



REFORMED  
— PAVILION —

# THE LORD'S SUPPER

By:

Reverend Andrew Lanning

The Lord's supper is a most nourishing and satisfying meal for God's people. In the Lord's supper God feeds his hungry and thirsty people with Jesus Christ. In the Lord's supper God nourishes his people unto everlasting life by Jesus' body and blood. The Lord's supper is the gospel, and the gospel satisfies God's people and makes them happy. "The Lord's Supper testifies to us that we have a full pardon of all sin by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself has once accomplished on the cross" (L.D. 30, Q&A 80).

The Lord's supper is a most nourishing and satisfying meal for God's people, just as Jesus intended it to be. Our Lord knows our emptiness, our weakness, our sin, our unbelief, our burdens, our wretchedness. Rather than casting us away from himself because of our slow hearts and dim understanding and wretched doubting, the Lord comes near to us time and again and preaches and preaches and preaches the gospel to us so that we might always hear of his grace to us sinners. And adding mercy to mercy, the Lord gives us a meal time and again by which he shows and shows and shows the gospel to us so that we might always see his grace to us sinners. "Christ promised that he will as certainly feed and nourish believers with his body and blood, as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup" (L.D. 28, Q&A 77).

The Lord's supper is a most nourishing and satisfying meal for God's people. But Reformed churches follow the curious tradition of administering the Lord's supper very infrequently. Most Reformed churches administer the Lord's supper once every three months—four times per year. The Church Order that most Reformed churches have used since the Synod of Dordt includes this article: "The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months" (art. 63). Assuming that a Reformed church has at least 104 worship services a year—two services per Sunday—a Reformed church has one hundred services without the Lord's supper and a mere four services with the Lord's supper. Even when Reformed churches administer the Lord's supper every two months, or also administer the Lord's supper on special services like Good Friday and Christmas, those churches only administer the Lord's supper six to ten times per year at most.

When it comes to the frequency of administering the Lord's supper, the Reformed tradition is ungenerous and stingy. Instead of setting the nourishing sacrament of Christ's body and blood before God's people often, Reformed churches restrict the number of administrations to the barest of minimums. It would be difficult to administer the sacrament fewer times a year than Reformed churches currently do. In Reformed churches Jesus' "as often as ye eat this bread, and

drink this cup" (I Cor. 11:26) turns out to be not very often at all.

The Reformed tradition's stinginess in the frequency of administering the supper is surprising because the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is very generous and rich. The Reformed confessions can hardly contain themselves in extolling the wonders and blessings of the Lord's supper. The Belgic Confession exults in the supper thus:

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 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. (art. 35)

The Heidelberg Catechism trumpets the supper thus:

Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and to drink of this cup in remembrance of him, adding these promises: first, that his body was offered and broken on the cross for me, and his blood shed for me, as certainly as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup communicated to me; and further, that he feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life, with his

crucified body and shed blood, as assuredly as I receive from the hands of the minister, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, as certain signs of the body and blood of Christ (L.D. 28, Q&A 75).

The Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper lauds the supper thus:

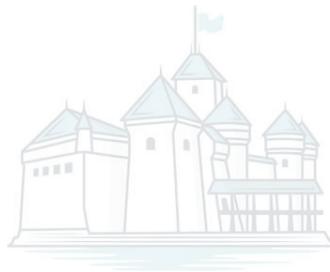
As often as ye eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you shall thereby, as by a sure remembrance and pledge, be admonished and assured of this my hearty love and faithfulness towards you; that, whereas you should otherwise have suffered eternal death, I have given my body to the death of the cross and shed my blood for you; and as certainly feed and nourish your hungry and thirsty souls with my crucified body and shed blood to everlasting life, as this bread is broken before your eyes, and this cup is given to you, and you eat and drink the same with your mouth in remembrance of me.

The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is anything but miserly! The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper overflows with comfort and refreshment for God's weary people. And no wonder. For the Lord's supper is the gospel, and the gospel is rich. The Lord's supper is Christ, and Christ is infinitely abundant. In the

Lord's supper God's poor are given the kingdom, God's mourners are comforted, and God's hungry and thirsty are filled. In the Lord's supper the blind and the starving taste and see that God is good. In the Lord's supper the thirsty come to the waters, and those who have no money buy wine and milk without money and without price.

If the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is so rich, how is it that Reformed churches so infrequently

administer the Lord's supper? How is it that the Reformed churches practice what John Calvin called a defective custom of infrequent administration? In order to answer these questions, we shall have to go back to the Reformation and look at some of the thorny problems that the churches faced as God brought them out of Roman Catholic darkness into the gospel's light.



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Reformed churches in general administer the sacrament of the Lord's supper very infrequently. Although Reformed churches meet more than one hundred times per year for worship, the Reformed tradition is to administer the Lord's supper only four to six times per year. The Reformed tradition of infrequent administration is surprising in light of the rich Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper. The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is that "as often as ye eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you shall thereby, as by a sure remembrance and pledge, be admonished and assured of this my hearty love and faithfulness towards you" (Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper). With such a rich understanding of the Lord's supper, how did such an infrequent administration come to pass among the Reformed? Let us look at the history of the Lord's supper to see how our tradition developed.

### Jesus' Institution of the Lord's Supper

When Jesus instituted the Lord's supper among his disciples in the upper room, he did not specify its frequency. Jesus taught the elements of the Lord's supper: broken bread, wine, eating and drinking, and the formula of administration. Jesus taught that the Lord's supper is a congregational meal for the church and not a private meal for individuals: "drink ye all." But Jesus did not specify how often the church

should administer the Lord's supper (see Matt. 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20).

Later, Jesus revealed the Lord's supper to the apostle Paul. In that revelation Jesus did specify that the Lord's supper was to be administered repeatedly: "oft" and "often." And Jesus taught the wonderful blessings that he would bestow upon the church each time the supper was administered: "this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me" and "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." Nevertheless, though our Lord taught that the Lord's supper was to be administered repeatedly, he did not specify *how often* it was to be repeated (see I Cor. 11:23–29).

From Jesus' institution of the Lord's supper, we can draw three conclusions regarding its frequency. First conclusion: the Lord's supper is to be administered to the members of the congregation repeatedly. The sacrament of baptism is only to be administered to a person once: "every man... ought to be but once baptized with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same" (Belgic Confession 34). But the Lord's supper is to be administered to God's people again and again: "keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior with thanksgiving" (Belgic Confession 35).

Second conclusion: the Lord left the exact frequency of administration

to the freedom and the judgment of his church. The frequency of administration belongs to those “certain ordinances” that “those who are rulers of the church institute and establish... among themselves for maintaining the body of the church.” These ordinances that the rulers freely establish are “useful and beneficial,” provided that the rulers “studiously...take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted” (Belgic Confession 32). Because our Lord did not specify the frequency of the Lord’s supper in his institution, his church is free to establish her own frequency.

The frequency of administration is like those other indifferent matters that the church decides: what kind of bread to use (white? wheat? leavened? unleavened?); what kind of wine to use (white? red? sweet? dry?); how the table is prepared (the minister breaks each piece of bread by hand? a committee cuts the pieces beforehand and the minister only breaks one piece? common cup? individual cups?); where the congregation sits to eat (in their pews? come to the front pews? sit around the table?); how the elements are distributed (handed out by the minister’s own hand to each person? passed in a plate by elders?); and any number of other details pertaining to the sacrament. All these belong to the free decision of the church. The only criterion is what is “useful and beneficial” (Belgic Confession 32) for the congregation.

By leaving the frequency of the Lord’s supper to the judgment of his church, our Lord wonderfully provided for the multitude of circumstances that his church would face through the years. There would be times of peace, when the church could administer the Lord’s supper at every worship service. There would be times of persecution, when the members of the church were on the run and no administration of the Lord’s supper would be possible. There would be times of conversion and growth, when God gathered his people in a certain place, but a consistory could not yet be formed and a church not yet instituted, so that the sacrament could not yet be administered. There would be times of apostasy and reformation, when the leaders and the people would need extra instruction to reject the corruption that had crept in and to recover the truth of the sacrament. The Lord’s wonderfully simple institution of his supper accommodates all the various circumstances of his church in this world. “As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come” (1 Cor. 11:26).

In their freedom to decide the frequency of the Lord’s supper, most Reformed churches since the Synod of Dordt (1618–19) have settled on four to six administrations per year. “The Lord’s Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months” (Church Order 63).

Third conclusion: every time the Lord's supper is administered, our Lord truly and graciously bestows heavenly blessings upon his church. The Lord's supper is not an empty ceremony but a powerful means of grace. "It is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ hath not enjoined to us the use of his sacraments in vain" (Belgic Confession 35). But "as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (I Cor. 11:26). By the Lord's supper Jesus himself "nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers" (Belgic Confession 35). By the Lord's supper we "certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only savior in our souls" (Belgic Confession 35). By the Lord's supper God "feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 75). By the Lord's supper we "obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal" by faith (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 76). By "these visible signs and pledges" of the Lord's supper, Christ assures us "that we are...really partakers of his true body and blood" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 79). "The Lord's supper testifies to us that we have a full pardon of all sin by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself has once accomplished on the cross" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 80).

What a wealth of riches for us poor, hungry, thirsty, mourning, lowly, wretched sinners! What a merciful

savior is our Lord, who graciously instituted such an abundant spiritual feast for the happiness and refreshment of his poor church!

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 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 35)

### The Early Church

After our Lord's death, resurrection, ascension, and bestowal of his Spirit, the church continued to celebrate the Lord's supper under the leadership of the apostles. The early church apparently administered the Lord's supper frequently. It is even possible that the regular practice of the early church was to administer the Lord's supper every time she met for worship.

When investigating the early church's practice, as it is recorded in the New Testament, one encounters two special meals that the church observed. The first special meal was the Lord's supper. The church kept this meal according to the institution of Christ as part of her official worship in her public assemblies. Paul refers to this sacramental meal as the "Lord's supper" (I Cor. 11:20).

The second special meal was a fellowship dinner. This meal was not part of the church's instituted worship but was part of her organic life as believers united to each other in the bonds of faith and love. Jude refers to these fellowship dinners as "feasts of charity" (Jude 12), or love feasts. Jesus and his disciples had often eaten meals together, and the early church kept up the practice of breaking bread with one another. There were many poor in the early church, but those who had means would provide the food and drink, and the church would gather together in fellowship to partake of the charitable provisions. In her early days the church celebrated these love feasts daily.

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:46–47)<sup>1</sup>

At times in the early church these two special meals would be celebrated back-to-back. Having partaken together of the sacrament of the Lord's

supper in the official assembly of the church, the members would linger together afterward in their love feast. In today's terms it would be like having a congregational dinner immediately following the morning worship service on a Sunday. How good and how pleasant it is when brethren dwell together in unity!

However, in Corinth, the two special meals became combined without any clear delineation. The church in Corinth called her meal the Lord's supper, but the members behaved disorderly and selfishly, as if they were at a drunken feast where it was every man for himself. The Corinthians' loveless love feasts drew Paul's sharp rebuke, in which he condemned their sacrament as being no sacrament.

When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. (I Cor. 11:20–22)

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1. Many interpret the language of "breaking bread" in Acts 2:42, 46 to be a reference to the Lord's supper. John Calvin, for example, appealed to Acts 2 in support of administering the Lord's supper every time the church has a worship service. Although such an interpretation is possible, there are several places in scripture that use the language of "breaking bread" simply to refer to a meal, for example, Jesus' private meal with the two travelers to Emmaus: "And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them" (Luke 24:30). For a more thorough discussion of "breaking bread" in Acts 2, see P. Aasman, "Celebration of the Lord's Supper—How Often?," *Clarion* 46, nos. 4–5 (1997), reprinted at <https://www.spindleworks.com/library/aasman/lshowmany.htm#1>.

It is especially in Paul's instruction to Corinth that we can discover something about the frequency of the Lord's supper in the early church. Paul was addressing the official worship of the church: "ye come together" (I Cor. 11:17) and "when ye come together in the church" (v. 18) and "when ye come together...into one place" (v. 20). When the members of Corinth came together in their worship, they administered the sacrament of the Lord's supper: "in eating" (v. 21). Paul takes it as granted that the administration of the Lord's supper was part of every coming together of Corinth in worship.

Now, the Corinthians had behaved disorderly and divisively in their worship, so that their coming together in worship was "not for the better, but for the worse" (I Cor. 11:17). And, yes, the Corinthians had so mangled the Lord's supper by their loveless selfishness that what was administered could not even be called "the Lord's supper" anymore (v. 20). Nevertheless, Paul did not rebuke Corinth for administering the Lord's supper frequently but for being hateful and divisive and disorderly in her eating and drinking.

In his epistle Paul immediately went on to reform the Lord's supper in Corinth. He wrote to the Corinthians what he had already told them in person about Jesus' revelation of the Lord's supper to Paul. "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (I Cor. 11:23). Paul reformed the Lord's supper by

instructing the Corinthians to partake in the knowledge of faith: "discerning the Lord's body" (v. 29). Paul reformed the Lord's supper in Corinth by instructing the Corinthians to partake in brotherly love: "Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another" (v. 33). But in his reformation of the Lord's supper, Paul did not restrict its frequency. Paul's doctrine of the Lord's supper for Corinth (and for the entire New Testament church) was that "as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (v. 26). For Corinth, "as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup" had been every worship service: "when ye come together in the church" (v. 18). The Corinthian church, now reformed by the word of God through the apostle Paul, could continue administering the Lord's supper every worship service: "when ye come together to eat" (v. 33).

### **The Church Fathers**

After the death of the apostles, the church continued to administer the Lord's supper frequently. From the year AD 100 onward, under the leadership of those men whom history calls "the church fathers," the church celebrated the Lord's supper at least once every Lord's day. Several early documents and writings of the church fathers explicitly instruct the church to administer the Lord's supper at least weekly. None of these early writings are inspired, and one can find much

error mixed in them. But these documents do record what the church's practice was immediately after the time of the apostles.

From the *Didache*:<sup>2</sup>

**Chapter 14. Christian Assembly on the Lord's Day.** But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: "In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations."

Ignatius of Antioch encouraged the members of the church that you come together man by man in common through grace, individually, in one faith, and in Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David according to the flesh, being both the Son of man and the Son of God, so that

you obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undivided mind, breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, but [which causes] that we should live forever in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

From Justin Martyr:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.<sup>4</sup>

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2. The *Didache* is an early summary of Christian doctrine in the form of practical instruction to new converts. Its author is anonymous, but it is generally accepted that the *Didache* was written in the first or second century AD. The chapter quoted here is found at <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-rob-erts.html>.

3. *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, chapter 20. Ignatius of Antioch (died ca. AD 108) was a disciple of the apostle John. For his faith Ignatius was thrown to the lions in the Colosseum in Rome, where he died with this confession of heaven on his lips: "May I have joy of the beasts that have been prepared for me."

4. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, Chapter 67: Weekly Worship of the Christians. Justin Martyr (ca. AD 100–165) was one of the earliest church fathers. After being converted from paganism, he wrote defenses of the Christian faith against pagan philosophers. He and several fellow Christians were arrested for their faith,

From Irenaeus, where “gift at the altar” is Irenaeus’ language for the Lord’s supper: “Thus is it, therefore, also His will that we, too, should offer a gift at the altar, frequently and without intermission.”<sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming testimony of the church fathers is that the church after the apostles administered the Lord’s supper at least once every Lord’s day.



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and the Roman prefect threatened them with death. “And all the martyrs said: Do as you wish; for we are Christians, and we do not sacrifice to idols. The Prefect Rusticus read the sentence: Those who do not wish to sacrifice to the gods and to obey the emperor will be scourged and beheaded according to the laws. The holy martyrs glorifying God betook themselves to the customary place, where they were beheaded and consummated their martyrdom confessing their Saviour” (“St. Justin Martyr,” in Herbermann, Charles [ed.], *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7 [New York: Robert Appleton Company], as quoted at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin\\_Martyr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Martyr)).

5. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.18.6. Irenaeus (ca. AD 120 – ca. AD 202) was a Greek bishop most noted for his refutation of the Gnostic heresies.

In these editorials we are investigating the curious Reformed tradition of administering the Lord's supper infrequently. Whereas Reformed churches meet more than one hundred times each year for worship, most of them administer the Lord's supper only four to six times per year. This Reformed tradition is curious because the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is so rich and fulsome. The Reformed doctrine of eating and drinking Christ's body and blood by faith implies that Reformed churches would administer such a nourishing sacrament often. How is it that Reformed churches have settled on such an infrequent—even stingy—administration of the sacrament?

In our investigation thus far, we have examined Jesus' institution of the sacrament, the early church's practice during the time of the apostles, and the early church's practice during the days of the church fathers. The evidence points to frequent administration of the Lord's supper by the early church. Prof. Hanks summarized this period of the church thus:

Because the Lord had commanded the church to celebrate this sacrament in remembrance of him, it was administered every Lord's Day and frequently at every ser-

vice, but without the lengthy liturgical form that we use today.<sup>6</sup>

This time we turn our attention to the church's decline into very infrequent administration of the Lord's supper.

### The Corruption of the Lord's Supper

It did not take long for the doctrine of the Lord's supper to be corrupted. The true doctrine of the Lord's supper is that our Lord made the one necessary sacrifice for the sins of his people by his death on the cross and that he appointed the Lord's supper to direct our faith to his one and only sacrifice. "The Lord's supper testifies to us that we have a full pardon of all sin by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself has once accomplished on the cross" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 80).

But the idea began to arise early on in the church that the Lord's supper was actually a repetition of the cross. According to Prof. Hanks: "The idea developed that the Lord's supper was an unbloody sacrifice that repeated the sacrifice Christ offered on the cross."<sup>7</sup>

The corruption of doctrine led to the corruption of practice. If the Lord's supper were actually a holy repetition of Jesus' dying on the cross, then only worthy people should be

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6. Herman Hanks, *Christ and His Church Through the Ages*, vol. 1, *The Ancient Church: AD 30–590*, 2nd edition (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021), 113.

7. Hanks, *Christ and His Church Through the Ages*, 173.

allowed to witness the reenactment. As one historian explains:

The worship service became sharply divided between the administration of Word and sacrament. The whole church gathered for the ministry of the Word, but before the Lord's supper could begin, three groups were dismissed from the church: the children, the catechumens and those under discipline. The bread and the wine of the Lord's supper were regarded as things so holy that not only must noncommunicant members and visitors be excluded from *eating* and *drinking* the bread and wine, but also from witnessing the breaking of bread and the distribution of both elements. The theological motive for this exclusion was that the bread and wine were increasingly thought of as a propitiatory sacrifice that had to be laid on an altar, and the minister of the Word was seen more and more as a priest officiating at the altar. The high point of the Lord's supper was no longer the communion which believers have with Jesus through faith when they eat and drink; the high point became the moment of consecration, when the common bread and wine became holy bread and wine, that is, when the bread and wine was transubstantiated

into the real body and blood of Christ. The liturgy became more elaborate as censors, chants, set formulas, formal gestures and so on were introduced. The people were taught to be content with the privilege of witnessing what the priest was doing at the altar on their behalf. The focus of blessing in the Lord's supper shifted from the act of personally eating and drinking bread and wine, to witnessing the bread and wine manipulated by priests at the front of the church building. In fact, people began to regard the work of the priests as being the only means of grace so that it became quite unnecessary and irrelevant to personally eat or drink.<sup>8</sup>

The false doctrine of the Lord's supper and the corrupt practice of administering it did not appear everywhere at once. But once apostasy creeps into the church, it steadily creeps its way through the entire church. Already by the fourth century, most people in the church never partook of the Lord's supper, which was by then commonly known as the Eucharist. The church held Eucharist services often; but the church did not administer that sacrament to the people, who were excluded from eating and drinking. Some church leaders encouraged the people to receive the Lord's supper regularly,

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8. P. Aasman, "Celebration of the Lord's Supper—How Often?," *Clarion* 46, nos. 4–5 (1997), reprinted at <https://www.spindleworks.com/library/aasman/lshowmany.htm#1>.

but the overwhelming practice of the church was not to administer the sacrament to the people. For example, John Chrysostom complained that no one came to the table of the Lord.

O custom, O presumption! In vain, therefore, is a daily offering made; in vain we stand before the altar; there is no one who will partake along with us.<sup>9</sup>

As the centuries rolled on, church councils stepped in by requiring a minimum number of times each year that the people should receive the Lord's supper. These rules were enforced by discipline, so that anyone who missed the minimum number of times could be excommunicated. The Council of Agde (AD 506) mandated that church members receive the sacrament at least three times per year—Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. The Fourth Lateran Council (AD 1215) mandated that church members receive the sacrament at least once per year—Easter.

A church historian summarizes this period of decline as follows:

After a period of renewal in the church during the fourth century, communion became less frequent

despite the protests of church councils. By the sixth century it was declared that churches must celebrate Eucharist at least three times per year (Christmas, Easter and Pentecost). By 1215, the minimum requirement was reduced to one (Easter), at which time the cup was withheld from the “laity” by church law. A theologian of that time, James of Vitry, explains the decline in frequency thus: “Since sins have so multiplied in the land, it is permitted that communion be received by the laity only one time per year, that is, at Easter.”

After the period of the early church, the whole celebration of the Lord's supper began to change. It was detached from the preaching of the gospel, and exalted as a mystery fit only for the few. The sacrament was emphasized as a necessary means of grace for adults, while at the same time, it was shrouded under mysterious liturgical actions. As the doctrine of transubstantiation took firm hold in the church, the congregation became afraid to personally participate in the sacrament, and

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9. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Ephesians*, as quoted in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4:17.46, 2:1425. Chrysostom (ca. AD 347–407) was one of the later church fathers. He was famous for his sound, eloquent preaching, for which he received his name “Golden-mouth” (Chryso-stom). Chrysostom referred to the Lord's supper as a “sacrifice,” by which he meant a sacrifice of thanksgiving, not a repetition of Christ's sacrifice. Chrysostom also referred to the Lord's table as the “altar,” by which he meant that place where Christians gather to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God. Nevertheless, the language of “sacrifice” and “altar” was not proper, for it too easily came to mean that place where Christ is sacrificed to God again in a non-bloody repetition of his sacrifice.

consequently, they were satisfied to merely witness the sacrament rather than personally participate in it. Consequently, over a period of 1200 years, the frequency with which one actually participated in the Lord's supper declined from every Sunday (52 times each year) to every Easter (1 time each year), although the church leaders tried at times to prevent this decline.<sup>10</sup>

It is striking how closely the present Reformed tradition of infrequent administration mirrors the Roman Catholic tradition during the Middle Ages. The synods and councils of the Middle Ages had to set a minimum number of administrations—at least three times per year or at least once per year. So also the Reformed tradition is stated in terms of a minimum number of administrations—"at least every two or three months" (Church Order 63). The synods and councils of the Middle Ages set a very low number of administrations—three times or one time. So also the Reformed tradition sets a very low number of administrations—four times or six times. The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is very different from the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Lord's supper! But the Reformed tradition gives the Lord's supper to God's hungry and thirsty people only slightly more frequently than the Roman Catholic Church did in the Middle Ages.

Next time we will look at the recovery of the Lord's supper during the Reformation. To whet our appetites for that recovery, let us hear from John Calvin.

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...It should have been done far differently: 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.<sup>11</sup>

John Calvin is fine, but what really whets our appetites is the Lord. Let us close this article by hearing from him.

This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. (I Cor. 11:25–26)

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10. Aasman, "Celebration of the Lord's Supper—How Often?"

11. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.46, 2:1424.

Thus far in our investigation of the Lord's supper, we have seen that the apostolic and early church administered the Lord's supper frequently—at least once every Lord's day and usually every time they gathered for worship. We have also seen that as the doctrine of the Lord's supper became corrupted in the Middle Ages, the frequency of participating in the Lord's supper declined drastically. Communion had become a nightmare of superstition and bondage. There was no comfort or relief in the Lord's supper, which had been transformed from a spiritually nourishing meal into a cold and fearful duty. By the time of God's great sixteenth-century Reformation of his church, most people in the Roman Catholic Church only partook of the Lord's supper once per year—and that only because they were required to.

This time we turn our attention to the recovery of the Lord's supper in the Reformation. The reformers argued for a frequent administration of the Lord's supper, in keeping with their view of the Lord's supper as the comfort of the gospel for God's people.

### **Martin Luther**

The Reformation of his church that God worked through Martin Luther was profound. Like the former and the latter rains that come down to revive the dry and barren ground, God's gospel of justification by faith alone came down from heaven to revive the dry and barren souls of God's people.

Where the gospel went, the hearts of God's people were made like the floors that are full of wheat and the vats that overflow with wine and oil (Joel 2:23–24). How wonderful was God's reformation of his church! How refreshing to his weary people!

The aspect of the Reformation that concerns us now is the reformation of the Lord's supper. Whereas Rome had corrupted the doctrine of the Lord's supper, Luther restored the true meaning of the Lord's supper. Even though it is probably a reflex for us to lump Luther's doctrine of consubstantiation with Rome's doctrine of transubstantiation, Luther's doctrine of the Lord's supper was as different from Rome's doctrine as day is from night. Rome's doctrine of the sacrament was that the Lord's supper is a re-offering of Christ, made by worthy people as their gift to God. Luther's doctrine of the sacrament was that the Lord's supper is a gracious meal, provided by a merciful savior as the gift of himself to his sinful and hungry people. Luther's doctrine of the Lord's supper was the recovery of the true essence of the Lord's supper: a real spiritual meal in which Christ graciously feeds his empty people with his proper body and blood for their salvation and comfort. A Reformed man is thrilled with the essence of Luther's doctrine of the Lord's supper because Luther's doctrine of the Lord's supper is the gospel.

Luther rejected a great deal of commonly accepted doctrine regarding communion. He was particularly opposed to the celebration of private masses, to the understanding of communion as a repetition of the sacrifice of Calvary, to the notion that there are “merits” in simply attending mass, to the doctrine of transubstantiation, and to the “reservation” of the sacrament—the claim that the body of Christ remains present in the bread even after the celebration of communion is over.<sup>12</sup>

It is also true that Luther made a grievous error in his doctrine of the Lord's supper, which error a Reformed man rightly condemns. Luther taught that Christ's physical body is present in, with, and under the bread in such a way that a partaker eats Christ's body with his earthly mouth and chews Christ's flesh with his earthly teeth. Over against this error of consubstantiation, the Reformed confess that we truly eat Christ's proper and natural body but by the operation of the Holy Spirit through faith, not with the mouth.

In the meantime we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner

of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith. (Belgic Confession 35)

Nevertheless, while thoroughly rejecting Luther's error, which is not insignificant, a Reformed man can still rejoice at and agree with the essence of Luther's doctrine of the Lord's supper. For the essence of Luther's view was not consubstantiation but Christ's gracious gift of himself and his righteousness to his sinful people. Luther's essential doctrine is captured in the Formula of Concord, one of the Lutheran confessions:

We believe, teach, and confess that the whole worthiness of the guests at this heavenly Supper consists alone in the most holy obedience and most perfect merit of Christ. And this we apply to ourselves by true faith, and are rendered certain of the application of this merit, and are confirmed in our minds by the sacrament. But in no way does that worthiness depend upon our virtues, or upon our inward or outward preparations.<sup>13</sup>

Luther's reformation of the doctrine of the Lord's supper led to a reformation of participation in the sacrament. God's people had been terrified to come to the Lord's supper under

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12. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 54.

13. Formula of Concord, Epitome 7:9, as quoted in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, *Modern Christianity: The German Reformation*, rev. ed. (1910; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans

Rome's doctrine. They approached the altar of a holy and an angry Christ only once a year and only because it was their duty. But once Luther's doctrine of the gospel broke through, God's people understood by faith the mercy of their savior and his supper. God's people could finally come to Christ's table to eat and drink their fill of his righteousness. In the Augsburg Confession Luther's weekly celebration of the Lord's supper—still called the “Mass” at that time—is evident.

At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting Luther's method of returning God's people to a frequent celebration of the Lord's supper. The common people in Rome had never been allowed to drink the wine of the supper, nor had they been allowed to touch the bread, which was placed on their tongues by the priest. The people of God had been held in bondage by Rome for so long that they could not all at once start coming to the table regularly. Some of them were

so wounded in their consciences by the terror and burden of the law that they had lain under that they were still terrified of encountering Christ in the sacrament. How heartbreaking that Christ's gracious meal had been transformed by Rome into a chain of guilt and manacles of despair for God's people. Luther was very gentle with them, letting the balm of the gospel do its work of healing their stricken and wounded consciences. Luther was sharp with those men who tried to force the people to the table and instead counseled patience as the people were taught and taught and taught again about their freedom in the gospel.

There were people who had grown up revering the host and the chalice of wine in such a way that it was impossible for them quickly to behave as though these were nothing special, as though they, who were common laypeople, should be able to touch the host with their hands and handle the cup of wine without terror. Luther well remembered his own paralysis at his first Mass. So to force people to handle the cup with their own hands was no different from forbidding them to partake of the cup. In these and other things, freedom must be the only guide. Let people be free to

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Publishing Company, 1979), 674.

14. Augsburg Confession, Apology, Article XXIV, paragraph 1, <https://thebookofconcord.org/apology-of-the-augsburg-confession/article-xxiv/>.

take the cup, but let them not be coerced to do it.<sup>15</sup>

What refreshment and relief the Lord gave to his people when he gave them his gospel and restored to them his supper. How gentle the Lord is with his broken people, and how tenderly he binds up all their wounds.

### John Calvin

John Calvin equaled Martin Luther in his regard for the Lord's supper. In fact, Calvin surpassed Luther; for whereas Luther stumbled in his doctrine of consubstantiation, Calvin saw clearly the believer's true partaking of Christ's body and blood by the spiritual means of faith and by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.<sup>16</sup>

In the Lord's supper the child of God partakes of Jesus by a wonder of God's grace and love. For Calvin, therefore, the Lord's supper was a marvelous banquet in which our compassionate Father lavishes his love upon his children for their assurance and salvation.

God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. And not content with this alone, he has willed, by giving his pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality. To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality [John 6:51].<sup>17</sup>

Historians, reflecting on Calvin's high estimation of the Lord's supper, marvel at his appreciation for the sacrament.

The Reformers, no less than the patristic and medieval theologians, held the Lord's Supper in

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15. Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 282–83.

16. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.17.10, 2:1370.

17. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.1, 2:1359–60.

the highest regard. “No writer has gone beyond Calvin in his estimate of the importance of [the Lord’s Supper] in the corporate life of the church,” insisted the great Calvin scholar, John T. McNeill. Calvin maintained, “There is nothing in heaven or earth of greater value and dignity than the body and blood of our Lord.” Indeed, “nothing (is) more beneficial to the church than this holy sacrament.” The Lord’s Supper played not a secondary, but a central role in the life of Reformed churches throughout most of their history.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the great refreshment that God bestows upon his people through the Lord’s supper, Calvin favored a frequent administration of the sacrament—at least every Lord’s day; if possible, every service. From the earliest days of his ministry, Calvin urged the leaders of the church to administer the Lord’s supper often. For example, in his Articles of 1537, which he submitted to the city council of Geneva, Calvin dismissed the idea of administering the sacrament a mere two or three times per year as incompatible with Jesus’ institution.

It would be well to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be held every

Sunday at least as a rule. When the Church assembles together for the great consolation which the faithful receive and the profit which proceeds from it, in every respect according to the promises which are there presented to our faith, then we are really made participants of the body and the blood of Jesus, of his death, of his life, of his Spirit and of all his benefits. As for the exhortations made there, we are to recognize and magnify by professing his praise the marvellous things graciously vouchsafed by God to us; and finally we are to live as Christians, being joined together in one peace and brotherly unity as members of one and the same body. In fact, it was not instituted by Jesus for making a commemoration two or three times a year, but for a frequent exercise of our faith and charity, of which the congregation of Christians should make use as often as they be assembled, as we find written in Acts ch. 2, that the disciples of our Lord continued in the breaking of bread, which is the ordinance of the Supper.<sup>19</sup>

What Calvin had recommended at the beginning of his ministry, in 1537, he consistently maintained throughout

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18. Terry L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2014), 151.

19. John Calvin, *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva Proposed by the Ministers at the Council January 16, 1537*, as quoted in *Reformed Pavilion* 1, no. 43 (February 3, 2024): 7–8.

his ministry: the Lord's supper was such a precious gift of God to his church that it ought to be administered very frequently. In his final edition of his *Institutes*, published in 1559, Calvin used strong language to condemn the medieval practice of infrequent administration. Calvin saw the frequent administration of the Lord's supper as providing true spiritual refreshment for God's people and as a preventative to Rome's multiplying ceremonies of man's invention.

Now, to get rid of this great pile of ceremonies, the Supper could have been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week.<sup>20</sup>

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 in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's Passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim his goodness; finally, by it to nourish mutual love, and among them-

selves give witness to this love, and discern its bond in the unity of Christ's body. For as often as we partake of the symbol of the Lord's body, as a token given and received, we reciprocally bind ourselves to all the duties of love in order that none of us may permit anything that can harm our brother, or overlook anything that can help him, where necessity demands and ability suffices... [After citing Acts 2:42] Thus it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving.<sup>21</sup>

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...It should have been done far differently: 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. None is indeed to be forcibly compelled, but all are to be urged and aroused; also the inertia of indolent people is to be rebuked. All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.43, 2:1421.

21. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.44, 2:1422.

22. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.46, 2:1424.

Calvin's advice that the Lord's supper be administered frequently was not followed. The leaders of the city of Geneva opposed Calvin's plan on the ground that the people were not ready to receive the Lord's supper frequently. It is questionable whether the city leaders were honestly accommodating the weaknesses of the people or whether they had merely found a convenient reason to oppose Calvin. Geneva would end up expelling Calvin from the city for his Articles of 1537, so it is possible that the city leaders were merely using the people's weakness as a pretext for maintaining the medieval tradition of infrequent participation in the Lord's supper.

Whatever the case, Calvin anticipated the leaders' objection. He proposed a system of rotating the administration of the Lord's supper among the churches of Geneva in such a way that each individual church would administer the Lord's supper only once a month but that those who wished to partake each week would know ahead of time where the Lord's supper was to be administered that particular Sunday. In this way a believer could partake every week, while the churches would accommodate those who were not yet convinced that they may do so.

But because the frailty of the people is still so great, there is danger

that this sacred and so excellent mystery be misunderstood if it be celebrated so often. In view of this, it seemed good to us, while hoping that the people who are still so infirm will be the more strengthened, that use be made of this sacred Supper once a month in one of three places where now preaching takes place, viz., St. Pierre, Riue or St. Gervais, in such a way that once a month it take place at St. Pierre, once at Riue, and once at St. Gervais, and then return in this order, having gone the round. It will be always not for one quarter of the city alone, but for all the Church; and for it a convenient hour will be chosen and announced everywhere on the previous Sunday.<sup>23</sup>

The leaders of Geneva would not have it. Politics prevailed, and a city council was elected that was downright hostile to Calvin. After only two years in its midst, Calvin was unceremoniously banished from the city of Geneva in 1538. Three years later, when the city had fallen into chaos and had again become a prey for the Roman Catholic Church, the city leaders summoned Calvin to return. Against his own desires, but convinced that it was the will of God, Calvin returned to preach and to teach in Geneva. But even then the leaders would only agree

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23. John Calvin, *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva Proposed by the Ministers at the Council January 16, 1537*, as quoted in *Reformed Pavilion* 1, no. 43 (February 3, 2024): 8.

to administer the Lord's supper four times per year.

Later on, in 1541, after his return to Geneva, [Calvin] further gave in to the weakness of human nature and agreed to a celebration four times a year, viz. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and the first Sunday of September.<sup>24</sup>

Geneva and Calvin never came to agree on the frequency of the Lord's supper. Though Calvin preferred weekly administration, taught weekly administration, and proposed weekly administration, the city council of Geneva would only administer the Lord's supper four times a year. Calvin submitted to the decision and suffered it, but he was never in agreement with it. Calvin's position to the end was that the rich spiritual banquet of the Lord's supper, given by the Lord to his church in grace, ought to be administered often to God's hungry and thirsty people. Toward the end of his life, Calvin wrote, "I have taken care to record publicly that our custom is defective, so that those who come after me may be able to correct it the more freely and easily."<sup>25</sup>

### Dutch Reformed Church

God brought the Reformed faith of John Calvin to the Netherlands. The gospel of salvation by grace alone to

the glory of God alone spread like wildfire in the northern part of the lowlands, and God established the Dutch Reformed Church on the foundation of that glorious gospel.

From the beginning the Dutch Reformed Church inclined to an infrequent administration of the Lord's supper. The pattern that had been established in Geneva in the 1530s and 1540s soon became Reformed tradition. By the time the next generation of Reformed ministers had been trained and were preaching in the Netherlands, it was normal to celebrate the Lord's supper only occasionally. It was only a short step from there for the accepted tradition to become a synodical mandate and a Church Order requirement.

The Synod of Dort, 1574, held that the observation [of the Lord's supper] should take place every two months. Following Synods endorsed this position. But the Synod of Dort, 1578, added that the "Kruiskerken," Churches beneath the cross of persecution, which often had to meet secretly, should celebrate the Lord's Supper whenever it was convenient. This was, of course, only a temporary ruling. As soon as persecution ceased the general rule went into effect. The Synod of 's

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24. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2009), 253.

25. Bretschneider, *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXXVIII, i, 213, as quoted at <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1990/lords-supper-how-often>.

Gravenhage, 1586, decided that if circumstances were favorable the Churches should also celebrate the Lord's Supper on Easter Sunday, the day of Pentecost and on Christmas. Until the year 1905 the Church Order provided: "The Lord's Supper shall be observed, as much as possible, once every two months. It will also tend to edification to have it on Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas, where the conditions of the Churches permit such."

The Netherlands Churches [the Dutch Reformed Church] altered this reading in 1905, and our [Christian Reformed] Synod of 1914 adopted this new redaction, so that Article 63 now simply reads: "The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months."<sup>26</sup>

With this, we have arrived at the answer to our question posed in the first editorial in this series. How did it come about that Reformed churches are so infrequent—even stingy—in their administration of the Lord's supper? How can the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper be so rich but the Reformed tradition of infrequent administration be so poor? Infrequent administration of the Lord's supper did not come from the reformers, who promoted as frequent

as possible an administration of the Lord's supper. Rather, the Reformed tradition is a carryover from the city council of Geneva, which only granted the churches four celebrations of the Lord's supper each year.

Next time let us investigate whether the Reformed tradition is consistent with the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper.

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26. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), 264.

**W**e have been investigating the Reformed tradition of administering the Lord's supper infrequently—only four to six times out of over one hundred worship services per year. Thus far we have seen that the practice of the early church was to administer the Lord's supper at least once every Lord's day, that the medieval church eventually reduced the frequency to only once per year, that Martin Luther and John Calvin argued for administering the Lord's supper at least weekly, and that the Dutch Reformed tradition of only four to six administrations per year followed the preference of Geneva's city council but not of John Calvin. This time let us turn our attention to the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper to see what it might imply about the frequency of administration.

### **The Gospel of the Lord's Supper**

The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is one of the richest doctrines of the Reformed faith. The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is every bit as rich as the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is every bit as rich as the Reformed doctrine of God's covenant of grace. The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is every bit as rich as the Reformed doctrine of sovereign election and reprobation. Among all the many bright gems of the Reformed faith, the Reformed doctrine of the

Lord's supper shines as one of the brightest.

If that estimation of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper seems over-the-top, then consider how effusive the Reformed confessions wax in their praise of the supper. The Belgic Confession:

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 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 35)

The Heidelberg Catechism:

The Lord's supper testifies to us that we have a full pardon of all sin by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself has once accomplished on the cross; and that we by the Holy Ghost are ingrafted into Christ, who according to his human nature is now not on earth, but in heaven at the right hand of God his Father, and will there be worshiped by us. (L.D. 30, Q&A 80)

The Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper:

From this institution of the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see that he directs our faith

and trust to his perfect sacrifice (once offered on the cross) as to the only ground and foundation of our salvation, wherein he is become to our hungry and thirsty souls the true meat and drink of life eternal. For by his death he hath taken away the cause of our eternal death and misery, namely, sin, and obtained for us the quickening Spirit, that we by the same (who dwelleth in Christ as in the head, and in us as his members) might have true communion with him, and be made partakers of all his blessings, of life eternal, righteousness, and glory.

The Reformed confessions can hardly contain themselves in extolling this heavenly meal that is the Lord's supper. And no wonder that the Reformed confessions so highly extol the sacrament, for so did our Lord. How simply but profoundly our Lord spoke of nourishing his hungry people: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). How heartily our Lord desired to eat the last supper with his disciples, at which supper he instituted the new supper. "And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). With what blessing our Lord brake and gave the bread

to his bride, and with what thanksgiving he gave her the wine.

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Matt. 26:26–28)

What makes the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper so glorious is that the Lord's supper is the gospel. The Lord's supper says one thing: Jesus Christ crucified. The Lord's supper is the glad tidings of great joy. The Lord's supper is the good news that God has reconciled sinners to himself through his only begotten Son. Both the preaching of the gospel and the Lord's supper are "ordained and appointed for this end, that they may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation" (Lord's Day 25, Q&A 67).

It is exactly because the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is the gospel that the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is the equal of the great Reformed doctrines of justification by faith alone, the unconditional covenant of grace, and sovereign predestination. Justification by faith alone is the gospel, and the Lord's supper is the gospel. The unconditional cov-

enant of grace is the gospel, and the Lord's supper is the gospel. Sovereign predestination is the gospel, and the Lord's supper is the gospel. How rich and how lovely is the Reformed gospel of the Lord's supper!

It is also exactly because the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is the gospel that those Reformed churches that turn the Lord's supper into the law are so cruel. There are churches that go by the name Reformed but that use the Lord's supper to terrorize the consciences of the people. These churches teach that one's worthiness to come to the table of the Lord must be found in oneself. One must pray enough, be mindful enough, prepare enough, obey enough, improve enough, or be good enough to come to the table. The better one is, the more worthy he is to eat and to drink Christ. The worse one is, the less worthy he is to eat and to drink Christ. The preparatory service the week before the Lord's supper becomes a prison, and the Lord's supper becomes a scourge. How cruel! How cruel that men should turn the gospel into the law and life into death! Such men give ashes for beauty, mourning for the oil of joy, and the spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise.

But behold the lovely truth of the Lord's supper. The Lord's supper is the gospel. The Lord's supper teaches us that our worthiness to come to the table is not found in ourselves, in our obedience, in our improvement, in our

goodness. The Lord's supper teaches us that our worthiness to come to the table is entirely the goodness, the obedience, the atonement, the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Our worthiness is not within us but without us. My worthiness is not me but he. The child of God has Christ and all his worth and blessing by faith alone, not by working or obeying or improving. What a lovely gospel! How refreshing to the hungry soul! How comforting to the ungodly sinner!

### What God Does by the Lord's Supper

The fact that the Lord's supper is the gospel means that the Lord's supper is a means of grace by which God saves and blesses his people. The Lord's supper is not an empty meal but a fountain that overflows with comfort and peace. Behold the riches that our gracious savior bestows on his poor people by his supper. Our Lord gave his supper "to seal unto us his promises." The Lord's supper is a pledge "of the good will and grace of God toward us." The supper is "to nourish and strengthen our faith" and has been "joined to the word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which he signifies to us by his word and that which he works inwardly in our hearts, thereby assuring and confirming in us the salvation which he imparts to us." By means of the Lord's supper "God worketh in us by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Belgic Confession 33).

Our Lord Jesus Christ “did ordain and institute the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and support those whom he hath already regenerated and incorporated into his family, which is his church.” By the Lord’s supper Jesus “nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat him, that is to say, when they apply and receive him by faith in the spirit.” Jesus gave the bread and wine “to testify by them unto us, that, as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterwards nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only savior in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.” Our Lord “works in us all that he represents to us by these holy signs.” In the Lord’s supper we eat and drink “the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ...by the spirit through faith” (Belgic Confession 35).

The Holy Ghost confirms faith in our hearts “by the use of the sacraments.” God appointed the Lord’s supper that “he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, that he grants us freely the remission of sin and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.” Both the preaching of the gospel and the Lord’s supper are “ordained and appointed for this end, that they may

direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation.” And “the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross” (Lord’s Day 25).

By the Lord’s supper the Lord “feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life, with his crucified body and shed blood, as assuredly as I receive from the hands of the minister, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, as certain signs of the body and blood of Christ.” By the Lord’s supper we “obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal.” By the Lord’s supper we “become more and more united to his sacred body by the Holy Ghost, who dwells both in Christ and in us” (Lord’s Day 28).

By the Lord’s supper Christ teaches us that “his crucified body and shed blood are the true meat and drink whereby our souls are fed to eternal life.” By “these visible signs and pledges” of the Lord’s supper, Christ assures us “that we are...really partakers of his true body and blood.” By the Lord’s supper Christ assures us “that all his sufferings and obedience are as certainly ours as if we had in our own persons suffered and made satisfaction for our sins to God” (Lord’s Day 29).

“The Lord’s supper testifies to us that we have a full pardon of all sin by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself has once accom-

plished on the cross.” The Lord’s supper testifies to us “that we by the Holy Ghost are ingrafted into Christ, who according to his human nature is now not on earth, but in heaven at the right hand of God his Father” (Lord’s Day 30).

By the Lord’s supper Christ assures us “that, whereas you should otherwise have suffered eternal death, I have given my body to the death of the cross and shed my blood for you.” By the Lord’s supper Christ assures us that “I...as certainly feed and nourish your hungry and thirsty souls with my crucified body and shed blood to everlasting life, as this bread is broken before your eyes, and this cup is given to you, and you eat and drink the same with your mouth in remembrance of me.” By the Lord’s supper Jesus “directs our faith and trust to his perfect sacrifice (once offered on the cross) as to the only ground and foundation of our salvation, wherein he is become to our hungry and thirsty souls the true meat and drink of life eternal” (Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper).

What a wealth of riches for us poor, hungry, thirsty, mourning, lowly, wretched sinners! What a merciful savior is our Lord, who graciously instituted such an abundant spiritual feast for the happiness and refreshment of his poor church!

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 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 35)

### **As Often As Ye Eat This Bread and Drink This Cup**

Our Lord is not stingy or miserly in distributing the meat of his flesh and the drink of his blood to his hungry and thirsty people. Every single time the Lord’s supper is administered, our savior bestows upon us an overflowing abundance of the riches of his grace. “This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me” (I Cor. 11:25). “As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come” (v. 26). “As often as ye eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you shall thereby, as by a sure remembrance and pledge, be admonished and assured of this my hearty love and faithfulness towards you” (Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper).

It is hard for us to fathom how *effectual* the Lord’s supper is as a means of grace. We are so weak, so impotent of heart, so dry of spirit, so doubting, so fearful, so unbelieving, so slow to understand, so sensual, so earthly-minded. But our Lord in pity has spread for us his heavenly table with exactly the elements to meet our

earthly weakness. Are we sensual and earthly-minded? Our Lord gave us bread and wine to speak to our senses. The bread's texture in the hand, the wine's aroma as it passes under the nose, the bread's flavor on the tongue, the wine's blossom in the throat—all so that our senses are overcome with the reality of bread and wine. Are we slow to understand and full of unbelief? Our Lord fills our senses with the reality of bread and wine that we slow-hearts might understand and believe that as real as the bread and wine are, so real are the true flesh and blood of our Lord, given for our salvation. Are we dry of spirit? Our Lord fills our mouths with the sense-arousing bread and merry-making wine that we dusty spirits might be refreshed by faith in the sustaining body and enlivening blood of our savior. Our Lord has given us an effectual supper, by which he accomplishes his gracious purpose of wonderfully comforting our poor, comfortless hearts.

Now, in possession of such a gracious, effectual, generous meal that the Lord has appointed to her, why should the church forego the administration of that wonderful meal? Which church would ever say to God's hungry and thirsty people, "We think that you have had enough Christ to last you for a few months, so we will not be spreading his table for you this week"? Or which child of God would ever say, "Though Christ has appointed a meal of his body and blood for my refreshment,

I can do without his meal for several months"? A Reformed church would not think of foregoing the preaching of the gospel, would it? Week in and week out, service by service, sermon by sermon, even psalm by psalm, a Reformed church feeds the congregation with the food of the gospel that Christ has appointed. If the church is so zealous to feed Christ's sheep in the green pastures of the gospel that the good shepherd has appointed, then why is the church not equally zealous to prepare for the sheep the table that the good shepherd has appointed? The Lord is abundant and generous in his supper. Why should the church even appear to be meager and ungenerous in administering his supper?

The Reformed tradition of administering the Lord's supper infrequently is deeply ingrained in us through long centuries of practice. But the Reformed tradition of infrequent administration is not consistent with the rich Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper. It is easy for the church to become set in her ways and for her tradition to seem to her the best way and even the only way. But let the gloriously rich Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper be the standard, and let Reformed churches adapt their tradition to their doctrine. Christ has given his church a spiritual table; let the table be spread! Christ has given his church a spiritual feast; let her eat and drink her fill! The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper is the

abundant gospel of Jesus Christ. Why should not a Reformed church consider administering the Lord's supper abundantly as well?

In the next article, Lord willing, let us answer some objections to the frequent administration of the Lord's supper.



REFORMED  
— PAVILION —

The Lord's supper is a spiritual feast, a nourishing meal, a means of grace, an ordinance of Christ. The Lord's supper is the gospel that Jesus' body has been broken and his blood shed for us sinners. By the Lord's supper the Lord makes us who are empty full and us who are poor rich. As often as the church partakes of the Lord's supper, she is assured of Christ's hearty love and faithfulness toward her. As often as the church eats and drinks Christ in the supper, Christ by his Spirit strengthens and confirms her faith. These editorials have proposed that the rich Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper calls for a frequent administration of the sacrament and that the Reformed tradition of infrequent administration is inconsistent with the Reformed doctrine of the supper. In this editorial let us consider some objections to the frequent administration of the Lord's supper.

Objection one: Frequent celebration of the Lord's supper could cheapen the Lord's supper by making it routine. Spacing out the celebration of the Lord's supper will keep the Lord's supper special and will help God's people appreciate its value. This is the argument of Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma in their commentary on the Church Order: "In our Christian Reformed Churches, as is the case in the Reformed Churches of Holland, the Lord's Supper is cele-

brated four times a year, or every three months. In our opinion this is a well-timed arrangement. To celebrate the Lord's Supper very frequently might detract somewhat from its sacredness and effectiveness. To celebrate it less frequently, say once or twice a year, would rob the Churches needlessly of a much needed blessing."<sup>27</sup>

Answer: Because the Lord's supper is an ordinance of the Lord, celebrating it very frequently would not at all detract from its sacredness and effectiveness. Christ works by the Lord's supper to refresh his people with his body and blood. Our Lord did not give his church a supper that could become cheapened by frequent use. Rather, our Lord gave his church a supper in which he powerfully works as often as it is used. "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (I Cor. 11:26). The sacredness and effectiveness of the Lord's supper is not strengthened by spacing out its administration because its strength and efficacy comes from Christ.

The sacrament of the Lord's supper is like the preaching of the gospel in this regard. Christ has ordained the preaching of the gospel, and he accomplishes his purpose with it every time the word is preached. We would not reduce the frequency of the Lord's word, as if that would preserve its

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27. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), 265.

effectiveness. Why would we reduce the frequency of the Lord's supper, as if that would preserve its effectiveness?

The Reformed church need not fear that she will become bored or unimpressed with the sacrament by administering it often, for the power of the sacrament is not in the church's receiving but in the Lord's giving. If it were up to us to maintain appreciation and fervency and piety every time the supper were administered, then the Lord's supper could very quickly become mere routine, no matter how frequently or infrequently it were administered. We are so weak, and our flesh is so disinterested in the things of heaven. But the power of the supper is found in our Lord's grace to his helpless people. He comes to us sinners and gives us his righteousness, to us dead and gives us his life, to us hungry and gives us his body for our food, to us thirsty and gives us his blood for our drink, to us who mourn and gives us his wounds for our consolation. And the Lord knows how to bless his people by his sacrament every single time it is administered, even when we have no appreciation or fervency or piety. Indeed, the Lord uses his supper to bestow upon us the appreciation and fervency and piety that we lack. "Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ hath not enjoined to us the use of his sacraments in vain, so he works in us all that he represents to us by these holy signs, though the manner surpasses our understanding

and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Ghost are hidden and incomprehensible" (Belgic Confession 35).

Objection two: The preaching of the gospel is the primary means of grace, and the Lord's supper is a secondary means of grace. God's people already have Christ's body and blood through the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, let there be preaching at every service, but there need not be the Lord's supper at every service.

Answer: It is true that the preaching is the primary means of grace and the Lord's supper is a secondary means of grace. The Holy Ghost *works* faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, not by the sacraments. By the sacraments the Holy Ghost *confirms* faith in our hearts (L.D. 25, Q&A 65). This means that God's people have Christ's body and blood through the preaching of the gospel. If God's people never had the sacraments but only ever had the preaching of the gospel, they would have everything of Jesus Christ and all of his salvation. The preaching does not lack anything that the supper provides.

However, though the preaching does not lack anything, we do. Though there is no problem with the preaching, there is a problem with us. The Lord did not give the Lord's supper to fill the preaching's lack but to fill our lack. The Lord did not give the Lord's supper because of preaching's problem but because of our problem.

Our problem is that our flesh is so full of doubt and fear and unbelief. Our problem is that we are of such little faith. Our problem is that we are so earthly and selfish and cannot and will not fathom the depth of God's heavenly grace to us. And so the Lord tells us and tells us and tells us in the gospel the glad tidings of Jesus Christ. And in his grace to us empty and troubled people, he spreads alongside the preaching a table at which he feeds us and feeds us and feeds us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And he has spread such a feast alongside the preaching not because the preaching needs it but because we do.

In our estimation of how much we need the Lord's supper, then, we do not proceed by comparing the supper as a secondary means of grace to the preaching as the primary means of grace. Rather, we proceed by receiving what our Lord has given us, for he is wiser than us. Our Lord instituted his supper because he has determined that we need the Lord's supper for our comfort. And our Lord did not give his supper as empty window dressing to the preaching of the gospel but as a true sacrament of his body and blood. By the Lord's supper our Lord is pleased graciously to comfort our poor, comfortless souls. When the church estimates how much she needs the Lord's supper, she must not make the preaching the enemy of the supper in order to forego the supper. Rather, Christ's hungry and thirsty church

gratefully receives both the preaching and the supper as her Lord's abundant provision to fill her desperate need.

Objection three: Reformed churches have a long-standing tradition of administering the Lord's supper only four to six times per year. Even if Reformed churches are free to administer the Lord's supper more often, Reformed churches today should hesitate to depart from the old paths of our fathers.

Answer: It is true that a Reformed church values her Reformed traditions. Many Reformed traditions are either based on biblical principles or have proved useful and beneficial to the churches through the years. For that reason a Reformed church cherishes a healthy regard for her traditions, and she should not try to change things merely for change's sake or out of a vain fascination with novelties.

But it is also necessary for a Reformed church to examine her traditions in the light of the scriptures and the confessions. It is possible that some of her traditions are vain. The old paths are not necessarily what our fathers have done for many years. After all, even our fathers could err. "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (Mal. 3:7). Rather, the old paths are God's ordinances of doctrine and worship, as he has revealed those ordinances in his word. Therefore, the test of whether something is truly an old path is not

whether that thing is a long-standing Reformed tradition. Rather, the test of whether something is truly an old path is whether that thing is an ordinance of God's word. "The old paths, where is the good way" are known by "the sound of the trumpet," which is "the word of the LORD" (Jer. 6:10, 16–17).

Therefore, a Reformed church is always reforming—not in the sense of always changing but in the sense of examining whether "all things are managed according to the pure word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only head of the church" (Belgic Confession 29). It is healthy for a Reformed church to examine her traditions in the light of her doctrine—that is, in the light of God's word—in order either to keep her traditions or to correct them accordingly.

In the case of administering the Lord's supper, the Reformed confessions overflow in describing the abundance that God provides his hungry and thirsty people through the supper. The Reformed tradition of withholding that abundant meal from God's people except for a handful of times each year is not consistent with the doctrine. Correcting that tradition is not a matter of novelty but is a matter of returning to the old paths by bringing the administration more in line with the doctrine.

Objection four: The church has the freedom to administer the Lord's supper frequently or infrequently. A

church is not better if she administers the Lord's supper more often or worse if she administers the supper less often. Why trouble the church with the issue of frequency if it is a matter of freedom anyway?

Answer: It is true that the church is free to administer the Lord's supper frequently or infrequently and is under no compulsion in this matter. In light of the fact that our Lord and his apostles did not ordain how often to administer the Lord's supper, the matter of frequency is *adiaphora* and can be decided church by church and circumstance by circumstance. The church that is hiding and fleeing due to persecution does not sin by foregoing the administration of the Lord's supper for a time. The church that is at peace does not sin by administering the Lord's supper at every service. The church is entirely free in the matter of how frequently she administers the sacrament.

However, let the church remember that inconsistent traditions can bind the church's freedom every bit as much as a false law. The church's sense of what is right and wrong is often held captive to an inconsistent tradition. How easy it is for the church to say, "But that's not how we do it" or "But that's not how we've always done it," even when the way she does it is inconsistent with her confession. Any attempt to bring the tradition in line with the doctrine can easily be seen as troubling the church. In such

a case the church, though boasting of her freedom, is not truly free to follow the word but binds herself under her tradition.

The question for the church in matters of adiaphora is what is useful and beneficial. “Useful and beneficial” is the language of the Belgic Confession in article 32.

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only master, hath instituted.

How wonderful and how delightful it is for the church to be guided by what is “useful and beneficial” in those things that are adiaphora. For “useful and beneficial” is the language of love. Love seeks out what is useful for the sheep. Love embraces what is beneficial for the sheep. In all things the rulers rule with affection and mercy and tender loving-kindness, remembering that these sheep over whom they rule are the sheep of Christ. Love does not yank the sheep this way and that according to the rulers’ changeable will, decreeing first this thing and then that thing with no explanation or with explanations that are a farce. Such leaders are cruel men, lords in God’s heritage, and utterly loveless.

Rather, the ruler operates out of love for the sheep of the Good Shepherd. His love includes instructing the sheep through patient explanations why the “institutions and ordinances” that the rulers have established are “useful and beneficial” to the sheep. (Oh, how utterly empty is every ruler, and how utterly lovely is our Good Shepherd!)

Guided by love for the sheep, the ruler applies the principles of the word of God to every question of adiaphora in order to lead them into what is useful and beneficial. Which Bible version shall the church use? There is no law, but it is useful and beneficial for the sheep that they use the King James Version as the most faithful translation. Which psalmbook shall the church sing? There is no law, but it is useful and beneficial for the sheep that they sing the Scottish Metrical Version as the most faithful singable translation. How many times shall the church assemble for worship on the Lord’s day? There is no law, but it is useful and beneficial for the sheep that they assemble as many times as preparation and earthly infirmities will allow. And in all of this, the law of love means that the rulers will not only apply principles but teach them so that the church understands what has been decided.

When it comes to the administration of the Lord’s supper, what is useful and beneficial for the sheep of Christ? Why, it is useful and beneficial for them to eat and drink Christ! And

it is useful and beneficial for them to eat and drink Christ often. The church is free to administer the sacrament frequently or infrequently. But what is of most use and benefit to Christ's sheep? Such a question does not trouble the church but profits her.

Objection five: Our Reformed confessions and Church Order only address the frequency of administering the Lord's supper in Church Order 63, where an infrequent administration is implied: "at least every two or three months." If the Reformed confessions and Church Order imply an infrequent administration in the one and only place that they address frequency, should not Reformed churches be satisfied with this?

Answer: The Church Order does imply an infrequent administration, and most Reformed churches administer the supper according to the Church Order's implication: four or six times per year. And although the Church Order allows for far greater frequency by saying "at least," the objection is still valid that the Church Order at least implies an infrequent administration of the Lord's supper.

However, it is not correct to say that the Reformed confessions do not address the frequency of the Lord's supper. In fact, the Reformed confessions recommend a *frequent* administration of the sacrament. While the confessions do not specify *how* frequent, they do imply that the Lord's supper should be administered often.

The Belgic Confession says that we should be "keeping up among us" the administration of the Lord's supper.

We receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our savior with thanksgiving, making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion. (Belgic Confession 35).

"Keeping up among us" is not the language of infrequency but of frequency. Especially when one considers the other things that are mentioned: the assembly of the people of God and confession of our faith. Those things happen every Lord's day, which certainly implies that "keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our savior with thanksgiving" normally would also be happening every Lord's day.

The strongest confessional statement about the frequency of administering the Lord's supper is undoubtedly found in the Canons of Dordt 3–4.17:

For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is his work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen.

This article has been so badly twisted by false prophets that God's people can hardly quote the article anymore without having to make a vigorous defense against men's corruption of the article. Without entering into a lengthy explanation of the article now, let this brief summary suffice.<sup>28</sup> Canons 3–4.17 is not teaching that the more readily a Christian obeys God's law, the more God will bless him. That is the lazy and treacherous explanation given by the foes of the gospel. Rather, Canons 3–4.17 is teaching that God confers grace upon his people through the means of the gospel that he has appointed: the means of the preaching of the gospel, the means of the administration of the sacraments, and the means of the exercise of Christian discipline. The article warns the church not to abandon these means of grace, as the church is always tempted to do. The article exhorts the church instead to exercise these means of grace. And the article reminds the church of the connection that God himself has made between the administration of the means of grace and God's conferring of his grace: "the more readily we perform our duty [of administering the means of grace], the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us." And the explanation for God's blessing's attending the administration of the means of grace is not to be

found in the church's faithfulness to God but in God's faithfulness to his church. "To whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen."

To put that in terms of the administration of the Lord's supper, the more the church administers the Lord's supper, the more Christ's sheep receive Christ's blessing through Christ's supper. And the flock's blessing is not due to the church's administration but to the grace of our Lord. Our Lord uses the means of his supper to bestow "blessing" and "saving fruit" upon his people, that his work may be "advanced." The sacrament is not in vain but has "saving...efficacy" by the operation of the Holy Ghost. The crystal clear implication of the article—so clear that it is almost an explicit requirement—is that the church administer the Lord's supper often: "readily" and even "more" readily.

Whatever infrequency of administering the Lord's supper the Church Order might imply, the Reformed confessions recommend a frequent administration.

Next time let us address some practical considerations for how to administer the Lord's supper frequently.

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28. For an explanation of the article and a defense of its truth, see Andrew Lanning, "Canons 3–4.17: 'Grace is Conferred by Means of Admonitions,'" *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 8–18; "More on Canons 3–4.17: 'Grace is Conferred by Means of Admonitions,'" *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5. (October 2022): 8–16.

In these editorials we have been examining the Reformed tradition of administering the Lord's supper infrequently—only four to six times out of more than one hundred services each year. We have traced the history of this practice to the city council in Geneva at the time of the Reformation, where we also heard John Calvin's objections to the council's practice. We have seen that the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's supper implies a frequent administration of the sacrament, for our Lord graciously and abundantly nourishes his church every time that the sacrament is administered. The Spirit uses the sacrament to strengthen his people's faith in the glad tidings of the gospel that the body and blood of Christ was truly given for them—as truly as they see with their eyes, hold with their hands, and eat with their mouths the bread and wine of the Lord's supper. Such an abundant feast was not meant to be kept in the cupboard but to be spread on the table. In the last installment we considered and answered some objections to a frequent administration of the Lord's supper. This time let us turn to some practical matters that would have to be addressed if a Reformed church were consider increasing its frequency of administering the sacrament.

### How Frequent Is Frequent?

If four to six administrations of the Lord's supper per year is considered infrequent, how many would be considered frequent? Twelve administra-

tions per year—once per month? Over fifty administrations per year—once per week? Over one hundred administrations per year—every service?

Different churches might come to different conclusions about how frequent is frequent, but there are a few helpful guides that the church can consider. First, there is the nature of the sacrament. The Lord's supper is Christ's instrument by which he works in his church. The Lord's supper is Christ's sign and Christ's seal to his people that they are righteous before God because of what Christ has done. The Lord by his Spirit operates through his supper "as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup" (1 Cor. 11:26). Therefore, it would be impossible to administer the sacrament too frequently. Even if the church would administer the sacrament at every single service, she could never wear out the sacrament, rob its power, or make it vain. The church in her folly can certainly corrupt the sacrament, as many have done. However, any corruption of the sacrament is not due to a frequent administration but to the vanity of man. As far as the sacrament itself goes, it can sustain the most frequent use possible.

Second, there is the analogy to the other elements of worship. The elements of worship are the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, publicly calling upon the name of the Lord in prayer and song, and offerings. When deciding how

frequently to administer the Lord's supper, a congregation could note how frequently she administers the other elements of worship. A Reformed congregation will find that she administers all the other elements of worship every time she meets. At every service a Reformed church preaches, prays, sings, and receives offerings. Why could not the Lord's supper, as an element of worship, be administered just as frequently as the rest? A Reformed church would not fail to pass the collection plate at a worship service; could she not also pass the communion plate at every service? A Reformed church would not fail to preach the gospel of Jesus' body and blood at every service; could she not also give the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood at every service? Because the Lord's supper is an element of worship, the frequency of the other elements of worship can illuminate the frequency of administering the Lord's supper.

Third, there is the example of history. We are not the first generation that has had to ask the question of how frequently to administer the Lord's supper. These editorials have already traced some of that history, so we will not repeat everything here. But the church in her years of spiritual strength administered the Lord's supper very frequently. The early church apparently administered the Lord's supper at every service. Martin Luther and John Calvin both urged the administration at least once every

Lord's day. The church today can look to her history, in the light of biblical principles, for illumination as she decides how often to administer the Lord's supper.

The church's answer to the question of frequency does not come from any specific commandment of the law. Our Lord, whose supper it is, gave no commandment regarding frequency. Let no one—present company included—bind the church to a certain frequency, as if it were the law of God. The church must certainly administer the Lord's supper, for our Lord ordained that she do so—"This do" (I Cor. 11:24–25); but the Lord did not specify how often she was to administer the Lord's supper.

The only law in the matter of frequency is the law of love. It is not a question of how often the church *must* administer the sacrament but of how often it would be *useful and beneficial* for the church to have the sacrament. "It is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church" (Belgic Confession 32). It is not a question of how often would be *enough* to keep the law but of how often would be *edifying* for the church. "Every church shall administer the Lord's supper in such a manner as it shall judge most conducive to edification" (Church Order 62).

Guided by the law of love, different churches might come to different

conclusions about how frequent is frequent. One church might conclude that its members feel uneasy and pressured to partake more than they are used to; the consistory in love could continue an infrequent administration while it teaches and instructs the members, bringing the church along together to the point that they could administer the Lord's supper more frequently. Another church might conclude that its members are hungry for a more frequent administration of the Lord's supper and could administer it at every service almost immediately. Another church might conclude that its members are ready for a more frequent administration but that changing all at once would be too much of a distracting novelty; the consistory in love could increase the frequency over time. Whatever the church decides in the matter of frequency, it decides in mutual love for the members—love that the apostle enjoins when he calls the church to tarry for one another. “Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another” (I Cor. 11:33).

The conviction of the undersigned is that the more the church studies the matter of how frequently to administer the sacrament of the Lord's supper, the more she will desire to administer the sacrament as frequently as possible. Christ overflows with generosity to his church, having given his body and blood for her redemption and giving his supper for her refreshment. The

church thus redeemed and refreshed will overflow with generosity among the members, “keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our savior with thanksgiving” (Belgic Confession 35). And the nature of the sacrament, the analogy of the other elements, and the example of history will give the church confidence to spread the table before God's people often.

### **The Simplicity of the Lord's Supper**

The Lord's supper is an infinitely rich meal, being the believer's participation in the body and blood of Christ. But the Lord's supper is a very simple meal to administer. There is nothing complicated about it, and there need be nothing lengthy about it. Bread and wine can be broken and distributed in the space of a few minutes. The words of institution can be spoken in a few seconds. Eating and drinking can be completed almost at once. Without rushing in the slightest, and giving the holy supper its due time, a congregation could complete the simple administration of the Lord's supper very briefly. How long does it take a particular congregation to pass the offering plates twice during a service? In the space of roughly that same time, the communion plates of bread and wine could be passed. Add a little extra time for Jesus' brief words of institution, the reading of an appropriate passage from scripture or the confessions, and brief prayers; and the entire sacrament could be completed

in a short time. The brevity of the communion service would not at all diminish from its meaning or effectiveness, for the Lord gave his church a very simple supper.

As Reformed churches currently administer the Lord's supper, at least a full thirty minutes is required. Much of this time is taken up by the reading of the Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's supper form is lovely, laying out the refreshing gospel of the sacrament. The Lord's supper form is one of the confessional treasures of the Reformed faith. But the Lord's supper form is lengthy, requiring that a significant portion of the worship service be devoted to it. This is no problem when the Lord's supper is administered infrequently. Once every three months the congregation squeezes the psalms, the prayers, and the sermon into less time in order to leave half an hour for the Lord's supper. But if a congregation were to administer the Lord's supper frequently, the reading of the same lengthy form every time would be so impractical as to be almost impossible.

The Lord's supper form is not essential to the administration of the Lord's supper, and the supper could be rightly and properly administered without it. There are certain things that are essential to the Lord's supper. The doctrine of the Lord's supper is essential. The ceremonies that Christ has prescribed in his word are essential. The spiritual nature of the sup-

per, free from superstition, is essential. The administration of the sacrament in the public worship of God's people, where there are sermons and prayers, is essential. All these essential things are explained and expounded by the form. Therefore, the church ought to read the form regularly in her administration of the Lord's supper. However, while the form explains and expounds the sacrament, the form is not the sacrament. If the church would administer the sacrament very frequently, she could still have all those essential aspects of the Lord's supper even if she did not read the form every time.

What about the fact that the Church Order requires that the form be read every time the supper is administered?

Every church shall administer the Lord's supper in such a manner as it shall judge most conducive to edification; provided, however, that the outward ceremonies as prescribed in God's word be not changed, and all superstition be avoided, and that at the conclusion of the sermon and the usual prayers the form for the administration of the Lord's supper, together with the prayer for that purpose, shall be read. (Church Order 62)

Church Order 62 ensures that the essential matters of the Lord's supper be observed: the prescribed ceremonies, spirituality free from supersti-

tion, the sermons and prayers, and the doctrine of the sacrament. However, the Church Order is working from the assumption that the Lord's supper will only be administered infrequently—four to six times per year. “The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months” (Church Order 63). Proceeding from the assumption of an infrequent administration, the Church Order requires certain things in the life of the church that would be impossible with a frequent administration. For example, the Church Order attaches some of the consistory's periodic work to the celebration of the Lord's supper, as a convenient time to make sure that these tasks are not forgotten. The elders are required to conduct family visiting “both before and after the Lord's supper, as time and circumstances may demand” (Church Order 23). Such a requirement would become so impractical as to be impossible with a frequent celebration of the Lord's supper. Or again, the members of the council are required “before the celebration of the Lord's supper [to] exercise Christian censure among themselves” (Church Order 81). Such a requirement for *censura morum* would likewise be so impractical as to be impossible with a frequent celebration of the Lord's supper. So also, when the Church Order requires that the form be read at every administration of the Lord's supper, it is assuming an infrequent administration of the supper. If the supper would ever be adminis-

tered frequently, the Church Order's requirement to read the form every time would become so impractical as to be an impediment to edification.

How might a Reformed church administer the Lord's supper frequently without using the beautiful but lengthy form every time, while still retaining the use of the form regularly? A church might decide to read the form four to six times a year, following the Church Order's guideline of administering the Lord's Supper “at least every two or three months.” Those celebrations of the Lord's supper would take the full thirty minutes that the church is currently used to. In this way the church would not diminish her use of the form but would use it as often as she currently does.

During all the other services in which the church administers the Lord's supper, she could use a much briefer liturgy that would still incorporate all the essential matters that belong to the sacrament. For example, after the sermon is finished, the supper could be administered as follows:

- Reading of a scripture passage or confessional statement regarding the doctrine of the Lord's supper (Lord's Day 28, Belgic Confession 35, a portion of the Lord's supper form, or some similar confessional statement; or a portion of Isa. 53, John 6, I Cor. 11, or some similar passage)
- Prayer

- Distribution of elements and partaking
- Psalm
- Doxology
- Benediction

What about preparatory and applicatory sermons? Administering the Lord's supper frequently would not allow for a dedicated preparatory sermon before every administration and a dedicated applicatory sermon after every administration. However, preparatory and applicatory sermons are not required by the Church Order but are simply part of the Reformed tradition that surrounds the Lord's supper. When one remembers that the preaching of every sermon is the gospel, then every sermon can be viewed as both preparatory and applicatory.

### Conclusion

As we conclude this series of editorials on the Lord's supper, let us return to where we began.

The Lord's supper is a most nourishing and satisfying meal for God's people. In the Lord's supper God feeds his hungry and thirsty people with Jesus Christ. In the Lord's supper God nourishes his people unto everlasting life by Jesus' body and blood. The Lord's supper is the gospel, and the gospel satisfies God's people and makes them happy. "The Lord's Supper testifies to us that we have

a full pardon of all sin by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself has once accomplished on the cross" (L.D. 30, Q&A 80).

The Lord's supper is a most nourishing and satisfying meal for God's people, just as Jesus intended it to be. Our Lord knows our emptiness, our weakness, our sin, our unbelief, our burdens, our wretchedness. Rather than casting us away from himself because of our slow hearts and dim understanding and wretched doubting, the Lord comes near to us time and again and preaches and preaches and preaches the gospel to us so that we might always hear of his grace to us sinners. And adding mercy to mercy, the Lord gives us a meal time and again by which he shows and shows and shows the gospel to us so that we might always see his grace to us sinners. "Christ promised that he will as certainly feed and nourish believers with his body and blood, as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup" (L.D. 28, Q&A 77).<sup>29</sup>

In light of Christ's overflowing bounty to his church in his supper, it would be appropriate for Reformed churches to reconsider their tradition of so infrequently administering the Lord's supper. In light of Christ's gift of

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29. Andrew Lanning, "As Often As Ye Eat This Bread and Drink This Cup (1)," *Reformed Pavilion* 2, no. 46 (February 22, 2025): 4.

such a rich spiritual table, it would be profitable and edifying for Reformed churches to consider administering that supper often.

As often as ye eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you shall thereby, as by a sure remembrance and pledge, be admonished and assured of this my hearty love and faithfulness towards you. (Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper)



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