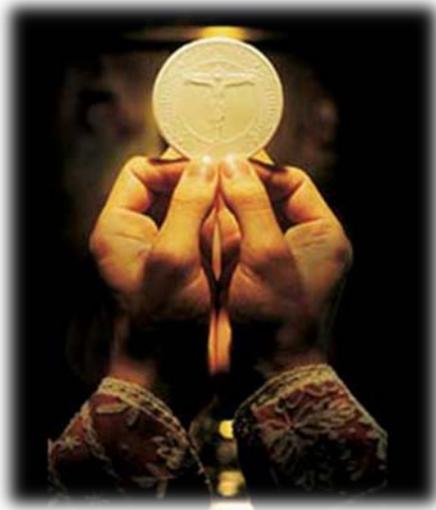


# Why Every Sunday Communion?



**“Pastor, if the Lord’s Supper is everything that the Bible and catechism say it is, then why don’t we have the opportunity to receive it when we come for worship each week.”**

Quote from 'The Blessings of Weekly Communion', Rev. Wieting, CPH, 2006

Every Sunday Holy Communion is the historic tradition of the Church from the beginning, and the tradition of Lutheran doctrine and practice.

The center of the Church's life is the Eucharist. The center of each Christian's life is the Lord's Supper (Eucharist). The Confessions of the Lutheran Church are explicitly and implicitly Eucharistic. The Divine Service (worship with holy Communion) was and is understood to be THE ordinary worship of the Church on Sunday. The Eucharist, however, was moved to the side during centuries of assault from rationalism, pietism, and too many other "isms" inflicted upon the Church and born from within her. What was once ordinary (in the sense of normal) became extraordinary (in the sense of exceptional) in the life of Lutheran congregations and Lutheran Christians in those congregations. The Eucharist, so long an addendum onto the Divine Service, is intrinsic to the Divine Service -- not only on Sunday morning but in the hearts and lives of the people in the pews. The Church from day 1 celebrated the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

Christ places the Sacraments central to His Gospel and who we are as His people. Our Lutheran Confessions are written from and to this perspective. Our hymnals are wonderful resources to direct us again to the Divine Service, where in Word and Sacrament fulfills the promise of the Christ.

## THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS

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

We see this theology of the sacrament reflected in the practice of the New Testament church.<sup>3</sup> Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost, the Christians "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*" (Acts 2:42). The first Christians' worship looked remarkably similar to ours in basic structure. It included God's Word

(the living voice of Jesus), the offering (*koinonia* in the sense of "sharing in something" - the hands of Jesus in action), the Sacrament of the Altar (the living Jesus Himself, according to both His human and divine natures), and prayer to the living Lord in their presence. This reflects the daily worship of the first Jerusalem church.

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

Oscar Cullmann examines Acts 2:42 and 20:7 and concludes: We have found a convincing argument for the view that as a rule there was no gathering of the community without the breaking of bread and that, even if there had been a service which was exclusively a service of the Word, it would have been in any case an exception . . . The Lord's Supper is thus the basis and goal of every gathering . . . Two main features of the purpose of all early Christian gatherings for worship must still be stressed. First, the Lord's Supper is the natural climax towards which the service thus understood moves and without which it is not thinkable, since here Christ unites himself with his community as crucified and risen and makes it in this way one with himself, actually builds it up as his body (1 Cor. 10:17)."<sup>2</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL WITNESS

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

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

Holy Communion continued to be the chief Sunday Service in all nonheretical churches of East and West throughout the entire history of Christendom unto the early 16th century, and then only was omitted in certain non-Lutheran protestant sects and denominations.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Didache, an early Christian document dated as early as A.D. 50 says, "On the Lord's Day, His special day, come together and break bread and give thanks."<sup>4</sup> Weekly Sunday communion is the historic tradition of the church from the beginning.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100-Ca. 165), whose writings are among the most important that have come down to us from the second century, gives a detailed description of the weekly worship of Christians. In it he explains how on every Sunday the Word is read and expounded ("the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets") and how bread and wine are used to celebrate the Sacrament.<sup>5</sup>

The church's historic liturgies serve as a witness to what she has always believed, confessed and taught.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that these early liturgies are communion liturgies. The consistent inclusion of both Word and Sacrament in these liturgies reminds us of the centrality of both in early Christian worship.

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

## **THE CONFSSIONAL WITNESS**

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

Luther championed a balance between Word and Sacrament in every chief Sunday service. Luther restored preaching to the communion service (it had been made optional years before),<sup>7</sup> and restored the Word -- sacrament unity of the service.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore Luther championed the return of the Sacrament to the laity, and in both kinds (both Body and Blood). Seeing the reconciliation of God and man in the forgiveness of sins, Luther stressed the forgiveness received in the Sacrament, and man's constant need to receive God's

grace. Speaking to the pastors of people who had gone to communion only once per year or less, in the introduction to the Small Catechism:

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

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

Luther never suspended Sunday or festival services at which people could commune, and (as we see above) urged people to come to communion often at these celebrations. It is evident from this and Pastor Luther's own parish experience at Wittenberg,<sup>9</sup> that he desired Lutheran congregations to continue publicly offering the sacrament on at least a weekly basis, and more often in larger parishes. "Other Lutheran Reformers (of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology) all agreed with this view, thinking that it was a continuation of Biblical teaching. And so, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, we find a

clear statement of Lutheran practice, in answer to the Roman charges that Lutherans had abandoned the Christian faith and sacraments:"<sup>10</sup>

## **CONCERNS SOME MAY HAVE**

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If you discuss every Sunday Communion, you may hear sincere, faithful people raise concerns/questions.

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

***"Why do I need the change?"*** Luther would answer, "Why, God's greatest treasure! The holy Body and Blood of Christ, and with it the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation!" This side of eternity's curtain, God offers no greater gift. It is given *"for you"* (Lk 22:19-20).<sup>14</sup>

***"We've never done it that way before."*** Our congregations are composed of people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Certainly we will want to be respectful and thankful for the rich diversity of experiences which God's people bring to our parish. However, this parish will never be able to duplicate those experiences for every (any?) member. We are a unique congregation with a unique mission. And while my own personal tradition is important, I must also be mindful of the tradition of the church. Lutherans teach that unbroken Christian tradition is to be respected (Augsburg Confession XV and Apology XV). This doesn't mean the majority or the past is always right, but it does mean we must be sure it is wrong before we take a different stance.

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

***"I do not feel the need to communion that often."*** Our feelings are unreliable gauges of spiritual need. In the catechism, "Christian Questions with Their Answers," Luther reminds us to commune first because of Christ's command and promise. And, he continues, though we may not feel any need, we should still believe the Scriptures which declare our need. Moreover, though I may not desire to commune on a particular day, there may be others who very much need and want the strengthening power of the Sacrament. Should my lack of perceived need, determine the need of my brother or sister? Christian charity offers a clear answer.

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

- The person mourning the death of a loved one.
- The person who after a long separation from God comes to church.
- The child of a divorced family who can commune only with the parent attending that day.
- The person diagnosed with cancer, disease, or another serious illness.
- The teen or adult whose work schedule prevents them from worshipping most Sundays.
- The person who struggles with their family issues Saturday night and needs to be reminded the most precious gift was and still is free.
- The abused person.
- The unemployed person.
- The person who is dying and desires this seal of resurrection.
- The person struggling, fighting with guilt and temptation
- The person who hungers for the sacrament.

"In our churches Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved." (Article XXIV). We see that the Lutheran Reformers continued to celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday, restoring and teaching its meaning, and inviting their people to commune more and more. Wrote John Gerhard, one of Lutheranism's great theologians:

Because therefore it has been accepted as a practice in the Christian Church that in the public assemblies of the Church after the preaching and hearing of the Word, this Sacrament is celebrated, therefore this custom must not be departed from without urgent necessity . . . it is . . . clear from Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 11:20, 33, that when the Christians did gather at one place, they were accustomed to celebrate the Eucharist (Quatuor Evangelistarum/Frankfurt and Hamburg, 1652 Vol. II, p. 1085).<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, the current practice of every Sunday Mass in the Roman church goes back to Rome 'copying ' the blessing of every Sunday Communion which our early Lutherans recovered to regular Church practice.

**Our concern in making the sacrament available to our people is one of spiritual care and growth.** When Jesus restored Peter after his denial, Jesus had only one command for him, "*Feed my lambs.*" Since God has promised that His Spirit is at work through the Means of Grace and only through these Means,<sup>15</sup> we desire to make these Means readily available to God's people for their spiritual strengthening and nourishment. Offering the sacrament frequently is a vital way for our parish to "feed the Lord's sheep" whom He has graciously placed in our care.

Weekly Sunday communion is the historic tradition of the Church from the beginning, and the tradition of Lutheran doctrine and practice.

## ENDNOTES

1. Kurt Marquart, "The 'Who' of the Sacrament," (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary), 4, p. 1.
2. Early Christian Worship, trans. A. Todd and James B. Torrance (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953) 29, 34.
3. Aubrey Bougher, Ten Questions and Answers on the Weekly Eucharist, (Luth. Liturgical Renewal, 1985).
4. The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Edinburgh; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 7, p. 381.
5. Justin Martyr, Apology, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., The Ante-Nicene Fathers with prefaces and notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 1, p. 186.
6. These can be divided into four major regional families: (1) The Syrian liturgies, centered in Antioch, which was probably the origin of the earliest complete communion rite that has come down to us, the Apostolic Constitutions. A further distinction is made between East Syrian liturgies from the Mesopotamia-Persia and West Syrian liturgies from Syria-Palestine, of which the Liturgy of St. James is the prime example. (2) The liturgy of Alexandria, used in Egypt and the neighboring countries, of which the Liturgy of St. Mark is best known. (3) the Western type of liturgy, of which the Roman rite is the prime example. (4) The Byzantine liturgy, centered in Constantinople and derived from the West Syrian tradition. Cheslyn Jones et al., eds., The Study of the Liturgy, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 230-244, 252-263.
7. Martin Luther, "Concerning the Order of Public Worship," (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) v. 53, p. 11.
8. "For properly speaking, the mass consists in using the Gospel and communing at the table of the Lord. . . For among Christians the whole service should center in the Word and sacrament" Martin Luther, "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg," (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) v. 53, p. 25, 90. Luther even emphasized this unity liturgically, prescribing in his *German Mass* that the words of the Gospel lesson and the Words of Institution by sung in the same musical tone. It is noteworthy that when Luther, the Champion of the Word, finally put his hand to reforming the liturgy, it was a service that included both Word and sacrament.
9. In Luther's own Wittenberg parish the sacrament was offered every Sunday at eight or nine o'clock along with Matins at five or six o'clock and Vespers in the afternoon, as well as on every festival day and every Wednesday. Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) v. 53, p. 68 and Dennis Marzolf, "A Sermon for Michaelmas I" (Mankato, MN: Mt. Olive Luth. Ch., Oct. 7, 1990).
10. Ten Questions and Answers, 16.
11. For an exposition of the early Lutheran theology underlying this practice see Martin Chemnitz, The Lord's Supper, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979).
12. Ten Questions and Answers, 20-21.
13. Werner Elert provides a helpful discussion of Neo-Protestantism's misguided effort to be "the church of the Word only" in The Lord's Supper Today, trns. Martin Bertram and Robert F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 5-7.
14. Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation, 42.
15. "We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil" (Smalcald Articles, Pt. III, Art. VIII, 10).

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