

STUDY SERIES - WEEKLY COMMUNION

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Study 1

Background

The possibility of offering holy communion each Sunday has been on the table here at St John's for some time (I mentioned it in my annual report in February). I recently led the Lay Assistants in a study of this practice, and Church Council has adopted their recommendation that I now lead the whole congregation in a study sometime during our gathering on Sunday mornings. The impetus for all this is the increasing realisation in Lutheran churches world-wide that the Sunday gathering of God's people is incomplete without the Lord's Supper and not consistent with the witness of the scriptures, church history and our Lutheran confessions. I therefore intend to look at what these sources say, and also why communion became less frequent, finishing with some practical issues. I'll do this primarily in writing (like this) so that the largest number of people can follow the study, and consider the material at home as well.

Scriptural witness

When our Lord instituted his holy supper he commanded, *Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me* (1 Corinthians 11:25). By this, Jesus was encouraging not just an annual celebration, like the Passover meal, but a frequent celebration, without prescribing exactly *how* frequent.

The practice of Jesus' disciples and the new-born church immediately after Pentecost indicate a *daily* celebration, as in Acts 4: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved* (Acts 4:42-47).

Here the key elements of divine service, Sunday worship, are all present:

- 1) the reading and preaching of God's word focusing on the gospel of Christ (*They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching*);
- 2) the offering in support of the gospel and the poor (*They devoted themselves to... the fellowship* - the word 'koinonia' here refers to a united sharing of finances and care for each other's needs, as we see from elsewhere in the first chapters of Acts);
- 3) the Lord's Supper (*They devoted themselves to... the breaking of bread*, an early term for holy communion);

4) and the offering of praise, thanksgiving and intercessory prayer (*They devoted themselves to... prayer*).

Right from the start the pattern of the liturgy included the Lord's Supper, not as an optional extra, but as an essential part of the presence and work of our risen Lord in worship.

At that very early stage Christian worship took place in homes, and the gatherings were daily. Later the pattern settled into daily devotion at home and weekly assembly in the congregation for the full service of word and sacrament - never just word alone. So Luke describes worship at Troas: *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread* (Acts 20:7). Notice the focus here on the Lord's Supper as the high point of the service, as indeed it is, putting into physical effect what is heard in the reading and preaching of God's word. Here is an example, too, of the weekly assembly settling down to take place on Sunday (*the first day of the week*) - the day of our Lord's resurrection and the beginning of the new world God is making in Christ. Every Sunday since, the church has celebrated our Lord's resurrection, and his holy Supper belongs to that celebration as his feast of victory over sin and death - the victory we participate in when we receive from the altar here in church his body once given and blood once shed on the altar of the cross, a miracle beyond comprehension.

And here's another important witness from the scriptures. When the Corinthian church was *abusing* the Lord's Supper by turning it into a drunken and selfish party, Paul responded by chastening them severely and teaching the proper benefits and conduct of holy communion (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). He *didn't* respond by telling them to *reduce the frequency of holy communion*. Yet this has been a (quite wrong) response in more recent centuries - using the holiness of the Lord's Supper and fear of its abuse to justify less frequent celebration. But this apparent concern for the Lord's Supper actually masks a quite significant error - the focus on what is in the heart of the *believer*, rather than what is in the heart of *God* and in the word and sacraments he provides for the church to use frequently and fully. Using that sort of logic, we should actually abstain from the reading and preaching of *God's word*, because it is equally as holy and just as often abused! The proper response, rather, is exactly that of St Paul - full and proper teaching so that the Lord's Supper is celebrated rightly and frequently, with great faith and joy. When the church does this, the gospel is proclaimed loud and strong as St Paul declares: *For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes* (1 Corinthians 11:26).

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Introduction to Study 2

This study is the second in a series examining the practice of celebrating holy communion every Sunday. The first study looked at what the scriptures have to say about weekly communion and the next study will examine why communion became less frequent, but now we turn to the witness of the church since New Testament times. Quite a number of practical issues spring to mind as well, such as what is the best way to distribute holy communion in our circumstances. These will be discussed in more open forum before our congregation makes any decision on this matter.

The witness of church history

There's no doubt that the practice of daily and at least weekly communion continued as *the norm* in the church spawned by the gospel. It was only in groups that were clearly heretical that weekly communion was done away with.

A document teaching many aspects of Christian life and dating from as early as 70 AD says this: *On the Lord's day of the Lord* (Sunday), *come together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your transgressions* (Didache, 14:1). Justin Martyr, a leading second-century defender of the faith, gives a detailed description of weekly worship in his *Apology*, explaining how *every Sunday* God's word is read and expounded, and bread and wine are used to celebrate the sacrament (1:66-67). Most telling of all are the *liturgies* of the early church, as these contain the essence of what the church believes and practices. Here we find that holy communion is an essential part of the regular service, and that the liturgies consistently contain the structure we know so well: first the reading and preaching of God's word, followed by the Lord's Supper - Christ proclaiming himself and then giving himself physically.

By the time of the Middle Ages, however, things had changed. Holy Communion was still being *celebrated* every week (in fact usually daily) in the 'Mass', but few people were *receiving* holy communion - it was considered too holy and mysterious. Christ was portrayed as an angry judge, so better not to get too close! Priests communed but others only infrequently and then only in one kind, taking the body of Christ but not his blood. People would come to *observe* the Mass and to *venerate* the body of Christ, either during the communion liturgy itself or later when it was stored in a tabernacle specially designed for that purpose. But our Lord's commands to *Take and eat* and to *Take and drink* were being ignored.

The witness of the Lutheran confessions

This was the situation Luther grew up with as a sixteenth century priest and teacher. His rediscovery of the gospel soon brought him to open up the Lord's Supper for people to actually receive again with faith and frequency. Instead of

changing the *Lord's Supper*, Luther changed the *message* - preaching and teaching Christ *properly*, including the good news that our Lord was there for people to eat and to drink as he had commanded, and that with his body and blood he also gives forgiveness, life and salvation. To make this possible, he and the Lutherans after him offered the lay people communion in both kinds and pressed the people to attend.

In doing this, Luther stressed our constant need to receive God's *grace* and therefore Christ's *provision* of that grace in the Lord's Supper. This is what he wrote to pastors in the introduction to his 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.* And in his Large Catechism Luther writes, *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 daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but continually grow stronger... What I mean is that those who claim to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive the blessed sacrament frequently.*

When defending their faith before the Emperor in 1530 the Lutheran confessors described their practice clearly: *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* (Augsburg Confession, XXIV).

These are the confessions of our own Lutheran Church of Australia and of our own congregation. We commit ourselves to them in our constitutions and confirmations. I believe that the time is ripe for us to put them into practice and celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

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Introduction to Study 3

In our study of weekly communion so far, we have seen that the witness of the scriptures, of church history and of the Lutheran confessions all affirm the Lord's Supper as an essential part of the Sunday gathering of God's people. Now we finish by asking why it is that the celebration of holy communion became less frequent. Remember that at least *offering* holy communion every Sunday (if not every day) was the *norm* both before the 16th century Reformation and for at least 100 years afterwards, except in certain Protestant sects that began teaching the real *absence* of Christ on earth rather than his real presence.

Why Lutherans gave up weekly communion

At least three factors contributed to Lutherans dropping weekly communion.¹

1. War and frontier conditions

First were the effects of 17th century European wars, and conditions in the 'new world' to which many Europeans migrated (including Australia from the late 18th century). The wars left many European cities devastated, and because many pastors were dead or drafted, holy communion was unable to be celebrated according to the regular schedule. And many emigrating to the new world found no pastor to give them the sacrament. As a result many Christians weren't able to receive the sacrament for long periods of time and grew accustomed to infrequent holy communion.

2. 18th century Rationalism

Secondly, the 18th century saw a strong intellectual movement called Rationalism. This elevated human reason above everything else including what were maligned as the 'primitive' beliefs and practices of traditional Christianity. In this view, man doesn't need anything but his *mind* to reach God. Argument took the place of devotion, speculation the place of simple faith in what God says, and Christ's communion command went unheeded. Although it's hard to believe, Rationalism became the popular fad of many clergy, with the result that in many places in America and the German-English countries of Protestantism, the church's practice of weekly communion was abandoned in favour of communion as infrequently as once or twice a year.

3. 18th century Pietism

Pietism was a reaction against Rationalism. It stressed inward feelings of the heart rather than complicated reasoning of the mind or even right belief based on the proper hearing of God's word and reception of the sacrament. So both the preached word and the administered sacrament were made subject to the emotions, sometimes even with outright hostility to 'outward' or 'formal' worship.

With this attitude a person easily thinks they don't need God's means of grace in holy communion. Pietism became a different form of 'works righteousness' in fact, precisely what Luther had so strongly opposed two centuries earlier.

Lutheranism in Australia²

These three factors all contributed to our inherited practice here in Australia. The remoteness of the early pioneers and the difficulty of serving them is quite clear - and is still an issue today for isolated locations. So is the fact that the first Lutherans who came here were quite obvious pietists. They offered communion only infrequently - perhaps four times a year - and even then churchgoers didn't always take the sacrament. Sometimes Luther, who said that a Christian should receive holy communion at least four times a year, was quoted in support of this practice. But his context was completely different: in his day communion was offered *every day* but many people chose not to receive the sacrament *at all*. People also thought Luther's emphasis that Christ's body and blood must be received *worthily* meant you had to be confident you'd been fairly good recently (missing the point that we live in a constant state of sin all the time), or that 'your heart was right with God' - even to feel *bad* enough about your sin (Pietism again). In fact Luther actually taught that to be worthy was to acknowledge one's sin and God's judgement for it, to believe that Christ died for our sins, and that in the Lord's Supper God offers forgiveness with Christ's body and blood to those who believe this. In other words, worthiness is nothing other than repentant faith in Christ.

This is not to ignore the state of individual consciences. If there is particular sin that a person feels disqualifies them from holy communion, then this should be worked through with the pastor beforehand, and it may well be appropriate to abstain where known sin goes unrepented.

But our concern is with *offering* holy communion every Sunday, not *requiring* people to receive it. And this brings us back to the heart of the matter: Christ is present in the Lord's Supper with the best of gifts, and it's our duty not to withhold him or them but rather to make both him and them available every Sunday. Thankfully this is what we see happening more and more as the church gradually recovers its biblical, historical and Lutheran practice of weekly communion.

¹ Drawing from an unpublished paper by Rev David Schoessow, 1997, citing Pastor A.N. Bougher in 'Ten Questions and Answers on the Weekly Eucharist', Lutheran Liturgical Renewal, 1985.

² Pastor Everard Leske's history of Lutheranism in Australia, *For Faith and Freedom*, p 252ff.

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Introduction to Study 4

We've come to the end of our studies on weekly communion. A brief addendum follows, to round the picture out, looking at where we are now in the Lutheran Church of Australia.

The practice of communion in the LCA now

In his history of Lutheranism in Australia published in 1996, Pastor Everard Leske makes these observations:

Mention should also be made of the dramatic change which has taken place in recent years in Australian Lutheranism in regard to the attitude to, and use of, holy communion.

When the LCA was formed, the final statistical reports of the two merging churches revealed an average holy communion attendance in the ELCA of 4.6 and in the UELCA of 3.5 confirmed member per year. Holy communion services were held in most congregations more or less monthly at best, and even regular churchgoers did not commune on every occasion... (He then discusses reasons for such low attendance, most of which were included in Study #3.)

The appearance in 1958 of H Sasse's monumental book, 'This Is My Body', made a great impact on Lutheranism worldwide, and no doubt also gave a massive fillip to this Australian forward move... The sharpened interest in lively worship that became evident in the mid-1970s once again included renewed emphasis on the sacrament, and led to a spectacular increase in communing by Lutherans. A number of bible study resources focusing on the sacrament were made available. Holy communion services began to be scheduled more frequently. More churches began to hold communion services at least fortnightly, and some every Sunday; some congregations which introduced multiple morning services on Sundays began to administer holy communion in at least one of them each week. Statistics once more began to tell a changing story. Annual averages increased from 5.19 in 1973, to 6.47 in 1978, to 8.8 in 1983, to 11.12 in 1988, to 14.99 in 1993. Certainly there is a danger of formalism, that the sacrament may be treated casually and taken for granted, and repeated teaching by pastors on the nature and blessing of holy communion is an ever-present need. But there is no doubt that many pastors and people have grown in appreciating the biblical truth which Sasse set forth so well in 'This Is My Body': that the sacrament is the gospel. And they are acting accordingly.¹

Similar sentiments were expressed in a 1990 LCA Commission on Worship statement concerning frequency of communion.

What now?

It would not be right to make a decision for weekly communion simply on the strength of a momentum in that direction, although the experience of our own LCA is informative and helps us understand where we are today. While increasing the frequency of communion has been admirable and a great blessing to the church, the most significant step is this last one: weekly communion for the reason that *Sunday worship is incomplete without it*. This is what we've seen in the earlier studies from the witness of the scriptures, church history, and our Lutheran confessions. As weekly worship is the body of Christ gathered by its Lord, to be enlightened and sanctified by his presence and gifts, then celebrating the Lord's Supper is obvious. It is self-evident obedience to Jesus' command to 'Do this'. How right it would be for us to gladly report our worship pattern as Luke does concerning the Christians in Troas: *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread* (Acts 20:7).

A word from the LCA Commission on Worship's statement to finish: *The promises connected with God's means of grace are not empty or unsure. God makes them effective. Therefore, wherever these means or 'instruments' are faithfully used, we can confidently expect spiritual growth and divine gifts, in both individuals and congregations. In this way God creates and sustains his holy church on its pilgrimage through time. For God's people on earth, the Holy Supper is, in all its regular simplicity, a climax beyond compare. Here frequent regularity need not reduce the unique to the ordinary - because of the riches and goodness of the great Lord who gives himself. Rather, we should appreciate frequency as a further sign of God's bounty. As we are so regularly called to the heights of heavenly joy in the Holy Eucharist, we anticipate the riches to come and experience a foretaste of the everlasting banquet of God.*

¹ Pastor Everard Leske's history of Lutheranism in Australia, *For Faith and Freedom*, p 252ff.