

Here, O My Lord, I See You Face to Face Encouraging the Frequent Reception of the Holy Supper

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*Here, O my Lord, I see you face to face; Here would I touch and handle things unseen,
Here grasp with firmer hand eternal grace, and all my weariness upon you lean.*

*This is the hour of banquet and of song; Here is the heav'nly table spread anew.
Here let me feast and, feasting still prolong the brief bright hour of fellowship with you.¹*

The last time you made your way to the Lord's Table, did it take your breath away as you came "face to face" with your Savior once again? As you received "things unseen" together in, with, and under the wafer of bread and the swallow of wine, did you marvel at the Real Presence, that unexplainable miracle of God's grace and power? As you stepped away from the Lord's Table, did you joyfully bask in sins forgiven, guilt cleansed, faith strengthened, eternal life assured, or even the simple words "for you"?

Even if you did none of these things, would you want to do it again? Would you want to partake of this foretaste of the heavenly feast, this "medicine of immortality"², to enjoy it all over again? I don't think I need to get a show of hands to answer that last question. To a man, every one of us would gladly shout, "Of course!" The Holy Supper is such a blessed, breathtaking, marvelous gift of grace from Christ our Savior that we cannot help desiring it more when we realize what it is we are getting.

At the same time, the Good Shepherd in his infinite wisdom and unfathomable grace has given each of us the responsibility and privilege to serve his flocks as his under-shepherds. It is our responsibility, then, to feed those flocks with a steady diet of the Gospel. From pulpits and in classrooms, we earnestly proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ found only in Holy Scripture. At the font, with the good news of sins forgiven and salvation guaranteed, we gladly welcome young and old into Christ's family through the water and Word of Holy Baptism. At the Table, however, we serve as instruments of Christ, as he gives himself, his real body and his real blood, in, with, and under bread and wine in his Holy Supper to be eaten and drunk for the forgiveness of sins. Dr. Luther put it well when he wrote, "**This sacrament is the Gospel**"³. Unlike Holy Baptism, however, this sacrament is also a Gospel gift we get to enjoy regularly and often. Living and serving in a sinful world also means that ministers of the Gospel have to encourage God's people to frequently partake of his gifts of Word and Sacrament. Unfortunately infrequency of reception has been a problem for the Christian church in every era.

The subject of frequency of Holy Communion has become a very hot topic in recent years. As I quickly found out when researching for this paper, much ink has been spilled on this subject in books and essays in our WELS circles and in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS). What has caused confusion in these discussions is an unfortunate combination of two separate questions – "How often should pastors/congregations offer the Sacrament?" and "How often should Christians receive the Lord's Supper?"⁴ Within this confusion, there are also two conflicting mindsets over which method is best. The one argues that the best encouragement

¹ *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. (Milwaukee:NPH, 1993) (CW) 315:1,2

² St. Ignatius to the Ephesians, Chapter 20 (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-ephesians-roberts.html>)

³ Martin Luther. *Luther's Works (American Edition), Volume 36: Word and Sacrament II*. (Minneapolis:Fortress, 1959). 289. Emphasis mine.

⁴ Rev. Jonathan Micheel. "The Church Offers the Sacrament." Delivered at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Holy Communion, 22-23 September 2003. 14. (<http://www.wlsessays.net/node/1465>)

for more frequent reception is more frequent celebration, which also often includes attachment to a certain liturgical form. The other argues that the best encouragement for more frequent reception is an emphasis on the blessings that flow from reception of the Sacrament, which then often leads to more frequent celebration in the congregation's worship life.⁵

The hope and prayer of this author is that this paper will encourage further discussion on the important subject of frequent reception in the life of the Church; provide a Scriptural and historical basis for encouraging frequent reception of the Holy Supper among God's people; and provide practical suggestions and resources to encourage more frequent reception of the Holy Supper in the congregation and individually. Above all, it is my prayer that Christ, the Lamb of God, increase our appreciation and zeal for his gracious gift of the Sacrament of the Altar through this study!

Why Encourage Frequent Reception of the Lord's Supper?

*Lord Jesus Christ, you have prepared this feast for our salvation;
It is your body and your blood, and at your invitation as weary souls, with sin oppressed,
We come to you for needed rest, for comfort, and for pardon.⁶
Jesus comes today with healing, knocking at my door, appealing, offering pardon, grace, and peace.
He Himself makes preparation, and I hear His invitation: "Come and taste the blessed feast."⁷*

In late 2005, our congregation began an in-depth study of the Lord's Supper. This study was brought on by a desire to change our practice of offering the Lord's Supper once a month to twice a month in our regular Sunday services. Being a small mission congregation with members spread all across northern and central New York, it quickly came to my attention that a rather sizeable number of our active members were missing out on receiving the Sacrament for up to months at a time, even though they were attending worship most other Sundays. Issues with distance, weather, jobs, and family activities were getting in the way. I felt this cause for pastoral concern merited a change in our practice.

For a young pastor with all of three months of experience under his belt, I figured the process would be a piece of cake. If we were to increase reception of the Lord's Supper among our members, we needed to increase the frequency. Oh, and there were plenty of other blessings and benefits that would come with that too, but we needed to offer it more. Over the years, I had learned a great deal about Holy Communion through Confirmation class, class discussions at the prep and college levels, and through a dogmatic study of the Sacrament at the Seminary. I knew what I was getting in the Supper and had grown used to communing more than once a month. I was spiritually hungry for more of that Gospel gift, and I assumed everyone else was as well.

No sooner than my next church council meeting with proposal in hand, I quickly realized that this process would be a lot more challenging than I thought. Objections quickly rose up from members of the council at my rapid attempt to ram through change in our sacramental practice. Needless to say it was a humbling experience, but one of the more mature members of the Council offered a suggestion that in the end proved to be a great blessing to our congregation. "Pastor, why don't we have a Bible study on the Lord's Supper? Then we can offer it on Sundays and midweek so the most members can attend. Then let's survey the members before we go ahead with recommending this change to the voters." Picking up the pieces of my shattered ego, I was satisfied with that suggestion as were the other members of the council, including those who objected.

⁵ Dr. John Brug, "Review of The Blessings of Weekly Communion by Kenneth W. Wieting" Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. Spring 2008, Volume 105:2. 151-153.

⁶ CW 312:1

⁷ LC-MS Commission on Worship. Lutheran Service Book (St. Louis:CPH, 2006) (LSB) 620:1.

I learned some very valuable lessons that evening and in the months that followed as we studied the Sacrament. I learned that you cannot ram through change in a congregation without causing yourself more grief than you will ever expect no matter how great you think your plan is. I also learned that you cannot change a congregation's sacramental practice without preaching, teaching, teaching, and more teaching. I learned that it better be change in line with the Gospel or you will have no justification for it. I learned the importance of encouraging more frequent reception by emphasizing the blessings of the Holy Supper. By the end of our study, which to this day is still the best consistently-attended Bible study we have ever had, there were members who came up to me and asked, "Pastor, if we get all this in the Lord's Supper, why don't we have it every week?" I knew there were many who were not ready for that yet, so I urged cautious, careful, well-taught progress before we get to that point, and hopefully, we will.

...But why go through all the work? Why take the time to teach young and old alike about the Lord's Supper and all the blessings that come from it? When you have so much other work to do, why take up valuable time to encourage more frequent reception of the Holy Supper among God's people, even if your congregation is not discussing offering the Sacrament more frequently?

When considering this question, the best place to look is Holy Scripture, but realize you will be hard pressed to find a specific statement there commanding Christians to receive the Sacrament X number of times. Scripture remains largely silent on the "how often" question. You do have the present imperative of Christ's command when he instituted the Supper, τοῦτο ποιεῖτε⁸ - "Do this", which indicates "that he intended the Supper to be celebrated on a continuing basis."⁹ You also have Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:26¹⁰, where Paul's wording indicates "Christians will repeatedly be participating in this sacramental meal..."¹¹ until he returns in glory, yet apart from these foundational statements, you will not find any direct references to frequent reception of the Holy Supper, as a classmate wisely advised during our congregation's study of the Lord's Supper, "Make sure you don't use ὡσάκις ἕαν as proof for communing twice a month." All that word indicates to us is that the Sacrament is to be celebrated and received often with the frequency of reception ultimately left to the Christian freedom of the believer.

Any attempt on our part to regulate or specify frequency for anyone else would be inappropriate. Interestingly enough, in the debates about the frequency of Holy Communion, this is the one aspect that every Lutheran writer seems to be agreed upon. You cannot force, regulate or specify frequency of reception on individual believers. To do so would be a return to the oppressive laws of the Papists and would change this blessed Gospel gift into a Law-demanded work, but more on that later.

With no direct command from the Lord indicating a certain frequency and the realization that Law motivation only creates despair or self-righteousness, we need to consider a different approach if we are to encourage frequent reception of the Supper among God's people.

We need to consider the nature of the Sacrament. Dr. Luther explains in his Small Catechism, "**First: What is the Sacrament of Holy Communion?** It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink"¹², or as we heard him say more simply, "This sacrament is the Gospel."¹³ The Holy Supper is a true means of grace, through which God conveys to us

⁸ Luke 22:19 - τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν; 1 Corinthians 11:24b-25 - τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ... τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὡσάκις ἕαν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. (Greek from The Greek New Testament, 4th Revised Edition, Electronic Edition – Logos Digital Library System).

⁹ Micheel 14.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:26 - ὡσάκις γὰρ ἕαν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ. New American Standard Bible - For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

¹¹ WELS Q&A. "Frequency of Receiving Communion" Date Unknown. (http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1518&cuTopic_topicID=60&cuItem_itemID=26886)

¹² Prof. Em. David Kuske. Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English (Revised). (Milwaukee:NPH, 1998) 13.

¹³ Luther 289.

the blessings of his grace. Gaylin Schmeling of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary writes in his devotional, God's Gift to You: A Devotional Book on the Lord's Supper,

The Lord's Supper is a means of grace. By means of grace we mean an instrument, or channel, that brings the benefits of the cross to us and makes them our own. This Sacrament is the gospel. Here we receive all the benefits of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. On the cross Jesus obtained salvation for all people. He won salvation once and for all at Calvary, but he did not distribute and give it on the cross. This he does through the Supper and the other means of grace, Baptism and the Word.¹⁴

When we take a closer look at the blessings that come from this means of grace, we quickly see how they could prove useful when encouraging frequent reception of the Supper among God's people. To give us some guidance we review Dr. Luther's explanation of the blessings of Holy Communion from his *Small Catechism*.

Second: *What blessing do we receive through this eating and drinking?*

That is shown us by these words: "Given" and "poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." Through these words we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in this sacrament. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.¹⁵

The Blessing of Forgiveness

*Mine is the sin but yours the righteousness; Mine is the guilt but yours the cleansing blood. Here is my robe, my refuge, and my peace: Your blood, your righteousness, O Lord, my God.*¹⁶

The primary blessing of the Holy Supper is the forgiveness of sins. This becomes very clear from Christ's Words of Institution as we read in Matthew 26:26-28, "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*.'"

There is an added element to this blessing of forgiveness that makes it distinctly personal as we read in Paul's recounting of the Words of Institution in 1 Corinthians 11:24, "...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 his *Large Catechism*, Dr. Luther brings together the blessing and the recipient of the blessing.

We come now to the power and benefit of the Sacrament, the real purpose for which it was instituted. It is most necessary to grasp what its power and its benefit are in order to know what to look for and what to get out of the Sacrament. This is clearly evident from the words just quoted: "This is my body and blood given and poured out *for you* for the forgiveness of sins." In other words, we go to the Sacrament because there we receive a great treasure through which and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. Why is that? Because there are the words, and it is they that give us this forgiveness. This is why Christ bids me to eat and to drink: He wants the Sacrament to be mine and to be a blessing to me as a sure pledge and sign of the treasure—yes, to be the very treasure itself which is my security against sin, death, and all evils.¹⁷

¹⁴ Pres. Gaylin Schmeling. God's Gift to You: A Devotional Book on the Lord's Supper. (Milwaukee:NPH, 2001) 11.

¹⁵ Kuske 13.

¹⁶ CW 315:4

¹⁷ F. Samuel Janzow. Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions. (St. Louis:CPH, 1978) 112.

It takes very little to see the practical nature of this blessing. In the Holy Supper, all other blessings are secondary compared to the blessing of forgiveness. We sin daily and so do all our members. Each of us desperately needs the assurance of the forgiveness of sins. In the Supper we receive Christ's body pierced for our transgressions and Christ's blood shed for our iniquities together with bread and wine. It is a visible treasure of Christ's full and free forgiveness that we touch and taste in the Supper. For that reason, when we come to the Lord's Table in repentance and receive the Sacrament, no matter how awful our past sins might be, no matter how heavy our load of guilt might be, every partaker can be assured that every single one of those sins has been forgiven by Christ's sacrifice on the cross for them.

The Blessing of Life

*Here would I feed upon the bread of God, here drink with Thee the royal wine of heav'n;
Here would I lay aside each earthly load, here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiv'n.*¹⁸

Forgiveness is by and large the primary blessing of the Holy Supper, but there are plenty of others. Besides forgiveness, Dr. Luther lists life. This is the blessing often described as "strengthening of one's faith". In his Large Catechism, Luther expresses the importance of the Holy Supper for our difficult struggle in this sinful world and against our sinful natures.

Therefore, it is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood...have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and attacks of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint and at times even stumble. Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger. For the new life should be one that continually develops and progresses. But it has to suffer a great deal of opposition...For times like these, when our heart feels too sorely pressed, this comfort of the Lord's Supper is given to bring us new strength and refreshment.¹⁹

The Sacrament provides necessary nourishment for the weary, sin-sick soul. In turn, this nourishment strengthens our faith, empowers the New Man for sanctified living, and enables us to bear life's burdens to the end of life. Pres. Schmeling writes about this blessing,

The body and blood of our Lord in the Supper are life giving. They are never unfruitful, impotent, or useless. Here we receive the body and blood of the living God into this body made of dust. What could be more powerful? What could be more beneficial?... The Lord's Supper is a heavenly and spiritual nourishment for both the body and soul of the believer unto eternal life. Because of this, believers in every burden and conflict of life will come to the Supper for the strengthening of their faith. This will also be the case with physical needs and sickness and especially at the hour of death. For there is no better help than that of the divine physician, who gives his life-giving flesh and blood as the soothing medicine, which aids and quickens us in soul and body.²⁰

¹⁸ *LSB* 631:2

¹⁹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000) (KW) 469 – *The Large Catechism* (LC) V:23-27.

²⁰ Schmeling 12,13.

As with forgiveness, one can easily see the practical nature of the blessing of life in the reception of the Sacrament. When we consider the Sacrament “a true, life-giving food and...a true, life-giving drink”²¹, it should come as no surprise when shut-ins or those near death eagerly, even hungrily, receive Christ’s body and blood in the Supper. In my brief ministry, I have experienced that time and again as God’s people seek nourishment for their souls for the difficult journey ahead.

The Blessing of Communion

*With you, Lord, I am now united; I live in you and you in me.
No sorrow fills my soul; delighted, it finds its peace on Calvary.
Lord, may your body and your blood be for my soul the highest good!²²
One bread, one cup, one body, we, rejoicing in our unity,
Proclaim Your love until You come to bring Your scattered loved ones home.²³*

Another blessing often mentioned besides those listed by Luther is the blessing of communion – union with Christ and with his people at his Table. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” Pres. Schmeling explains why this blessing is so important for God’s people,

In the Supper there is an intimate union with Christ, for he comes to believers with his body and blood and remains with them. He draws us into union and communion with the deity itself. As we are united with Christ in his Supper, so we are also spiritually united with the members of his body, the church. One cannot be united with Christ without also at the same time existing in communion with all the other members of the body. As he comes into us with his flesh and blood, uniting us with himself, so he comes into all the other communicants, drawing us together as his church.²⁴

Again we see the practical aspects of this blessing. As we heard in the hymn earlier, here in the Sacrament of the Altar we come face to face with Christ, as close as possible on this side of heaven. Christ actually gives himself to us together with bread and wine! When you think about it, does it not make your jaw drop as you marvel at the miracle of the Real Presence? It makes one wonder where there is not greater celebration when we receive the Holy Supper. Christ with all his power, all his grace, all his blessing sits down and gives himself to us. Then to top it all off, we are not alone in enjoying this Holy Communion, but rather we are joined at the Lord’s Table with those who are one with us in Christ, who are united with us through a common confession of holding to God’s Word in its truth and purity.

So often we focus on the negative aspect of close(d) communion and how people regard it as intolerant and judgmental. While there is no denying the objections we face for such an ancient, Scriptural practice, far too often we neglect to rejoice in the blessing of that communion. We neglect to rejoice in the opportunity to join our brothers and sisters in Christ at the Lord’s Table declaring to the world that we kneel together and stand together as members of Christ’s church, that we have real unity in what we believe and teach (an increasingly rare blessing in this ecumenical age!) and not in some lowest-common-denominator brand of fellowship like so many others around us. One of my personal joys in the ministry is communing a youth or adult confirmand for the first time. There is always a little awkwardness as they get used to our congregation’s particular practice and

²¹ KW – *Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration (FC:SD)* VIII:76, pg. 631.

²² CW 310:12

²³ LSB 623:4

²⁴ Schmeling 14.

usually a few nerves, but there is always joy on their faces and joy on the faces of the members of the congregation as they finally join God’s people at the Table publicly declaring their unity by their actions.

The Blessing of Eternal Salvation

*Feast after feast thus comes and passes by, yet, passing, points to that glad feast above,
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy, the Lamb’s great marriage feast of bliss and love.*²⁵

The third blessing that Luther lists in his Small Catechism is eternal salvation. In the First Century, St. Ignatius described the Holy Supper as “the medicine of immortality”²⁶. Because at the Lord’s Table we receive the forgiveness of sins and strength for our new lives in Christ, we also find there the blessing of eternal salvation. This particular blessing is often described as “preparation for the marriage supper in heaven”²⁷ or “a food preparing us for eternal life.”²⁸ The Holy Supper assures us that heaven is ours and salvation is guaranteed in the body and blood of Christ, so that one day we will join all the saints around the table at the marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven.²⁹ Martin Chemnitz comments on this blessing of eternal salvation as he discusses the comfort of the Real Presence to Christians under the cross.

Our nature, although according to the promise we have the hope of glorification, is still befouled with uncleanness, oppressed with miseries, and exposed to all the darts of Satan, the world, and the flesh. As a result our faith is under the cross and still terribly tossed about by temptations. Therefore in the Supper Christ offers us His own body and blood which have been exalted above all miseries into the glory of the Father. He does this in such a way that through them He joins Himself to this miserable nature of ours, so that with this most present and sure guarantee and seal He may give us the certainty that He does not wish us to remain in these miseries forever but that we shall someday be conformed to His glorious body which He offers to us in the Supper as a seal of our own coming glorification.³⁰

While describing the public confession of faith involved in the Holy Supper, St. Paul also describes the eschatological aspect of the Sacrament in 1 Corinthians 11:26, “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*.” It is good for us to remember that when we partake of the Holy Supper, we not only remember Christ’s suffering and death for the forgiveness of our sins, but we also look forward to the fulfillment of our salvation when he returns on the Last Day. In that way, then, the Holy Supper provides us with a frequent opportunity to have our eagerness for Christ’s return strengthened no matter when we partake of it during the church year.

Other Blessings

To conclude our discussion of the blessings of the Holy Supper, it is worth noting that Lutheran authors over the centuries have suggested other blessings that could easily be discussed when it comes to encouraging

²⁵ CW 315:6

²⁶ St. Ignatius to the Ephesians, Chapter 20 (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-ephesians-roberts.html>)

²⁷ Paul E. Kretzmann. This Do Ye Often. (Milwaukee:NPH, 1952) 67.

²⁸ Schmeling 15.

²⁹ In a devotion on Re 7:14, Pres. Schmeling offers some insight into this by pointing to the shape of communion rails in old Norwegian Lutheran churches. He writes, “In many old Norwegian churches, the altar rail forms a half circle. It is built to picture the circle continuing on behind the altar into the eternal. The other half of the circle is the feast of heaven. As we eat with the Lord on this side of heaven, our brothers and sisters who have gone before are eating on that side of heaven, all one in the Lord. This is our closest relationship with our loved ones who have died in the Lord. As we eat at the Lord’s Table here, we have the certainty that we will feast with him forever in paradise above—the Lamb’s high feast.” (Schmeling 92)

³⁰ Martin Chemnitz. The Lord’s Supper (*De coena Domini*). tr. J.A.O. Preus. (St. Louis:CPH, 1979) 191.

frequent reception of the Holy Supper. Some might surprise you that they are listed under the category of blessings (and therefore may not strike you as such), but here are a few worth noting:

1. Remembrance of the death of Christ
2. The assurance that we are firmly kept and preserved by the power of God in his covenant of grace
3. The stimulus of self-examination
4. A confession concerning the person of Christ
5. A better understanding of Christ's sacrifice
6. Obedience to the Savior's command
7. Laying the foundation of complete trust in Christ
8. An example and incentive to others
9. Thanksgiving (*Eucharist*)
10. Increase in love for Christ and for our neighbor³¹

The Sacrament of the Altar is the Gospel. The Holy Supper is a means of grace. With a closer look at just four of the blessings that flow out of the reception of the Sacrament, it becomes quite clear which mindset we are to take when encouraging frequent reception of the Supper among God's people. As we now take a look at the "how" of encouraging frequent reception, we will see that such an emphasis on the blessings of receiving the Sacrament is not only the best form of encouragement in our own day, but was the cherished practice of our Lutheran forefathers as they ministered to God's people.

How Do We Encourage Frequent Reception of the Holy Supper?

*Soul, adorn yourself with gladness; Leave the gloomy haunts of sadness,
Come into the daylight's splendor, there with joy your praises render.
Bless the One whose grace unbounded this amazing banquet founded;
He, though heav'nly, high, and holy, deigns to dwell with you most lowly.
Hasten as a bride to meet him, and with loving rev'rence greet him,
For with words of life immortal he is knocking at your portal.
Open wide the gates before him, saying, as you there adore him:
Grant, Lord, that I now receive you, that I nevermore will leave you.
He who craves a precious treasure neither cost nor pain will measure,
But the priceless gifts of heaven God to us has freely given.
Though the wealth of earth were proffered, naught would buy the gifts here offered:
Christ's true body, for you riven, and his blood, for you once given.³²*

Equipped with the proper tools for Gospel motivation, we have one more question to consider, "How do we encourage frequent reception of the Holy Supper?" Well, Shepherd, it starts with you. In Homiletics courses, preachers are encouraged to preach to themselves first when writing and delivering a sermon. A similar encouragement can be given to the Lord's shepherds when it comes to encouraging frequent reception, particularly in the pastor's personal practice and his attitude.

It was not all that long ago that pastoral theology texts advised pastors that "under ordinary circumstances" they would not have to request a lay leader to administer the Sacrament to him "...for pastors, almost without exception, have ample opportunity to receive the Sacrament at the time when conferences and

³¹ 1-2 – Martin Chemnitz. Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion. tr. Luther Poellot. (St. Louis:CPH, 1981) 128-129; 3-8 – Kretzmann 6; 9-10 – Kenneth Wieting. The Blessings of Weekly Communion. (St. Louis:CPH, 2006) 203, 215.

³² *LSB* 636:1, *CW* 311:2-3.

synods are held or by calling in a brother minister for that purpose.”³³ As time went on and common practice changed to more frequent celebrations of the Sacrament, this position softened. Schuetze and Habeck write, “The pastor receives communion at conferences and conventions. He, however, is a communicant of his congregation and may wish to commune in fellowship with the members and thus supplement the less frequent opportunities which conferences provide.”³⁴ From my limited experience, I think we can safely assume this suggestion has become common practice in most of our congregations where there is neither an associate pastor, vicar, or male called worker. I also think we can safely assume that our pastors receive the Holy Supper whenever it is offered, though there might be variations if multiple services are offered. Whatever your personal practice might be, we need to always keep in mind the importance of the pastor’s model for the people.³⁵ Whether it is his regular reception of the Sacrament, his joy for ministry, or his faithfulness to the Word, the flock is watching the shepherd and often will follow his example for good or ill.

As part of that model for God’s people, another area we need to keep in mind is our attitude about the Sacrament and about receiving the Sacrament. When it comes to teaching or preaching about the Sacrament, do you convey the reverent joy that comes from the good news of sins forgiven through the Supper? When it comes to the Order of the Sacrament and its distribution, is it something you are trying to get through because the service is going long? Have you done it so often that you could easily catch yourself being distracted when making your way through the Preface, the Consecration, the Distribution, and/or the Dismissal? Now I am not suggesting that you put on some kind of superficial front, but our attitude about the Sacrament can either convey our reverent joy that flows from the blessings of the Holy Supper or unintentionally teach the people that the Sacrament really is not that big of a deal. If we are to encourage God’s people to frequently receive the Holy Supper, Pastor, it starts with you.³⁶

From the Pastor’s personal practice, we then need to consider how to encourage frequent reception of the Holy Supper on the congregational level. In a recent Facebook conversation with a fellow WELS pastor, I received some good advice that lays the groundwork for our discussion here. Rev. Johnold Strey wrote,

We cannot overdose on the gospel. Given that many of our people are not in contact with the means of grace Monday through Saturday, we need to give them as much contact with the means of grace on Sunday morning as possible, and in as many avenues as possible (Scripture, sermon, absolution, song texts, symbolism, sacrament). Luther's thoughts about teaching people toward the Sacrament so that they ask us to offer it is a good spirit to take into the discussion. It's not about "thou shalt," but "let us!"³⁷

Before we continue with practical ways to encourage frequent reception in our congregations, here is the Luther quote referred to above. “This, too, needs to be stressed, while keeping in mind that 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,*

³³ Dr. John Fritz. Pastoral Theology: A Handbook of Scriptural Principles Written Especially for Pastors of the Lutheran Church. (St. Louis:CPH, 1932) 146.

³⁴ Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck. The Shepherd Under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology. 2nd Ed. (Milwaukee: NPH, 1981) 86.

³⁵ My father, Rev. Alan Gumm, shared a conversation that happened when he first started serving his current congregation, Hope Ev. Lutheran Church in West Chicago, IL. At the time, his congregation offered two services on a Sunday morning. Right before the late service, the elder who was assigned the task of assisting with communion asked my father if he was going to commune during the late service. My father replied, “No, I took it in the early service.” The elder responded, “Have you sinned since the early service?” My father communed in the late service.

³⁶ Rev. Joel Sauer offers an excellent paper on the Pastor’s personal preparation for the Sacrament, so he can prepare God’s people to receive it. His paper is entitled, “Reception of the Lord’s Supper: Preparing Myself and My People”. You can find the essay in the Bibliography and its location on the web. It is definitely worth the read!

³⁷ Rev. Johnold Strey. Facebook Conversation. 15 September 2009.

*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.*³⁸ So how do we go about doing this?

Teach, Teach, and Teach Some More!

A vital lesson I learned right away when our congregation considered offering the Lord's Supper more often was the importance of spending time teaching the Sacrament to young and old alike. Real time for teaching was spent on a month's worth of Sunday mornings and a month's worth of Wednesday evenings to make sure that as many of our communicant members as possible had a chance to receive an in-depth study of the Sacrament before any decision was made.³⁹ The response that study received was quite amazing with members basically doing what Luther said would happen—the people “just plain compelled me to administer the sacrament to them.” Consider ways that some kind of study of the Lord's Supper can be incorporated into the Adult Bible Studies offered at your congregation. Perhaps it could be included in a 6-year rotation of in-depth studies on each chief part of the Catechism.

Other obvious areas where teaching the Sacrament will take place are in Youth Confirmation and Bible Information Classes (BIC). Another personal joy of ministry for me is teaching the Sacraments in these classes, including walking the confirmands through the Lord's Supper in the sanctuary before they are confirmed. Youth and Adult Confirmation classes are great opportunities to encourage frequent reception as young and old alike prepare to receive the Sacrament at your church for the first time.

This is also a time when you will have to answer a variety of questions about the Sacrament and receiving the Lord's Supper. For busy pastors, it is often easy to look with dread to a lesson on the Lord's Supper, because of the diverse views that students, especially adults, bring to the table. When you remember the countless blessings Christ gives through the Sacrament, however, see these lessons not as burdens to “get through”, but as opportunities to convey what a wondrous gift the Holy Supper truly is as Christ gives us himself and all his blessings of grace therein. You can also encourage good preparation for the Sacrament by inviting people to visit you for private absolution (a sadly rare practice today!) or by sharing the “Personal Preparation for Holy Communion” from *Christian Worship*, page 156, and encouraging its use. Another suggestion you can use to encourage not only frequent reception of the Holy Supper, but to encourage the continued spiritual growth of youth confirmands is to give them a “Spiritual Growth Kit” when they are confirmed. Our congregation originally started giving confirmands a prayer book at their confirmation, but that has since grown into a prayer book, a copy of Gaylin Schmeling's devotional on the Lord's Supper⁴⁰ or Richard Lauersdorf's devotional *As Luther Taught the Word of Truth: Devotions on the Small Catechism*, and a copy of Richard Melheim's introductory booklet, *Welcome to the Lord's Table*.⁴¹

There are also plenty of opportunities to teach pre-Confirmation children, post-Confirmation teens, besides the other members of the congregation on a continuing basis.⁴² The key for encouraging frequent reception among God's people is looking for opportunities to teach about this wonderful gift of God's grace in the Holy Supper and then taking those opportunities to teach God's people.

Setting the Table – Preaching the Sacrament

Indeed, true Christians who cherish and honor the sacrament should of their own accord urge and constrain themselves to go. However, in order that the simple people and the weak, who would

³⁸ *KW – The Small Catechism (FC:SC)* Preface:21-22, pg. 350. Emphasis mine.

³⁹ If the reader would be interested in a digital version of the Bible study on the Lord's Supper we used in December/January 2006, please contact the author of this paper. You will receive my permission to make use of this Bible study or any part of it.

⁴⁰ Sadly this devotional is now out of print, but Lauersdorf's devotional is an excellent substitute that not only covers the Holy Supper, but the other parts of *The Small Catechism*. Both books were/are published by Northwestern Publishing House.

⁴¹ This book is available through Concordia Publishing House.

⁴² Pastor Micheel provides a host of suggestions for teaching these various groups in his Symposium essay, 2-7.

also like to be Christians, may be induced to see the reason and the need for receiving the sacrament, we shall talk a little about this. As in other matters that have to do with faith, love, and patience, it is not enough just to teach and to instruct, but there must also be daily exhortation, so that *on this subject we must be persistent in preaching*, lest people become indifferent and bored. For we know and feel how the devil always sets himself against this and every other Christian activity, hounding and driving people from it as much as he can.⁴³

Infrequency of receiving the Lord's Supper has been a problem for the church in every era. It was seen in every generation and we see it today in our congregations and church body. It was no different in Luther's era, as he did battle with the same devil we fight, and fought with the same sword of the Spirit we have—the Word of God. Luther's encouragement is as applicable for us today as it was to the Lutheran preachers of the 16th Century. Not only do we teach the Supper, we need to preach it too!

There are really two types of preaching the Sacrament—preaching about it and preaching to it. Perhaps it is time to offer some catechetical preaching during the summer and fall. This often has the effect of opening some eyes in the congregation as people recall what they learned years ago or realize what they really never knew.⁴⁴ Other possibilities for preaching about the Sacrament are: specific opportunities during the church year as on Maundy Thursday; a topical sermon series on the Sacrament itself; a sermon series on the Ordinary, especially the canticles of the Order of the Sacrament; and occasional references to highlight one or more facets of the Supper when a text provides the opportunity.⁴⁵

Besides preaching *about* the Sacrament, we also preach people *to* the Sacrament. That's what Dr. Luther was referring to when he said, "...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."⁴⁶ How do we preach like this? This might sound familiar. We preach God's condemning Law in all its severity, then we follow that up with the good news of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and then announce that Christ is giving his very body and blood in the Sacrament for forgiveness, new life, and salvation. To preach people *to* the Sacrament, we preach Law and Gospel in Word and Sacraments. We do not force or compel anyone to receive the Sacrament. Law motivation never works. It only creates despair and self-righteousness, but since the Sacrament is Gospel, let us proclaim it in all its blessed beauty as the visible, physical forgiveness of our sins directly from Christ himself. In reality through our preaching, which always takes place before the Sacrament, we have opportunity to "set the table", to urge and encourage God's people to receive all the blessings and benefits of the Gospel gift of the Holy Supper, to realize what they are receiving in, with, and under that bread and wine.⁴⁷

More Frequent Opportunities?

Now this particular subject could take a paper onto itself (and it has!). As you encourage a practice of frequent reception in your congregation, however, the subject of offering more frequent celebrations of the Holy Supper (and even every Sunday Communion) will likely come up for discussion. Rather than spend another paper's worth of time addressing the question "How often should pastors/congregations offer the Holy Supper?", here are a few suggestions and principles to aid you as these discussions come up in your own congregation(s) as you encourage frequent reception among God's people.

⁴³ *KW:LC V:43-44*, pg. 471. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ This also applies to the other parts of the Catechism as well.

⁴⁵ Micheel 7-10.

⁴⁶ *KW:SC Preface:21-22*, pg. 350.

⁴⁷ LC-MS Pastor Kenneth Wieting fleshes out this concept in his article, "Sacramental Preaching: The Lord's Supper" in Liturgical Preaching. Eds. Paul Grime and Dean Nadasdy. (St. Louis:CPH, 2001) 71-75.

- Before you even get into this discussion, understand why it is a discussion worth having in your congregation. As Dr. Luther said, “This sacrament is the Gospel.”⁴⁸ The Sacrament is a precious sin-forgiving, life-giving, salvation-assuring gift of grace from our loving God. We cannot get enough of that good news in its visible form. It is worth noting again, “We cannot overdose on the gospel. Given that many of our people are not in contact with the means of grace Monday through Saturday, we need to give them as much contact with the means of grace on Sunday morning as possible, and in as many avenues as possible (Scripture, sermon, absolution, song texts, symbolism, sacrament).” When you and your congregation realize the blessings and benefits that flow from the Lord’s hand of grace through his Holy Supper, having this discussion loses some of its terror.
- Get to know the history of the ebb and flow of frequent celebrations of the Sacrament and the reasons why the Christian/Lutheran church got away from frequent celebrations. As interesting as it would be for us to work our way through that this morning, a handful of authors have done a fine job of providing a relatively unbiased view of this history. I recommend checking out what they have to say to get a good grasp of this history: Rev. Jonathan Micheel’s 2003 WLS Symposium essay, “The Church Offers Holy Communion” – pgs. 14-18; Take Eat, Take Drink: The Lord’s Supper Through the Centuries by Rev.. Em. Ernest Bartels (LC-MS); and Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church by Prof. Timothy Maschke – pgs. 464-465.⁴⁹
- Realize that there will be objections to more frequent celebrations. As mentioned at the beginning of the “why?” section, my initial attempt to change our congregation’s sacramental practice was quickly met with some objections. As we studied the Sacrament, I discovered that these objections were quite common when the subject of frequent celebrations of the Holy Supper comes up for discussion. The two I encountered were “If we offer Communion too often, it won’t seem as special”, and “If we have it more often, it will scare off visitors.” I found that these particular objections stemmed from a fear of the unknown and a certain amount of doubt that the Sacrament was capable of carrying out the purpose for which Christ instituted it—as a means of grace.⁵⁰ When it came to visitors and our practice of close(d) communion, we would have to deal with it no matter when we celebrated the Sacrament. At the same time, these objections made it necessary to teach, teach, and teach some more the Sacrament of the Altar and the blessings therein. For that reason, rather than looking at this discussion as a tough task we want to avoid because of the objections, we should rather expect them and use them as opportunity to provide our flock with thorough training, so they can appreciate the Sacrament all the more for how “special” it is when they receive it.
- Know why you are doing it – One objection that often comes up during discussions on frequent celebration is “Don’t make communing into a new law”. This was a concern for Dr. Luther during the early years of the Reformation in Wittenberg, and it ought to be a concern for us as well. Former WLS President Edmund Reim offered some good advice on this subject in a 1948 *Quartalschrift* article on “The Liturgical Crisis in Wittenberg, 1524”.

For Luther the very greatness of the Sacramental Gift presupposed a genuine, unfeigned demand for its administration. Our generation can learn much from this attitude of Luther. If the Liturgical Movement of our day will see its mission in reviving the interest of the Church in the Sacrament which has been entrusted to it, and in stimulating an increased desire in our congregations for the blessings which are thereby conferred upon us, and if the exponents of this movement will content themselves with patient Scriptural indoctrination and evangelical invitation and persuasion as their means for attaining this end, then they will certainly be rendering a service of the highest order. And if such efforts will lead to a situation where it

⁴⁸ Luther 289.

⁴⁹ Rev. Kenneth Wieting (LC-MS) also has an interesting history in his book, The Blessings of Weekly Communion, but on occasion, it struck me that he was straining at times to give evidence for the necessity of every Sunday communion.

⁵⁰ For more about addressing these objections and others, check out pgs. 19-28 of Rev. Micheel’s WLS Symposium essay.

becomes advisable to provide more frequent opportunities for communion, such steps will surely be welcomed by all concerned. But if the argument for a more frequent celebration of the Sacrament is to consist of attempts to discredit our present Sunday worship because it often is “merely” a service of the Word, if the communion is treated as a liturgical requirement which is needed either for the sake of completeness of the service or for the sake of ancient tradition, then we are on the way to the ritualism against which Luther protested so vigorously.⁵¹

- Make haste slowly and keep on preaching, teaching, and teaching some more. These discussions touch on very personal aspects of your members’ personal piety. Be patient and keep on teaching!

Encouraging Individual Members

When encouraging individual members to receive the Holy Supper frequently, the faithful shepherd needs to remember that neglect of the Word and Sacrament often go in hand in hand. He will, therefore, need to provide brotherly admonition and encouragement when such a pattern of infrequency becomes apparent in a believer’s life. As those with much or little experience know, dealing with such infrequency is a constant struggle for the pastor and the congregation, but a worthy struggle nonetheless.

When carrying out this brotherly admonition, our forefathers from the Reformation, Post-Reformation and Modern eras of the Lutheran church provide some excellent advice for pastors encouraging frequent reception today among God’s people.

Let those who profess to be Christians prepare to receive this blessed sacrament often... It is of course true what we said, that nobody should ever be driven or forced to attend the Lord’s Supper, lest a new slaughter of souls begin. We must nevertheless understand that people who absent themselves and abstain for such long periods of time from the Sacrament are not to be taken for Christians... I call it scorning the Sacrament when a person, though there is nothing to hinder his attendance, lets a long time pass without ever desiring the Lord’s Supper....⁵² (Martin Luther – *Large Catechism*)

Therefore, you ask, how often would be enough to have been a guest of this Supper? It is not for any man to give a specific answer to this, either with a number or with a certain measure, other than as often as a troubled conscience feels and recognizes that it needs those benefits that are offered in the Supper for comfort and strengthening. Consciences are therefore not to be forced but aroused to frequent use of this Supper by earnest admonition and by consideration of how necessary [and] likewise how salutary and profitable the use of this Supper is for us. But he that does not attend this most holy table thereby clearly shows that he is a Christian in name rather than in fact, namely that he is one who neglects and despises the command of his Savior, who says: Eat, drink, and do this as often etc.⁵³ (Martin Chemnitz – *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*)

In providing encouragement, the impression must not be given that to receive communion a specific number of times is necessary as a part of fulfilling one’s Christian duty. The Lord does not by law require communion attendance. But he does graciously invite sinners to his Supper for the comfort and healing it offers. Let the pastor work toward more frequent use of this sacrament by fanning the flame of desire for it. This includes demonstrating the need for it by exposing sin and by reminding his hearers that the fruits of Jesus’ death are offered to the sinner

⁵¹ Prof. Edmund Reim. “The Liturgical Crisis in Wittenberg, 1524”. *Quartalschrift/Theological Quarterly*. July 1948, volume 45:3. 175.

⁵² Janzow 115-116.

⁵³ Chemnitz *Enchiridion* 128.

personally and directly as he eats and drinks Jesus' body and blood.⁵⁴ (Schuetze and Habeck – *The Shepherd Under Christ*)

From these quotes we can see how much care and concern our forefathers had for the souls under their care and how much they desired the souls under their care would receive the Sacrament at the Lord's Table. At the same time, they make it very clear that frequent reception should never be made into a law or a demand of duty or a fulfillment of a requirement. To do so would change the Gospel into Law. Their faithful example is worth our imitation in these days when the Sacrament is often neglected.

One other suggestion for encouraging frequent reception among individual believers is the use of solid Lutheran devotional materials that have some amount of focus on the Sacrament. Two resources that I have found particularly useful in this regard are the aforementioned devotional *God's Gift to You* by Pres. Gaylin Schemling (ELS) and a 1952 NPH devotional entitled *This Do Ye Often* by Rev. Paul E. Kretzmann (LC-MS). Though both are out-of-print at present, they are good examples of Scriptural devotional material that can help prepare and encourage Christians for reception of the Supper.

Conclusion

Not long after I was ordained, one of our organists began to play the hymn that gives this paper its title whenever I put away and cover the Communion vessels at the end of the Distribution. There is something bittersweet about the covering of the vessels as the strains of "Here, O My Lord, I See You Face to Face" play in the background. At the end of that hymn are two verses that express the communicant's confidence in Christ's presence though the feast is over, while looking ahead to the marriage feast in heaven when we will see Christ face to face.

*Too soon we rise; the vessels disappear. The feast, though not the love, is past and gone.
The bread and wine remove, but you are here, nearer than ever, still my shield and sun.
Feast after feast thus comes and passes by, yet, passing, points to that glad feast above,
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy, the Lamb's great marriage feast of bliss and love.*⁵⁵

So how do you encourage frequent reception of the Holy Supper among God's people? Proclaim it. Teach it. Preach it. Help your flock to appreciate it for what is – a means of grace. It is not ours to embellish or make more than it is, nor is it something for us to neglect for other things. This Sacrament is simply the Gospel—God's gift to us, food for the soul, and a foretaste of heaven. I hope it takes your breath away whenever you celebrate it and fills your flock with joy-filled longing for the day when the feast will never end.

Soli Deo Gloria!

⁵⁴ Schuetze and Habeck 86.

⁵⁵ CW 315:5-6

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