

Can You Tell Me? The Lord's Supper: How Often?

Question: *Why do many Reformed Churches celebrate the Lord's Supper every other month? Is it proper to celebrate it each Lord's Day?*

Answer: The Lord's Supper is neither an ordinance nor a mere memorial celebration. It is a sacrament; a means of grace; a sign and seal of the covenant. Calvin loved to refer to it as nourishment for the soul. He wrote, "Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality." Calvin also discussed the frequency of the Lord's Supper celebration. He observed, "The Sacrament was not ordained to be received only once a year as now is the usual custom. Rather, it was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's Passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith." Calvin favoured a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper according to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book IV, Chap. XVII, 44). He based it on such texts as Acts 2: 42; 20:7. However, Calvin did not believe that the texts noted could be used to prove that the Apostolic Church celebrated communion every day or every week. Reformed scholars are still divided over the interpretation of Acts 2: 42. They differ whether the breaking of the bread refers to the Lord's Supper or an ordinary meal.

Historically, Reformed Churches feared that a weekly Lord's Supper celebration would turn it into a mere ritual. For example, Synod of Dort (1574) held that the observance should take place every two months. The CRC Synod of 1914 declared: "The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months." Through these Synodical decisions the Lord's Supper celebrations were judged as highlight occasions in the Reformed Churches. The bimonthly or quarterly celebration prevented the danger that the Lord's Supper would fall into disuse.

Because the Lord's Supper celebration is vital for a healthy personal and congregational life, the Reformed Churches have a preparatory service the Sunday prior to the Lord's Supper celebration. The preparatory form is read. The use of this form prevents the danger that the celebration becomes a mere ritual. We need self-examination. Do we live in peace and harmony with our neighbour? Do we love the Lord? Are we earnestly seeking to please Him?

Historically, the general pattern in Presbyterian churches was quarterly communion or even annual communion. Infrequent communion enhanced the solemnity of the occasion. They also emphasized the need for a preparatory service. Johannes G. Vos. notes in his *The Westminster Larger Catechism. A Commentary*: "The 'communion season' is the divinely appointed time for taking inventory of our spiritual state, measuring ourselves by the divine standard, repenting of and forsaking what is contrary to God's will, and resolving by God's grace to live a life that will be pleasing to Him." And he comments, "The general abandonment of such preparatory services in many denominations, that formerly maintained them, is one of the signs of the spiritual decadence of modern Protestantism."

Is it proper to celebrate the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day? There is no consensus that the Apostolic Church instituted it as a weekly celebration. Furthermore, the reasons for the Synodical decisions to have bimonthly or quarterly celebrations have not changed. We still need self-examination and preparation in the light of the high view we have of the sacrament.

Johan D. Tangelder.
March, 2005