

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." After he took the cup, he gave thanks, and he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Preaching COMMUNION Remembrances

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "The cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went

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Foreword

When I left seminary in 1976, I thought that all pastors working within the tradition of the Protestant Reformation viewed communion as a preaching ordinance. This was a peculiarity of my thinking that I somehow derived from Scripture under the influence of writers like Calvin, Berkouwer, and Ridderbos. This booklet is an attempt to explain why I believe preaching communion remembrances ought to be the view of the Lord's Table practiced by the heirs of the Reformation.

Accordingly, I want to thank the members of the Westminster Reformed Church for their patience, support and encouragement regarding my labors in the gospel in general and regarding my preaching communion remembrances during communion. The fact that preaching communion remembrances helps them fix their eyes, not on themselves, but on the risen Lord Jesus has the greatest importance. I also want to thank my wife Patricia who has done everything in her power to prompt me to write about communion. She has done this because in her words, "preaching communion remembrances gives me the time to remember the Lord Jesus in the context of communion in a way that I could never do otherwise." Finally, I thank my son, Jonathan, for doing the book design and production.

It is my hope that the church of the Lord Jesus will find immeasurable blessings in partaking of the benefits of His body and blood by means of the nourishment provided in a special way through preaching gospel remembrances.

Introduction

Should gathering the church to observe communion primarily involve remembering Christ in a unique and focused way through preaching? Put simply, should every communion service have a communion sermon that directs the people of God to Christ in a way that is distinct from “regular preaching”? The purpose of this booklet is to support and explain the claim that Scripture teaches us to answer these questions with a resounding affirmation. Yes, when the church gathers for communion it should have the primary intention of remembering Christ in a unique way through preaching. Yes, every communion service should have a sermon that directs the Lord’s people to their Lord in a distinct way, a way that is distinct from regular preaching.

Why should communion be a preaching rite? How can we justify the distinction between a Christ-centered “regular” sermon and a Christ-centered communion sermon? These are the main questions that need answering if we are going to exercise the greatest possible care regarding the Lord’s Table. Once we have answered these questions, we will be in a position to discuss related matters such as the frequency of communion in light of the nature and value of communion. It should be obvious that the distinctiveness of a communion sermon imposes certain limits within which communion worship will best take place (cf. the addendum: “Preaching Communion Remembrances and the Question of Frequency”).

The question of preaching during communion is very important, not only because there are differences here that Christians should resolve, but also because communion is a

means of grace appointed by God for the strengthening of our faith and the deepening of our love. If there are ways for us to improve and enrich communion worship (and we think that preaching communion remembrances is an important way to do this), then they should be discussed, clarified, and applied. Furthermore, an improved understanding of preaching in relation to communion is a good development that does more than one thing at once. It removes a fog of mysticism and man-centeredness from the Table as it directs us to remember the Lord Jesus according to Scripture. We must find the very center and keep our eyes on Jesus. To do that we must forget ourselves, even our sinful selves, and observe communion as Jesus said, “In remembrance of me” (Lk. 22.19).

In light of these things, we should set forth the biblical teaching that supports the idea of preaching communion remembrances, we should explain what a communion service with this emphasis will “look like,” and then we should defend this teaching from possible challenges and misunderstandings. Finally, we reiterate some of these things and make application of preaching communion remembrances by discussing the question of frequency (How often should the church observe communion?) in the addendum.

I. Why should communion be a preaching rite?

From Acts 20:7-12 we know that preaching a sermon in conjunction with communion is proper but the text does not tell us that the sermon ought to focus on remembering in a distinct way. What considerations support the idea of preaching communion remembrances? Biblical support arises from the following: the command to remember, explaining the visible and inaudible, Christian Passover, union and communion, “remembering along the lines of God’s reminding” (source unknown) and the parallel of looking to Jesus in the book of Hebrews.

The command to remember

The best place to begin is with the command of the Lord Jesus that we remember Him. The Gospel of Luke is the only Gospel that mentions the command to remember: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (22:19). The other Gospels report the command to eat bread and drink wine as the foundation of the institution of the new covenant Passover meal that the church is to observe until the Lord returns (“when the kingdom of God comes,” Lk. 22:18). The apostle Paul builds on the words of institution from the Gospel of Luke:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night

when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11.23-26).

Paul applies the command to remember to the taking of both the bread and the wine ("he...took bread...broke it, and said ...do this in remembrance of me...also he took the cup...saying...do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me"). Since Luke reports it only in connection with drinking, Paul's application to both elements must accent the importance of remembering as an essential part of communion.

As to the content of our remembering, we are to remember the *person* of Christ (the Lord from heaven who became incarnate, Jn. 1.1-14), who He is ("do this...in remembrance of *mē*"). We are to remember the *work* of Christ summarized in His death on the cross (1 Cor. 11.26). Moreover, we are to remember His person and work from a post-resurrection perspective as Paul's account makes clear; the death of the risen Lord is what we proclaim until He comes. Therefore, the content of our remembering is nothing less than the *person and work of Christ in both His humiliation and exaltation*. His death, the death of the incarnate, risen and returning Lord, stands at the center of the work He came to do in obedience to the will of the Father in heaven. He became incarnate in order to redeem the Father's elect (Jn. 17.1-2, 6, 9, 21-24). By His accomplished work, He received the authority to give eternal life to the children the

Father gave to Him (Jn. 17.1-2; Heb. 2.10-18). We are to remember Him with a distinct focus on His person and work.

Communion is for the church in the time after our Lord's resurrection. Therefore, when He said, "Do this in remembrance of me," we have to view the death of Christ broadly rather than narrowly. There is more here than simply noting that He died and is coming again. We are to remember the *risen* Lord (this directs us, for example, to the resurrection appearances in the Gospel narratives). However, He says, to remember "me." The person who died and rose again is the one that we are to remember. He is the Lord from heaven who became incarnate. He is God and man in one person and two natures. Therefore, the horizon of our meditations expands to include the person and work of Christ in humiliation and exaltation.

Remembering His death, showing it until He returns, must center on the supreme act of saving love that summarizes His coming on a mission of fulfilling the Father's will.

To give full depth to all that comes to mind regarding the accomplished work of Christ in humiliation and exaltation, we must spend a good deal of time in each communion service. We think and learn discursively (in stages and small bites). Therefore, communion sermon after communion sermon, we are responsible to remember the Savior, but this remembering cannot be exhaustive. Instead, communion preaching reasonably follows a pattern of focusing on Christ in some distinct but partial way.

The content of our remembering with its unique focus on the Lord Jesus along with the importance of remembering indicate that the fulfillment of this duty will take some time, much more than what it takes to read a communion passage with some brief comments. In this connection, the fact that Paul tells us that communion is a proclamation (1 Cor. 11.26;

cf. Acts 17.3) suggests the reasonable inference that preaching is to guide the remembering (through Paul, Jesus in effect said, “In the process of remembering me you proclaim my death until I return”). Preaching communion is thus to have a distinct goal of focusing and engaging the mind in a concentrated way on the Lord Jesus.

If we trace the reference to the new covenant *in my blood* (1 Cor. 11.25) back to the blood of the covenant mentioned in Exodus 24 (v. 8), we can see the parallel between the OT servant of the Lord telling the people “all the words of the Lord” (v. 3) and the NT servant doing the same. At the least, part of keeping the old covenant meal (v. 11) was a reiteration of the word of God. Now the new covenant meal does the same but with a newness that places distinct focus on Christ.

Moreover, if we take Luke 24.13-35 as historical-redemptive anticipation of communion with the risen Lord, then our Lord’s action places emphasis on “the things concerning himself” (v. 27) in all of Scripture. Thus, associated with His presence with us in the breaking of bread in the time between His comings, we look to Scripture for a special focus on Him. Now we have the gospel accounts and can look there in a primary way to remember Him according to Scripture and within the context of Scripture as a whole. Ministers then should open the Scriptures with a special focus on the Lord Jesus as part of coming to the Table (cf. v. 32).

Furthermore, communion should be a preaching rite because of what it takes to remember. It seems reasonable to conclude that remembering is more than avoiding a state of total forgetfulness. It is more than simply taking some notice to mind. It means to recall to the mind, to retain in the mind, to keep someone in one’s thoughts and affections. It includes a process of recollection. For example, when God remembers our

sins it means that He considers them in detailed and fitting coordination with the just punishments they deserve.

When the OT saint performed a sacrifice, it served as a remembrance (Lev. 24.7; Ps. 37.1; 69.1). However, the reminding of sin associated with the sacrifices of the OT provides a wonderful contrast to communion. Those sacrifices drove home the fact of our sin and need, but communion arises from the accomplished sacrifice so it does not focus on our sins. On the contrary, communion focuses on our Savior who did all that was necessary to deliver us from our sins. Thus, a communion service should have a sermon that brings Christ to mind in a distinct, focused, and concentrated way. In the OT sacrifices, there was a reminder of sin (cf. Heb. 10.3). There was a continuous reminding of sin and of the fact that God remembers sin, but per atonement in Christ, He remembers our sin no more (Heb. 10.17; 8.12).

The command to remember is first among the considerations that lead us to preaching communion. In summary, we have touched on the following things. 1) The content of communion remembering is the person and work of Christ in humiliation and exaltation. If we are going to do justice to the fullness involved, then there must be some depth of reflection in each communion gathering and from communion to communion in the life of the church. 2) Communion is a proclamation (1 Cor. 11.26) and proclamation involves explaining His suffering and resurrection (cf. Acts 17.3). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that preaching communion remembrances is properly part of communion worship. 3) Per Luke and Paul, remembering has a special accent and importance. Coupled with the fact that it takes time to engage the mind actively in meaningful remembering (cf. when the Lord remembers our sins, He considers them in

detail) the suggestion is that communion proclamation should take the form of a sermon that focuses on remembering the Lord Jesus in a distinct way. In OT sacrifices, there was a continual reminding of sin; now, per communion, we know that God remembers our sins no more. These considerations are like dots on a page that when connected reveal a picture of communion as a preaching ordinance.

Explaining the visible and inaudible

Communion should be a preaching rite because it is inseparable from the gospel word that we preach. The sacrament is a gospel sign and thus expresses the gospel in symbol. Therefore, as Calvin put it, ministers ought to point the people where the sign points (*Institutes*, 4.14.4, with “clear voice” the minister is “to lead the people by the hand wherever the sign tends and directs us”). The word and sign go together; it is not a bare sign and its use should include explanation of the gospel of Christ whose body and blood it represents. As a visible word, the sacrament is inaudible but that does not mean that the church should engage in sacramental worship in silence. Because of our proneness to wander in thought and because of our forgetfulness, the minister ought to explain the heart of the gospel to which the elements point. This gospel proclamation by explanation takes the form of a communion sermon.

Christian Passover

The idea of some time spent remembering (guided by the head of the household) was part of the old covenant anticipa-

tion of new covenant communion (cf. a memorial, Ex. 12.14 that included explanation, Ex. 12.26). During Passover, the leader of worship was responsible to explain the meaning of the symbolic partaking of the sacrificed lamb. Now we have the reality of the new wine and the new wineskin of the Christian Passover that replaces unleavened bread and lamb with bread and wine. In the new covenant administration of the Passover, the head of the household of faith is to proclaim the death of Christ in a post-resurrection perspective. That means we are to remember Jesus as our life-giving nourishment in terms of His person and work in humiliation and exaltation. These things accumulate: the nature of remembering according to the command of Christ, the bond of word and sacrament, and the work of ministers in the new covenant household of faith are lines that naturally converge in a communion sermon.

Union and Communion with Christ

To remember Christ when the church gathers for communion worship will best include all that it takes for the branches to abide in the vine within the context of the gathered church. Much is mysterious about communion (such as understanding how Christ is present by the Spirit offering Himself to us during a communion service) but mystery does not entail the fog of mysticism, emotionalism and subjectivism. We come out of the fog by communion with Christ through His word because we abide in Him and He abides in us when His word abides in us (Jn. 15.7). The implication is that proclamation enabling the Lord's people to abide in the word is part of communion remembering. The "co-union" aspect of communion involves abiding in Him together through the

word and by the Spirit. It appears that communion includes the inseparable bond between word and sacrament, the gathering of the church for fellowship with the Lord by means of His word, and the use of the sacrament as a seal of the promises of the gospel. This combination of things suggests that preaching communion remembrances furnishes the context by which the sacrament makes the promise of the gospel more understandable.

Remembering along the lines of God's reminding

The connection between Jesus' exhortation to remember Him ("remember *me*") and the Gospels as the product of the Holy Spirit's work bringing all things to remembrance (Jn. 14.25-26) suggests that remembering should include the life of Christ as well as His person, work, death and resurrection. Notably, the reminders given by the Spirit (v. 26) include the words of Christ (v. 25). Hence, both the words and works of Christ will enable remembering Him.

Of course, to remember the person, words and works of Christ, we will need to follow an orderly and clear pattern of preaching to bring out the richness of the Gospels. Moreover, it does not mean that this emphasis replaces the death of Christ (cf. show His death until He returns, 1 Cor. 11.26) for His death stands as the supreme act of His saving love in self-sacrifice for sinners. The point is simply that the supreme act of love shines in bold relief against the background of the person and work of Christ in both His humiliation and exaltation. After all, communion is for the post-resurrection church that looks back

from His exaltation to His humiliation and then forward to His coming.

Furthermore, the church has the command to remember Him, which she can hardly do by neglecting the Holy Spirit's reminding of Him that we have in the Gospels of the New Testament (this is as Jesus had promised: "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you," Jn. 14.26). It is reasonable therefore to conclude that we can do justice to the nature of the sacrament as a "remembering" in inseparable conjunction with the testimony of the Spirit to the person and work of Christ in the Gospels by preaching that testimony. Doing so will understandably take up the entire communion service (in all primary respects) and it will be the core of communion service after communion service in the life of the church.

The parallel of looking to Jesus in the book of Hebrews

"Looking to Jesus" (Heb. 12.2) establishes a relation to communion, at least in principle. In looking to Him, we look to the ascended Sabbath king, which is comparable with remembering Him now from the perspective of being on this side of His death and resurrection (our great high priest "has passed through the heavens," Heb. 4.14). God exalted Him by raising Him from the dead (cf. Heb. 5.5 with Acts 13.33). Thus, to fix on or concentrate on Him involves much more than a few moments of reflection that occur after the morning sermon. In both everyday life and in communion, the Christian

has the duty of reflective concentration on the Lord Jesus. Both take time and discipline of mind. Thus, communion remembering is arguably healthy and hearty when the shepherd guides the flock to focus on Christ in a distinct and special way that relentlessly subordinates every other consideration.

In the end, from Hebrews 12 we learn a) that remembering the risen Lord involves strong discipline of mind to concentrate on the Lord despite pulls and tugs to the contrary (suffering, etc.), and b) that communion is one of the resources appointed by the Lord to aid us in our pilgrim journey, which is a journey of faith. The design of communion is to direct our attention and no doubt actually continually *redirect* our attention for clear, distinct, and decisive focus on Jesus. It is not in tension with fixing our eyes on Him daily in the pilgrim journey. Indeed, communion is an aid that motivates and guides the journeyman's gaze.

Summary

It should be evident from the passages cited above that when our Lord commanded that His church remember Him that He called for diligent and thoughtful recollection. This kind of recollection that includes His person and work in both His humiliation and exaltation as proclamation of His death to the end of the age finds its most appropriate expression in new covenant preaching. In the night of His betrayal, the Lord Jesus sketched that pattern of remembering for the time between His comings. Now, on this side of the resurrection, heads of the household of faith have the responsibility of explaining the new covenant meal of mercy in the partaking of bread and wine.

Bread and wine are symbols that are hooks for the memory on which to hang various details of the gospel. On this point, the illustration of my Dad's dusty boots may be useful as an aid in summarizing things we have already covered and anticipating the characterization of communion distinctiveness we are about to make. His boots stick in my memory of what I used to do as a child. I recall running down a narrow sidewalk in the back of my home to greet my Dad coming home from work. He would park his truck in the backyard and I would meet him on the sidewalk looking up at his knees and down at his boots. I was so small that I could see his boots close up. They were leather boots and covered with light gray dust. I did not know what my Dad did at work but the memory of the dusty boots has never left me. Years later after not seeing my Dad for twenty years, as I walked from my truck, my young son met me on the sidewalk. I noticed my own dusty boots. I had become a bricklayer like my Dad and the dust that came from the mortar while laying brick whitened my boots. Now dusty boots stir up a flood of memories about my Dad and his work in relation to me and my work.

In a similar way, the elements at the Lord's Table stir up a flood of memories about our Lord and His work in relation to His children and their work. It is important to note, however, that we do not simply use our imaginations to contemplate His work, as I do regarding my Dad's work by analogy with mine. The flood of memories that ought to be food for our thoughts flows inseparably from the Scriptures, particularly from the "remembrances" given by the Holy Spirit in the Gospels. This is what communion preaching seeks to cultivate in the hearts of the Lord's people. It is to this aspect of our subject that we now turn.

II. What Sets Communion Preaching Apart?

Two things highlight the distinctiveness of communion preaching: its focus and its uniqueness. Consideration of each will help us characterize a communion service that has this accent and it will help us see what this kind of preaching will “look like.”

A. The Focus of a Communion Sermon

What is the primary focus of communion? The answer should be obvious but it can be lost easily. I want to show how easy it is to miss what is primary. Because of other things that may be good in themselves, it is quite common that we lose focus.

The loss of focus that can occur reminds me of an experience of my sons when they were little. There was a time in their pre-teen years when it was quite noticeable that they truly enjoyed communion Sunday at the church where I was the pastor. Many years later, I found out why. They used to raid the communion trays after the service to eat and drink all the leftovers! They looked forward to this every month. There were little gleams in their eyes when on the way to church, they would ask, “Are we going to have communion today?” Yes! They would say with no doubt some kind of pumping of the fist. Obviously, their communion enjoyment was just a little out of focus.

So, what is the focus of communion? The answer is clear. The focus is the Lord Jesus, as he said, “Do this in remembrance of *me*” (only with the bread in Lk. 22.19 and with both bread and cup in 1 Cor. 11.24-25). The focus is so obvious that we would think that we could never miss it. Yet we do miss it and we do so all too often. Why else would we need this *command* to remember? We need the clear and straightforward command because we tend to forget and we tend to get things out of focus.

Now there is no question about it. The central figure of the Christian life is the Lord Jesus Christ. The Table is His Table; it is the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 10.21). Therefore, we need to step back and rethink our approach to communion regarding a misplaced emphasis on human imagination and a misleading accent on self-examination.

1) God's reminding versus excogitation

Consider how the gospel accounts present the death of Christ. Matthew 27 records the crucifixion in verses 35-50, in only sixteen verses. But note: most of these verses deal with the activity of others: the guards (35-38), people passing by (39-40), the chief priests, teachers and elders (41-43), the robbers crucified with him (44) and the attempt to give Jesus the wine vinegar (48). On the actual crucifixion of Jesus and all of its agony, Matthew only cites the words of Jesus to the Father in verse 46 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). It is interesting to think about the lack of emphasis on His personal experience of suffering such a violent and painful death.

Mark's account is very similar with fourteen verses (15.24-37). Attention is on the activity of others in relation to Christ.

There are comments regarding the soldiers (24), the time of the crucifixion (25), the inscription put above Him (26), the location of the robbers, “one on his right and one on his left” (27), mockery (28-32), darkness (33), the same word of Christ to the Father that we read in Matthew (34), the comment about Elijah (35-36) and the record of the Lord’s last breath (37). The account is pointedly objective.

Luke has fourteen verses (23.33-46) and the words of Jesus that are recorded do not concern Himself, or His suffering, but they concern forgiveness for the soldiers and for one of the criminals crucified with Him.

We may think that John will have a longer and more detailed account as the youngest and the beloved disciple. However, his account of the death of Christ is only thirteen verses long (19.18-30). Instead of words of a sufferer, we hear Jesus assign to John the task of caring for his mother. Instead of weakness and loss of perspective in suffering, we learn that Jesus knew that all was completed and that is why He said, “I thirst” and “It is finished.” His saying about thirst was not a weak and frail request; it was an expression of determined resolve to return from the wasteland of sacrifice to the refreshing waters of fellowship with the Father. He panted after God like the deer after the water brooks because He accomplished His mission on earth.

What do we learn from the Gospels regarding the crucifixion? We have to be impressed with the fact that the sufferings of our Lord are in a sense marginalized. Even his mental and spiritual suffering is far away in the background. The Gospel writers put the crucifixion before us as an objective fact; as an accomplishment. He is not a victim. He is completing His work as the sacrificial lamb. The emphasis is not subjective but objective. A great transaction between heaven and earth unfolds

before our eyes and emphasis is on the fact that Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth (cf. He is Jacob's ladder, Jn. 1.51 with Gen. 28.12; He is therefore the gate of heaven, Gen. 28.17).

Therefore, remembering is not excogitation. We do not need to try to relive the cross, to re-enact it or dramatize the subjective experience of suffering. In another context of worship, it is evident that Easter dramatizations of the crucifixion collide with the gospel record.

How then do we remember? We are to remember the way God reminds us, along the lines of His reminding. Indeed, we are to remember in accord with God's reminding.

So, where do we go to remember by God's reminding? We go to the gospel recorded in the Gospels. The Gospels are the remembrances. Instead of excogitating remembrances, we are to remember along the lines spelled out in the first four books of the New Testament. The gospel narratives will be the primary source within the context of the testimony to Christ in all sixty-six books of the Bible.

Remembering is not primarily subjective. God has given us the signs of bread and wine. He is reminding us through these elements of the Lord Jesus. There is objectivity to the signs: they embody His word to us. This is primary; this has priority. The gospel that centers in Him is being reiterated. When a worker puts a traffic sign up, who is speaking? Is the worker saying, "Stop," "Go," or "Yield"? No, it is the state and the governor that are regulating the flow of traffic. Likewise, the Governor of the heavens and the earth is speaking through the communion elements. Therefore, we can correctly state that in communion we have the voice of God in sign and seal. Communion preaching is the preacher's task that directs God's people to His word regarding the Lord Jesus in an objective way.

2) God's reminding versus self-examination

Acknowledgement of sin is an indispensable component of the Christian life. It must therefore be part of the fabric of communion observance. However, it is important to determine exactly what that part actually is, whether or not it should have a pronounced place in communion. In practice, perhaps not in word, we may make confession of sin a central component of the Lord's Table. Is this possibly a mistake? Could you have a communion service without having an excruciating season of self-examination? Could we have a legitimate, God honoring, communion service without having an emphasis on self-examination? Could there be a communion service that is pleasing to God where the ministers do not even raise the matter of self-examination? There are some good reasons to answer these questions with a hearty affirmation.

First, to make self-examination central blurs our vision and distorts our focus. How can this be so? It takes our attention away from the Saviour and places it on ourselves. Is there not something very simple, plain and intuitively straightforward about this point? If you engage your mind and your thoughts during communion in reflection on your sins then for that time, at least, you are not focusing on the Lord Jesus. Your focus is fragmented.

If you are honest, you will spend the whole time on your sins and will not have time to remember Christ. His holiness shines, exposes, and pierces to the dividing of joint and marrow. That is, if you know yourself to be a sinner before the perfection of God, you will have to ask, "Where do I stop if I search out my sins in serious self-examination? Is there any stopping point?"

Do we need the command to focus on the Lord Jesus? Do we forget Him? “Yes” is the answer to both questions. It may be somewhat surprising or even startling. It is an astounding fact that we desperately need direction back to what is central in Christian faith, the fixing of our eyes on Christ. We are sinners indeed. We do, in fact, lose our way. We often have blurred vision. Communion preaching is a corrective. It sets our focus on the Lord Jesus, not on ourselves, even our sinful selves, but on Him.

Distraction is a subtle enemy that will rob us of our fullest benefit of communion. Luther, when warned of an assassin, carried the man's portrait with him to be on guard. We need to have a portrait of distraction, an assassin that will destroy if not guarded against. The way this assassin destroys is by saying, “look at yourself...look at yourself.” Watch out for this enemy!

Therefore, we must do some forgetting in order to remember! We must forget ourselves, even our sinful selves, and center our attention on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, according to the record in the Gospels, Jesus instituted communion without any reference to self-examination. Go through each account of the institution in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22 and you will not find even a hint of self-examination as part of the procedure of keeping the Lord's Supper.

Self-examination is not central. If anything, it is a by-product. In Luke 22, where is the accent on self-examination (cf. 22:14 -23)? Is self-analysis a point of emphasis in Matthew 26:26-30? Is it the focus in Mark 14:22-26? There is no reference to this duty in any of the passages giving the institution of the Lord's Table. The Gospel of John has no record of institution at all.

In light of these facts regarding the Gospels, where then do we get the idea of self-examination? It is from 1 Corinthians 11:28, “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” Of course, we are to read and understand this verse in light of its context. Looking more closely we find a number of important facts. First, there is reiteration of the institution of the Table with no attention to self-examination (11.23-25). Second, Paul connects self-examination with “unworthy” participation (11.27). Thus, it is important to define unworthy participation to get the point of examining oneself. Unworthy participation is the result of divisions within the church that manifested themselves *at the Table* (11.17-22). The Corinthians came to the Table “not for the better but for the worse” (17) and so they “despised” the church (22; cf. 11.33-34 for the road of self-examination they are to travel).

Therefore, we must conclude that self-examination is not an essential part of communion; it is only necessary where there is serious abuse of the Table. We must stress the fact that abuse of the Table, radical abuse, necessitated the exhortation to self-examination; Paul introduces it to correct abuses at the Table lest the church continue to receive God’s judgment (30, “many of you are weak and ill, and some have died”).

Finally, it is important to make it clear that even where there is radical abuse regarding the Table, this fact does not tell us that self-examination in this situation becomes the primary focus of communion. Surely, God’s family members ought to resolve these abuses *before* coming to the Table. Then they may come with the right intention of sharing with one another (1 Cor. 11.33; coming to the Table this way presupposes repentance as the good fruit of proper and prior self-examination).

Therefore, the Gospels, which do not mention self-examination, give us the tone and tenor of communion. The emphasis in the Gospels is on the Lord's body and blood; the emphasis is on remembering His person and work.

To be sure, we come to the Lord with recognition of our sin and self-examination may very well occur. There is no prohibition; to say that would go too far in the opposite direction. The point is simple: self-examination is not the focus of communion. The focus is on our Lord. It is worth repeating that He said, "Do this in remembrance of *me*."

Third, "Forgive us our debts" is a daily matter. Every day we should examine ourselves and confess our sins to the Lord. Communion is not the time appointed for self-examination as its primary focus. The intent is not that the Table be an excruciating time of self-analysis, confession and repentance; that is not the design for preparation *before* coming to communion, either. These are daily matters of the Christian life so they naturally surround communion observance. Of course, if there is radical abuse of the Table itself then radical repentance must precede it. Furthermore, confession may emerge in communion as a by-product of what is primary.

To be sure, we are sinners, but communion is for sinners as the gospel is for sinners. It is not so much that we must deal with our sins to ready ourselves for communion. Rather, we need communion to help us deal with our sins in the strength, comfort and encouragement of gospel-good-news! Thus, we come to the meal of covenant mercy to hear the voice of God and to receive strengthening by the additional word, as an oath for confirmation that we may know the unchangeable character of God's good purpose for us (Heb. 6.13-18).

We have access to the Communion Table by means of a fundamental acknowledgment of our unworthiness.

Marvelously, the Table is for sinner-saints, for those who admit their unworthiness and unrighteousness (cf. Lk. 18.13-14) and who cling to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, forgiveness and eternal life.

A Summary on Self-examination

Not all sinners have an invitation to the Lord's Table. The Table is for sinners who acknowledge their need of the body and blood of Christ, of His work as the ultimate mediation between God and man.

Self-examination is not primary. It is a by-product but it is not the focus of communion. Communion is not specifically or primarily a time to concentrate on ourselves even as sinners. Of course, there is no forbidding of self-examination. Indeed, it will naturally surface when we spend time with the Lord. His glory, honor, majesty and holiness will tower over us and put us to shame. However, shame is not the constant of communion. The constant is joy and rejoicing at the table feast of forgiveness that is before us in the person and work of Christ.

A self-examination emphasis misdirects attention to our sins and us. It misdirects to the sins of the church. Whether our thoughts are on the small picture (individually) or the big picture (corporately), either way our eyes are on the wrong picture when we concentrate on our sins and the sins of others. This kind of contemplation can discourage people from coming to the Table. The Table is for sinners but the concentration is not on our sinfulness; instead, the concentration is on Christ, who He is and what He did to save sinners. The concentration is on the fact that He gave His body and blood for our nourishment and life.

B. The Uniqueness of a communion sermon

It seems sufficient to say that though every sermon is to be rooted in Christ not every sermon is about Him. The distinction between a regular sermon and a communion sermon applies even when preaching through the Sermon on the Mount where Christ is the Preacher. For example, He directs us to the Beatitudes and the blessedness of the righteous person. Preaching the Beatitudes will therefore go where Christ points us and concentrate on marks of the Christian (Mat. 5.3-12). Among things treated will be the fact that the blessed person, though insulted, will respond as a gentle and merciful peacemaker (5.5, 7, 9). Granted, Christ is the Preacher and the proper responses of the new covenant saint can only follow from submission to Him by faith.

Therefore, it should be obvious that a sermon on the Beatitudes will direct the church in contemplation of the blessings that flow from heaven's king to the new covenant saint. Attention will be on the Christian as he is in himself before God and as he relates to others before God. Granted, the Christian life and all its blessings have the unquestionable foundation that is Christ. However, a communion sermon is not like this. In a communion sermon there is concentration on Christ in a special way that involves suppression of emphasis on the Christian life. Here Christ is not the foundation of the building in which everything is connected to Him and in that way expressive of the gospel of the kingdom. Instead, in communion, Christ is the building itself. His word given through His apostles is the foundation of this building but He is the building and all eyes are on Him. Instead of following His

lead and looking at the new covenant saint, we follow His lead to look at Him in communion for He said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

As another example, the theme to emphasize when working with Matthew 5.19 is surely the Law as the key to *Christian* greatness. The Lord Jesus is the one who directs us in thought to our duty in relation to the Law and He directs us to greatness in the kingdom. These themes come to us from the lips of Christ Himself, and in this text, *He directs our thoughts to considerations about ourselves and not to reflections about Him*. Of course, if considerations about ourselves are in proper perspective, we will see them in relation to Christ.

Therefore, preaching about how Christians can be great in serving the Lord Jesus Christ is surely different from remembering Christ. We can note this difference while we recognize that a sermon about Christian greatness has its ground in Christ in His very words. It is understandable then that a sermon that focuses on Christ in a distinct way is different from a sermon that goes where Christ points us, namely, to a focus on some other theme (the Law, the sixth commandment, marriage, Christian greatness, etc., Mat. 5-7; all of these things are of course rooted and grounded in Christ).

Therefore, a particular focus will govern the choices of texts preached and even how the same text may come into view in a regular sermon versus a communion sermon: the goal for preaching at the Table is to focus on Christ in a distinct way. In communion, the accent will not be on how Christians attain greatness. Instead, this provision from the Lord testifies to His gracious and loving heart in granting restored dignity to His people so the accent will be on His grace and love. Therefore, the use of this passage (Mat. 5.19) in communion worship will accent the goodness of the Lord. The duty and dignity of

Christians will be a sub-point but not the main point. The uniqueness of communion preaching is in its focus on Christ in whom the Christian lives rather than on Christian living with Christ as the foundation.

Again, the main thing is focus; it takes some discipline of thought and concentration of the mind to put all attention on the Lord Jesus and to keep other things in a subordinate position in the sermon. The working principle will be that it is the goal of focus on Christ that determines the text for a communion message and that determines the things in a given text that are treated and the relative time assigned to them.

Review

What is it that sets communion preaching apart from regular preaching? A disciplined focus on the Lord Jesus sets it apart. A primary goal is to avoid the blurring effect of misdirection to ourselves, even as sinners. The uniqueness of the communion sermon also sets it apart. This is just to say that the goal of remembering the Lord Jesus in a distinct way governs preaching so that every other consideration is subordinated to the goal of focusing on the risen Savior with single-minded diligence and discipline. The concentrated effort involved in single-mindedness is the responsibility of both the preacher and those who listen to the preaching of communion remembrances.

The following is a question that might help add some perspective on the distinctiveness of communion preaching within the normal diet of preaching. Is there anything that the minister would (or should) avoid in regular preaching in order to reserve it for communion? Another way to get at this

question is to wonder if we might avoid the Gospels or sections of the Gospels in regular preaching because they contain pointed remembrances of the Lord Jesus. It is possible to think that avoiding some things is the only way to maintain a difference between regular preaching and communion preaching.

In replying to these inquiries, it is important to state that the distinctiveness of communion preaching does not necessitate the conclusion that the minister is to avoid some texts of Scripture in the regular preaching diet. To confirm this point, let us consider the example of an expository series on the Gospel of Matthew in relation to preaching communion remembrances.

First, this Gospel and any Gospel account are included in such exposition; there is no exclusion of the Gospels. Second, ministers will exposit all the paragraphs of the Gospel under review from beginning to end. There is no excluding of any section to leave it for a communion message. Third, some of the preaching in such a series may take exactly the same form as a communion sermon. During such a series many topics will not lend themselves to “remembering Christ” as directly as other topics; time and reflection spent on the Christian’s duty to not worry (Mat. 6.25-34) is different from time and reflection spent on the loud cry of Jesus from the cross (Mat. 27.46). Accordingly, it is difficult to suggest any difference between a regular exposition of the words of Jesus from the cross and a communion exposition of those words. Therefore, there may be times when there is no substantive difference between regular preaching and communion preaching. Fourth, though regular preaching may overlap with communion preaching, the opposite is not the case. Communion preaching will “avoid” some texts or certain emphases within a text in order to concentrate distinctively on the Lord Jesus (because He said, “Do this

in remembrance of me.”). In communion, speaking will not be about Christians or Christian duty (such as “do not worry” and why); speaking will be about Christ and how He fulfilled His duty in the covenant of redemption.

The perspective we are seeking to emphasize is this: regular preaching points to Christ, even preaching about Christian duties to which Christ Himself directs us, and it may at times overlap in essence with communion preaching, but preaching the remembrances during communion worship has a distinct focus on the Lord Jesus that involves the subordination of matters like Christian duties. The point, then, is that we seek in communion to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ in a distinct way.

III. How is preaching communion remembrances defended?

We have made the point that eating and drinking at the Lord’s Table should take place under the nourishing words of gospel preaching that centers on Christ in a unique way. The goal is to demonstrate the importance of preaching communion remembrances as substantially and clearly as possible. Now, it may be helpful to turn our thoughts to some objections or concerns that may come to mind in reaction to the claim that communion services ought to be preaching services that give distinct focus to Christ.

Is communion the NT Passover?

One objection may be that the tie of NT communion with OT Passover is not close enough to root the explanatory-preaching dimension of communion. However, a couple of things defend this approach. *First*, the following passages in the Gospels indicate beyond question that Jesus intentionally instituted communion during the Passover meal: Matthew 26.17, 20, 26-29; Mark 14.12, 22-25; and Luke 22.7-8, 11-20. He subtly merges Passover observance with communion observance when He says, “I will not eat it [this Passover] until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 22. 15-16), which will be in consummation fulfillment. To what meal does He refer? It is the Passover but with changes from the use of unleavened bread and lamb to bread and wine, because He is our Passover (cf. 1 Cor. 5.7).

Second, the principle Jesus gave us of continuity with the OT in Matthew 5.17 guides us not to think abrogation but fulfillment. He thus tells us to look for continuity with OT shadows in NT realities. We should look for the fulfillment of the Passover that has come in His death as the Passover lamb and the fulfillment form of the Passover meal is now in the Lord’s Supper. It is because of the new wine of fulfillment that we have a new wineskin. The Passover structure (i.e. wineskin) cannot handle the new wine. Therefore, there must be a new wineskin to contain the new wine.

Both of these comments, the promise-fulfillment bond of Passover with communion and the guidance of the Lord as to how we are to think in terms of continuity about the changes from OT to NT, confirm the validity of drawing a line from old covenant exposition of the meaning of Passover to new covenant exposition of the meaning of communion. We are on the very edge of the scroll and cannot help but infer to the reasonable-

ness, appropriateness, and value of preaching communion remembrances on the part of new covenant heads of the household of faith.

Do we lose the sacrament?

A possible line of thought is that preaching communion would involve “a disregard of the concept of sacrament” (Berkouwer, *Sacraments*, 48; the sign does not have vocal cords and it should not have them). The idea here might be that if there is preaching of communion then we lose the sacramental side of things (there is a reduction of the sacrament to “regular” preaching). A brief reply can emphasize the point that the use of the elements as signs is the symbolic core of the sacrament. If the signs (the sacramental signs of bread and wine) are in use, then the preaching service is necessarily a communion service; but once the preaching service thus becomes a communion service at that time, the minister has the responsibility to explain the Christian Passover and point the people where the signs point them (*Institutes* 4.14.4). There is no reduction of the sacrament to regular preaching nor a loss of its sacramental distinctiveness if there is a distinctive preaching of communion remembrances.

Is this a novel idea in the life of the church?

A recent book on communion (*Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* by Keith Mathison) traces developments in the teaching of the church throughout church

history and especially in reformed communities since the time of John Calvin. We may wonder why it is that in this book there is no development of communion as a preaching rite. Granted, communion is not a didactic service in which we explain the differences between transubstantiation, consubstantiation, suprasubstantiation (279), and so forth (cf. C. Hodge, *Princeton Sermons*, 338, “its primary design is not to instruct...how inappropriate...to dwell at a feast on the proper mode of eating.”). The Lord’s Table is not *about* communion. That is, coming to the Table is not a time to come and reflect on differences and resolutions about communion. However, although observing communion is not a time for thinking about communion, Calvin helpfully states that preaching should “make us understand what the visible sign means” (*Institutes*, 4.14.4, paragraph 1).

Some think that neglecting Calvin’s doctrine of the real presence of Christ weakens diligent observance (Mathison, 289). On reflection, however, it is not necessarily the loss of the doctrine of the real presence in reformed theology that has impoverished communion worship. Instead, it seems better to say that the loss of preaching communion has impoverished communion worship. At least, the neglect and the failure to cultivate this aspect of communion tend to blur the focus of communion.

Can we account for the blurring that involves the neglect or rejection of preaching communion remembrances in a reformed context? Some suggestions might be the following.

a) The Westminster Standards guide the minister in communion (powerfully since 1646), and they do not expound on communion as a preaching rite. In the directory for public worship, the Westminster formulators say, “When it [communion] shall be administered, we judge it convenient to

be done after the morning sermon” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Free Presbyterian Publications, p. 384). The directory is not on a par with the standards themselves but its impact is surely far reaching.

b) The reaction to early Zwinglianism, shall we say the over-reaction, seems to suppress the importance and implications of remembering even though Jesus explicitly said, “Do this in *remembrance* of me.” According to the view descending from Zwingli (1484-1531), the sacrament is not a means of grace but merely a bare memorial. However, if we give remembering due emphasis, combine it with explanation as was done in the Passover, and emphasize the important bond of word and sacrament, then it seems inescapable that we preach communion rather than simply administer it after the morning sermon. Then we have a means of grace *par excellence*.

c) It is conceivable that a contributing factor is the trend toward weekly communion. Those who have moved this way and those who are moving this way may sometimes see themselves going against the grain of communion as a preaching rite. Practically speaking, it does not help the case for weekly communion to draw attention to the claim that you should preach communion every time you have communion. This is understandable for it is difficult to see how there could be a distinct sermon on remembering Christ every time you have preaching of the word. Therefore, it seems to be fair to ask if perhaps a contributing factor in the suppression of preaching communion remembrances is an over-reaction to the notion of a bare memorial, which is our next consideration.

Is this a bare memorial?

“Remembering along the lines of God’s reminding” is hardly a bare memorial. Using the illustration of the vine, communion with Christ involves partaking of the body and blood of Christ symbolically (cf. Jn. 6.53-58 with 6.32-40 where believing is at the least central in feeding on the flesh of Christ); in other words, it involves abiding in the vine. How, in a practical way, do we abide in the vine? It is by abiding in His word and having His word abide in us. This implies the need and value of meditating on the word of Christ during communion. To avoid subjective excogitation, the minister should direct this meditation through preaching. Preaching should center on remembering the Lord Jesus. That must include all that would be involved in remembering Him; it will therefore include a special concentration on Him that will cover His person and His work in both humiliation and exaltation. The supreme sacrifice of the cross and the Lord’s second coming are also part of the picture. The preaching diet can develop all these things in a rich and varied way over the course of communion services but always with the goal of remembering our redeemer in a distinct way.

Is the distinction between a regular and a communion sermon valid?

How can we justify the distinction between a Christ-centered “regular” sermon and a Christ-centered communion sermon? Because every sermon is about Christ, some may

reason that it is wrong to speak of communion sermons in distinction from regular sermons. This suggests that there can be sermons in which we do not remember the Lord Jesus and such a thought is surely incorrect.

In reply, the emphasis on communion remembering in distinction from regular preaching does not lose sight of the fact that all preaching is ultimately about the Lord Jesus. The distinction comes to this: a communion sermon that preaches Christ is distinct from a regular sermon that preaches Christ. Both types of sermon preach Christ but they do so with distinct emphases. Again, it may be helpful to describe the regular preaching of Christ as comparable to a building that has Christ as the foundation but in communion preaching Christ is the building.

Therefore, no matter what the topic or text of Scripture may be, the sermon will (must) make its way to Christ as the foundation of the gospel new and old. The emphasis of the regular sermon, then, is on the building that has Christ as its inseparable foundation.

For example, a sermon on a section from the book of Job must spend time putting the paragraph into its context within the book of Job and within the history of redemption looking forward to the coming of Christ. That paragraph in the book of Job has its own theme that must be central in the delivery of the sermon because of the practical nature of preaching. Ministers must preach the whole counsel of God piece by piece to the people of God in an orderly way. Surely doing things decently and in order applies to sermons as well as the other elements of worship and the responsibility of clarity must necessitate defining terms and making clarifications that consume much of the preaching time. Consequently, the focus surely must be on the things brought before our eyes in the book of Job.

Nevertheless, all preaching must lead to Christ; He is the foundation of all of Scripture including the book of Job. Giving time and focus to the nuances of a particular text is the task of regular preaching of Christ. The emphasis is on the distinct content of the particular section of Scripture under current review. Special relevance pertains here to ministry of the word that seeks to exposit the books of the Bible section by section. Orderliness and clarity necessitate that due attention be given to what is emphasized in any given context. In this way, the disciple-minister brings forth the richness and variety of the gospel of Christ from the storehouse of new covenant fulfillment (cf. Mat. 13.52). The ultimate goal is to expound on the whole counsel of God to the glory of God (cf. Acts 20.24-28).

This might suggest to some that there is no need for communion remembering of the Lord since we remember Him in every sermon as the foundation of whatever edifice of truth is before us. One could argue here that communion is unnecessary since we remember Christ in every sermon. However, in reply we should be aware that communion is neither optional nor unnecessary (or superficial). The Lord ordained it as an important means for the blessing of the church by the working of the Spirit (again, see the command, "Do this...").

Returning to the original complaint, we have to ask about the matter of emphasis. Is it not the case that in a sermon from the book of Job, the emphasis has to be on the specific section in view from the OT book? Should not there be an emphasis on the particular text in order to do justice to that text in its context, to promote clarity, and to preach the whole counsel of God in an orderly way? Should not there be a step by step process in which various topics will be covered to accent one facet of the diamond of truth after another from sermon to sermon? If we give an affirmative answer to these questions then

the focus of these sermons must largely go where these texts take us. In so doing, we will not have our focus on Christ *in a distinct way*. However, when we come to communion, we are to focus on Him in a distinct way, a way that that is not done in proper regular preaching.

Are there problems with a non-preaching rite?

A preaching rite is more suited to meaningful remembering than a five to eight minute period of communion. There are a number of problems with the non-preaching rite because the time to remember the Lord Jesus in a substantive way is so short.

1) One problem is fragmentation. Our thoughts are fragmented and hindered from meaningful remembering if we spend most of the time in worship, for example, on the relationship of Abraham and Lot or the dietary laws in the OT as the focus of the sermon, and then try to shift attention to communion with a *focus* on Christ. This fragmenting of focus or blurring of vision occurs where there is expository preaching on a regular week-to-week basis without preaching of communion remembrances when the church partakes of the Lord's Supper.

To be sure, all Scripture leads to Christ, points to Him, teaches about Him and centers on Him. The OT promised the coming of Christ and the Lord Jesus was active at creation and in the Old Testament. However, to work through an account about Abraham is *about Abraham* though it leads us ultimately to Christ. Inevitably, the time of focused contemplation on the

risen Lord Jesus is extremely limited. However, in a communion sermon, we should remember Him as the Lord of glory who became flesh and dwelt among us, who lived, preached, healed, rebuked Phariseism, and forgave sinners. In every detail, the sermon at the Table is *about Christ*. There needs to be much time, the whole time, devoted to thinking about the Lord Jesus.

2) Another problem is the loss of historical perspective.

Remembering Jesus has a historical dimension including His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. In other words, we ought to reflect on Him in terms of His whole work of humiliation and exaltation. In a five-minute time of sacramental observance, we can hardly even think about dipping the bucket into this well of gospel truth. However, the communion sermon draws refreshing water each time the church gathers at the Table and it does so regularly from communion service to communion service.

3) Finally, reflective vitality is needlessly restrained.

Due to schedules and time constraints, the introduction of communion at the end of the worship service has a sort of “tacked on” quality about it. Remembering takes time and concentration. We need the minister’s pointing where the sign points. We need time for reflection. We must forget ourselves and concentrate reflectively on our Lord.

Where mental effort is absent, there is no remembering of Him. Where time is minimal, mental effort is limited. Where concentration is limited, remembering is impoverished. We need concentration on Christ and not on ourselves. We need to concentrate on Him in a distinct way, a sacramental way that binds the word and sacrament. This can only be done by preaching communion remembrances.

Conclusion

Many reasons support the idea of preaching communion remembrances. They combine to establish a frame of mind and a direction of thought regarding communion. The most important reason (if we can isolate one from the others) is the command of Christ that we partake of the bread and wine in remembrance of Him. This unique remembering points us to the gospel by which we continually remember the Lord Jesus. The sacrament is an additional word that focuses our thoughts on the word. It is not simply subjective recollection. It is active remembering that follows the etchings of the word to which it points. Therefore, we are to go to the gospel with a special focus: to remember the Lord Jesus along the lines of God's reminding. In a primary way (though not exclusively), we are to center our thoughts on Him by means of the gospel narratives. Doing this from a post-resurrection and a post-ascension vantage point calls us to remember the person and work of Christ in both His humiliation and His exaltation. Above all else, we focus on Him in terms of His person and the work He accomplished in the supreme act of obedience unto death on the cross.

What then shall we say to these things? What then shall we do regarding them? Our approach both to preaching (as preachers) and to listening (as disciples of the risen Savior) should be resolute. With determination, like that of forceful men robbing a storehouse (cf. Mat. 11.12 with 13.44), we should seize communion preaching as a prize. Ministers ought to rethink how they plan sacramental worship so that the focus is truly on Christ according to the Holy Spirit's reminding. Church members should hold ministers to account in this

regard. If a reader of these pages sees the need, he or she should speak to church leaders about preaching communion remembrances. Our prayer must be, “May it be so Lord Jesus, to Your honor and glory both now and forevermore. Amen.”

Addendum

Preaching Communion Remembrances and the Question of Frequency

Determining how often communion ought to be observed depends on the teachings of Scripture, especially the key texts (Acts 2.42; 20.7) along with the passages that teach us the nature of communion. *For our purposes, the nature of communion must include the biblical basis for understanding communion as a preaching rite.*

The Key Biblical Passages

How solid then is the case for weekly communion based on the book of Acts where the key texts are located?

1) Obviously, Acts 2.42 supports *daily* and not weekly observance of the breaking of bread.

2) Agreeing with Calvin, Mathison says, “it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving” (*Given for You*, 225). However, this line of thought proves too much unless he means to have communion after Sunday evening preaching and Wednesday preaching as well as after Sunday morning preaching.

3) Everything rests on Acts 20.7. Some comments put this text into perspective.

a) Acts 20 is a point on an arc.

The book of Acts is a book of transitions. If we grant that Acts 20 describes weekly communion, it is conceivable that the transition from daily to weekly communion is part of a larger shift to a normal state of things in which communion takes place less frequently than on a weekly basis.

b) The resurrection affects the day of worship.

Rather than grounding Acts 20.7 in the institution of communion as done by Mathison (226), it is better to connect the new day of worship to the resurrection. Consider how the Gospels accent the first day of the week as resurrection day and thus impress this on the memory of the church for all time (Mat. 28.1; Mk. 16.2; Lk. 24.1, 13; and Jn. 20.1, 19).

c) The failure argument fails.

If the purpose of gathering fails when there is no observance of communion (as Mathison has it, 226) then we must have communion either every time the church meets or the gatherings without it are invalid. This is surely going too far and it leaves no room for a charitable spirit toward any church that does not have communion weekly (if we say things like, “the Sundays of worship in between communion are worthless.”).

d) The text has historical particularity.

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.”

Does the passage make the point that every first day of the week the church gathered to break bread? No, the passage states a number of things that took place on the first day of the week, namely, intending to depart on the next day, Paul preached *and*

he preached when the church gathered to break bread. Thus, we have these facts: on the first day of the week, Paul preached to the church that gathered on that day to observe communion (that historical first day of the week within the history of Paul's missionary journeys).

Unquestionably, the church assembled on that day with the purpose of breaking bread. Unquestionably, Paul began to preach on that day when the church began to break bread. However, the text does not tell us that these things were the regular practice of the church. The text does not say, "Every first day of the week the church gathered to break bread." It does not say, "Every first day of the week Paul preached," that "Paul preached during communion," that "someone preached," or that "someone preached during communion."

Granted, the text does not teach that communion was *not* a weekly practice but neither does it say that communion *was* a weekly practice. This discussion of Acts 2.42 and Acts 20.7 sends us forward to the theological argument as the key to the question of frequency.

The Theological Argument

Mathison does not state the nature of communion as a preaching rite. His concern is with the reality of the means of grace. His point is a good one: that the presence of Christ in a special way (or better, doing a special work) in communion makes it a glorious and important means of grace. In turn, appreciation for communion as a means of grace designed to seal and confirm our faith should cause the Lord's people to desire to have communion more frequently rather than less frequently (*Given for You*, 293-295).

On the other hand, granting that we should preach communion remembrances every time we have communion, then one may fittingly conclude that the demand for weekly communion is unreasonable. It is unreasonable because in a weekly setting we would lose either the distinctiveness of communion preaching or the distinctiveness of regular preaching. Simply put, the distinctiveness of both types of preaching rests on the fact that remembering the Lord Jesus takes time and concentration of mind. Therefore, we ought to preach communion remembrances and point the flock to where the sacraments point.

A number of considerations summarize the weakness of the argument for weekly communion presented by Mathison.

1) This argument for weekly communion proves too much (and is unacceptable by *reductio ad absurdum*) unless the arguer is prepared to have communion every time the church meets for worship and the preaching of the word. The counter that a Sunday evening service is simply an extension of the morning service has a very low degree of plausibility and it gets worse when other worship services of the week are entertained.

2) It turns out that everything rests on the theological argument because the key passages do not confirm the claim that communion became a regular weekly part of worship in apostolic times. This lack of biblical support decisively weakens the church history argument (that the early church practiced weekly communion and that “infrequent communion was the later Roman Catholic innovation” that arose “in the Middle Ages,” Mathison, 293).

3) The theological argument that the nature of communion determines its frequency has weight but it must include the principle of preaching communion remembrances within its

premises and when that is done there is good reason not to have communion weekly.

The principle that emerges is that *we ought to observe communion as often as is practical and in a way that does full justice to preaching communion remembrances.*

In this light, we can summarize a number of important goals that should guide us no matter what the debates may be that surround the Lord's Table. First, one goal is to be diligent in availing ourselves of a very important means of grace (that we need and that is for our benefit). Second, another goal is to preserve the distinctiveness of regular preaching and to keep it in balance by continually regaining focus by means of communion (by the interplay of regular preaching with communion preaching). Third, most of all, the goal is to promote a special remembering of the Lord Jesus by repeatedly and regularly spending entire worship services in concentrated remembrance of Him.

Communion is an important means of grace that is divinely appointed and therefore, necessary and beneficial. More is better. The burden of proof rests with those who opt for less frequency. Therefore, we should partake of communion as often as is biblically reasonable because it affords us a *special* time of fellowship with the Lord. Communion with the Lord is available to us in not only private devotions and regular gatherings but also in a distinct way at the Lord's Table. By His command and provision, communion gives us a special and distinct opportunity to enjoy His presence, to enjoy His company, and thus to enjoy Him.

We have a propensity to forget. Remarkably, we all too easily forget the Lord Jesus. When we think about it, the surprising call to Christians to remember their Savior is not so surprising after all. Therefore, we need to have communion as

frequently as possible within the wisdom principles associated with good order. Pastoral concern and care suggest that we establish a corporate pattern for the Lord's Supper that is sufficiently regular to minimize the distancing effect of normal unavoidable absences. The premise is that absence does not make the heart grow fonder. Instead, absence from the Table makes the heart grow weaker.

Moreover, from a pastoral perspective, it seems wise to enhance and balance the diet of preaching with adequate regularity of communion for both pastor and flock; both need to focus in a special way on the Lord Jesus.

Conclusion

Consequently, it seems wise to view monthly communion as the golden mean (with bi-monthly communion as something close to the golden mean). On one hand, there are good reasons to think that anything less frequent than monthly communion is too infrequent with a tendency to lose balance and allow too much forgetting of the Lord Jesus (though a bi-monthly pattern preserves the distinction between regular preaching and the specialness of communion preaching; it has distance without too much distance). On the other hand, having communion more frequently than monthly has the tendency to neglect the specialness of preaching the remembrances (truncating the nature of communion), or to lose the distinctiveness of communion preaching by lacking sufficient background of regular preaching (contrary to bi-weekly observance).

Thus, whatever pattern a particular church practices because of concern for wise principles of good order and a healthy diet of the gospel, the church's attitude toward those

who adopt any other ritual pattern must be seasoned by the principle of NT ritual simplicity. Love and tolerance must govern our attitude. *All other views (no matter where one stands in viewing them) ought to be thought of as valid even if they are not thought to be the best choice in light of the relevant wisdom principles that ought to govern order and practice.*

Bi-monthly observance is adequate, relatively speaking, but monthly may be better because it strikes the good balance of having communion with greater frequency while accenting its uniqueness. We can also appreciate the sense in which a five-minute remembering at the end of a worship service has value and blessing for the church because it inescapably unfolds from preaching.

The claim here is that communion observance can be better than a five-minute time of reflection at the end of worship; there is a better use of the means appointed. We can be more diligent in our use of this means of grace by giving the whole time to a concentrated and focused remembering of the Lord Jesus in a way that is distinct from how He is always remembered in regular preaching.

To Him be the glory both now and forevermore, Amen.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it with you in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives.



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