

The Importance of Weekly Communion

In Remembrance of Me, Week 3

I. The New Testament _____ was _____

There is no *command* in the New Testament that communion be celebrated weekly. Yet a weekly observance (at least) is *implied*, and we should take this as a pattern for our churches:

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, **to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. **They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,** ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.



Acts 20:7-12

⁷ **On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.** Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. ⁹ Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" ¹¹ **Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate.** After talking until daylight, he left. ¹² The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

To "break bread" does not necessarily mean communion, because it can also be language for just eating and sharing a meal (see Luke 9:16). Yet Acts is the sequel to Luke, and it seems significant that Luke does use the language of breaking bread in the Last Supper and in the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30, 35) which is reminiscent of the Last Supper. It is thus likely that the language in Acts of "breaking bread" includes the practice of the Lord's Supper, along with a fuller meal.

Additionally, "on the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7) seems to have been a special weekly regular assembly of the Christians to worship, because Paul gives instructions for his financial collection for the Jewish churches to be taken up "on the first day of the week" (1 Cor 16.1-2; see also Rev 1:10).

Paul also implies that the Lord's Supper took place every time the Corinthian church met:

1 Corinthians 11:20

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, **for your meetings** do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that **when you come together as a church**, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰ So then, **when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,** ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers.

II. The Early Church _____

Didache 14.1 (see also 9.1-10.7) (late 1st century or early 2nd century)

On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks (*eucharist*), having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure.

Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 65-67 (lived 110-165)

But we, after we have thus washed him who has been convinced and has assented to our teaching, bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled, in order that we may offer hearty prayers in common for ourselves and for the baptized [illuminated] person, and for all others in every place, that we may be counted worthy, now that we have learned the truth, by our works also to be found good citizens and keepers of the commandments, so that we may be saved with an everlasting salvation. Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss.

There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.



And this food is called among us *Ευχαριστια* [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body;" and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, "This is My blood;" and gave it to them alone. Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. **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.** And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. **But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.** For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome 22 (around the year 215)

On the first day of the week the bishop, if possible, shall deliver the oblation [what is offered to God] to all the people with his own hand, while the deacons break the bread. When the deacon brings it to the elder, the deacon shall present his platter, and the elder shall take it himself and distribute it to the people by his own hand. Other days they will receive the oblation according to the command of the bishop.

Summary Statements on the Church's Practice

“The Lord’s Supper was observed every Sunday as the climax of the church’s worship. It was administered by the pastor or elders of each local church, associated with the proclamation of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and accompanied by prayers of thanksgiving, confession of sins, and offerings of material goods for those in need” (Michael J. Svigel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith*, 156).

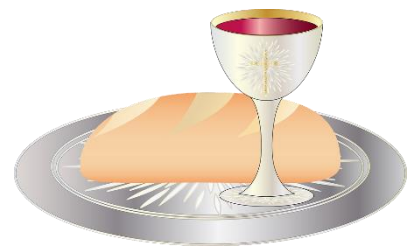
“For the next 1,500 years there is no record of Sunday gatherings of Christians that did not include the celebration of the Lord’s Table” (“‘Remembrance’ and Worship: The Mandate and the Means,” Timothy J. Ralston, *Reformation and Revival* 9.3 [2000, 77-89]).

III. Into the Medieval Period, Communion Continued to be Celebrated (at least) _____, Though _____ Led to _____

- “In the Eastern churches, the Lord’s Supper was primarily a weekly celebration. In the Western churches, it became a daily occurrence” (Wieting, *The Blessings of Weekly Communion*, 74).
- In the Western Church (Roman Catholic):
 - A requirement to confess your sins to a priest before communion began to reduce participation.
 - Understanding the mass as a sacrifice that removes sin, performed by the priest, also reduced participation.
 - The rise of “private masses” celebrated without anyone participating also became common.
- One writer summarizes:

In the 4th century, “The external statistical growth of the church in this period was accompanied by symptoms of serious spiritual sickness. Amid all the outward excitement and expansion and enrichment, an inward decline in lay Communion began to set in. According to one commentator, ‘the decline in lay Communion is complained of already by Chrysostom in Antioch at the end of the fourth century, and from then on things move downhill.’ Chrysostom complains that “in vain do we stand before the altar; there is no one to partake”” (Wieting, *The Blessings of Weekly Communion*, 71).

“Although the number of Masses was vastly increased—perhaps to fifty a week in an average parish church—reception of Communion by laypeople dropped from approximately three times a year at the beginning of the Middle Ages to only once a year after the thirteenth century. Monks who were deemed especially pious received Communion once a month or more often. Votive Masses for special concerns or special needs became common. Ordained monks or priests were endowed by a wealthy donor to say Mass—often several times a day and with no one present except the celebrant himself” (Wieting, *Blessings*, 82).

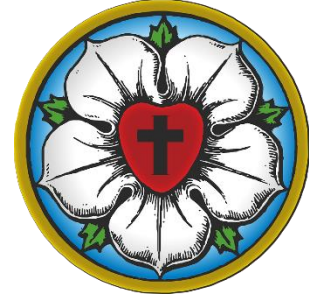


IV. In the _____ and up to the present day, Practices of Communion Became _____.

- The Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church maintained communion as the climax of the service.
- Luther maintained regular weekly communion and tried to increase participation among the people, since actually receiving communion was rare for non-clergy in the Roman Catholic church at that time. He also did away with masses without people in attendance.

- Luther wrote:

“First, that all masses without communicants should be completely abolished. . . . Second, that one or two masses should be celebrated on Sundays or on the days of the saints in the two parish churches. . . . Third, during the week mass could be celebrated on whatever day there is a need for it, that is, if there are some communicants present who ask for it and desire it. In this way no one would be forced to come to the sacrament, and yet everyone would be served [with the sacrament] in an orderly and sufficient way” (cited in Wieting, *Blessings*, 105).



- Yet later in Lutheran circles, pietism (an emphasis on inward emotional commitment to Christ) and rationalism (a deemphasis on the supernatural) aided the neglect of communion, so weekly communion became rare: “In large measure, the Lutheran immigrants to this continent were not arriving with the understanding of worship shared by Luther and the early church. Rather, they were arriving with worship practices that had been greatly impoverished by Pietism and Rationalism in this century of the ‘death of the Sacrament’” (Wieting, 132).

- In other Reformation circles, regular weekly communion also failed to remain consistent:

“Unfortunately for Calvin, the civil authorities forbade him to practice frequent communion, fearing that it represented ‘too radical a change from the late-medieval practice of infrequent reception of the sacrament’ because of the spiritual responsibility required of the worshipper. Subsequent Reformed practices and elements of English Puritans influenced by Calvin carried infrequency further. Fueled by an extremist rejection of Roman Catholicism, they saw a weekly Eucharist as ‘papist’ (while at the same time highly esteemed), resulting in a liturgical minimalism” (Ralston, “Remembrance”).

- Realities in America made the situation even worse:

“Then the move to America, westward expansion, and the chronic lack of ordained clergy made matters worse. Congregations sprang up served by non-ordained preachers who, because of their high regard for the sacraments, depended on itinerant ordained ministers to supervise their irregular celebration. For many the Eucharist was a rare even in church life and this irregular pattern of celebration became the ‘norm’ in subsequent church practice (even when clergy became available in sufficient numbers to allow resident ministry).

The overwhelming effect of the Second Great Awakening completed the process. Originally a revival ended with a common baptism of converts (Saturday), followed by celebrations of the Lord’s Table according to the pattern of each congregation participating in the revival (Sunday). Under Charles Finney’s influence the revival emphasis shifted to the pattern and tools of successful conversion: preparatory music, an extended sermon and the call to repentance. This pragmatic success of revivalist practices to fill the pews on the frontier gradually overwhelmed the worship convictions of many traditions. The revivalist service model became the standard Sunday worship, now strengthened by the Charismatic renewal emphasis on musical praise. Ask the average person today to define corporate ‘worship’ and you’ll hear ‘music’” (Ralston, “Remembrance”).

The Bottom Line

_____ the _____ of _____.

...by _____ that weekly communion is the _____.

...by learning that weekly communion is the _____ of all _____ the centuries.

...by realizing the _____ weekly communion are _____ than _____ it.

...by _____ weekly communion for your _____.