

# Martin Luther on Frequent Celebration of the Lord's Supper<sup>1</sup>

***Martin Luther believed that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated at least weekly in the congregation. However, a Christian should not feel compelled to take the Lord's Supper every week.***

In his Preface to the Small Catechism he explains,

we should not compel anyone to believe or to receive the sacrament and should not fix any law or time or place for it. Instead, we should preach in such a way that the people make themselves come without our law and just plain compel us pastors to administer the sacrament to them. This can be done by telling them: You have to worry that whoever does not desire or receive the sacrament at the very least around four times a year despises the sacrament and is no Christian, just as anyone who does not listen to or believe the gospel is no Christian. For Christ did not say, "Omit this," or "Despise this," but instead [1 Cor. 11:25], "Do this, as often as you drink it. ..." He really wants it to be done and not completely omitted or despised. "Do this," he says. Those who do not hold the sacrament in high esteem indicate that they have no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no dangers, no hell. That is, they *believe* they have none of these things, although they are up to their neck in them and belong to the devil twice over. On the other hand, they indicate that they need no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nor any other good thing. For if they believed that they had so much evil and needed so much good, they would not neglect the sacrament, in which help against such evil is provided and in which so much good is given. It would not be necessary to compel them with any law to receive the sacrament. Instead, they would come on their own, rushing and running to it; they would compel themselves to come and would insist that you give them the sacrament. For these reasons you do not have to make any law concerning this, as the pope did. Only emphasize clearly the benefit and the harm, the need and the blessing, the danger and the salvation in this sacrament. Then they will doubtless come on their own without any compulsion.<sup>2</sup>

In his writings and sermons, Martin Luther comments on how the Roman Catholic Church distorted the meaning of the Lord's Supper in such a way as to make believers fear partaking of the sacrament.

In a sermon from 1534, Luther explains,

Formerly under the papacy we were deterred by Paul's word: "He who receives it unworthily, receives it to his own condemnation" [1 Cor. 11:29]. For the teachers and interpreters of this passage did not themselves understand what receiving it "unworthily" actually meant. Consequently, the Holy Sacrament suffered the dishonor of the people shunning it like poison. And so it ceased to be a meal which ministered comfort and became instead a fearsome ordeal. The false preachers are responsible for this... For so the teaching went: You should first make a full confession of sins and make restitution

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on a study entitled "Communion Frequency in the Lutheran Confessions and in the Lutheran Church" by David J. Webber, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Scottsdale, Arizona, (2012). Electronically retrieved 12/26/2021 at <http://redeemerscottsdale.org/2019/11/communion-frequency-in-the-lutheran-confessions-and-in-the-lutheran-church-pdf/>

<sup>2</sup> Small Catechism, Preface: 21-24, Kolb/Wengert pp. 350-51. Emphases in original.

for them. In this we have been instructed to do the impossible, to first be pure of all evil. And when we felt our uncleanness and unworthiness, we were less than anxious to come forward, because we thought we would be feeding on death. This is exactly what happened to me: because I felt myself impure, I dreaded the Sacrament, fearing that I would receive it unworthily.<sup>3</sup>

Luther argues in the Large Catechism that the Lord's Supper is not for the perfectly righteous. It is not necessary to prepare yourself for weeks or months to take the Lord's Supper:

But suppose you say, "What if I feel that I am unfit?" Answer: This is my struggle as well, especially inherited from the old order under the pope when we tortured ourselves to become so perfectly pure that God might not find the least blemish in us. Because of this we became so timid that everyone was thrown into consternation, saying, "Alas, you are not worthy!" Then nature and reason begin to contrast our unworthiness with this great and precious blessing, and it appears like a dark lantern in contrast to the bright sun, or as manure in contrast to jewels; then because they see this, such people will not go to the sacrament and wait until they are prepared, until one week passes into another and one half-year into yet another. If you choose to fix your eye on how good and pure you are, to wait until nothing torments you, you will never go. For this reason we must make a distinction here among people. Those who are impudent and unruly ought to be told to stay away, for they are not ready to receive the forgiveness of sins because they do not desire it and do not want to be righteous. The others, however, who are not so callous and dissolute but would like to be good, should not absent themselves, even though in other respects they are weak and frail. ... People never get to the point that they do not retain many common infirmities in their flesh and blood. People with such misgivings must learn that it is the highest art to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness. For we are not baptized because we are worthy and holy, nor do we come to confession as if we were pure and without sin; on the contrary, we come as poor, miserable people, precisely because we are unworthy. The only exception would be the person who desires no grace and absolution and has no intention of improving.<sup>4</sup>

Lutheran minister David Jay Webber explains that Luther gives us a basic summary of his views on when penitent and believing Christians should commune, in his exegesis of a crucial phrase in Christ's Words of Institution<sup>5</sup>:

Indeed, precisely his words, "as often as you do it," imply that we should do it frequently. And they are added because he wishes the sacrament to be free, not bound to a special time like the Passover, which the Jews were obligated to eat only once a year, precisely on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first full moon, without variation of a single day. He means to say: "I am instituting a Passover or Supper for you, which you shall enjoy not just on this one evening of the year, but frequently, whenever and wherever you will, according to everyone's opportunity and need, being bound to no special place or time" (although the pope afterward perverted it and turned it back into a Jewish feast).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, Sermon for "Easter Wednesday," *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), Vol. 6, pp. 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Large Catechism V: 55-61, Kolb/Wengert, pp. 472-473.

<sup>5</sup> Webber, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Large Catechism V: 47-48, Kolb/Wengert, pp. 471-472.

Rev. Webber further explains,

As a matter of principle, Luther refuses to get specific in telling believers how often they should receive the Lord's Supper. If pressed he would probably say, no more than "daily," and no less than "around four times a year," but he would not go beyond that. Because of his conviction that we "should not fix any law or time or place for it," Luther was opposed to the papal and conciliar decree of 1215 which said, in effect, that Easter is the correct "time" for people to commune. He would certainly also be uncomfortable with any congregational "communion schedule" that artificially limited the members' opportunities for communion to a certain Sunday of the month, thereby implying that the other Sundays of the month are *not* the correct "time" for people to commune. The sentiment that "We are to come to it as often as it is celebrated,"<sup>7</sup> though well-intentioned, is likewise not fully compatible with the Reformers' basic conviction that no trace of coercion or "law" is to be present in the consideration of this question, either explicitly or implicitly. Again, to quote the Apology, "we do not prescribe a set time because not everyone is prepared in the same way at the same time." From the perspective of the gospel, he who is both Gift and Giver in this holy Supper graciously *invites* us to come. He does not order us to go. Through his Word he lovingly *draws* us to his body and blood, and to the forgiveness that they have won for us. He does not push us.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, Martin Luther believed that the clergy have a duty to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper weekly, but church members should have freedom of conscience to partake of the sacrament less frequently. However, it would be expected for all Christians to partake at least four times per year, since the Scriptures prescribe a frequent observance of the sacrament:

While the Reformer can enjoin weekly celebration of the Sacrament on the clergy, he noticeably refrains from ordering the laity to commune weekly. His reticence here perfectly parallels his softly-softly approach toward accustoming the laity once again to receive the Supper in both kinds. Age-old custom can be overcome only gradually, and just as it would take time for the laity to get used to receiving the Chalice, so likewise gentle pastoral care and unremitting instruction would be needed in order to make inroads into the medieval habit of communing only once or thrice a year. But Luther's refusal to dragoon the laity to the altar must not be so interpreted that we fail to mark his clear longing for frequent Communion to be the rule and not the exception of congregational life.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Preus, *Getting into the Theology of Concord*, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Webber, pp. 27-28.

<sup>9</sup> John R. Stephenson, "The Holy Eucharist: At the Center or Periphery of the Church's Life in Luther's Thinking?", p. 158.