

Communion Practice at Redeemer: An Explanation of Our Current Practice of Monthly Communion

Dear members of Redeemer URC,

Recently (April 8, 2008), the elders of Redeemer had a conversation reviewing our current practice of monthly communion. The fruit of that discussion is this letter to the members of Redeemer to explain why the elders felt our current practice should be continued.

The reason we feel it necessary to explain our approach is that we want to be pastorally sensitive to the concerns of some for whom this practice is unfamiliar and might even be troubling. Many of us come from a background that has been shaped by the practice of quarterly communion. Quarterly communion has a long history that dates back to Calvin's church in Geneva during the 16th Century Reformation. However, the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper four times per year was not an expression of Calvin's own view and desire, but that of the city council. Calvin would have liked more frequent communion, in actual fact every week. The City Council decided it should be only 4 times a year. This practice was a great improvement on the practice of the church in the Middle Ages in which each person was required to attend at least once a year. It is a misconception of many that the quarterly practice was a response to the Roman Catholic practice of frequent communion. In actual fact, it was the opposite.

To explain our decision to continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper each month, we offer the following summary of our reasons for this practice. We also offer a more lengthy explanation for those who wish to reflect further on the subject.

A Summary of Our Reasons to Continue Monthly Communion

- After a review of our current practice of monthly communion, the elders were convinced that this practice is in accord with the teaching of Scripture and our confessions.
- Our current practice is also in line with the current practice of many United Reformed Churches who have reformed the older practice in favor of more frequent communion.
- The older practice of quarterly communion was not originally introduced in opposition to the practice of the Roman Catholic Church. In actual fact, it was the City Council of Geneva's decision to increase the practice of the Middle Ages from once a year to *at least* four times a year. Calvin and other Reformers would have preferred a more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper.
- Acts 2:42 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-33 suggest that it was the standard practice of the early church to celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly when they came together for worship.
- In our Reformed confessions, we see that the sacraments are part of *the means of grace* that are the objective channels through which Jesus Christ ordinarily communicates his grace to us. So they are not first of all about us, and what we do for God, but they are about God and what he does for us and in us.
- The sacraments are given to nourish and strengthen our often weak and tired faith. They are given as a visible, tangible confirmation to us of God's love and grace for us in Jesus Christ to encourage us to persevere (cf. Belgic Confession, Article 33).
- The Lord's Supper, in particular, is given to confirm, sustain, nourish and refresh our faith by leading us to feed upon the body and blood of Jesus Christ himself (cf. Lord's Day 28, Q&A 75; Belgic Confession, Article 33).
- In light of the Scriptures and confessions, the elders were persuaded that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated on a regular basis for the good of God's people and for the glory of God, since in it "Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and

gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death; nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood” (Belgic Confession, Article 35).

A Further Explanation of Our Practice

The traditional practice of quarterly communion has served the churches well in the past, but it has had the unfortunate result that some think that the Sacrament would diminish in value and importance if celebrated more frequently. Certainly, this danger is real. It is always possible, when we are dealing with the things of God, that we would simply begin to mindlessly go through the motions. Jesus condemned the people of his day for this: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8). The danger of emptying out our worship is very real and should always be a concern for the people of God. But having the Lord’s Supper only four times a year does not by itself diminish this danger. Neither will more frequent communion make the danger any greater. It is always a problem for us to take the things of God for granted and treating them as common, drawing near to God with insincere hearts. However often we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we will have to struggle against this problem in every aspect of our worship of the triune God.

Our current practice of monthly communion is to be seen as a further reformation of the older practice and is based upon the teaching of Scripture and our Reformed confessions. It is important to note that we are not the only church in the United Reformed Churches that has reformed the older practice. There are many other congregations that have opted for more frequent communion, varying from bi-monthly to every Sunday.

Scripture

The Scriptures make clear that it was the practice of the early church to frequently celebrate the Lord Supper. Acts 2:42 is a key verse in setting before us the practice of the apostolic church: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, *to the breaking of bread* and to prayer.” The sequence of teaching, fellowship, breaking of *the* (communion) bread, and prayer is a summary of their regular worship services. Notice that they “devoted themselves” to this. “They continued steadfastly,” according to one translation. They persisted in doing this. All this points to the fact that it was their regular practice.

The fact that this was the regular practice of the early church is also seen in 1 Corinthians 11:17-33, the key passage which explains the Lord Supper. Much can be said about this passage, although we will focus on the central point Paul is making. “When” the Corinthians “come together as a church” (v. 18; note vv. 17, 20, 33, 34 for similar language) to worship they had a meal together which they presumed to be the Lord’s Supper. But Paul points out that their meal with all its irregularities was an abuse of the Lord’s Supper (cf. vv. 20-22). So he goes on to explain what the Lord’s Supper is and how it should be enjoyed (vv. 23-32). Assumed and underlying the whole discussion is that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated every time they “came together as a church,” and Paul does not find this the problem but rather opposes their misuse of the Supper.

Now we have to be careful here because not every action of the early church’s practice is normative for us. We only have to think about their practice of selling all of their “possessions and goods” and sharing everything they had (Acts 2:45; 4:32-37). We simply do not have a Scripture passage that tells us exactly how often we should celebrate communion. So we have to be very careful what we deduce about the frequency of communion. But we can say at least this much: the early church did celebrate communion frequently. The reason for this is because they understood the nature of the sacrament. They understood why God has given to us this means of

remembering his great work in faith. To help us understand the general biblical teaching on the sacraments we have to look to our confessions.

Our Reformed Confessions

To understand why the sacrament of the Lord's Supper should be celebrated regularly we must understand what a sacrament is, and what the Lord's Supper, in particular, does for and in the believer.

It is important to remember that the sacraments are *means of grace*. The means of grace are those "objective channels which Christ has instituted in the church, and to which He ordinarily binds Himself in the communication of His grace."¹ Someone else explained it in simpler terms like this: "The Christian is to grow in grace and in the knowledge of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Just as his physical body requires nutritious food to grow physically, so also he needs spiritual food to grow spiritually. This spiritual 'food' that God has provided for the Christian's growth in grace theologians refer to as the 'means of grace.'"² Lord's Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 65 & 67, explains to us the primary and secondary *means of grace*:

Q: "You confess that by faith alone you share in Christ and all His blessings: Where does that faith come from? A. The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.

Q: "Are both the Word and the sacraments then designed to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?" A: "Right! In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and through the holy sacraments he assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross."

Preaching is the primary means of grace because this is what the Spirit uses to produce and work faith in Jesus Christ in our hearts. That faith worked in us by the Holy Spirit through the Word is then confirmed in us and we are assured by the Holy Spirit in the sacraments of the wonderful grace of God in Christ that cleansed us from all our sins and reconciled us to God so that we can look forward to eternal fellowship with the Triune God. The sacraments do not produce faith; they confirm, strengthen, and nourish our faith, assuring us of the glorious life we have in Christ. Therefore, they are called the secondary means of grace.

It is very important to understand that the sacraments are first of all a channel through which God communicates his grace to us and not something that we do for God. The sacraments are dangerously misunderstood and their blessings made void when they are conceived as something we do for God and not something God does for and in us. The Belgic Confession, Article 33, makes this point eloquently:

We believe, that our gracious God, on account of our weakness and infirmities has ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us his promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God toward us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith; which he has joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses, both that which he declares to us by his Word, and that which he works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which he imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 604-5.

² Robert Reymond *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 911.

Spirit. Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.

In the same way that God pointed Abram to the stars in the sky when he in weakness doubted the promise of God (Genesis 15:1-6), and that God stooped down to grant Gideon's request about the fleece when he doubted the Word of God (Judges 6:36-40), so God shows his tender care for us in giving us visible, tangible signs (water, bread and wine) to confirm in us and assure us of his grace in Jesus Christ for us, to help us in our weakness. The sacraments are given to us by God to help us cling to him when our faith is weak. When we are battered by the trials of life and exhausted by the intensity of our struggle against our sinful flesh, the world and the Devil, wondering whether God still truly loves us, the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, are a visible, tangible sign and seal of the reality of God's love in Christ. The Lord's Supper was given as a continual reminder of God's sustaining grace and power that will uphold us through every trial and battle in this life, until the end when we will celebrate with Christ in his Father's kingdom at the wedding feast (cf. Matthew 26:29).

Just as bread sustains our earthly life and wine refreshes us when we are thirsty and tired, so the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper point us to the body and blood of Jesus Christ that nourish, strengthen, sustain and refresh the hungry and weary soul of the believer (Lord's Day 28, Q & A 75; BC Art.35). As the Belgic Confession confirms in Article 35: "This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His suffering and death; nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood." The Belgic Confession emphasizes that the manner of our eating and drinking of Christ is not with our physical mouths, but by "the Spirit through faith," which is the "mouth of our soul." Christ "communicates Himself" to us in the Supper. It is Christ who gives us "Himself and all the merits of his suffering and death" to enjoy. It is Christ who nourishes. It is Christ who strengthens. It is Christ who comforts. It is Christ who quickens and refreshes.

How often do you need Christ to communicate Himself to you in this way? How often do you need to enjoy Christ and his merits? How often do you need to be strengthened in your faith? How often do you need to be nourished, comforted and refreshed?

As those whom Christ has authorized to oversee the life of this congregation, we are persuaded that we need the benefit of the Supper as a means of grace on a regular basis for the good of God's people and for the glory of God's grace in Christ. We desire to honor Christ by making use of this glorious means of grace. As elders we believe that we honor Christ and serve God's people by celebrating communion every month.

In the service of Christ and his flock,

The Elders of Redeemer URC