraments do not always retain their proper virtue (*vim*); but all persons are not capable of receiving Christ and His gifts (*dona*). Therefore on God’s part there is no variability, but on the part of men each one receives according to the measure of his faith” (Chapter 18).

<sup>16</sup>Timothy George, “John Calvin and the Agreement of Zurich (1549),” *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed., Timothy George (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 42. See the article by Peter Wallace in this issue of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*.

<sup>17</sup>Calvin rejects Zwingli’s suggestion that a sacrament is chiefly the oath taken by a soldier. As Willem Balke observes, “Calvin insists that the signs in the sacrament are not from man but from God. What God testifies to in these signs is primary; human testimony is strictly subordinated to this. What we receive from God precedes our witness to Him and to men. Thus: ‘We do not tolerate that which is secondary in the sacraments be regarded by them as the first and even the only point. Now, the first point is that the sacraments should serve our faith before God; after this, that they should attest our confession before men’” (Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William J. Heynen [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 123).

Reformed churches, but it did not heal the divergent tendencies. Although our confession is officially Reformed and therefore not Zwinglian, American Calvinists have tended to be far more suspicious of granting too much to the sacrament than too little.

## The Devaluation of Reformed Eucharistic Theology

As we have argued, one's view of the nature of the Supper plays no small part in determining frequency. If the sacrament is chiefly a matter of our remembering or our attesting to our faith and obedience, it is not surprising that it should be infrequent. There are so many other things in the service, after all, that remind us of Christ's passion for us and excite our piety. How many times can we hear, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord," when it is patently obvious that we were not? If the efficacy lies not in God's action, but in ours, the Supper can only become an intolerable burden. That the Supper is in many of our churches regarded chiefly as a memorial of Christ's death is prominently suggested by the one-sided statement from the words of institution, "Do this in remembrance of me," engraved on the front of the Communion table in Baptist and Reformed churches alike. What might be the response if one were to replace these words with another part of the words of institution, such as, "This is my body...This is my blood"? This too would be one-sided, of course, but it might elicit greater opposition than the more common selection. The point is to suggest the indivisibility of nature and frequency. We see this in the Reformed scholastic Wollebius: "The true purpose of the holy supper, above all others, is to confirm spiritual nourishment or preservation to eternal life by the merit of the death and obedience of Christ. On this the union of the faithful with Christ and with one another depends." Consequently, "The holy supper ought to be observed often...."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Wollebius, "Compendium Theologiae Christianae," *Reformed Dogmatics: Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology Through the Writings of Wollebius, Voetius, and Turretin*, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee III (1965; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977): 24.15, 17.

Yet the unbeliever receives only the sign, refusing the thing signified. After all, they possess neither the Spirit nor union with Christ. (It is the same with the Word: it is God's word, a means of grace, were no one to believe it.)

B. A. Gerrish observes that "in recent years the few who have studied [Calvin's] theology of the Lord's Supper in America have mostly been Roman Catholics." In fact,

Calvin's eucharistic piety has repeatedly been lost, or at least curtailed, in the churches that officially claim him as their Reformer but in fact have moved closer in their sacramental theology to the Zwinglian view, which Calvin rejected as profane. It has even become commonplace to make a sharp distinction between 'evangelical' and 'sacramental' piety. The distinction, as such, could hardly find support in Calvin, for whom the Supper attested a communion with Christ's body and blood that is given precisely by the gospel.... It is fascinating to note how problematic such language strikes many of Calvin's spiritual descendants.<sup>19</sup>

This divergence from the commonly accepted Reformed appreciation for the sacrament cannot be charged to the Puritans, at least considered as a whole. Hywell Roberts is correct when he asserts, "The Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shared a common theology of the Lord's Supper with the Anglicans who favored the Elizabethan settlement of religion. Both parties accepted Calvin's interpretation."<sup>20</sup> John Owen argued regarding the Supper, "[O]f this blessed, intimate communion with Christ, and participation of him in the divine institution of worship, believers have *experience* unto their satisfaction and ineffable joy. They find him to be the spiritual food of their souls, by which they are nourished unto eternal life

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<sup>19</sup>B. A. Gerrish, "Calvin's Eucharistic Piety," in *Calvin Studies Society Papers*, 1995, 1997: Calvin and Spirituality / Calvin and His Contemporaries (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services, 1988), 64.

<sup>20</sup>Hywell Roberts, *Union and Communion: The Westminster Conference Papers* (1979), 55.

by a spiritual incorporation with him. They discern the truth of this mystery, and have experience of its power.”<sup>21</sup>

As for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, those who construed the sacraments in moralistic and rationalistic terms were the Socinians, whose Racovian Catechism declared that the Supper is for “commemorating [Christ] or of showing forth his death.”

*Q.* Is there no other stronger reason [for its institution]?

*A.* There is no stronger reason—although some assert that he instituted it in order that from the observance of it the remission of sins and the confirmation of our Faith might follow....What is to be thought of these opinions? They cannot be maintained. For...it is evident that it was not instituted with the view that we might receive any benefit from Christ at the celebration of it, except in so far as it is worthily observed it forms a part of Christian piety. And as the confirmation of our faith, so far is our faith from being confirmed by the mere use of the bread and wine, that he who would worthily partake of them ought to be already assured of the remission of his sins on the part of God; and the more certain he is of this, the more worthily will he be able to comply with this ordinance.

Here the Calvinistic view is explicitly rejected as mysterious and incomprehensible—damning criticism only for those who happen to be rationalists.

Not only the Socinians, but the Pietists, contributed to the downgrading of sacramental belief and practice. Praising the movement for being in step with its times, Paul Tillich notes, “The subjectivity of Pietism, or the doctrine of the ‘inner light’ in Quakerism and other ecstatic movements, has the character of immediacy or autonomy against the authority of the church. To put it more sharply, modern rational autonomy is a child of the

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<sup>21</sup>John Owen, “Sermon 15: The Chamber of Imagery in the Church of Rome Laid Open,” *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 8: Sermons, ed. William H. Goold (Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 563.

mystical autonomy of the doctrine of the inner light.”<sup>22</sup> For many of the Pietists, as for many of the Anabaptistic “enthusiasts” of the Reformation period, the correct direction was inward, not outward. Measuring one’s devotion and determining from that whether one was genuinely converted was far more to the point than external rituals. To this day, many Reformed and Presbyterian churches find it easier to criticize formalism than pietism. This may be due in part to the fact that many Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America happened to be Pietists, having immigrated from established churches in the old world.

But whereas Lutheran pietism tended toward evangelical sentimentality (e.g., “In The Garden”), Reformed pietism tended toward covenantal legalism, an emphasis on the human side of the covenant. Hence, what is lost is the emphasis on the divine initiative in grace. In baptism, this means that the focus is on the subject’s obligations to believe and obey and thus manifest grace rather than on God’s promise to forgive and preserve us in faith and repentance. As such, it is a means of obligation more than a means of grace, subjective rather than objective. It is no wonder that this has led to lamentable anxiety on the part of many who do not feel qualified to take Communion because of their weakness, despite the fact that this sacrament is given precisely for their weakness.

New England Puritanism saw the conditional-unconditional pendulum swing back and forth a number of times, until finally Jonathan Edwards is found reacting against his grandfather’s strange notion of the Supper as a “converting ordinance.” Although he speaks devoutly of the sacraments, Edwards is chiefly interested in the inner operations of the soul and the direct influence of the Spirit on the heart. Reacting strongly against his grandfather’s “half-way covenant,” with its implicit acceptance of the “mixed assembly” view of the church and its objective view of the sacraments as being “a converting ordinance,” Edwards definitely anticipates the sentimentalizing tendencies of American pietism, romanticism, and revivalism.

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<sup>22</sup>Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 286.

Furthermore, Edwards reacts against the alleged formalism of his grandfather's generation by viewing the covenant in quite idiosyncratic terms that left the children of believers under the wrath of God until they personally experienced conversion.

But as the institution of American revivalism came into its own, the "holy fairs" identified with the Scottish-American sacramental seasons morphed into the mass revival meeting with extravagancies replacing ordinary word and sacrament ministry as the means of grace. As conversion displaced justification and union with Christ in centrality, emphasis fell on human willing and running—and the techniques that could be devised for better evoking sound piety. Who needed a church with its objective ministry when there were so many talented evangelists who could organize successful events?

Another cause of the devaluation of the Reformed sacramental doctrine was the fear of Romanism. Responding to this threat was and remains a noble calling, but one discerns in mid-nineteenth-century reactions either a lack of familiarity with the Reformed position or a flagrant disregard for it. According to Scottish Presbyterian theologian James Bannerman, for example, infant baptism was even questionable and Calvin's eucharistic doctrine was strange. "There are some theologians indeed who in their explanation of the Sacraments make them seals of the covenant in general, and not seals of the believer's own personal interest in the covenant."<sup>23</sup> This position, which Bannerman appears to reject, has been held not merely by "some theologians," but by those like himself who subscribe to the Westminster Standards, which teach that "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace" (Chapter 27).

At about the same time, the great Presbyterian historical theologian, William Cunningham, wrote: "It is quite plain to anyone who is capable of reflecting upon the subject, that it is adult baptism alone which embodies and brings out the full idea of the ordinance, and should be regarded as the primary type of

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<sup>23</sup>James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 2 (1869; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 72.

it.”<sup>24</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Cunningham would offer the following complaint with respect to a Reformed view of the Supper:

It can scarcely, we think, be denied that the general tendency, even among the Reformers, was to exaggerate or overstate the importance and efficacy of the sacraments...This appears more or less even in Calvin, though in his case there was an additional perverting element—the desire to keep on friendly terms with Luther and his followers...he made an effort to bring out something like a real influence exerted by Christ’s human nature upon the souls of believers, in connection with the dispensation of the Lord’s Supper...[which] was about as unintelligible as Luther’s consubstantiation. This is perhaps the greatest blot in the history of Calvin’s labours as a public instructor...We have no doubt that the general tendency among Protestant divines, both at the period of the Reformation and in the seventeenth century, was to lean to the side of magnifying the value and efficacy of the sacraments, and that some of the statements even in the symbolical books of some churches are not altogether free from indications of this kind.<sup>25</sup>

Southern Presbyterian theologians, such as James Thornwell and Robert L. Dabney, sympathized with these views. “When one examines the Scriptures, and sees the brief and simple statements there given concerning the sacraments,” Dabney assures, “he will be very apt to feel that the place assigned them in many Protestant, and all Romish systems of divinity is inordinately large. This is an evidence of the strong tendency to formalism. In our treatment of the subject, much of the length assigned it will arise from our attempts to rebut these formal and superstitious tendencies....”<sup>26</sup> While conceding that the view that sacraments are nothing more than badges or signs is true but insufficient, he rejects Calvin’s view as mystical and irrational.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; reprint, Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 239.

<sup>25</sup>Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 240

<sup>26</sup>R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1879; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 727.

<sup>27</sup>Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 811-12.

Tragically, even Charles Hodge could only refer to the view of “the French, the Belgic, and the Scots” confessions as “the peculiar views of Calvin,” although he might have included the Westminster Confession, as it is consistent in upholding the Reformed doctrine from which Hodge demurred.

While continental Reformed traditions have their own weaknesses, such as pietism, it would appear that the Scoto-American branch of our communion has, in its fear of formalism, been more congenial to revivalism and a certain degree of rationalism than to classical, confessional Reformed eucharistic theology. But I wish to return now to a point raised above concerning the relation of covenant and sacrament.

Too often overlooked is the relation between the doctrine of covenant and one’s view of the sacraments. John Williamson Nevin was a theologian of the German Reformed church, after studying under Hodge and even serving at his side as a lecturer at Princeton. His book *The Mystical Presence* (1846) sought to defend the classical Reformed view, although it was not without its own idiosyncrasies. He found it ironic that the view that in the sixteenth century was unjustly denounced by Lutherans as vile rationalism and symbolism was now being unjustly denounced by heirs of Calvin as irrationalism and formalism. Nevin was concerned that “our modern Puritans” are more subjective and rationalistic than the Reformers—and even than the original Puritans themselves. He also thought that the seeds of rationalism and subjectivism were already sewn in original Puritanism and only came to full flower in his day.

### Exegetical Rationale for Frequent Communion and Concluding Observations

We have defended the Reformed conviction that the sacraments were instituted by God chiefly as means of grace. Whatever other blessings may result from their lawful use, this must be recognized as their principal object: to convey Christ and all his benefits to poor sinners who every hour depend on the continuing intercession of the Savior so that their faith will not



fail. Faith is weak, not strong, in the believer. It therefore needs to be regularly nourished by the means of grace which God alone has prescribed for that benefit.

Moreover, we have argued that there is a necessary connection between covenant, Christology, and the Supper. We cannot pit the invisible and spiritual against the visible and physical without doing violence to the doctrine of the incarnation itself. Spiritual blessings come to us through physical agency: that is as true for the sacraments as it is for the preached word. The objection that frequent communion will render the sacrament too familiar makes as little sense as suggesting the same of the preached word. Since the same substance is offered to us in both, namely Christ and all his benefits, why should we deprive our people of one or the other?

But I would like to conclude this all too cursory analysis with a few exegetical remarks and some general observations. As we have already observed from Calvin's exegesis of Acts 2:49, the ordinary practice appears to have been frequent (weekly) Communion along with the preaching and teaching on the Lord's day. It was the earliest practice of the Christian church as well, and only changed in the direction of annual celebration as the church descended into superstition, innovation, and ignorance in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, Jesus said, in his institution of this meal, "*As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of me.*" Of course, this is not necessarily equivalent to a command for weekly communion, and whatever is not commanded is not required of all churches. Nevertheless, does it not at least assume frequent celebration? The Apostle Paul seems to assume frequent Communion when he identifies the celebration in terms of "when you come together" (1 Cor. 11:17). In fact, the Corinthians are accused of gathering for a purpose other than receiving the Supper: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper" (v. 20). Granted, the criticism is directed at their coming together for *sinful* activities, but there may be an inference here in support of Communion as a common event in the life of the church sufficient for it to even be regarded as a reason for their coming together. When we come together to

receive Christ and his benefits through the Supper in faith, we have no doubt that we are participating in the communion of the body and blood of Jesus Christ our risen Savior (1 Cor. 10:16). Furthermore, we are knit together as the body of Christ through this heavenly action (v. 17). Why should this be infrequent?

The writer to the Hebrews, in Chapter 6 particularly, warns believers not to return to the shadows of the law—and this should warn us against formalism. Any attempt to capture God in ritual or habit is as futile today as it was in the Old Testament. Yet there is no doubt but that God acts in the new covenant just as miraculously through the ordinary means that he has provided. Those who belong to the covenant are within the sphere of God's redemptive activity, described here as those who have been "enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (vv. 4-5). It is no wonder, then, that to fall away from this covenant is such a dangerous act. It is through the ordinary ministry of Christ in his church that the branches of the heavenly Tree of Life stretch forth their heavy boughs with the fruit of everlasting life. If we "taste of the heavenly gift" and "share in the Holy Spirit" through the sacraments as well as having "tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" through the preaching, why would we settle for less than God offers as a medium for communicating this grace?

My other arguments are more practical in nature. Perhaps our services are sometimes regarded as dull and cerebral because we have not only neglected to vigorously proclaim God's law and gospel as they converge in Christ, but because we have neglected to make use of the only other repeatable means that God has ordained for our growth in Christ. When the service includes both word and sacrament, the saving work of Christ is always central and there is often a sense of completion: the promise has been given this day not only in word, but in act. Here and only here do we have God's authority not only to hear the promise, but to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

I realize that there are often extenuating circumstances in executing a weekly Communion. We have already seen how Calvin and Bucer fell short of their goals, exasperated by their city councils. John Knox's *Book of Discipline* and *Directory for Worship* both call for Communion to be celebrated "frequently," although in practice this was often thwarted by the lack of sufficiently trained Protestant ministers. But it would be a profound pity if, without their enormous obstacles, our practice today nevertheless followed that which they considered less beneficial to the long-term health of Christ's flock.

A third practical argument concerns the diaconal implications. As Karel Deddens remarks,

Here we have the very root of diaconal work. The festive spirit in which we celebrate the Lord's Supper is also an occasion for us, in accordance with Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism, to show compassion for the poor. Ideally speaking, it should be possible for the deacons to conduct their work of providing for the poor in the congregation from this [Communion] collection alone. And this ideal would become reality if the festive character of the Lord's Supper came to full expression in our services.<sup>28</sup>

Martin Bucer was correct to wonder at how our conduct toward each other would be improved if we were an eucharistically-oriented people? Could there be churches just on either side of the tracks, we might wonder, which took no account of each other, being baptized into this passing age instead of Christ? Through the Spirit's agency, the Word, Baptism, and the Supper form a single island of divinely-created unity out of the world's divisive rivalries. Here is the one place where "all are one in Christ." It's not the musical style that unites them, the socio-economic or racial complexion of the community, the age or political orientation. Here, in the pew, at the font, and at the table, only one division really matters: Christ and idols.

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<sup>28</sup>Karel Deddens, *Where Everything Points to Him*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1993), 93.

In fact, as Deddens reminds us,

If the Lord's Supper were celebrated more often, we should not view such a change as an accommodation to 'sacramentalists' who wish to place less emphasis on the service of the Word; rather, we should view it as an execution of Christ's command.... There are some people who say: 'But the *congregation* is not asking for more frequent communion!' This may be true, but such a consideration is not determinative. Instead we should be stimulated to engage in some reflection.<sup>29</sup>

Deddens points to important synods in the Netherlands judging that there should be "more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper..., pointing to 1 Corinthians 11:17 and other passages by way of support."<sup>30</sup> Deddens complains that certain factors have contributed to a certain weakening of the importance of the Supper: the inordinate length of an overly didactic form, which undermines the festive character of the sacrament, and the influence of pietism in certain circles: "Under the influence of pietism and mysticism, a sense of 'unworthiness' is awakened within them, and they become afraid that they may be 'eating and drinking judgment unto themselves.' As for those who were still bold enough to go to the table of the Lord, their faces suggest that a funeral is underway rather than a celebration."<sup>31</sup> We need to make clear to our congregation that they cannot excommunicate themselves.

What then of the Preparation Form in the Psalter Hymnal? Does worthy eating not require greater introspection than weekly Communion affords? Calvin offers a warning against an overly introspective approach to this question:

Certain ones, when they would prepare men to eat worthily, have tortured and harassed pitiable consciences in dire ways; yet they have not brought forth a particle of what would be to the purpose. They said that those who were in the state of grace ate worthily.

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<sup>29</sup>Deddens, *Where Everything Points to Him*, 91.

<sup>30</sup>Deddens, *Where Everything Points to Him*, 91.

<sup>31</sup>Deddens, *Where Everything Points to Him*, 92.

They interpreted ‘in the state of grace’ to mean to be pure and purged from all sin. Such dogma would debar all the men who ever were or are on earth from the use of this Sacrament [of the Supper]. For if it is a question of our seeking our worthiness in ourselves, we are undone; only ruin and confusion remain to us.<sup>32</sup>

It is inspection, not introspection, for which the Apostle calls in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34. The context appears to be quite clear about this: eating and drinking unworthily at least in this case took the form of orgies, selfish neglect of others, and the apparent absence of any discipline of notorious sinners among them. While there may be more involved with the preparation of our hearts for the Supper, Paul was not initiating a liturgical element of preparation to worthily receive. Once more, Holy Communion (like baptism and the preaching) is chiefly an objective affair and it is something that God does for us, not something that we do for God. He does not need our resolution or our memorializing of his Son’s death, but we need to hear again and not only hear but see *his* resolve and his remembering of his own promise to us individually as his covenant children. As in every covenant there are two parts, so too in this one we are called upon to respond to the gracious work of God in Christ; nevertheless, the word and the sacraments are called means of *grace* for a purpose. It is because their chief force lies not in the opportunity they afford us for stirring up our zeal, but in the sheer fact that through them the Holy Spirit gives us a share of that inheritance that we have in Christ.

It seems to me that there is no reason to abandon the Preparation Form, but to assimilate it perhaps into the ordinary service. Care should be taken here, as throughout the service, not to be overly didactic and wordy. This is a time for God to act according to his promise, not primarily an opportunity for us to teach. Or, alternatively, one could use the Preparation Form once a month.

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<sup>32</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 151.

Regular Communion would also affect the Communion Form. The forms that I have written for Christ Reformed Church (URC) in Anaheim incorporate most of the elements and even paraphrase sections of the Communion Form in the *Psalter Hymnal*. However, they vary slightly. In fact, I would actually recommend adding alternative services, so that the liturgy could enjoy some variety (as one example, singing the Ten Commandments one Lord's day before the public confession and then saying them the near the end of the service, indicating both the first and third use of the law).

One final appeal. Some of us have come from charismatic, non-Reformed backgrounds influenced by the "Jesus People" and the California beach culture in which a Communion service of Coke and potato chips was thought to underscore the unimportance of the physical element and play up the spiritual meaning. We may respond in horror at such a thought, but then we must ask ourselves why we refuse to use the element that the Savior and King of the church prescribed, *viz.*, wine. Abandoning wine in favor of grape juice was unknown in the church until American Prohibition, a movement led almost entirely by Arminian revivalists (especially Methodists and disciples of Charles Finney). American fundamentalism rested its case against wine in Communion on the exegetically untenable position that the "wine" in the New Testament was never fermented. While many conservative Reformed and Presbyterian brothers and sisters would regard this conclusion as naïve, many of us have nevertheless argued that fermentation is not essential to wine. This argument was unknown to our forebears, as it was to Scripture. And if it is not a sound argument, why should we continue to replace our Lord's required element with an element that he has not commanded?

Obviously, there is a bit of practical change involved with such a recovery of the Reformed appreciation for the Supper. Furthermore, we must beware of equating weekly Communion with the Reformed doctrine itself. Obviously, churches were able (though with difficulty) to accept their hardships and celebrate infrequently. It *is* essential that this issue of frequency never

become a matter of division among us, when the sacrament was given in part to preserve unity. But I do hope that, whatever our practice, we will find it suitable to the view of this great gift that we find in Scripture and in our confession:

*This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. At that table he makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death, as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood (Belgic Confession, Art. 35).*