

Weekly Availability of Communion in the Lutheran Church

The Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day

Q: Why would the church desire to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the Divine Service each Sunday?

A: Since in the Lord's Supper we receive our Lord Jesus' very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins it is a great gift to us and is central to the Divine Service. The holy Christian church throughout the ages has identified the Lord's Day (Sunday) with the Lord's Supper. As such the Lord's Supper was never viewed as an occasional extra or as somehow not as important as the other means of grace (Word, Absolution, Holy Baptism). In the Supper the Church, the Bride of Christ, sees herself clearly as the Body of Christ, being "one flesh" with Christ Jesus -- a great mystery indeed (Ephesians 5). The Supper is our Lord's last will and testament where we receive His life-giving mercy.

Also, since each day and each week we are in need of the Lord's forgiveness and strength, we are therefore in need of the Lord's Supper much in every way. Today, our increasingly less and less Christianly influenced culture threatens our faith daily, along with the help of Satan and our own sinful desires (old Adam). In the Christian Questions and Answers in the Small Catechism Luther writes the following, admonishing us to frequently receive the gift of Communion: "What should admonish and incite a Christian to receive the sacrament frequently? In respect to God, both the command and the promise of Christ the Lord should move him, and in respect to himself, the trouble that lies heavy on him, on account of which such command, encouragement, and promise are given."

Q: As Lutherans, what do we officially teach in our confessional writings regarding the frequency of the Lord's Supper's celebration?

A: For example, in the Apology [Defense] of the Augsburg Confession (Article XXIV,1), it is said of the Mass, meaning the Divine Service of Holy Communion: "In the beginning we must make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are performed 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. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, such as the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things."

Q: As specifically Missouri Synod Lutherans, has anything been said addressing this subject?

A: Yes, the 1995 Convention of the LCMS passed the following resolution: To Encourage Every Sunday Communion, RESOLUTION 2-08A , Overture 2-51 (CW, pp.149-150): Whereas, the opportunity to receive the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day was a reality cherished by Luther and set forth clearly with high esteem by our Lutheran Confessions (Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession and of the Apology); and Whereas, our synod's 1983 CTCR document on the Lord's Supper (p.28) and our Synod's 1986 [1991] translation of Luther's Catechism both remind us that the Scriptures place the Lord's Supper at the center of worship ([Acts 2:42](#); [20:7](#); [1 Cor. 11:20, 23](#)), and not as an appendage or an occasional extra; therefore be it RESOLVED, That The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in convention encourage its pastors and congregations to study the scriptural, confessional, and historical witness to every Sunday communion with a view toward recovering the opportunity for receiving the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day. Action: Adopted.

Q: Would this mean that every communicant must receive the Sacrament every Sunday?

A: No. Absolutely not. This is about the *availability* of the Lord's Supper, not setting rules about how often someone should receive it. We are very staunch about not setting laws about how often it must be received. But for us to have the freedom to receive it often based on need, conscience, it needs to be available as Lutherans and the church catholic have known it in better times. So while the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (Defense) make it clear that Lutheran Churches celebrate the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day and on festival days, the preface to the *Small Catechism* also makes it clear we make no laws about how often someone should receive this gift personally. We take our vows of confessional subscription very seriously on both aspects of communion frequency. We are recovering lost treasures.

Q: How should I react if I see someone not going to the Lord's Supper now and then?

A: Put the best construction on it and think of it in the kindest way as the eighth commandment bids us do. The offering of the Lord's Supper every Sunday does not and should not imply that we must attend every time. Take the time to prepare regularly. When we may have grown up with an infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper it is natural to think we should attend every time it is offered. But even that can be mechanical. But when it is offered every Sunday we can regain a more "organic" rather than "mechanical" view between how often we commune vs. how often it is offered. So there is a tremendous opportunity to grow in our faith and understanding when we can have it available every Sunday service and yet in freedom prepare. We should not act on any real or perceived social pressure in this regard. Resist

that temptation. The Gospel is forced on no one – no conversion by the sword – but it is always preached and offered. So likewise with this sacramental form of the saving Gospel, the Lord's Supper, it is offered but forced on no one. This is our view with private confession and absolution as well – it is forced on no one but it is available for those who are troubled by sins they have a hard time believing are forgiven.

Q: Will weekly Communion cause the Sacrament to mean less?

A: On the contrary, the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper will indicate and confess our high esteem and desire for the gift of our Lord's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins which is received in this gift. The Lord's Supper is a central way our faith is sustained in Christ. The Lord's Supper is no less important than the other gospel gifts by which our faith is sustained. We have weekly sermons, pray the Lord's Prayer regularly, confess the Creed, and so forth. The meaning of the Lord's Supper does not come from us, but from Christ and His Word. Contrite sinners cannot have too much of the Gospel.

It acknowledges the Lord's holy presence with us and that gathered around Him, in heaven and on earth, are "angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven." That's something to rejoice in. Saying, "I love you" more often in a marriage doesn't cause it to mean less. This is about feeding faith and building up the Body of Christ. Consider what our Lutheran Confessions say about the "mass" (Divine Service with Holy Communion). In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, we subscribe to the following:

At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we [Lutherans] 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. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things.
[The Book of Concord]

Also see: [Acts 2:42](#); [Acts 20:7](#); [Revelation 3:20](#); [John 6:52-57](#); [1 Cor. 11:23-26](#)

Q: Isn't weekly Communion just a Roman Catholic or "high church" practice? How can Lutherans have weekly Communion and still be "good" Lutherans?

A: It is true that Roman Catholics have Holy Communion available to them (at least) each Sunday, in fact some have it daily. However, many others celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly as well. For most of Christian history the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper was the universal practice of the Church, and was regarded as a minimum. They saw a balance in both Word and Sacrament in the Divine Service. Weekly Communion is not a UNIQUELY Roman Catholic practice. This is important to note. The weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper is not where we disagree with Rome. The propitiatory sacrifice of Christ's body and blood in the Mass is the chief point of contention between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. There are also other issues where Rome holds to errors that divide us on the Lord's Supper.

The true test of what is genuinely Lutheran is not what we knew when we grew up or what our confirmation pastor told us or even what our home congregation does, but the real measure is the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. We pledge ourselves to the Scriptures and the Confessions. We also can have great guidance from church history and the writings of those

orthodox Christians who have gone before us. Clearly, as seen above, our Confessions clearly teach the weekly availability of the Lord's Supper (as well as festival days). It actually is very Lutheran to make the Lord's Supper available each Sunday. It is something that we lost for quite some time and are gradually recovering. Perhaps you can help in this recovery as well? ...

Q: I'm not used to weekly communion availability, as I grew up with it once per month or even four times a year. How do I get more comfortable with this idea? I know it is not new to Lutherans in history, but for me, personally, it is new. How can I get beyond emotional reaction?

A: Simply give it some time. Revamping and maturing our expectations and routine takes time. We have the Christian Questions and Answers from Luther in the Small Catechism to help communicants prepare for the sacrament. Be open to learn, to study, and to grow in your faith. While it is new to you it is not new to Lutherans or Christians before the Reformation. It is a restoration of something once known to Lutherans. In the Small Catechism preface Luther only mentioned four times a year as a minimum for reception of the Lord's Supper, not as a standard for how often it should be made available.

WHY DID COMMUNION CELEBRATIONS GET DOWN AS LOW AS FOUR TIMES A YEAR OR ONCE PER MONTH IN MANY PLACES AMONG SOME LUTHERANS?

While the Lutheran Confessions, the Book of Concord, are quite clear that Lutherans celebrate (offer) the Lord's Supper every Sunday (Lord's Day) and on festival (feast) days, and that we make no laws about making someone receive this gift, we may well wonder why some of us may remember Lutherans celebrating the Lord's

Supper infrequently – such as once per month or even four times a year. Why have some grown up with the idea that this is what Lutherans intended or saw as ideal, when such isn't really the case? *History teaches us better who we are.*

WAR, PIETISM, AND RATIONALISM

In the aftermath of the Thirty Years War, a partly religious war in Europe from 1618-1648, teaching suffered and some pastors were conscripted into military service. Catechesis and liturgical practice suffered much during this time. In reaction to a high concern for teaching and practice prior to and during the Thirty Years War, Pietism arose as a movement which internalized religion and emphasized feelings and our works. Soon after this rationalism arose during the "Enlightenment" which sought to put human reason, philosophy and science above faith or theology. This, too, affecting church teaching and liturgical/sacramental practice. A.B. Bougher writes:

"... pietism stressed inward religion. Later on, it became opposed to the "outward" or "formal" worship. Its effects are still felt today. Both the preached Word and the administered sacrament were put in subjection to one's "heart" and Christianity became for many Lutherans a sentimentalized religion with the *right emotions* being more important than the right belief, or the proper hearing of God's Word and the receiving of His sacraments. With this attitude, a person through his or her own belief and religiosity made himself or herself right and didn't need God's means of forgiveness in the sacrament. Pietism became, in fact, a new "works-righteousness" which Luther had tried to get rid of two centuries earlier." [Pietism eliminated many practices – frequent

communion, confession & absolution, chant, sign of the cross, historic vestments]. ...

EXTERNAL NON-LUTHERAN INFLUENCES AND ANTI-"CATHOLIC" BIAS IN AMERICA

Rev. Dr. C.F.W. Walther, first president of the Missouri Synod, wrote in an essay, indicating the challenge that Lutherans often faced in being accused of being "too catholic":

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them. The Roman anti-christendom enslaves poor consciences by imposing human ordinances on them with the command: "You must keep such and such a thing!"; the sects enslave consciences by forbidding and branding as sin what God has left free. Unfortunately, also many of our Lutheran Christians are still without a true understanding of their liberty. This is demonstrated by their aversion to ceremonies. It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the difference between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when a person sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American denominations just so they won't accuse us of being Roman Catholic! Indeed! ...

It may give us pause to remember what Martin Luther actually wrote the "four times a year issue": *Whoever does not seek or desire the Sacrament at least some four times a year, it is to be feared that he despises the Sacrament and is no Christian, just as he is no Christian who does not believe or hear the Gospel... (Sm. Cat.).*

This article is from Gloria Christi Lutheran Church (LCMS), 1322 31st Avenue, Greeley, Colorado 80634 (970) 353-2554, gloriachristi@gloriachristi.com