

On the Nature and Frequency of the Lord's Supper

This essay is an edited version of the lecture entitled "Frequent Feeding: Communion as Nourishing Worship," given at the Great Lakes Reformed Conference in October 2023.

Introduction

In 1555, John Calvin asked the following of the Magistrates of the city of Bern regarding the celebration the Lord's Supper:

Please God, gentlemen, that both you and we may be able to establish a more frequent usage. For it is evident from St. Luke in the Book of Acts that communion was much more frequently celebrated in the primitive Church, until this abomination of the mass was set up by Satan, who so caused it that people received communion only once or twice a year. Wherefore, we must acknowledge that it is a defect in us that we do not follow the example of the Apostles (John Calvin, *Letter to the Magistrates of Berne*, 1555).

The practical issues surrounding the nature and frequency of the Lord's Supper have been with us from the earliest days of the Reformed tradition.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a rationale for the frequent (weekly) celebration of the Lord's Supper. To accomplish this, I will: 1). Address the idea of the Supper as spiritual nourishment by surveying the biblical evidence which speaks to nature of the Supper, then 2). Consider biblical evidence for frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, and then 3). I will briefly address common objections to frequent celebrations of the Supper, before 4). I will wrap up with a discussion of the pastoral benefits of frequent communion.

The key take away from this essay is that nature of the Lord's Supper defines (or at least it should) its frequency. What the supper is—a spiritual feeding—ought to provide the rationale for when and how often we celebrate it.

The Nature of the Lord's Supper

We begin by surveying the biblical evidence which speaks to the nature of the Lord's Supper. As we do so, keep in mind that the Lord's Supper is instituted during the Last Supper.

To fully appreciate the theological richness of the Lord's Supper, we must put it in its first century context of table fellowship, and the Jewish Passover—the Old Testament thought world of the New Testament authors. The significance of "table fellowship" in the Mediterranean world of the first century should not be underestimated. To eat with someone at table was, in effect, to be identified by a bond with those with whom you ate.

This is especially significant in light of Exodus 24, when Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders of Israel were summoned by YHWH, to go up on Mount Sinai and eat a meal of covenant ratification in his presence. The Exodus 24 account subsequently frames our Lord's willingness to join in table fellowship with repentant sinners—a scandalous event in the eyes of

the Pharisees as evident in Matthew 9:10-13:

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Another consideration is that the Last Supper is a Passover meal, as the gospels indicate (Mark 14:12 ff). Our Lord’s words and actions indicate that he saw the institution of the Lord’s Supper as a fulfillment of the Passover and connected his actions to its fulfillment. The historical development of the Lord’s Supper within the New Testament itself—from the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the gospels to the practice of the “Lord’s Supper” as seen in 1 Corinthians 11 is significant. Paul’s account of the Corinthian Church’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper (mid 50’s) was actually written before the gospel writers wrote in the mid 60’s, giving us the account of our Lord’s institution of the Supper during the Last Supper. This explains the different word order in the accounts of Paul-Luke and Mark-Matthew, and demonstrate that apostolic practice (i.e., in the Corinthian church) very closely followed what our Lord commanded in the upper room on the night in which he was betrayed, a decade or so before the synoptic gospels were written.

The Reformed understanding of the Supper in terms of sign/seal (bread and wine), thing signified (forgiveness through his shed blood, the “blood of the covenant”), and sacramental union (our Lord’s words “this is my body”), arises directly from the biblical data. When Jesus speaks of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, we take him at his word without resorting to confusing sign with the thing signified (in the case of Rome), or inserting words such as “this represents my body,” where they do not belong (in the case of memorialists). As Paul calls Christ the rock (1 Corinthians 10:4), so too, the bread is Jesus’ body—not because the sign is miraculously changed into the thing signified as Rome argues in transubstantiation, but because Christ can speak of the bread (the sign) as the thing signified (his body) using the language of sacraments. Because a true sacramental union exists between the sign and the thing signified, the bread can indeed be spoken of as Christ’s body (Matthew 26:26 ff).

Following Calvin, the Reformed have tried to keep in mind both the reality of Christ’s bodily ascension—wherein Christ’s true human nature is now in heaven awaiting his return (Acts 1:9-11)—and the real presence of Christ’s body in the sacrament (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). It is important to note that the Reformed view (following Calvin) is not some kind of half-way house between Luther’s view of the “real presence” as “in, with and under the bread and wine,” and the Zwinglian trajectory of the “real absence,” which focuses upon the memorial aspects of the Supper.

The Reformed view is formulated in light of Calvin’s doctrine of “union with Christ.” Though Christ’s true human nature is in heaven, nevertheless the believer receives all of his saving

benefits because the Holy Spirit has united the believer here on earth to Christ in heaven through faith, so too Christ can be in heaven and the believer can receive his true body and blood, because the same Holy Spirit ensures that those already in union with Christ receive his true body and blood when they take bread and wine in faith (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-29). The manner of eating is spiritual, not “carnal.” We truly receive Christ through faith and not by mouth.

In the words of institution, the body of Christ is not brought down to us—i.e., localized on an altar as the Lutherans argue, but the believer is able to feed upon Christ in the heavenlies through the power of the Holy Spirit who ensures that we receive what is promised. The means of reception is faith (the mechanics remain a mystery), since it is the soul not the body that receives the reality of what is promised, as the mouth receives only consecrated bread and wine. When we when eat bread and drink wine, through faith, the Holy Spirit ensures that we receive the true body and blood of Christ which is in heaven because we are in union with him.

There is also a covenantal dimension to the Supper, since each time it is celebrated, God re-affirms his covenant oath to save sinners by bearing the curse for them, and reminds participants that Jesus Christ still enjoys table fellowship with sinners as was typologically set forth in Exodus 24. Given these biblical themes, and the biblical language of “real presence,” in addition to the biblical practice of connecting the word and sacrament (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11; Acts 20:7), it is hard to make any kind of a case for a pure memorialism or infrequent communion as is practiced by many Reformed Christians. That Christ is sacramentally present with his people through the Supper as they feed upon him in faith, is at the heart of the biblical teaching and Reformed doctrine regarding the Lord’s Supper. In Article 35, the *Belgic Confession* confesses that we believe that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper “to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family,” his church. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.1, the Supper is likewise said to be “spiritual nourishment.”

The memorialist position (inadvertently) makes the human testimony of worthiness to partake, or of our testimony to faith in the promises of God, central to the Supper. This inevitably depreciates the fact that the essence of the Supper is a spiritual feeding and a covenant meal, in which God re-affirms his covenant oath. It is the Holy Spirit working through the word, and not a priest or minister that makes the sacrament efficacious for believers. God is the active party (not the “rememberer” nor a priest) whenever the supper is celebrated. We speak of the sacraments as the “visible word.” We ought to see the Supper and the elements of bread and wine as gracious gifts from God—manna from heaven as it were—given to us by God to communicate to us the realities of the blessings of the covenant of grace, through the signs instituted by God. The Supper is not incidental to the Christian life and is a vital part of our sanctification and growth in Godliness.

As for the warning about “discerning Christ’s body in the Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:28-30), the sacrament is not to be viewed as though it were somehow poisonous to the non-Christian, who will get sick and dies by receiving the Supper unworthily. Rather, by not receiving the Supper in

faith, the non-Christian places themselves in a position where the consequences of their sin and the judgment of God upon them can become a frightful reality. As Zacharias Ursinus put it, “an abuse of the sign is contempt cast upon Christ himself; and is an offense against his injured majesty.” This is why the Reformed “fence” the communion table or practice closed or “close” communion, to protect those who do not discern the body of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. But all repentant sinners, who are baptized and profess faith in Christ, and seek his saving benefits through faith, are welcomed to the table so that we may demonstrate to the watching world that we are indeed one, just as our Lord himself prayed.

The Frequency of the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper

We move on to address the second point mentioned previously—the matter of frequency of celebration. The most important passage in this regard is Acts 2:42. This passage gives us the earliest picture of the Christian church, “rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit.”[1] Luke describes how the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

In Acts 2, we read that the church in Jerusalem was founded on apostolic preaching. Its members enjoyed the fellowship of others who trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus to save them from the wrath of God, and who recently experienced the events of Pentecost. Calvin, saw this passage as significant for any discussion of the frequency of the Lord’s Supper because Luke establishes “that this was the practice of the apostolic church It became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper and almsgiving” (*Institutes*, 4.17.44).

Calvin is probably correct—the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship among believers culminates in the “breaking of the bread and the prayers.” The “breaking of bread” is a reference to the Lord’s Supper, which was a distinct activity within the context of the fellowship meal (“table fellowship”) shared by those present. Had Luke been referring to the “fellowship” meal (the ancient equivalent of the modern “pot-luck”) and not to the Lord’s Supper, it would hardly have been worth mentioning.[2]

Luke’s use of the term “breaking of bread” is likely another way of referring to what Paul calls the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:20). Luke uses an early Palestinian name for the sacramental portion of the fellowship meal, not the larger meal in general.[3] In Judaism, “breaking of bread” refers to the act of tearing of bread which marks the beginning of a celebratory meal, never to the whole meal itself.[4]

The fact that the disciples “devoted themselves” is used in at least one ancient source to refer to synagogue worship, which points to a formal (or intentional) activity as opposed to a more casual occasion. The verb “devoted” appears several times in Acts and often means “to attend worship regularly” (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:26; 6:4).[5] This indicates that the four elements mentioned by Luke (the apostle’s teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers) are dependent upon the act of the participants in “devoting themselves” to a particular sequence of events—that

the breaking of bread and the prayers followed the sermon (or teaching) and table fellowship.[6] The “breaking of bread,” is a technical term used by Luke to speak of the Lord’s Supper as a distinct element of worship, not just the fellowship meal.[7]

The celebration of the Last Supper as a Passover meal,[8] along with the specific instructions given by Jesus provides an important theological and redemptive historical context for the institution of the Lord’s Supper as one of the prescribed elements of worship after Pentecost, in direct fulfillment of Jesus’s command to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The early church drew upon the disciple’s vivid memories of their final hours with our Lord in framing the manner of celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20). As Jesus transformed the Jewish Passover by pointing to his own future actions in fulfilling what the Passover symbolized (Luke 22:16), so too every bit of data we possess points us in the direction that the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper whenever they assembled for worship as Jesus had instructed them to do.

Another line of evidence which implies that the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated frequently is that the Lord’s Supper is a ratification meal associated with covenant renewal. There are deep roots for the celebration of a meal of covenant renewal throughout Israel’s own history (e.g., Exodus 24:11; Deuteronomy 12:6-7; 14:26; Nehemiah 8:9-12). In the words of institution Jesus speaks of his cross and the supper which commemorates it as a covenantal transaction—“the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin” (cf. Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20).[9] Although the Passover was an annual event, Jesus affirms that the new covenant in his blood was to be celebrated frequently by his people, an understanding confirmed by the practice of the apostolic church.

Another indication that the Lord’s Supper is tied to covenant renewal—as a foretaste of the eschatological messianic meal is found in Revelation 3:20, where our Lord says to the church in Philadelphia, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” The imagery used in Revelation 3:20 invokes images of a bridegroom entering the chamber of his bride, and also alludes to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in anticipation of the future parousia.[10] Through this act of eating with his people, Jesus is present with his disciples in anticipation of the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, and reflects the sense of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:26, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”[11] This implies a frequent celebration of the sacrament in fulfillment of our Lord’s command, and in anticipation of his hoped-for return.

The frequency of the Lord’s Supper is also discussed in Acts 20:7, where Luke writes, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.” Luke mentions that this meeting occurred on the first day of the week (which is the first time in Acts we read that the church worshiped on Sunday). This indicates that this is a Lord’s Day worship service at Troas (“when we gathered together to break bread”). Paul, spoke in a formal manner (the apostle’s teaching) and the service went late into the night (v. 11). Paul may have spoken

informally to those present, after the “official service” had ended.[12]

That this is a reference to the Lord’s Supper becomes clear in verse 11, when Luke adds “And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.” Luke seems to distinguish between Paul’s participation in the “breaking of bread,” and the fellowship meal when he adds that Paul had eaten (taken food).[13] This would indicate that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated after the fellowship meal had concluded (or as part of the fellowship meal), as is prescribed in Acts 2:42 and as we see in I Corinthians 11, to which we will turn shortly.

As Dennis Johnson points out, the sequence of events in Acts 20:7-12 indicates that believers assembled to eat a meal, followed by worship, and Paul—who was leaving the next morning—spoke for a long time before the assembly celebrated the Lord’s Supper.[14] Paul may have talked on into night (informally) after the service had concluded. We are told that Paul talked so long that a young man named Eutychus fell soundly asleep, then fell out of the window to his death, only to be raised to life by Paul (Acts 20:11). Luke seems to be describing the ordinary practice of the apostolic church as it meets on the Lord’s Day.

Another important passage is 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 and 33-34, where some five times Paul describes the Corinthians “as coming together as a church” (v. 18) for the purpose of worship, which includes the celebration of the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood (vv. 23-26). In verse 17, Paul speaks of not being able to commend the Corinthians because “when they come together” its not for the better. Although they “come together” as a church, there are still divisions among them, so that when they “come together” it is not the Lord’s Supper that they eat (v. 20). In verse 33, Paul instructs the Corinthians that “when you come together to eat” the members of the church are to wait for one another (v. 33). Instead of abusing the fellowship meal, the Corinthians should eat at home before “they come together,” so that they do not come under God’s judgment.

The verb Paul uses is a semi-technical term for the assembly of God’s people for worship.[15] Because it is repeated throughout this section (and means the same thing in Acts 14:23, 26), it serves to bolster Paul’s primary point that when the Corinthians assembled for worship, they were not celebrating the Lord’s Supper as had been instituted by Christ, and as they had been instructed by Paul (v. 23). Although the abuses of the Supper were so severe that Paul comes very close to forbidding the Corinthians from serving the fellowship meal as part of their worship, the apostle does take the occasion to remind them of the importance of celebrating the Lord’s Supper properly so as to avoid the judgment of God, while indicating that more instructions are to come (v. 34).

Since Paul reminds the Corinthians that in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper they “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes,” (v. 26) and that since the Supper was linked to the “coming together” of the congregation for worship (as in Acts 2:42), we should interpret 1 Corinthians 11:20 to mean that when the church met in Corinth for public worship, the preaching of the word and the observance of the Supper were central, and as Calvin concludes this “was the established

order” (*Institutes*, 4.17.44).

The cumulative evidence from Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 33-34, indicates that frequent (weekly) communion was the universal apostolic practice.[16] Since we are “really partakers of His true body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit” (*Heidelberg Catechism* Q & A 79), this too points in the direction of more frequent (weekly) observance of the sacrament.

The critical questions then are whether or not contemporary Reformed/Presbyterian practice matches the apostolic pattern, and if not, why not? The question T. David Gordon recently asked when addressing this matter is, does the frequency of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, reaching the level of a good and necessary inference? He thinks so.[17] I agree.

Common Objections to the Frequent Celebration of the Lord’s Supper

Next, what are the common objections to the frequent celebrations of Lord’s Supper?

The first objection is “if you celebrate the Lord’s Supper every week, doesn’t it get old?” “Doesn’t weekly communion turn the sacrament into an empty ritual?” These sorts of objections are easily answered that the same thing could be said of any of the prescribed elements of worship, including the preaching of the word, the fellowship, and the prayers.

And then there are the more nit-picky objections, such as weekly communion adds too much time to the service, or that this requires a significant effort to prepare on a weekly basis—both true, perhaps, but irrelevant to the point at hand. Another objection is that if a church fences the table, that might frustrate visitors and make it difficult when visiting family members cannot commune. True, but there are good ways to deal with this. Some object because weekly communion sounds “too Catholic,” but this objection is based upon an ignorance of the Reformed doctrine of the Supper which not only strengthens faith because Christ “works in us all that he represents to us by these Holy signs” but which requires self-examination and moves us to “a fervent love of God and our neighbor” (*Belgic Confession*, Article 35).

The most significant objection to weekly communion is that the New Testament nowhere prescribes it. But this argument assumes that the apostolic practice is descriptive only, not prescriptive. But the burden of proof falls squarely upon those who would argue that even if Acts 2:42 is descriptive and not prescriptive, apostolic practice should not be followed by churches today because of practical considerations or ill-founded objections.

In light of the biblical evidence just considered—which points in the direction that the apostolic church celebrated the Lord’s Supper weekly as an essential element of worship, and that our confessions speak of the Supper as spiritual food, and in light of the additional evidence this was the practice of the early church, as well as the desire of John Calvin—it is rather ironic that after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic faithful are able to partake in the Eucharist whenever they attend

a worship service, while many Reformed and Presbyterian congregations observe the Lord's Supper only four-six times a year. A good anecdotal case can be made that more frequent observance of the Lord's Supper seems to be a definite trend in Reformed and Presbyterian circles—to my mind a good thing.

The Pastoral Benefits of the Frequent Celebration of the Supper

The great benefit derived from feeding upon Christ in our hearts through faith—an act which is a wonderful consolation for God's people who are dissatisfied with their progress in the Christian life (*Heidelberg Catechism* Q & A 81)—is either not duly considered, nor truly appreciated as a means of strengthening weak faith. While we are right to be confident that the preached word creates faith, it is easy to overlook the importance of strengthening that faith once created. As Zacharius Ursinus reminds us, “whatever the word promises concerning our salvation through Christ, that the sacraments, as signs, and seals annexed thereto, confirm unto us more and more for the purpose of helping our infirmity.”[18]

How one understands the nature of the Lord's Supper will determine how frequently one observes it. Those who argue for infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper often tend to focus upon the subjective state of the sinner in preparing themselves to partake. Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11:28-30 certainly needs to be heeded. “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” If the primary focus of the observance of the Lord's Supper is that this is a memorial meal which is centered upon sufficient introspection and self-examination on the part of the participant so as to be worthy to partake, the tendency will be to celebrate the Supper infrequently because the requirements to partake seem so lofty, the warning to discern Christ's body seems so severe, and the honest believer knows themselves to be completely unworthy.

And yet it is Calvin who reminds us, “if you are serious in your intention to aspire to the righteousness of God, and if, humbled by the knowledge of your own wretchedness, you fall back upon the grace of Christ, and rest upon it, be assured that you are a guest worthy of approaching this table. . . . For faith, even if imperfect, makes the unworthy worthy.”[19] When Calvin discusses how the Supper is to be administered, he reminds us of the importance of a properly ordered liturgy which prepares us to come to the table with the confidence of knowing that we are justified sinners, who through faith possess the merits of Christ. Such a liturgy, Calvin believes, includes prayer, a sermon (in which the gospel has been announced), the words of institution (including the promises of the gospel and the fencing of the table to unbelievers), instruction to receive the Supper in faith and thankfulness, the singing of a Psalm, followed by the reception of the bread and wine. Once the bread and wine have been received, there should be a confession of faith, an exhortation to live appropriately, followed by the giving of thanks and praises unto God (*Institutes*, 4.17.43).

While the Supper is to be observed in remembrance of Christ's saving work, and while believers are to examine themselves before they partake, the focus should not fall upon our subjective

condition (and how well we've prepared ourselves to come), but on what is objectively promised us in the bread and wine. If one's theology of the Lord's Supper is grounded in what is promised to those who partake (spiritual food and drink) then the tendency will quite naturally be toward a more frequent celebration. After all, Jesus gives himself to us in the Supper. John records Jesus speaking of himself by saying, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). That gospel promise never gets old, or at least it shouldn't, if we consider the guilt of our sins, confess them, and then are promised pardon as part of our personal preparation to receive Christ's body and blood. After all, the Lord's Supper is a gospel sacrament in which "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

This is precisely what is affirmed in question and answer 79 of the **Heidelberg Catechism**:

Q 79. Why then does Christ call the bread His body, and the cup His blood, or the new covenant in His blood; and the apostle Paul, the communion of the body and the blood of Christ?

A. Christ speaks thus with great cause, namely, not only to teach us thereby, that like as the bread and wine sustain this temporal life, so also His crucified body and shed blood are the true meat and drink of our souls unto life eternal; but much more, by this visible sign and pledge to assure us that we are as really partakers of His true body and blood by the working of the Holy Spirit, as we receive by the mouth of the body these holy tokens in remembrance of Him; and that all His sufferings and obedience are as certainly our own, as if we ourselves had suffered and done all in our own person.

All of this is to say that the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper is directly tied to the preaching of the gospel. It is certainly not an oversight when the *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks to the matter of the creation of faith in Q & A 65, when it affirms that faith is created by the preaching of the gospel in particular, not the "word" in general. This is because the catechism assumes that the word has two parts, the law and the gospel (Q & A 3-5), and that the preaching of the former does not create faith, serving rather as the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude (Q & A 86, 114-115).

Because the observance of the Lord's Supper is the logical (and liturgical) culmination of the preaching of the word, the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper provides the fitting, natural and, dare I say, "biblical" culmination of the worship service. The gospel promises are proclaimed from the word, and then ratified in the Supper. We are reminded not only of Christ's presence with us ("this is my body") but of his favor towards us because through his sacrificial death, our sins are forgiven (Matthew 26:28). Since believers partake together (as seen in the apostolic emphasis upon the fellowship meal), those who have heard the gospel promise see the fruits of that promise manifest in their midst. As Paul reminded the Corinthians "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). The Supper not only strengthens our faith, but it reminds us that all believers are members of Christ's one body. Not only this, in the Supper we are continually pointed ahead to

the great messianic feast when Christ's kingdom is finally and gloriously consummated (cf. Revelation 19:7-9). In light of this, it is proper to conclude that the preached word naturally leads to (and culminates in) the celebration of the Lord's Supper, as seen in the apostolic pattern.

In the absence of frequent observance of the Lord's Supper, the gap created in the apostolic order of worship becomes rather noticeable. There is a reason why those fundamentalists who stand in the revivalist tradition place the "altar call" or an appeal to make some sort of re-dedication or re-commitment to Christ at the end of the service, after the sermon. When God's word is proclaimed, we are called to act upon what we've just heard. But the absence of the Supper creates what seems to be a rather abrupt ending to worship, and the sense that something is missing gives impetus to those who want to see the preached word culminate in some sort of a call to action, which then takes on a more formal role in closing out the worship service. Since this same tension exists in many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, there is likewise a tendency to see the worship service culminate in the exercise of the charismatic manifestation of the Spirit, which not only brings the service to a more dramatic ending, but serves to connect the worshiper to the church in the Book of Acts.

This sense that Christians should see themselves as part of that church founded by the apostles and that concluding worship immediately after the sermon is too abrupt (as though something were missing) is not necessarily a bad thing. But this tension can lead to bad things if we seek to fill the gap with humanly-devised ceremonies (such as the "altar call") or distorted views of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper not only fulfills the apostolic prescription and brings the service to a well-defined end, it ties contemporary believers to the apostolic church. After all, we hear the same gospel Jesus proclaimed to his disciples and which they, in turn, proclaim to us. We then take in our hands the very same elements (the bread and wine) which Jesus gave to his disciples on that fateful night in which he was betrayed, and of which the members of the churches in Jerusalem, Troas, and Corinth took in their hands. And through the work of the same Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised to send to his disciples, our faith is both strengthened and confirmed. As Calvin reminds us, Christ "nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments, whose one function is to set his promises before our eyes to be looked upon, indeed, to be guarantees of them to us" (*Institutes*, 4.14.12).

And since this is the case, why should we not take advantage of such a good and gracious gift passed down to us by the apostles, so that when we come together as a church on the Lord's day, that we too devote ourselves to "the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

[1] F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts: The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 73.

[2] Bruce, The Book of Acts, 73.

[3] I. Howard Marshall, Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 83.

[4] Joachim Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 120-121. The participle is προσκατεροντες

[5] Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, 118-119—The verb is προσκατερέω.

[6] Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, 118-119.

[7] This term κλάσις occurs only once elsewhere (Luke 24:35) of Jesus' breaking of bread with the two who had been on the way to Emmaus, yet the corresponding verb [which is?] occurs frequently with reference to the Lord's supper (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 10:16), and the context indicates that the breaking of bread belonged specifically to religious exercise—the apostle's doctrine and fellowship and the prayers. Acts 2:46 indicates that the breaking of bread from house to house refers to ordinary eating. It was from house to house, and is interpreted as receiving their food with gladness and singleness of heart. The co-ordination in Acts 2:42 implies that the supper was an integral part of the worship of the early church, practiced by those who received the Word, were baptized, and were added to the disciples (cf. vs. 41).” See John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976-82), 2.380.

[8] I. Howard Marshall, Last Supper and Lord's Supper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 21.

[9] Meredith G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 185-186.

[10] G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 308-309.

[11] G. B. Caird, The Revelation of Saint John (London: A & C Black, 1966), 58.

[12] F. F. Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 425-426.

[13] Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles, 426.

[14] Dennis E. Johnson, The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption, (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1997), 84.

[15] The verb is συνέρχομαι. See Gordon D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New

International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 536.

[16] According to Francis Turretin, “the practice of the apostolic church . . . constantly retained the breaking of bread. Hence the disciples are said to have `continued in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42). Christians are said to have come together upon the first day of the week to break bread (Acts 20:7), i.e., to celebrate the holy Supper, which was consistently done on the Lord’s day when they assembled to hear preaching and perform the other public exercises of piety. Hence the whole action is wont to be described by the breaking of bread. To say that this rite was indeed used here, but not as necessary, is to beg the question and take for granted what is to be proved. For on the contrary, we solidly gather the necessity of this rite [the breaking of bread] from the practice because the church could do nothing here, nor prescribe it to others, except what she had received from the Lord and to which she felt herself bound by the command of Christ. See, Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1997), III.445-446.

[17]

http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=104&pfriendly=Y&ret=L29zLmh0bWw%2FYXJ0aWNsZV9pZD0xMDQ%3D

[18] Ursinus, Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, 340.

[19] John Calvin, The First Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians, trans., John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 253.