

The Church Offers Holy Communion

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In his novel, *The Hammer of God*, Lutheran theologian and pastor Bo Giertz tells three tales that happen at the same Lutheran parish in Sweden over the course of three centuries. In the first story, a young, cultured, intellectual pastor is forced to leave the comfort of the parsonage to visit a dying man in the middle of the night. Out of his element, the young pastor must discuss matters of spiritual life and death with this tormented man, who—more than the pastor himself ever has—is grappling with guilt as he prepares to face the holy God. Usually equipped with a flowery, poetic sermon, the pastor finds himself suddenly without anything wise to say. So he turns to the old agenda he has brought with him. He prepares the Communion for the man and the family members who have gathered by his bedside. He reads the confession of sins as the people join their voices to his. Then he reads the absolution. As a smile begins to play on the dying man's lips, the pastor continues.

He read the Admonition and the Words of Institution over the bread and the wine. The holy words restored his confidence. Here, nothing depended on himself. Here he was simply a steward, a nameless link in the long succession of hands which Christ had used throughout the ages to distribute His gifts to men. For the first time he felt it a relief, rather than a compulsion, to be nothing but a servant of the church, without any contribution of his own, and with no other glory to seek than to steward the holy heritage honorably.¹

The Lord's Supper is not something that we do. Sure, we (or the altar guild members) prepare the table. We sing the songs. We speak the words. We distribute. We eat and drink. Yet we are not the primary actors when the Sacrament takes place. Christ is. The Supper's bread and wine, created by the Father, are the true body and blood of Christ, which he gives into mouths cleansed by the Spirit.

This essay means to spark discussion of a few practical issues related to the Lord's Supper. We wish to examine—not comprehensively, but perhaps a little more deeply than we usually do—several of the practical things related to offering and receiving this Sacrament. We hope that this will spur further reflection and discussion, which will in turn lead to a greater sacramental piety among our people. (A working definition of “sacramental piety” might be “how we put into practice what we believe about the Sacrament”.) Even as we discuss these things, however, we dare not think of the Supper as something that is ours to treat in whatever way we please. That was the

¹ Bo Giertz, translated by Clifford Ansgar Nelson. *The Hammer of God: A Novel about the Cure of Souls*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960. pp.33f.

Corinthians' mistake. This is the *Lord's Supper*. Through it he does something to us. We seek only to be stewards, links "in the long succession of hands which Christ [has] used throughout the ages to distribute His gifts to men."²

Teaching the Sacrament

One of the members of our congregation, after years of farming in the California sun, was diagnosed with melanoma. After his condition worsened and he was unable to travel, my associate and I began going to his home once a month, since he lived some 100 miles from our church. We would gather with him and his extended family in their large family room and hold a service. Nothing fancy—assorted chairs from the house set up in front of a small makeshift altar. Page 15 sung to HymnSoft played on their home computer. But our Lord was present, freely giving pardon and peace through Word and Sacrament. Talented and resourceful, the family had constructed a Communion rail to allow those who were able to kneel while receiving the Sacrament. After one of the services, while the chairs were being rearranged for a Bible study, I caught my two daughters, then ages two and four, at the rail "playing" the Lord's Supper. Between the two of them, they knew most of the words I spoke during the distribution, and they knew what happened. They knew that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were the body and blood of Jesus Christ, meant to be distributed, eaten and drunk.

While this experience taught me that my daughters needed some catechesis on, among other things, Augustana XIV and *rite vocatus*, it taught me something else as well. It's never too early to begin teaching and learning about the Lord's Supper.

Non-reading children can receive some basic instruction about the Supper. We won't start with the Marburg Colloquy ("Good morning, boys and girls. Can you say *Oecolampadius*?"), but with the basics. In children's sermons or Sunday School opening devotions, we can show them the altar and elements and simply explain what happens. Being as concrete as possible is important. In the Lord's Supper Jesus really comes in a

² Fitting questions at the beginning of a long essay: "Why should we bother with this stuff? Aren't many of the particulars about how we go about celebrating the Supper just adiaphora?" Certainly. However, the fact that many practices are matters of freedom does not mean that we may not profitably discuss them. "It's an adiaphoron" ought not to be used as a trump card to squelch all discussions. On the contrary, when we make the determination that a certain practice is neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God, then the discussion must begin, not end. When discussing *Mitteldinge* related to the Sacrament, we will do well to do not only what is permissible, but also what is wise and beneficial. Edmund Reim, former professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, wrote the following referring to Article X of the Formula of Concord, the article dealing with the Adiaphoristic Controversy: "This should make it clear once and for all in our Lutheran Church that in order to justify a given course of action it is not enough to show that the thing itself is an adiaphoron. That is rather the point at which our Christian judgment should go into action and prove itself sensitive and alert to the great issue of our Christian freedom, as well as deeply concerned over the possibility of causing spiritual offense even to a single soul. Here 1 Corinthians 10:23 is in order: "Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is constructive." [*Our Great Heritage*, vol.3, p.165. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991] Let this wisdom frame our discussion. While we dare not lay down commandments that God has not given about things related to the Sacrament, we also dare not shrug and say, "It doesn't matter." The Sacrament is practical, important and worthy of our careful study.

special way to people. He loves them and takes away their sins. The bread is his body. The wine is his blood.

Not only is imparting cognitive knowledge important in teaching the Sacrament to pre-literate children, but providing affective experience is as well. In other words, teaching them the facts, the *What does this mean?* of the Supper, is important. But so is connecting that knowledge with positive experiences. In fact, in the case of young children, who have limited cognitive capabilities, these experiences may be more important. *Children in Worship: Lessons from Research*, based on a study conducted in many Lutheran (including WELS) churches says, “The power of the nonverbal for the pre-reader in providing messages of important and core values of that worshipping community should not be underestimated.”³

What do the children see and hear during the celebration of the Sacrament? What experiences will they associate with the instruction they are given? Do they see the presiding minister reverently approaching the altar and preparing the elements? Do they see him extending his hands toward them as he says, “The Lord be with you”, or moving his hands heavenward while he says with a smile, “Lift up your hearts”? (For that matter, do they see the minister at all, or are they standing in the back rows behind the rest of the congregation? If they are in the back rows, are booster seats or other accommodations provided for them?) Is the minister wearing special vestments as he presides at the Sacrament? Is he lifting up his hands in the ancient *orans* position as he prays? Do they see him lift up the paten as he says the words, “This is my body”, the chalice as he says “This is my blood”? Does he reflect the solemnity and joy of the Supper as he sees the people coming to receive the Lord’s body and blood? For that matter, do the people going to the Lord’s Table and departing from it look like they’re happy to be doing what they’re doing?⁴ These visual and auditory experiences, combined with instruction, will give children lasting impressions of what the Supper is and how important it is.

³ Shirley K. Morgenthaler, Peter M. Becker and Gary L. Bertels. *Children in Worship: Lessons from Research*. River Forest, Illinois: Pillars Press (a division of Concordia University, River Forest), 1999. p. 24. *Children in Worship* notes three key components for involving children in worship: 1) environmental factors (e.g., what do children see/hear/sense when they worship?); ritual and predictability (predictability is particularly important for achieving participation of young children who can’t yet read a service folder or hymnal); 3) intentional enculturation (i.e., worship planners making plans to include children in the worship life of the congregation throughout their various stages of development). A worthwhile study for a worship committee would be to apply these three points to a congregation’s worship in general and to its celebration of the Sacrament in particular.

⁴ The old debate: “What look should people have on their faces going to Communion and coming from it?” See the article “Greater Joy in Communion” by Commission on Worship administrator Bryan Gerlach, available on the WELS website, Commission on Worship page. My opinion: no single mood captures the profound meaning of the Sacrament. Solemnity, joy, reflection, celebration—all are appropriate, and this testifies to the depth of this sacrament. In general, perhaps we could do more to emphasize the gospel nature of the Meal, since the penitential emphasis of preparing for the Supper can overshadow the joy of celebrating it. Read Johann Franck’s classic Communion hymn “Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness” (*Christian Worship* 311), taking note of the confluence of fitting emotions in the Supper. “Hasten as a bride to meet him, and with loving reverence greet him...”

Granted, we've just opened a can of worms. Many of these questions involve long-standing ceremonies associated with the Sacrament. Essays could profitably be devoted to this topic alone.⁵ The wearing of a chasuble, the elevation of the consecrated elements—these things and more have accompanied the Sacrament through the ages. And not just in the Roman church—many ceremonies were intentionally retained after Evangelical Lutheran reforms were made to the Communion service. “Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved... For ceremonies are needed to this end alone that the unlearned be taught.”⁶ Of course, the Confessions frequently warn that ceremonies not be considered meritorious, that they not obscure the gospel and that they not be considered mandatory.⁷ Nevertheless, ceremonies were deemed valuable because they had the effect of teaching people things about the Sacrament and about sacramental piety. In a time when many people did not read, ceremonies taught people visually that something of highest importance was happening at the Communion. Could some of these same ceremonies not also be beneficial for those among us who do not read, namely, little children? Could ceremonies not benefit even visually-oriented adults in our post-literate age?⁸ *Children in Worship* suggests an approach to ceremony that includes providing children with affective experiences and imparting to them cognitive understanding. Speaking of John Westerhoff, the researcher upon whose work the *Children in Worship* research was based, it says,

Westerhoff's concern for ceremonial acts, rituals, and ritual acts as significant components of spiritual formation may bring to the minds of some the threat of falling into ritualization. Westerhoff shares that concern and would allay that fear with the encouragement to explain the rituals in the context of instruction. The fear of rituals must not prevent congregations from providing the rituals and ritual acts that afford children the opportunity to join them in worship... Intentional worship instruction must take place during the school years and be expanded upon during adulthood. The rituals, however, must be done during formation, the earliest years of a child's life.⁹

As children grow older, they will be ready and willing to receive more instruction. Worship education in general is critical. Children who have not yet reached the

⁵ See, for example, Rev. Bryan Gerlach's essay “How High Is Too High? How Low Can We Go? Acceptable range of worship practices in the WELS”. Available from the WELS Commission on Worship ⁶ AC XXIV, *Concordia Triglotta* (hereafter *Trigl.*). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (Reprinted 1988 Northwestern Publishing House), 1921. p.65. This topic could be the subject of a number of essays. See, for example, Bryan Gerlach's essay “How High Is Too High? How Low Can We Go? Acceptable range of worship practices in the WELS”. Available from the WELS Commission on Worship.

⁷ For instance, the same article of the Augustana continues, “Scripture also teaches that we are justified before God through faith in Christ, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. Now if the Mass take away the sins of the living and the dead by the outward act, justification comes of the work of Masses, and not of faith, which Scripture does not allow.” *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁸ It's been observed that in previous centuries many adults could not read. Now adults *can* read but *don't*.

⁹ *Children in Worship*, p.37.

traditional age for confirmation instruction are often eager to learn more about what happens in public worship. They will be able to connect what they've been observing in church with what they are now being taught about its significance. Again, children's sermons provide opportunity for this instruction. So do Sunday School lessons and the application sections in them.¹⁰ Catechism classes could include the appropriate unit from the worship education series *Come Worship Christ*, including a "field trip" to the sanctuary. Purposeful education about the Sacrament and about its attendant rite and ceremonies can connect the experiences children have had observing it to the meaning of those experiences.¹¹

At the teenage level, reinforcement of truths learned in Catechism class is crucial, especially if our teenagers are moving from a parochial school environment to a public high school. There they will encounter things that would make our jaws drop, including all manner of irreligious behavior and quasi-religious viewpoints. We can remind them that in the Sacrament they receive Christ's body and blood for forgiveness and strength. When they fall to temptation, we can tell them that God has made a new covenant with them, a solemn promise, sealed in Jesus' blood, not to remember their sins anymore. We can assure them that their Lord loves them, that in his grace he valued them and made them his own at an inestimable price—the price of their Lord's body and blood, which they can eat and drink in his Holy Supper.

Instruction in apologetics can also be valuable at this age. Teenagers love to argue; we can equip them to argue from a biblical perspective. (When I say "argue", I don't mean fighting; I mean making a claim and backing it up.) They are sure to encounter different views of the Lord's Supper and to be tested in regard to their beliefs. We can equip them with appropriate Scripture, as well as analogies and illustrations. And we must challenge them. The safe environment of our classrooms and youth meetings is the place where we can confront them with challenging heterodox views of the Sacrament and enable them to respond. That way they won't be rookies when it happens for real. In addition to debating skill, we must also give practical instruction on discussing their convictions "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). For even as they discuss things passionately, they can be satisfied to proclaim the truth in love and let the Holy Spirit do his work, since they are dealing with something supernatural that

¹⁰ *Christ-Light* lessons from Northwestern Publishing House make these connections frequently, and *Christ-Light* devotes a series of lessons to several facets of worship. See Old Testament Set 4, weeks 1-6.

¹¹ What about giving a blessing to children at the Communion rail? It can be a powerful way of including children in worship, not just as spectators, but as participants. Care must be taken not to imply that children are receiving exactly the same thing as those receiving our Lord's body and blood. The children are receiving an efficacious blessing, to be sure, but we should not imply that receiving the body and blood is merely the grown-up version of getting a blessing. Other concerns should also be taken into account. For example, if children can come to receive a blessing, what about adult catechumens? What about visitors? Additionally, the giving of a blessing assumes that the presiding minister knows all of those coming to the table. If he doesn't, he won't be sure who receives a blessing and who receives the Supper. I served the Supper at a different parish when a brother was on vacation once. The church had the custom of having children kneel at the rail for a blessing. Things got interesting when middle-school-aged children came forward. Were they communicants yet? What resulted were less-than-declaratory words spoken during the distribution: "The true body of Christ, given... *for you?*" This is one of the many practices that can be helpful or distracting, depending on how it's explained and implemented.

cannot be proved (or disproved) by human reason. Best of all, we can assure our teenagers that as they continue to receive the Sacrament, their Lord will continue to be with them, strengthening their resolve and giving them the words to say.

Heightening the importance of instruction at younger ages is the fact that many of our young adults go away to college or into the military. Thousands of miles away, we can't have the direct contact with them that we used to. The instruction we have given, about the Christian faith in general and about the Lord's Supper in particular, will have to serve them while they are away—unless, of course, they will be near a WELS congregation or an active campus ministry program. One thing pastors can do is to meet with college-bound teens (starting in their junior year in high school or earlier) and encourage them to select a college at which their spiritual life can be nurtured. Instead of letting our high school students choose a college based on a host of other factors and then asking, "Now, what about church?", perhaps we can urge them early on to make closeness to Word and Sacrament a priority. With students who are far away from a WELS or ELS congregation, keeping in contact will be critical, though this is easier said than done. But can we endeavor, by phone or by e-mail, to let students know we're available to answer questions and to give guidance? If we can stay in contact with them, we can encourage them to remember God's grace, at least coming to his house and receiving his Supper when they come home.

Adult instruction in the Sacrament can be difficult, given the diverse views of the Lord's Supper that people bring with them. One main aspect of instruction may be ascertaining the views of the Sacrament held by those being instructed. One recent Bible information class I taught included people with a variety of backgrounds. One student was a teenager whose parents were non-practicing Roman Catholics. Another was a non-member school parent who attended a local Pentecostal mega church; he was well studied in the Bible. Another was the mother of one of our preschool students; she had grown up Episcopalian but had been away from church for many years. Still another was a Latino man with a Roman Catholic background who had lived in several predominantly Catholic countries. During the instruction course's lesson on the Sacrament, I figured out that I would need to learn where people were coming from and then tailor further discussion and instruction based on their backgrounds.

Scriptural instruction on the essence, purpose and fruits of the Sacrament will be the cornerstone for teaching adults. In addition, we will want to address practical issues related to sacramental piety. We can encourage good preparation for the Sacrament, inviting people to visit us for private absolution, for instance. During the adult information class it is helpful to scan "Personal Preparation for Holy Communion" in *Christian Worship*¹² and encourage its use before coming to church, before the service or during the offering. We can encourage frequent attendance at the Lord's Table, focusing on the power and blessings promised and conveyed in the Sacrament. We can explain the liturgical setting of the Supper, as well as ceremonies associated with it.

¹² *Christian Worship*, p.156.

Not only will we instruct adults as they come into our fellowship, but we will continue instruction as long as they remain members of our churches. A Bible class on the Lord's Supper would be beneficial every couple years. It need not be a twelve-week, in-depth course. Two or three sessions could serve as a good review of doctrine and practice. It could also provide an opportunity for "Pastor, I was wondering" questions about the Sacrament. Satan does not want Christians, including those in our churches, to receive any gospel. He will do all he can to drive people away from the Meal. Let us continue, then, to instruct and encourage all ages to appreciate the Lord's Supper.

Preaching the Sacrament

And, indeed, those who are true Christians and esteem the Sacrament precious and holy will urge and impel themselves unto it. Yet that the simple-minded and the weak who also would like to be Christians be the more incited to consider that cause and need which ought to impel them, we will treat somewhat of this point. For as in other matters pertaining to faith, love, and patience, it is not enough to teach and instruct only, but there is need also of daily exhortation, so *here also there is need of continuing to preach* that men may not become weary and disgusted, since we know and feel how the devil always opposes this and every Christian exercise and drives and deters therefrom as much as he can.¹³

With these words Luther urges continual preaching on the Sacrament. In Wittenberg parish life he no doubt saw what pastors still see—the devil working to keep people from the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for their forgiveness. The same devil has the same goal now as he did then. And we have the same weapon to battle him—the Word of the Lord.

Preaching about the Sacrament

Periodic catechetical preaching can awaken Christians to how much they've forgotten (or never learned in the first place) about the Lord's Supper. When is the appropriate time for such preaching? Opportunities may present themselves throughout the year. Maundy Thursday is a traditional and fitting time. Singing Luther's catechism hymn, "Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior", the Hymn of the Day for Maundy Thursday, will enhance any instruction given from the pulpit.

Sermon series also serve a good purpose. The Time of the Church (Sundays after Pentecost) provides time to break from the lectionary for topical series. Following is one series preached by WELS pastors John Vieths and John Koelpin based on the four parts of the Small Catechism¹⁴. Other such sermon series¹⁵ are out there in filing cabinets and on hard drives. Why not share them at conferences and circuit meetings?

¹³ LC V. *Trigl.*, p.763. Emphasis added.

¹⁴ From "Preaching the Catechism", presentation by Rev. John Vieths at 2002 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts. Presentation available on WELS web site, Commission on Worship page.

Part of the Catechism: 1st, The Institution of Holy Communion

Readings: Exodus 24:1-11, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 22:7-20

Hymns: 420, 403, 125 (vs. 1,4), 312, 318

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The Lord's Supper Is More than Just a Meal

1. It Is Jesus' Own Body and Blood.
2. It Is a Preaching of the Gospel.
3. It Is a Personal Promise from God.

Part of the Catechism: 2nd, The Blessings of Holy Communion

Readings: Isaiah 6:5-7, Psalm 103, 1 Peter 2:21-25, Matthew 26:26-30

Hymns: 226, 385, 486 (1,2), 311(1-5), 316

Text: Psalm 103:1-8/Words of Institution

There Is Fruit In The Lord's Supper

1. Fruit given to the sinner
2. Fruit found in forgiveness
3. Fruit lasting for eternity
4. Fruit strengthening for the fight

Part of the Catechism: 3rd, The Power of Holy Communion

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 119b, Romans 10:8-18, John 6:60-63

Hymns: 259; 288; 469 (1-4); 135; 293

Text: Romans 10:17/Matthew 26:26-28

Partake of a Powerful Meal

1. Power which gives blessings
2. Power which comes from the Word
3. Power which focuses on Christ

Part of the Catechism: 4th, Preparation for Proper Reception

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-7, Hebrews 10:19-31, Matthew 11:28-30

Hymns: 336, 304, 488 (vs. 1,4), 397, 331

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

Prepare to Receive Your Savior's Body

1. Prepare Your Hearts.
2. Prepare Your Minds.

Highlighting parts of the Ordinary can also highlight the Supper, since the songs and prayers of the liturgical service prepare communicants for reception of the body and blood. One could preach a sermon series on the parts of the service, explaining those songs, dialogues and prayers that have formed the backbone of Christian worship for

What is printed here is a slightly abbreviated version of what Rev. Vieths included in his presentation. Hymn numbers are from *Christian Worship*.

¹⁵ Devotions on the Sacrament can also be good resources for preaching. See, for example, ELS professor Gaylin Schmeling's *God's Gift to You*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2001.

centuries.¹⁶ Or one could use opportunities provided by the lectionary to unpack some of the concepts in the Liturgy. Following is an excerpt from a sermon on John 1:29¹⁷, a natural connection point to the Agnus Dei. Preceding this portion of the sermon is an exposition of the significance of sacrificial lambs in the history of God and his people.

The Jews prayed toward the temple. We pray in the direction of the Baptizer's gaze, following his long, bony finger. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. We pray to Christ, our Passover, our whole burnt offering, our substitute sacrifice. We sing this prayer, the Agnus Dei, in the context of his Supper, and that's no coincidence. The meal we eat is the meal of his sacrifice. His blood was painted on the wood of the cross as the doorpost of the world. Where the blood is, there death passes over. His body offered up for your sins. There on the altar is the body of the Lamb slain for you and for all.¹⁸ There in the chalice is his blood that washes away your sin and the sin of the world. He is your food and drink. He is your life. Remember how we prayed for mercy and peace at the beginning of the service? Your kyries are answered. The Lamb has heard your prayer. Mercy and peace are yours in his body and blood.¹⁹

Occasional references to the Sacrament can serve to highlight one or more facets of the Supper. Which facet will be suggested by the text for the day. For instance, a sermon on Ephesians 4:1-7,11-16²⁰ could highlight how the Lord's Supper expresses and fosters the unity that exists among Christians, unity that is established by God and strengthened by growth in his Word.

A question: How often do we speak of the Sacrament in our preaching? Or, How often do we speak of the Sacrament in proportion to other things? I remember being urged as a seminarian to make reference to certain things regularly in preaching. Evangelism and missions, as one example. "Always be looking for opportunities to encourage people to share the gospel," we were told. Good advice. We should bear in mind, though, that there are innumerable good things to mention regularly in preaching—not only missions, but also encouragements to godly living, service, etc. To go into every sermon with an agenda can have the effect of muting the main point of the pericope; that we will try not to do. The text will make it clear what to highlight. That said, though, I offer this encouragement (and if anyone wants to accuse me of talking out of both sides of my mouth, let him go ahead): Refer to the Sacrament frequently in preaching! Why? The Sacrament is the gospel. And the gospel is what saves and enables Christian living. "Go and tell about Jesus" and "Go and serve Jesus" certainly are biblical commands. Furthermore, love for God and neighbor are at the heart of both. But these exhortations

¹⁶ See Paul Burgdorf's *This Blest Communion! A Series of Sermons Based on the Common Service of Christendom*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1943.

¹⁷ *Christian Worship* lectionary, Epiphany 2A.

¹⁸ We assume the author of this sermon would not consider himself in the receptionist camp.

¹⁹ William Cwirla (LC-MS pastor in Hacienda Heights, California), "Unfolding the Meaning of the Liturgy" in *Liturgical Preaching*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001. p.157.

²⁰ *Christian Worship* lectionary, Pentecost 10B.

are law, not gospel. The Sacrament, on the other hand, is pure gospel. Preaching people to the Table will not hinder things like missions, personal evangelism and Christian service. It will enhance them.

Preaching to the Sacrament

In many churches, the pulpit stands between the font and the altar. Evangelical preaching addresses the baptized, confronting and consoling with the Word of the Lord, then guiding them to his Table where they receive their Savior's body and blood. In the Holy Supper, God gives his baptized children, who have been addressed and instructed by his Word, strength for their pilgrimage and a tantalizing foretaste of the great feast to come.

Therefore, not only will we preach *about* the Sacrament, but we will preach Christians *to* the Sacrament. These overlap, of course, but some additional attention to this second point is warranted.

Lastly, since the tyranny of the Pope has been abolished, people are no longer willing to go to the Sacrament and despise it. Here again urging is necessary, however, with this understanding: We are to force no one to believe, or to receive the Sacrament, nor fix any law, nor time, nor place for it, but are to *preach in such a manner that of their own accord, without our law, they will urge themselves and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer the Sacrament.*²¹

How does one preach in such a manner? First, by proclaiming the law of God in all its damning severity to awaken people to the need for a vicarious sacrifice. Then, by proclaiming the good news that Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. And he is here, in his body and blood freely sharing the fruits of his sacrifice with sinners. Law-gospel preaching, then making the connection to the Sacrament. Luther seems to have this in mind in the Small Catechism preface:

For if he [i.e., the one who does not highly value the Sacrament] believed that he had so much that is evil, and needed so much that is good, he would not thus neglect the Sacrament, by which such evil is remedied and so much good is bestowed. Neither will it be necessary to force him to the Sacrament by any law, but he will come running and racing of his own accord, will force himself and urge you that you must give him the Sacrament.

Hence, you must not make any law in this matter, as the Pope does. Only set forth clearly the benefit and the harm, the need and use, the danger and blessing, connected with this Sacrament, and the people will come of themselves without your compulsion.²²

²¹ SC Preface. *Trigl.*, p.537. Emphasis added.

²² *Ibid.*, p.539.

Not forced, but drawn by Christ—that is Luther’s basic evangelical principle when it comes to the Sacrament. The same evangelical principle should be at the center of our preaching people to the Sacrament. The doctor does, however, point also to Christ’s command as he urges people to the Supper, and he does so forcefully, showing us that pointed exhortation to receive the Sacrament is in place.

And we have, in the first place, the clear text in the very words of Christ: *Do this in remembrance of me*. These are bidding and commanding words by which all who would be Christians are enjoined to partake of this Sacrament.

Thus, you perceive, it is not left free in the sense that we may despise it. For that I call despising it if one allow so long a time to elapse and with nothing to hinder him yet never feels a desire for it. If you wish such liberty, you may just as well have the liberty to be no Christian, and neither have to believe nor pray; for the one is just as much a command of Christ as the other. But if you wish to be a Christian, you must from time to time render satisfaction and obedience to this commandment. For this commandment ought ever to move you to examine yourself and to think: See, what sort of Christian I am! If I were one, I would certainly have some little longing for that which my Lord has commanded [me] to do.²³

Neglecting the Sacrament proves to a sinner how much he needs the Sacrament! Luther knows that he is dealing with Christians *in concreto*, people with both Old Adam and New Man. He uses the law on the Old Man, the gospel on the New—an excellent model for our preaching as we spur people to the Supper.

Another concept related to preaching people to the Sacrament is what Concordia–Fort Wayne professor Arthur Just calls “setting the table.” Using as sort of a paradigm the account of the Emmaus disciples, he notes that preaching leads naturally into the breaking of bread. (Yes, there is discussion about whether the phrase “breaking of bread” refers to the Sacrament, or at least how often it refers to the Sacrament. More on that later. Nonetheless, the progression is compelling.) The Christ reveals himself through the Scriptures, and then goes on to reveal himself in a unique way at table. LC–MS pastor Kenneth Wieting refers to this when he writes in *Liturgical Preaching*,

The order followed by the risen Christ is first to teach and then to feed. His Christ-centered proclamation of the Scriptures on Easter eve set the table for revealing himself in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24)... Shouldn’t our preaching likewise set our people’s hearts on fire prior to the Holy Meal?

This is why the order of the liturgy has been first Word and then Meal down through the centuries. It is no accident that as the risen Christ comes among his people today, he still comes first preaching himself and then

²³ LC V. *Trigl.*, p.765.

giving himself to be recognized and received in the breaking of the bread. His Word sets the table for his Supper. The proclamation of Christ is followed by food for the journey, that is, by the provision of his very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.²⁴

Wieting then goes on to give samples of “setting the table.” They are simply lectionary-based opportunities for encouraging people to the Meal of our Lord. Proclaiming the sinner’s need. Proclaiming the Savior’s grace in meeting that need. Proclaiming the special means whereby the Savior conveys his grace—his body and blood in the Supper. Surely many preachers do this already. Yet encouragement and practical suggestions are beneficial. An example of “setting the table” follows. It comes from a sermon on Mark 2:23-28, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. The sermon highlights that God’s work for people, not people’s work for him, was the intent of the Sabbath and is still the keynote in our worship today. This excerpt is from the concluding part:

Mercifully, God adjusts our vision. He condemns our self-centeredness, telling us that our works will never save us. Then he turns us to himself and his work. He’s the one who is most active when we come to church. We can’t see it, but it’s true. God is here, our loving Father, reaching out to us with his care and concern. Our Lord Jesus is here, coming to us to freely give us his gifts: forgiveness for every sin, new life now and forever. The Holy Spirit is here. He adopts people into the family of God through Holy Baptism. He works for us and in us as God’s Word meets our ears and minds and hearts. He gives us life by giving and confirming faith in Jesus. When we come to church, realizing that we have failed to do all the work our God has given us to do, Jesus pronounces us pardoned. Then he invites us to his Supper and says, “Rest from your labor. Look at the work I have done for you—work that saves you and gives you life. Look at what I have done! Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Take and drink; this is my blood, poured out for you.” Don’t be fooled when you come to church. God is the main one at work here. Sure, we pray and praise and sing and stand, but only in response to what he is doing for us.

So why do we come to church? What’s the point? The point is not to curry favor with God by meeting an obligation. Nor is it merely to entertain ourselves.

So why do we come? Because we need what God is doing for us here. We need the love. We need the forgiveness. We need the spiritual life. Where else can we get these things?

We come to church not so we can do something for God, but primarily so that God can do something for us. His work is here. His gifts are here. His

²⁴ Rev. Kenneth Wieting, “Sacramental Preaching: The Lord’s Supper.” in *Liturgical Preaching*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001. pp.72f.

love is here. His life is here. We need these things. And they're all free. So we come.

We close this section with words from Dr. Luther, who knows that not only parishioners but also pastors have both Old Adam and New Man! Let these words of law and gospel motivate us to relentlessly keep preaching the Sacrament for the sake of God's people and our Lord's glory.

But if you do not urge this [i.e., that people go to the Sacrament], or make a law or bane of it, it is your fault if they despise the Sacrament. How could they be otherwise than slothful if you sleep and are silent? Therefore look to it, ye pastors and preachers. Our office is now become a different thing than it was under the Pope; it is now become serious and salutary. Accordingly, it now involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trials, and, in addition thereto, little reward and gratitude in the world. But Christ Himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully. To this end may the Father of all grace help us, to whom be praise and thanks forever through Christ, our Lord! Amen.²⁵

Frequency of the Sacrament

The time: several decades ago. The place: a small-town Lutheran parish on the Great Plains. The local custom is to celebrate the Sacrament several times per year, once every couple months. In the week before the Sacrament is offered, the pastor is responsible for procuring the bread and the wine. He is to purchase an adequate supply for the upcoming Communion. Then, after the members of the church receive the Sacrament on Sunday, they will file by a collection basket and drop some money into it. This is to reimburse the parson for his expenses. Furthermore, it is understood that the pastor will pocket any overage in contributions—kind of a bonus, a tangible thank you for his services.

A new pastor comes to the parish. Not fully aware of the ins and outs of the congregation's Communion practice, he makes a radical suggestion: "Let's have Holy Communion more often." Imagine the shock that rippled through his flock! "*Gasp!* Filthy lucre! Could it be—our new pastor, a money-grubber?!"

While it's hard to envision this scenario replaying itself in our day, it's not at all impossible to imagine strong reactions following suggestions to offer Communion more often. Such reactions have been voiced in our synod in recent years as discussions about "the frequency issue" have been raised or revisited. Publications like *The Motley Magpie* have prompted vigorous debate and passionate arguments.

The frequency of the Sacrament merits thorough study. Many issues are involved—exegetical, historical and practical. Pastors would do well to take up the topic at circuit meetings and pastoral conferences, taking time to dig into arguments that are

²⁵ SC Preface. *Trigl.*, p.539.

advanced. Going beyond visceral emotional reactions and looking at the issue objectively is crucial. What follows is not a comprehensive study of the “how often” question but rather some thoughts that hopefully will assist in such a study.

At the outset we should note that there are two questions to address when discussing the topic of frequency. One is, “How often should pastors/congregations *offer* the Sacrament?” The other distinct question is, “How often should Christians *receive* the Lord’s Supper?” Some confusion has resulted lately in our circles, I believe, because these two separate questions have been combined. It might have happened that pastors often told their parishioners, “Go to Communion as often as it is offered.” Perhaps this was to move people away from conventional thinking that went along these lines: “I’m not going to Communion today; I went once already this month.” But combine “Go as often as it’s offered” with “Let’s celebrate Communion every Sunday” and the result is the perception of a legalistic demand that people commune every week, whether well prepared to do so or not.

Therefore, one misconception about those who advocate every Sunday Communion is that they are making a law that every Christian must receive the Sacrament no less than once a week.²⁶ Advocating every Sunday celebration, however, means to afford the *opportunity* for worthy communicants to receive the Sacrament every Sunday and festival day. It is not synonymous with requiring Christians to receive the Supper every week.

It may be helpful to step back for a moment and examine the biblical and historical perspective of the “How often” question. (Note that here we will be dealing with only the first question mentioned above, namely, “How often should pastors/congregations *offer* the Sacrament?”)

The Biblical Perspective

Scripture gives no specific command to Christians as to how often the Lord’s Supper should be offered or received. Christ’s command, “Do this,” is a present imperative²⁷, which indicates that he intended the Supper to be celebrated on a continuing basis. For how long? “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26 NIV). Our Lord intended his body and blood to be distributed and received on a continuing basis until his coming in glory. Beyond these foundational instructions, we have no direct word from the Lord commanding a certain frequency for either offering or receiving the Sacrament. The Meal’s nature as gospel and means of grace prompts Christians to offer and receive it often. This is what Luther emphasized in his well-known comments on the *Verba*:

²⁶ LC–MS pastor Kenneth Wieting encountered this in responses to a recent survey of LC–MS pastors about how often they offered the Sacrament. “One fear was expressed by a few pastors that completely surprised me. Their concern was that we not make frequent communing a new law. With this I heartily agree!” See “The Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day”. Available on the website of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Worship page.

²⁷ tou/to poiei/te Lk 22:19; 1Co 11:24,25.

And we have, in the first place, the clear text in the very words of Christ: *Do this in remembrance of Me*. These are bidding and commanding words by which all who would be Christians are enjoined to partake of this Sacrament. Therefore, whoever would be a disciple of Christ, with whom He here speaks, must also consider and observe this, not from compulsion, as being forced by men, but in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to please Him. However, if you say: But the words are added, As oft as ye do it; there he compels no one, but leaves it to our free choice, answer: That is true, yet it is not written that we should never do so. Yea, just because He speaks the words, As oft as ye do it, it is nevertheless implied that we should do it often; and it is added for the reason that He wishes to have the Sacrament free, not limited to special times, like the Passover of the Jews...²⁸

To enable Christians to receive the Sacrament freely, the early church celebrated it frequently. On the question of exactly how often, there is some uncertainty. In part it has to do with the Lukan phrase κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου, “the breaking of the bread.” Does this refer to the Eucharistic Meal, the Lord’s Supper? If so, always? Sometimes? When? Variations of the phrase occur in Luke 24:35, the account of the Lord’s appearance to the Emmaus disciples; it occurs again in Acts 2:42, the record of the Jerusalem Christians gathering around the apostles’ doctrine, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers; a participial form is found in Acts 2:46, telling us what the believers were doing in their homes; we find it also in Acts 20:7: “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread [κλάσαι ἄρτον]. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight” (NIV). 1 Corinthians 11:20,33 have also been advanced to show that the Supper was offered when Christians “came together” on the Lord’s Day for the public reading of the Scriptures, preaching and the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Johann Gerhard gives his assessment of these references: “It is... clear from Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 11:20,33, that when the Christians did gather at one place, they were accustomed to celebrate the Eucharist.”²⁹ *Christian Worship: Manual* concurs: “There is a great deal of evidence from the history of the church that supports an every-Sunday communion in addition to an every-Sunday sermon. That the early Christians received the supper whenever they gathered on the Lord’s day is obvious as one reads in the Acts and 1 Corinthians.”³⁰ Hermann Sasse concludes (and this point is evidently not much disputed among Lutherans), “The Church of the first centuries was the Church of the Eucharist. A Sunday, a Lord’s Day, was unthinkable without the Lord’s Supper.”³¹

²⁸ LC V. *Trigl.*, p.763.

²⁹ Qtd. in Webber, *op.cit.*, p.3.

³⁰ *Christian Worship: Manual*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993. p.44.

³¹ Sasse, *op.cit.*, p.2.

The Historical Perspective

Churches of the Augsburg Confession typically offered the Lord's Supper at least once per week.

Now, forasmuch as the Mass is such a giving of the Sacrament, we hold one communion every Sunday and holy-day, and, if any desire the Sacrament, also on other days, when it is given to such as ask for it. And this custom is not new in the Church; for the Fathers before Gregory make no mention of any private Mass, but of the common Mass they speak very much. Chrysostom says "that the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some to the Communion and keeping back others."³²

The Augsburg Confession lays down no law for how often the Sacrament must be offered or received. It does indicate, however, that if there are worthy communicants who desire the Supper, offering it daily is not too often. It goes on to note the abuses that were taking place with daily masses, namely, that they were masses with no communicants at which the priest alone partook, supposedly benefiting souls living and dead. To these *Winkelmessen* the confessors strenuously object. They do not object, however, to frequent, even daily, offering of the Sacrament, provided there were properly prepared communicants who desired it.

Forasmuch, therefore, as the Mass with us has the example of the Church, taken from the Scripture and the Fathers, we are confident that it cannot be disapproved, especially since public ceremonies, for the most part like those hitherto in use, are retained; only the number of Masses differs, which, because of very great and manifest abuses, doubtless might be profitably reduced.³³

This reduction was evidently a move from masses every day, many of which were the private masses done by the priests, to masses every Sunday and festival. This was not a reduction from every Sunday down to every other Sunday, once a month, twice a month, etc. The Augustana claims that such a reduction in the number of masses was legitimate; not every public service needed to include the Communion. Weekday services or early Sunday morning Matins services (which would have served as an additional Sunday service, not a shorter substitute for the *Hauptgottesdienst*), for example, did not require offering the Sacrament.

For in olden times, even in churches most frequented, the Mass was not celebrated every day, as the *Tripartite History* (Book 9, chap. 33) testifies: "Again in Alexandria, every Wednesday and Friday the Scriptures are read, and the doctors expound them, and all things are done, except the solemn rite of Communion."³⁴

³² AC XXIV. *Trigl.*, p.67.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.69.

We should note, though, that Luther and his colleagues never wished to deny anyone the Sacrament if he or she desired it, provided that proper preparation had taken place. “We hold one communion every Sunday and holy-day, and, if any desire the Sacrament, also on other days, when it is given to such as ask for it.”³⁵

Someone might wonder, “Was retaining the custom of having the Sacrament every Sunday just a holdover from Roman Catholicism? It might have been something that the Reformers wanted to change but just didn’t get around to.” This thought would have some merit if not for the fact that later generations of Lutherans retained the custom, passing up opportunities to drop it. Consider the interims of the late 1540s. Charles V came in and ransacked the heartland of the Reformation. He forced the Evangelicals to reinstate some worship adiaphora, only he did not consider them adiaphora. This led to the Adiaphoristic Controversy and Article X of the Formula of Concord. Lutherans would not let themselves be forced into observing customs that were otherwise matters of freedom. If offering the Supper every Sunday had been considered a Roman practice, this time of the interims would have been a fitting time to abandon it. The Lutherans did not, however, suggesting that they did not consider every Sunday Communion a Roman practice at all, but rather one consistent with their evangelical theology and praxis.

So what changed the practice of offering Communion “every Sunday and holy-day”? By the time the nineteenth century arrived, every Lord’s Day Communion was no longer common in Lutheran churches. Several factors played a role. Among them was war. The Thirty Years’ War, for instance, ravaged Germany. Many churches were laid waste, many pastors killed. In this climate, maintaining regular Sunday services with sermon and Supper was impossible in some locales and extremely difficult in others.

Other factors were theological. Pietism was certainly one of these. When personal experience was emphasized at the expense of the means of grace, the Supper naturally suffered. Paul Prange in his 1991 essay, “The Effects of the Age of Pietism on the Lutheran Church”:

If baptism was devalued, what about the Lord’s Supper? We expect to find that it has more attraction for the Pietists, since it is connected with adult repentance. A modern German historian expected the same thing but was impressed to learn “how relatively unimportant a role the Lord’s Supper actually plays in Pietism.” He quotes the Lutheran Pietist, Gottfried Arnold: “The more perfect a Christian is, the less he is in need of Holy Communion; it is only an aid to the weak.”

³⁵ AC XXIV. *Trigl.*, p.67. See also Luther’s response to church leaders in Nürnberg, from the Weimar Edition, qtd. in David Jay Webber (ELS pastor and rector of Saint Sophia Seminary, Ukraine), “Communion Frequency in the Lutheran Confessions.” pp.2f. Luther says here that Christians have the right to compel their pastors to give them the Sacrament, and that pastors, because of their office, have no right to refuse worthy communicants. (Webber’s essay available at <http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.comunionfreq.html>)

This attitude explains how our Lutheran Confessions can take weekly use of the sacrament for granted, while we discover only a monthly use (or even less frequent one hundred years ago) at some places in our own circles. The practice of offering the Lord's Supper less frequently comes directly from Pietism, and it is tied more directly to a devaluation of liturgy than to any other phenomenon. It might be expressed in this way today: "If I get good feelings about myself from a small group Bible study, I do not feel an immediate need for the Lord's Supper, especially when I have to sit through another mumbling of page 15." Church records document the trend that wherever Pietism takes hold, communion attendance drops dramatically.³⁶

Rationalism, too, had its way. It simply was not sensible to pay much attention to a sacrament which was by its very nature *mysterium*. As Christianity became more rationalistic, efforts to maintain the foolishness of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments waned even more.

Yet another factor, especially for Lutherans in North America, was the distance between churches and the paucity of pastors. Immigrants who settled in rural areas were not often close to a village church. Pastors did their best to gather the faithful, but because there weren't many pastors, this was hard to do. Circuit riders made their way from homestead to homestead. Regular weekly services were rare in some parts. The Sacrament, therefore, was not available on a weekly basis.³⁷

The status quo at the time of the Reformation was to offer the Sacrament every Sunday and festival day. Comments made by Lutheran fathers tell us that it was not merely fear of change that was responsible for maintaining this practice. Evangelical and pastoral concerns buttressed it. Liturgical scholar Luther Reed wrote, "All this was more than mere conservatism. It was keen value-judgment. Luther fearlessly cut out errors and impurities and with equal earnestness sought to preserve the good."³⁸

The status quo in our day—generally speaking in WELS—seems to be to offer the Sacrament less frequently than every Sunday. Do we have good reasons for maintaining the status quo? We may. The possibility also exists that conservatism is a major factor in retaining the practice of not-every-Sunday Communion. It would be wise to scrutinize our rationale, for as stewards of God's holy things what we do potentially affects souls. We would probably say (or perhaps, we *are* saying), "The Lord's Supper every Sunday? Why?" At the time of the Reformation, Lutherans would have said, "The Lord's Supper every Sunday? Why not?"

³⁶ Rev. Paul Prange. "The Effects of the Age of Pietism on the Lutheran Church". Prepared for presentation to the South Central District Pastoral Conference, October 22, 1991. Available on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library website.

³⁷ The three-part outline, consisting of Rationalism, Pietism, War/Frontier, was used by David Schoessow in his 1997 essay "Holy Communion—Should We Offer It More Frequently?" Available at www.confessionallutherans.org.

³⁸ Luther Reed, qtd. in Webber, op.cit., p.5.

Some Concerns about Every Sunday Celebration

Some concerns have been voiced about reinstating the practice of offering the Lord's Supper every Sunday and festival day. What follows is not a comprehensive list of those, but it may fuel discussion and thoughtful observation.

If we offer Communion too often, it won't seem as special.

Isn't it true that "familiarity breeds contempt" and that "absence makes the heart grow fonder"? One can imagine an immigrant family, isolated on the Midwestern plains in the mid-1800s, longing for the circuit rider to bring a sermon and the Sacrament. One can see the tears welling up as the Lord's body and blood are distributed and received for the first time in months.

But is this the ideal? Should we encourage people to wait significant periods of time before receiving the Sacrament so that they will appreciate it more when they do receive it? Some faithful, orthodox Lutheran pastors have suggested as much.³⁹ To be sure, communicants do receive an emotional benefit from the Lord's Supper. It is a benefit that is of inestimable value to many distressed and wounded penitents. But is it the main benefit we receive from the Supper? With Luther we must say that forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are of even greater value. Indeed, without the actual gift of forgiveness conveyed in the Sacrament, the emotional impact of the Supper would be diminished, to say the least. Wouldn't it be wise to offer the Supper often so that people can avail themselves of its blessings whenever they need to? Furthermore, on any given Sunday the Sacrament may seem "special" to a hurting Christian whose pain is known only to him/herself and the Lord.

And when does a Christian not need the gifts God gives in his Supper? Luther writes in the Large Catechism of the daily need for forgiveness and strength to battle devil, world and flesh—needs that the Lord meets through his Meal.

On this account it is indeed called a food of souls, which nourishes and strengthens the new man. For by Baptism we are first born anew; but (as we said before) there still remains, besides, the old vicious nature of flesh and blood in man, and there are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes also stumble.

Therefore it is given for a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh itself so as not to fall back in such a battle, but become even stronger and stronger. For the new life must be so regulated that it continually increase and progress; but it must suffer much opposition...
Now to this end the consolation is here given when the heart feels that the

³⁹ At a discussion following Rev. Ron Muetzel's presentation on Sacramental piety at the 2002 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts, someone mentioned that a veteran pastor had once given such advice several decades before.

burden is becoming too heavy, that it may here obtain new power and refreshment.⁴⁰

ELS pastor and professor David Jay Webber concludes, “The operative reflectional analogy to the Lord’s Supper in the life of a Christian is not the occasional banquet that marks only ‘special’ events or anniversaries, but is instead the regular, daily meal that sustains us in our normal human existence.”⁴¹ Should the Lord’s Supper be thought of as “special”? By all means, yes! Preferable, though, is that it be thought of as special in this sense: that it is something missed when absent, something that the Christian does not want to go without.

Something else that should not be overlooked is the multifaceted nature of the blessings of Holy Communion. Not only does our Lord give his body and blood for forgiveness and salvation, but also to express his love intimately for each of us. The Lord’s Supper is for each communicant a uniquely delivered, personal “I love you” from the Savior. An analogy that’s been used: would any of us inform our spouses that we intended to say “I love you” half as often so that it would seem twice as special when we did say it?

If people do fail to regard the Sacrament as the priceless treasure that it is, then how should pastors address that? “The solution is not to withdraw grace (that is done only to the manifestly impenitent) but to preach repentance. Taking the Gospel, the Sacrament for granted is a dreadful sin. But how is this prevented? By removing the Sacrament? God forbid! Remove that which causes the sin!”⁴² Will offering the Supper less often prevent people from despising it? Would that really address the problem? It is better to lead people to repentance and faith in the words and promise of God connected to the Sacrament.

Don’t make frequent communing a law.

A misconception was mentioned above, one that seems to be voiced often: If we were to offer the Sacrament every week, would people get the impression that we were requiring them to receive it every week? It bears restating that offering the Sacrament every Sunday means to afford the opportunity for Christians to receive it that often. WELS pastor John Berg asserts that such a frequency of celebration provides the faithful with freedom to receive it, and he raises thought-provoking questions.

In his “Concerning the Ordering of Divine Service (*Gottesdienst*) in the Congregation” Dr. Luther wrote “but should some desire the Sacrament on a day other than a Sunday, Mass is to be held, as devotion and time permit; for in this connection one cannot lay down either a law or a *limit*.”

⁴⁰ LC V, *Trigl.* p.757,759.

⁴¹ Webber, *op.cit.*, p.5.

⁴² John W. Berg, “The Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” p.14. See Berg’s footnotes (104-107). Essay delivered at the 1999 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts. Available at <http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.berg.html>

[*The Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1932, vol.VI p.63] We don't make laws, but do we artificially, arbitrarily, even legalistically, limit the faithful's opportunity to receive the Sacrament? It is a simple truth, no one must receive the Sacrament when it is offered but you cannot have the Sacrament if it is not offered. How many know that it is their confessional right to have the Sacrament "when they ask for it" [AC XXIV:34f, *Trigl.*, p.67]? Should the church refuse some, on the basis that some do not desire it? We all believe, teach and confess in the Large Catechism that "the body of Christ can never be an unfruitful, vain thing, that effects or profits nothing." [LC V, *Trigl.*, p.759]⁴³

Johann Gerhard, dogmatician and leader in the Lutheran Church of the 17th Century, wrote, "Because therefore it has been accepted as a practice in the Christian church, that in the public assemblies of the church after the preaching and hearing of the Word, this Sacrament is celebrated, therefore this custom must not be departed from without urgent necessity."⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that Gerhard does not seem to mind keeping every Sunday celebration as—if we may put it this way—"policy" in Evangelical Lutheran congregations. He says nothing here about compelling people to receive the Sacrament, but of the importance of offering it weekly. It is a "custom", but one that "must not be departed from without urgent necessity."

We must take care that the frequency of celebration is not regarded as a matter of law. As with any practice in the realm of adiaphora, we must carefully explain that we do what we do not because a law mandates it, but because it is constructive, beneficial and in accord with the freedom of the gospel. Luther took this approach when he and others in Wittenberg began making changes to the Mass, abolishing what was false and settling on a truly evangelical practice. In his "Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament" of early 1522 (in the aftermath of some radical reforms of Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets), Luther writes, "But the gospel wants to proceed along the correct path freely, unencumbered with any ordinance. It wills to be lord over all ordinances, and have the right to observe now this one, now that one. Such liberty, however, cannot be brought speedily to the rank and file of people."⁴⁵ In this case, Luther was referring to offering both the bread and the cup to the laity. He did not advise instituting the practice immediately, giving the impression that people had to receive both kinds, but rather he advised patient instruction and gradual change. The following quotation illustrates this and reveals a point of connection with the frequency issue.

I wish, and it ought to be so, that no mass at all would be celebrated except at such times as the people were present who really desired the sacrament and asked for it, and that this would be only once a week or once a month. For the sacrament should never be celebrated except at the instigation and

⁴³ Ibid., p.14.

⁴⁴ Qtd. in Webber, op.cit., p.3.

⁴⁵ AE 36:256.

request of hungry souls, never because of duty, endowment, custom, ordinance or habit.⁴⁶

The Reformer's thinking seems to have been along the following lines. If Christians do not desire it, the Sacrament shouldn't be celebrated just for the sake of celebrating it. However, if Christians do not desire the Supper, they nevertheless always need it, and evangelical preaching and teaching should awaken cognizance of that need. Then, when people desire it, they must not be denied the opportunity to receive it. The gospel, which seeks to comfort the wounded Christians in our congregations, guides our practice.

If we offer the Lord's Supper every week, could it denigrate the importance of the preached Word?

There is legitimate basis for concern on this point. Roman Catholicism has at times elevated the Sacrament over preaching. Melancthon writes in the Apology of the virtual abandonment of preaching and catechesis: "Among the adversaries, in many regions, during the entire year no sermons are delivered, except in Lent."⁴⁷ The celebration of the Sacrament, along with its supposed *ex opere operato* benefit, had displaced the proclamation of the Word. The thinking that went along with this was difficult to root out of the Lutheran Church. Lutheran worship historian Dr. Joseph Herl related that in Lutheran churches where the Reformation had taken hold, some parishioners came late to the Sunday *Hauptgottesdienst*. They skipped the sermon and stayed only for the consecration and elevation. Then they left! In their minds the Sacrament was the main thing, and just being there for the consecration was enough.⁴⁸ The preached word was held in frightfully low regard.

Christians are always in danger of neglecting the Word in favor of something else, and that "something else" could be the Sacrament—such a situation would assume a grave misconception of both Word and Sacrament. But is this happening in our circles? Are we esteeming the Lord's Supper so highly that the preaching of the gospel is being marginalized? Is it possible that it could be the other way around—that we so highly value the Word that we de-emphasize the Sacrament? Surely our Lord gave us both Word and Sacrament. Neglecting either one is always wrong and injurious to souls. We must be careful not to denigrate the preaching of the gospel in favor of the Sacrament. Likewise, we must be careful not to denigrate the Sacrament in favor of the preached Word.⁴⁹

The means of grace is the gospel. By our Lord's design, the gospel comes to us in several ways. The existence of the Supper does not demean the existence of the preached Word. Luther in the Smalcald Articles:

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in His grace.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp.256f.

⁴⁷ Ap. XV "Of Human Traditions in the Church". *Trigl.*, p.325

⁴⁸ Presentation at the 2002 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts.

⁴⁹ On this point see also Webber, op. cit., p.5f.

First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18,20...⁵⁰

Both Word and Sacrament are ways in which the gospel comes, and each has its own unique traits. Luther notes that the Lord's Supper is the gospel coming to the individual sinner in a personal way:

Therefore we too are preaching the death of Christ according to the words: "Do this in remembrance of me." However, a distinction has to be made here. When I preach his death, it is in a public sermon to the congregation, in which I am addressing myself to no one individually; whoever grasps it, grasps it. But when I distribute the sacrament, I designate it for the individual who is receiving it; I give him Christ's body and blood that he may have the forgiveness of sins, obtained through his death and preached in the congregation. This is something more than the congregational sermon; for although the same thing is present in the sermon as in the sacrament, here there is the advantage that it is directed at definite individuals. In the sermon one does not point out or portray any particular person, but in the sacrament it is given to you and to me in particular, so that the sermon comes to be our own. For when I say, "This is the body, which is given for you, this is the blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins," I am there commemorating him; I proclaim and announce his death. Only it is not done publicly in the congregation but it is directed at you alone.⁵¹

Both Word and Sacrament are gifts of God; therefore both are to be desired by the Christian. Luther illustrates this in his characteristically down-to-earth way in "A Short Order of Confession Before the Priest for the Common Man" of 1529. In this brief imagined dialogue between pastor and penitent, Luther models how one may simply confess sin in one's own words. The following exchange concludes the conversation.

[Penitent:] I ask you to strengthen my little faith and comfort my weak conscience by the divine word and promise.

[Pastor:] Why dost thou desire to receive the sacrament?

[Penitent:] Because I desire to strengthen my soul with God's Word and sign and to obtain grace.

[Pastor:] But hast thou not found forgiveness of sins by absolution?

⁵⁰ SA III, IV. *Trigl.*, p.491.

⁵¹ "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics". Luther's Works, American Edition (AE). Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959. vol.36, p.348f.

[Penitent:] So what! I want to add the sign of God to his Word. To receive God's Word in many ways is so much better.⁵²

In this connection, Hermann Sasse notes that in the apostolic church, both preaching and the Sacrament were emphasized—as they must be by Christians of all ages. Holding one in high regard did not mean disparaging the other.

The Church of the first centuries was the Church of the Eucharist. A Sunday, a Lord's Day, was unthinkable without the Lord's Supper. But if ever the Church was a preaching Church, the Church of the apostles and the Church Fathers was. The same is true of all great periods of the Church. The sacrament and sermon belong together, and it is always a sign of decay of the Church if one is emphasized at the expense of the other.⁵³

In 1991, while researching strategies to introduce a new WELS hymnal, Bryan Gerlach spoke with worship voice and former Presbyterian minister Robert Webber. Webber related a story about how he once counseled a student in crisis. The conclusion of his counseling advice was “Flee to the Eucharist.” Gerlach observed that our pastors do well encouraging people to “Get into the Word.” Could we add to that a frequent exhortation to “Flee to the Supper”? Knowing our people and the sins that plague them, we realize that they need the Word. They need the law and the gospel. They need ongoing instruction in basic teachings of the Bible. But as we devote time to increased preaching and catechesis, we can also devote energy to increasing appreciation for the unique and dynamic gift of the Holy Supper.

Word and Sacrament are on the same team. Pointing people to the Sacrament is not pointing them away from the Word. The Sacrament will fuel a desire for the Word, and the Word a desire for the Sacrament.

Our closed Communion practice could offend visitors.

A few months after my ordination, I made a Monday phone call to a woman who had visited our service the day before. She had left before the end of the service but had left her name and number on a visitor card. I thanked her for coming and invited her to come again. I told her that maybe next time she'd be able to stay for a few minutes after the service and talk. She then informed me that it hadn't been a time constraint that had prompted her to leave early. It had been our closed Communion practice. Then came the lecture. “Honey,” she began, “I've been a Lutheran longer than you've been alive.” She vehemently made her points, and I responded as best I could. Finally I summarized the Biblical basis for closed Communion. She replied, “Yeah, I guess I've heard that before, but I just don't buy it.” The end of the conversation came soon after. We haven't heard from her since.

⁵² AE 53:117f.

⁵³ Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959. p.2.

Every pastor has heartbreaking tales to tell of prospects offended by closed Communion—ones not only like the one above with argumentative guests, but also ones with the searching and the hurting. Just bring up the topic and faces will flash in the minds of pastors—faces of those who left their churches because they were not yet invited to receive the Sacrament. What pastor, after going through such an experience, hasn't wondered, "Is it really worth it?"

This concern about every Sunday offering of the Sacrament is a serious one. Revivalism changed the nature of public worship in America; the Sunday service is often the first point of contact with the unchurched. And in a time when superficial ecumenism runs rampant, closed Communion is an entirely foreign concept to many people. They've never even considered the possibility that such a thing exists. Furthermore, in a country in which the Protestant representational view of the Sacrament is prevalent, people wonder what is so important about partaking of the Supper. "It's just wine/juice and a cracker. What's the big deal about who gets it?"

When visitors come on a Sunday when the Lord's Supper is not celebrated, many of us breathe a silent sigh of relief: "Whew! One less uncomfortable thing I have to address today." We would prefer to start with the basics of sin and grace and "ease into" harder, politically incorrect doctrines like closed Communion. But when people walk into our churches cold, as they do in our day and age—and as we *want* them to do—we don't have time on Communion Sundays to go slowly.

Of course, we will have to address the issue of closed Communion eventually. What about those visitors who happen to come to a service that includes the Supper? What about those who come on a non-Communion Sunday who say enthusiastically, "I'll be back next week!" It is something we will have to deal with sooner or later. Not offering the Sacrament for the sake of visitors among us doesn't eliminate the need to explain closed Communion; it only postpones it.

We must train our own members in what closed Communion is all about. Lead them to see that we do what we do out of concern for those who might receive the Sacrament in an unworthy way; we want to do what we can to see that all who commune receive it to their spiritual benefit, not to their detriment. Instructing our own members is vital. They are the ones who, in many cases, have invited the visitors to our services. They are, therefore, the ones who have the most natural opportunity to explain that we don't simply invite everybody to receive Communion. (An intermediary step in instructing might be simply telling our members to tell their friends, "Our pastor's policy is to make an appointment to talk with people who would like to come to Communion at our church. He'd be happy to meet with you." This way, we pastors can do the work of explaining our practice until our people have received more instruction.) Two components of our instruction suggest themselves. First, our people need to understand the evangelical reasons behind our practice. If our own members don't "buy into" our rationale, they will be reluctant to speak to visiting friends and relatives about it. Covering the topic in Bible classes and maybe through written tracts made available to them is useful. Second, our members need a concrete strategy they can employ to explain

our practice. They need to know what to say and how to say it. Again, this instruction could be given in Bible classes or through short, explanatory tracts that our people could give to their visiting friends.

When it comes to announcements (verbal or in the bulletin) about closed Communion, there are several schools of thought. The “less is more” school keeps it short and simple. The simplest announcement, whether verbal or written, might be, “If you are not a member of our church, please make an appointment to speak with a pastor about Communion before coming forward to the altar.” The “more is more” school of thought gives a thorough explanation, usually through a written tract that is available or even inserted into the service folder. Rationale for our Communion practice, basic instruction about the Real presence, a brief discussion of church fellowship—all these things and more can be included. Also beneficial are concrete suggestions for visitors to help ease discomfort they may feel not going to Communion.⁵⁴ A third school of thought between “less” and “more” aims to keep explanations short but to cover the necessary bases. Each pastor will have to determine the best route for his situation. One caution is in place, however: try not to let closed Communion overshadow the blessings of the Sacrament. Aim to make the joy of forgiveness and fellowship the keynotes of the Supper. And say what is true: we *do* want people to join our Communion fellowship after instruction. It’s not “Never” but “Not yet.”

When we practice closed Communion, we are speaking the truth in love—assuming that we are implementing biblical principles in a spirit of love. And visitors can benefit from only observing the Supper—what of the proclamation of the death of Christ that the visitor sees and hears? Celebrating the Sacrament according to its divine institution is gospel proclamation (1 Corinthians 11:26), even though it is not giving the Lord’s body and blood to be eaten and drunk. Furthermore, before we rule out the possibility of more frequent celebration, the needs and desires of our members must be considered along with those of visitors. We must ask and seriously consider the question, “For fear of offending visitors, should we withhold from our people the Sacrament, which has the command and promise of our Lord behind it?”

At the same time, though, the effect of closed Communion on visitors ought not be pooh-poohed. The divine service is very often where inquirers first come into contact with our churches. And they come with less-than-orthodox preconceptions: a superficial ecumenism, a belief that the Supper is only a visual aid, etc. Raising the stakes is the consumer mentality that many people bring when coming to our churches for the first time: “Give me the product I want, or I’ll take my business elsewhere.”⁵⁵ Working in our culture, conditioned as it is by ecumenism, consumerism and non-sacramental Protestantism, our pastors and missionaries are faced with many hard cases. Exploratory

⁵⁴ See WELS home missionary Don Schulz’s insert page in the November 2002 *Mission Counselors’ Newsletter* for a good example. A brief explanation of closed Communion is there, along with an encouragement to visitors not to feel uncomfortable and concrete ideas for what to do while church members are receiving the Sacrament (suggested prayers, etc.).

⁵⁵ One wonders if this dynamic was present in the early Evangelical Lutheran church, when every Sunday Communion was the norm; was the public service the first contact the unevangelized had with the church? If so, did they come with the consumerist preconceptions that many of our worship visitors bring?

missions, where many or most of those attending worship are not communicants, must wrestle with this issue. It is no easy task to balance the needs of communicants, whom we want to long for and request the Sacrament, and the needs of the unchurched, with whom we want to build continuing, gospel-centered relationships. Evangelical Lutheran missionaries will need to discuss and grapple with these issues.⁵⁶

Having Communion takes a long time on a Sunday morning; that makes it hard to do every week.

This concern ought not be quickly dismissed, especially considering large congregations with multiple back-to-back services on a weekend. I remember as a boy standing shoulder-to-shoulder with people in the narthex of St. Mark's in Watertown, Wisconsin, as we waited for one Communion service to end and the next to begin. It got crowded, even in that expansive area. The time-sensitive nature of our American culture is an additional concern. Would people avoid our church if they knew the service was going to take a long time? On the other hand, in our culture the time constraints on some people may keep them from church altogether on some Sundays. This leads us to ask, "Would making Communion available more often enable them to receive it more often?"

Rather than surrendering to the "it takes too long" concern, we could try to streamline the Communion service. I'm not suggesting that we take a scissors to page 15 or that we scrap everything and fashion a new but not improved Communion service. But we could evaluate things that take time in the service.

The method of distribution is one of those things. A small chancel that takes time to get into and out of and that accommodates a small number at each table—this can elongate the time of distribution. Continuous distribution (or "station Communion") is an alternative. Communicants file up to receive the body of Christ from the minister or deacon, who remains standing in one place, then they move to the other station to receive the blood.⁵⁷ The distribution formula for this method is "The body of Christ, given for

⁵⁶ By the way, I have another closed Communion anecdote. (This one has a happy ending, to counterbalance the previous story.) The husband of a woman who had been visiting our church regularly came one Sunday by himself—one of the first times he had attended. I vaguely recalled seeing him before, but couldn't remember any details about him. My associate, who had talked with the man before, was out of town that day, so I couldn't get the skinny. Later in the service, the man came to the rail to receive the Sacrament. Evangelically (or maybe spinelessly), I gave him the benefit of the doubt and communed him. I spoke with him after the service. He was very cordial. But I learned that he was a non-practicing Roman Catholic. I asked him, as gently as I could, not to come to the altar for Communion until we'd had a chance to talk more. He agreed and left. (I promptly located the president of our congregation and did a *Pater, peccavi*: "I think I just gave Communion to a Catholic!" I didn't want him to find out later and bring me up on charges with the district president, whose office was right down the hall from mine.) At any rate, the man eventually began the Bible information class, and during the lesson on Communion, he told me that he'd gone home fuming the day I had asked him not to come to the altar again before more instruction. Thanks to the Spirit, however, he understood the rationale when I explained it to him. Long story short (too late!)—he now serves as the chairman of our school board.

⁵⁷ This method does not allow for kneeling, which has been a beneficial and significant custom. Kneeling expresses reverence for the body and blood of Christ, distributed and received in the Supper. Kneeling side by side with Christians in close communion emphasizes the communal nature of the Meal, which is an

you. The blood of Christ, poured out for you.” These words are said to each individual communicant.⁵⁸

Other parts of the service should also be evaluated. For example, need every stanza of every hymn be sung? Shortening the service of the Sacrament is one route that is occasionally tried. Trimming out the Preface and Sanctus does shorten things. But because of the ancient use of these parts of the service (the Preface dates back to the Second Century AD) and the preparatory nature of the canticles, this is not advisable. Could the first part of the service, the service of the Word, be shortened, though? Could one of the first two lessons occasionally be omitted, along with the psalm perhaps? (The Gospel, which forms the backbone of the service of the Word, should not be omitted.) Can we even consider—dare I ask it?—a shorter sermon? We don’t wish to diminish the importance of the preached Word in people’s minds, but neither do we wish to minimize the importance of the Sacrament.

Finally, we can also lovingly instruct our people that “Church can’t last more than an hour” is actually not among the Ten Commandments. “You shall have no other gods” and “Remember the Sabbath day” are. We must not antagonize people, intentionally lengthening the service to teach them a lesson—one that I doubt would be learned anyway. But we will promote the unique benefits given in God’s house, benefits that can be found nowhere else, spotlighting God’s gifts in Word and Sacrament.⁵⁹

Tough Questions

It bears repeating that there is no divine command as to how often to offer or to receive the Sacrament. Nevertheless, we need to carefully contemplate this issue and not simply shrug it off.⁶⁰ There are some questions to ask our brothers and ourselves. “Is offering the Supper every other week, as many of us do now, too *infrequent*? Or is it sufficient? Am I meeting the needs of people who desire the consolation that the Sacrament provides? It would take a lot of effort to have the Lord’s Supper more often. A lot of instruction, a lot of practical ‘headaches’. Is it worth it?” In all this, we must not lose sight of the most basic fact: in the Supper, our Lord gives us his body and blood for

aspect that is often overlooked. Kneeling has also served as a confessional statement. In the days of the Prussian Union in the early 19th Century, Lutherans confessed their belief in the Real Presence by kneeling to receive the Sacrament alongside the Reformed, with whom they had been forced into union.

Nevertheless, if we were forced to make a choice between less frequent offering of the Sacrament with kneeling and more frequent offering with stations, we might wisely choose the latter.

⁵⁸ *Christian Worship: Manual*. p.178.

⁵⁹ Other concerns could be mentioned about increasing the number of times we offer the Supper. One example has to do with the predominant “mood” of the Supper. In our synodical history, preparation for the Sacrament was stressed. Faithful members went to the parsonage on Saturday to announce, then sometimes fasted till the Supper had been received. This was, indeed, “fine outward training” and maybe evidenced a seriousness about the means of grace that we lack in our day. It might also, though, have had the side effect of discouraging frequent reception or of making penitence overshadow forgiveness. If people first think of rigorous discipline when they think of the Sacrament, they may resist the suggestion to offer it more often: “What are you trying to do to me? Make me even sorer for my sins?” Additional factors, too, could be cited.

⁶⁰ See footnote number 2 of this essay.

forgiveness, life and salvation. His is the evangelical imperative, “Do this.” The gifts he gives in this Meal are gifts that no one else can give. The manner in which he gives grace in the Supper is unparalleled. For the sake of the gospel and our people who need it, this discussion about how often we offer the Sacrament is worth having.

Conclusion

In *The Hammer of God*, there are a few recurring characters, if one can call them that. One is the church building. It stands immovable in each of the novel’s three stories, which happen in three different eras in history. Another recurring “character” is the parsonage. And in each of the three stories, there is one other thing that makes an appearance. It is the parish’s portable Communion set—chalice, host box and flask in a sturdy leather case. Over the centuries it was used to serve the Lord’s body and blood to countless sick and troubled sinners.

Word and Sacrament endure. In every age, Christ’s pastors bring his body and blood to the weak and wounded. “Until he comes” the Supper will stand as a vital means of pastoral care, for the Lord’s Supper is the gospel.

In the course of a trying ministry, pastors may be tempted to set aside the Supper—perhaps not completely, but to a degree—for something that seems more effective. After all, who would conclude, after analyzing what the eye sees in the Sacrament, that it would accomplish anything? But we know what the Father has revealed to us by his Spirit: when Jesus is involved, there is more than meets the eye. The words of the Word are attached to this eating and drinking. This Sacrament is imbued with divine power.

Upon these words [i.e., the *Verba*] rest all our foundation, protection, and defense against all errors and deception that have ever come or may yet come...

Now this is plain and clear from the words just mentioned: *This is My body and blood, given and shed FOR YOU, for the remission of sins.* Briefly that is as much as to say: For this reason we go to the Sacrament because there we receive such a treasure by and in which we obtain forgiveness of sins. Why so? Because the words stand here and give us this; for on this account [Christ] bids me to eat and to drink, that it may be my own and may benefit me, as a sure pledge and token, yea, the very same treasure that is appointed for me against my sins, death, and every calamity.⁶¹

May our Lord preserve his Word and Sacraments among us until he comes.

⁶¹ LC V, *Trigl.*, p.757. Italics in original.

For Further Discussion

1. Thoughtfully consider these questions: “What importance do I attach to the Lord’s Supper in my ministry as *Seelsorger*? What role does it actually play as I care for my people?” (Don’t just give the answer your PT professor would have wanted to hear; be honest.) Share your reflections as you wish.
2. Subsequent to the previous questions ask, “What role do I want the Lord’s Supper to play in my ministry?” and “How will that happen?” Again, share your reflections as you are comfortable doing so.
3. Evaluate the suggestions for teaching the Sacrament to various age groups. Have you done any of these things? If so, how did they work? Do you have any suggestions to add?
4. Do you feel comfortable pointing to Christ’s command to receive the Sacrament as Luther did, or is this somewhat legalistic? How do you address both the Old Adam and New Man when preaching about and to the Sacrament?
5. What, in your view, is the strongest argument in favor of offering the Lord’s Supper every Sunday and festival? Why do you answer the way you do? What is the weakest argument in favor of it? Why?
6. What, in your view, is the biggest concern or obstacle to offering the Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis? Why do you answer the way you do?
7. How does a pastor’s personal sacramental piety affect that of his congregation? What implications does your answer have for you and your people?

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Appendix: Preparing for the Sacrament

Self-Examination

The Apostle commanded preparation for receiving the Sacrament when he wrote, “Let a man examine himself, and in such a way let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28, my translation).⁶² The present imperative δοκιμαζέτω commands an ongoing evaluation; this is to be way things are always done. The verb used here brings to mind the Old West and a cowboy biting a gold coin to see if it was genuine. To test or examine oneself involves determining whether certain things are true about oneself. What are those things? First, “Am I penitent? Do I desire the forgiveness here given?” Second, “Do I believe that I here receive the body and blood of Christ?” Luther mentions these two things in his “Confession concerning Christ’s Supper”: “This is why Paul admonishes them to examine themselves and perceive *who they are* and *how they regard this bread*. If they do not regard it as the body of Christ, or treat it as if it were not the body of Christ, then they do not discern the body of Christ; and this offense will not go unpunished.”⁶³

The command to examine oneself is the first part of 1 Corinthians 11:28. But the second part must not be overshadowed: “...and in such a way let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” The goal of self-examination is reception of the Sacrament in a fitting manner. Paul does not say “examine yourself” in order to scare people from the Table, but to draw them there to receive blessing. It is not some worthiness in ourselves that makes us fit for the Sacrament, but it is trust in Christ. Luther says it better:

Therefore such people [i.e., those who “desire to be godly” but feel “feeble and full of infirmities”] must learn that it is the highest art to know that our Sacrament does not depend on our worthiness. For we are not baptized because we are worthy and holy, nor do we go to confession because we are pure and without sin, but the contrary, because we are poor miserable men, and just because we are unworthy; unless it be someone who desires no grace or absolution nor intends to reform.

But whoever would gladly obtain grace and consolation should impel himself, and allow no one to frighten him away, but say: I, indeed, would like to be worthy; but I come, not upon any worthiness, but upon thy Word. Because Thou hast commanded it, as one who would gladly be Thy disciple, no matter what becomes of my worthiness. But this is difficult; for we always have this obstacle and hindrance to encounter, that we look more upon ourselves than upon the Word and lips of Christ.⁶⁴

⁶² Two articles on self-examination and related issues are found in *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997). One is John Schaller’s “Self-examination according to 1 Corinthians 11:28.” vol.2. The other is August Pieper’s “God’s Judgment upon the Unworthy Use of the Lord’s Supper, 1 Corinthians 11, 10:14-22.” vol.2.

⁶³ AE 37:347. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴ LC V, *Trigl.*, p.767. Has an overly penitential attitude ever existed among us? Bryan Gerlach relates this story in a recent article: “A ‘seniors’ Bible class was discussing the Sacrament’s dominant mood. One

The goal of self-examination is a personal appropriation not only of the law but especially of the gospel. To recognize the Supper of the Lord as a means of grace, to proclaim the death of the Lord with believing joy—these are the goals of self-examination. It's hard to improve on the Small Catechism: “*Who, then, receives the Sacrament worthily?* Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well-prepared who has faith in these words: *Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins.*”⁶⁵ The foundation of Biblical self-examination is not predominantly law but gospel, not works but faith. To examine oneself is not to fulfill a legal prerequisite for admittance to the Supper (“I’ve done what the Lord has commanded; now I’m worthy to receive the Sacrament.”). Rather, it is a faith-born recognition of one’s need and of Christ’s promise to meet that need with his body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

What does self-examination look like in practical terms? A good starting point is to recommend that each communicant ask himself/herself a few simple questions before eating and drinking. The following series of four questions is adapted from a Bible information class booklet commonly used in our synod.

Before coming to the Lord’s Supper, ask yourself:

- Am I sorry for my sins?
- Do I trust Jesus Christ as my Savior from sin?
- Do I believe that I receive the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper?
- Do I intend, with the help of God, to change my sinful life? (This is really another way of asking, “Am I repentant? Do I desire forgiveness from God and not just a free pass to sin more?”)⁶⁶

“Personal Preparation for Holy Communion” in *Christian Worship*, an abridged and adapted form of Luther’s Christian Questions, is also an excellent reference. “Worship leaders ought to refer to this devotional tool in the weekly service folder and in Bible and instruction classes... Pastors may also use this form when they have private consultation with members and encourage them toward regular use of the Lord’s means of grace.”⁶⁷ The 1998 revision of the Small Catechism (Kuske) lists the Christian Questions and refers students to them in the section on confession.

veteran believer told a remarkable story from his youth. He remembers when people communed infrequently, often only four times per year. He told how communing too often telegraphed that one must have done something really bad to need Communion so often. For him the dominant emphasis was emphatically repentance. When he went forward to receive our Lord’s precious body and blood, he said it felt like ‘crawling forward on all fours,’ not sure he wanted to be there but knowing that Jesus expected him there.” Bryan Gerlach. “Greater Joy in Communion.” Available on the WELS website’s Commission on Worship page.

⁶⁵ SC, *Trigl.*, p.557.

⁶⁶ Forrest Bivens and David Valleskey. *New Life in Christ*. Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. Cf. p.41.

⁶⁷ *Christian Worship: Manual*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993. p.223.

Confession and Absolution

Since confession and absolution, whether public or private, has long been an integral part of preparing for the Sacrament, we turn our attention to it now. At the direction of the steering committee, we highlight Luther's excellent "Brief Exhortation to Confession" of 1529.⁶⁸

Luther notes three problems with the practice of private confession and absolution that existed in his day. First, he notes that under that papacy, confession was mandatory. Second, people were forced to enumerate specific sins. Third, people were never instructed about the great benefit that private absolution held in store for them.

Concerning confession, we have always taught that it should be voluntary and purged of the pope's tyranny. We have been set free from his coercion and from the intolerable burden he imposed upon the Christian church. Up to now, as we all know from experience, there has been no law quite so oppressive as that which forced everyone to make confession on pain of the gravest mortal sin. Moreover, it so greatly burdened and tortured consciences with the enumeration of all kinds of sin that no one was able to confess purely enough. Worst of all, no one taught or understood what confession is and how useful and comforting it is. Instead, it was made sheer anguish and a hellish torture since people had to make confession even though nothing was more hateful to them.⁶⁹

One might expect Luther, after giving such a scathing evaluation of private confession under the pope, to do away with the practice altogether. But he doesn't.

These three things have now been removed and made voluntary so that we may confess without coercion or fear, and we are released from the torture of enumerating all sins in detail. Moreover, we have the advantage of knowing how to use confession beneficially for the comforting and strengthening of our conscience.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ This is not included in the *Concordia Triglotta*. Bente explains: "Furthermore, the second edition [of the Large Catechism] of 1529 adds the 'Short Admonition to Confession'... This addition, however, was embodied in neither the German [1580] nor the Latin [1584] Concordia." F. Bente, "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books", p.84. The citations here are from the Theodore G. Tappert edition of the Book of Concord, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959. The "Brief Exhortation" is included also in the F. Samuel Janzow translation of the Large Catechism, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978.

⁶⁹ Tappert, p.457.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.457. This opinion is in accord with the Augsburg Confession. Article XXV, "Of Confession": "Confession in the churches is not abolished among us; for it is not usual to give the body of the Lord, except to them that have been previously examined and absolved... Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution, as being the voice of God, and pronounced by God's command... Confession is of human right only [not commanded by Scripture, but ordained by the Church]. Nevertheless, on account of the great benefit of the absolution, and because it is otherwise useful to the conscience, Confession is retained among us." AC XXV, *Trigl.* pp.69,71.

Luther knew, though, that where freedom is given, there the flesh sneaks in. He describes a situation that sounds eerily similar to ours today:

Everyone knows this now [i.e., that confession is not mandatory, etc.]. Unfortunately, men have learned it only too well; they do whatever they please and take advantage of their freedom, acting as if they will never need or desire to go to confession any more.⁷¹

Some people, Luther continues, reject coming to confession because they don't want any part of the gospel. "To others who gladly hear it, however, we must always preach, exhorting, encouraging, and persuading them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure which the Gospel offers."⁷²

The "Brief Exhortation" goes on to note that confession is not restricted to the confessional. Echoing the Fifth Petition, Luther points out that confession may be made to God. "In fact," he writes, "the whole Lord's Prayer is nothing else than such a confession. For what is our prayer but a confession that we neither have nor do what we ought and a plea for grace and a happy conscience?"⁷³ There is also confessing one's offenses against one's neighbor, a personal confession, absolution and reconciliation. As a third category, Luther lists the private confession made to one's fellow Christian when he is disturbed by some personal conflict or difficulty. "So if there is a heart that feels its sin and desires consolation, it has here a sure refuge when it hears in God's Word that through a man God looses and absolves him from his sins."⁷⁴ These words remind us that preparation for the Sacrament takes place not only at a special time, but in the course of the daily life of repentance and faith.

Luther goes on to remind us of what we learned in the Small Catechism: confession has two parts. The first is recognizing and confessing our sin, the second receiving absolution in faith. "We should take care to keep the two parts clearly separate. We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God's Word. We should not act as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present him, but simply to accept and receive something from him."⁷⁵

Throughout the "Brief Exhortation", Luther stresses two points. First, confession dare not be legislated; people must not be compelled to come or forced to confess. Second, the great benefit of confession is the absolution, the gospel.

We urge you, however, to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you. The Word or absolution, I say, is what your should concentrate on,

⁷¹ Tappert, p.457

⁷² Ibid., pp.457f.

⁷³ Ibid., p.458.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.458.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.459.

magnifying or cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude.

If all this were clearly explained, and meanwhile if the needs which ought to move and induce us to confession were clearly indicated, there would be no need of coercion and force. And man's own conscience would impel him and make him so anxious that he would rejoice and act like a poor, miserable beggar who hears that a rich gift, of money or clothes, is to be given out at a certain place; he would need no bailiff to drive and beat him but would run there as fast as he could so as not to miss the gift.⁷⁶

If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it.⁷⁷

Private confession and absolution is not absolutely necessary, but why would a Christian turn away from this salutary practice? It provides an opportunity for several things. It is a time for individualized application of God's law, as a penitent is led to recognize his/her sins in light of the Ten Commandments and his/her station in life. It is a time for individualized proclamation of the gospel, as a pastor, in the stead of Christ, announces forgiveness. That evangelical purpose is what the Confessions highlight: "*On account of the great benefit of the absolution... Confession is retained among us.*"⁷⁸ It is a time for pastor and penitent to confidentially discuss fruits of repentance and faith, motivated by the forgiving grace of God. It is a time to reaffirm knowledge of basic Christian doctrine, especially knowledge about the nature and benefits of Holy Communion. We don't have to have private absolution, but why would we not want it?

One wonders if this practice (for it centers in the gospel) would bring many benefits if we encouraged it. Not that we do not encourage it at all now—the 1998 Kuske edition of the Small Catechism reads, "It is helpful for us to make a private confession to our pastor when we seek assurance of forgiveness for a sin that especially troubles the conscience."⁷⁹ Could people be encouraged to make use of this practice still more often? Husbands and wives confessing their sins against one another, both to each other and to the pastor, receiving forgiveness as from Christ himself; teenagers confidentially confessing their failures to resist temptation, receiving forgiveness and being counseled on fruits of faith; college students coming to the campus pastor with guilty hearts and leaving set free by Christ.

Do we fear the practice of private confession because of lingering memories of Roman abuses? Not long ago I spoke with a pastor who recalled his days growing up in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. One of his boyhood friends, who was Catholic, would sometimes

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.459f.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.460.

⁷⁸ AC XXV, *Trigl.* p.71. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ David P. Kuske. *The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English.* Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 3rd edition, 1998. p.276.

come to his friends with the unusual request, “Give me something to confess! I’ve got to go to confession, and I don’t have anything to tell the Father. He might not let me go till I give him something good!” There are indeed many things to watch out for. But in Luther’s day the abuses of the confessional were arguably even worse. Yet he saw the evangelical benefits of private confession and absolution as so great that the potential for abuse did not deter him from retaining a sanitized version of the practice.

Prof. John Pless, in his article “Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist,” advocates making a concerted effort to reclaim the Lutheran practice of private absolution. He notes that it is grounded in the biblical and Lutheran doctrine of repentance and supported by strong law-gospel preaching. Pless encourages continuing catechesis concerning confession, particularly private confession. Venues for such catechesis include, obviously, catechism class, but also youth Bible classes and meetings of church leaders. Such instruction would be critical, especially in a church body like the WELS that has not in its history commonly practiced private confession.⁸⁰

Pless also points out the potential benefits of pastors setting aside specific times when they are available for private confession and absolution. He offers this rationale:

Setting aside a period of time each week for confession and absolution has several advantages. First, it says to the congregation that confession and absolution is indeed a natural part of the church’s life and the ordinary means of pastoral care. Confession and absolution is not reserved for desperate cases or extraordinary expressions of sinfulness. Second, it provides an avenue for those who have never taken advantage of this gift to approach their pastor without awkwardness. Third, it reminds our people that confession and absolution is there for them. The weekly announcement in the church bulletin or the sign in front of the building gently reminds parishioners of this gift. Knowing that confession and absolution is regularly offered often prompts people who do not come at the scheduled time to seek out confession and absolution at other times when they are pressed hard by their sin and tormented by Satan.⁸¹

So let’s say we want to bring back the spiritually beneficial and thoroughly Lutheran custom of private confession and absolution—utilized not just on rare occasions but as a regular feature of pastoral nurture. How should we go about it? One option would be to reinstate the practice and legislate its use. We could require it, say, at least once a year. We could do it with good intentions—we wish to know if people are receiving the Sacrament worthily, and we wish people to benefit from private absolution. A second option would be to make people aware of the gospel benefits of private absolution, to give them opportunities to make use of it, to gently instruct them about what it is and is not. As Luther noted, if we were to take the second option we would run

⁸⁰ For a thorough study of private confession’s history, see Mark Jeske’s 1979 essay “The Practice of Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church,” available on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library’s web site.

⁸¹ Pless, *op. cit.*, pp.24f.

the risk that people wouldn't come. Nevertheless, this course of action is the only appropriate one. First of all, we could study the issue as pastors, reviewing the rationale for private absolution. Personally and at the circuit and conference levels, this overlooked treasure of our Lutheran heritage could be studied and its practical implications discussed. The sections on confession in the Small and Large Catechisms are a place to start. Volume 53 of the American Edition of Luther's Works has several down-to-earth sections about what private confession and absolution may "look like." And we pastors could do more than just talk about private absolution. We could seek it ourselves. Is this a pastoral service that circuit pastors could provide? Then we could instruct our people. Such instruction would need to include, perhaps first of all, what private confession is not. Since the practice has been misused, we would need to disabuse people of false notions and caricatures; confession is not a mandatory enumeration of sins, it is not the one good work that makes one prepared to receive the Sacrament, etc. It is receiving absolution from the minister as from Christ himself.

"As if I don't have enough things to do in a week!" the busy pastor objects. But what better way to spend time than in the person-to-person application of law and gospel? An alternative to a more formal approach is what we already do: focus pastoral counseling on repentance and forgiveness.⁸² Prof. John Schaller makes reference to something like this when, after mentioning things to discuss with someone who desires to receive the Sacrament, he writes, "Penitents need not even notice that the preacher is examining them; he can potentially carry on the discussion in the tone of a normal conversation."⁸³ And waiting for the forgiven sinner is the Lord's Table with all its gospel blessings.

Announcing for Communion

Luther advocated announcing one's planned attendance at the Lord's Supper as he encouraged pastoral care.

The bishop should be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord's Supper so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord's Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the Word and sign of grace and salvations from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so

⁸² This is, I believe, currently the core of our Seminary's approach to pastoral counseling, the Repentance-Hope model.

⁸³ „Die Beichtkinder brauchen gar nicht zu merken, dass der Prediger sie exploriert; er halte die Besprechung möglichst im Tone gewöhnlicher Konversation.“ John Schaller. *Pastorale Praxis*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1913. My translation.

that they may be consoled and comforted; this was Christ's purpose, when he in priceless love gave and instituted the Supper, and said, "Take and eat," etc.⁸⁴

But by this did Luther mean that no one should ever come to Communion unless he had been thus examined by the pastor sometime in the preceding week? No.

But I think it enough for the applicants for communion to be examined or explored once a year. Indeed, a man may be so understanding that he needs to be questioned only once in his lifetime or not at all. For, by this practice, we want to guard lest the worthy and unworthy alike rush to the Lord's Supper, as we have hitherto seen done in the Roman church. There they seek only to communicate; but the faith, the comfort, the use and benefit of the Supper are not even mentioned or considered.⁸⁵

Announcing for Communion, then, had both a law and a gospel function. It provided the pastor with the opportunity to talk with people. The pastor could find out if people were penitent, if they knew what the Lord's Supper was—in short, if they had examined themselves so as to receive the Sacrament in a worthy way. It was not always necessary, but it certainly could be beneficial. For that reason it was to be encouraged.

WELS pastor Edward Zell once lamented that announcing for Communion was falling into disuse among us: "It has so much to commend it that we feel it would approach the criminal to emasculate it any further or let it deteriorate any more than it has."⁸⁶ That was in 1964! Assuming that the trend away from Communion announcement has continued, so has the deterioration of which he speaks. Zell, clearly coming from a pastoral perspective, argues for this custom's recovery and use. He lists several reasons "why we should intensify our efforts to keep this custom on a higher plane." Among them:

It helps direct the mind and thinking of the announced communicant toward the Sacrament itself; 2. A prior time for announcement will afford ample time for the Scripturally required self-examination of the communicant; 3. It affords an opportunity for private confession for the communicant. This takes on greater importance when one again remembers the great demands on the time of the pastor; when it becomes virtually impossible to set up an individual appointment for days at a time; 4. It gives the pastor the time and the place that he, as the shepherd, may reprove, exhort, rebuke, comfort, encourage, or commend. Please do not

⁸⁴ AE, 53:33.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p.33.

⁸⁶ Edward Zell. "The Appropriateness and Value of Customs Associated with the Sacraments and Church Rites". Presented to the Michigan District Convention, Saginaw, Michigan, June 17, 1964. Available on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library's web site.

underestimate the value of this time; 5. It is an invaluable aid in helping to maintain the Scripturally correct practice of a “close communion.”⁸⁷

A potential downside of requiring Communion registration or announcement is that it could keep people from communing who were, in fact, well prepared. If people’s schedules have them running around all week, they may not have opportunity to contact the pastor. In a harried society like ours, this would be a real concern. But there is also potential benefit for maintaining this custom, even in a fast-paced world—*especially* in a fast-paced world. Times of personal contact and conversation between pastor and people are rare. Any opportunity for it should be encouraged. The *Shepherd under Christ* is realistic, yet optimistic:

Whether communion announcement will serve a spiritual purpose will depend on the pastor. Practical circumstances have made a meaningful practice difficult. It will require initiative and imagination on the part of the pastor to find ways of overcoming the difficulties. But the effort is not in vain since the Word of God that is used can lead to more worthy and even more frequent reception of Holy Communion.⁸⁸

A “Must” immediately before the Supper?

A practical question: Do we need to have a corporate confession and absolution in every service with the Lord’s Supper? The *Shepherd under Christ* says “Yes” as it urges self-examination and thoughtful preparation for the Sacrament:

The church has very properly included confession and absolution as a significant part of communion preparation, either in a separate confessional service, or, as is most common now, as part of the order of service with Holy Communion. The congregation joins in making a public, general confession to God. The pastor, as the called servant of God, announces the free and unconditional forgiveness of all sins through the blood of Christ. When communion is included in services that use the order for matins or vespers, *the pastor must remember to add the confession and absolution*, possibly after the sermon before the communion liturgy.⁸⁹

The point is well made. In a time when private absolution is rare and even announcing for Communion is a custom inconsistently practiced in our churches, the public confession and absolution serves a useful purpose in encouraging self-examination. But should it be a requirement? Must a pastor “remember to add the confession and absolution” in every

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck. *The Shepherd under Christ*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974. p.88.

⁸⁹ Schuetze and Habeck, op.cit. p.90. Emphasis added. A liturgical note: if a service has the Sacrament, it is wise to use an order of service designed for it. In *Christian Worship*, this would be the Common Service or the Service of Word and Sacrament. Matins and Vespers are, strictly speaking, daily prayer offices.

service in which the Sacrament is celebrated? In a 1987 essay (when the services for *Christian Worship* were in their formative stages), James Tiefel noted this about Luther's perspective on the question:

For as highly as he valued confession, he did not see as close a connection between confession and the Lord's Supper as we see in our day. For one thing, he refused to demand the rite in a legalistic way: "I will not have anyone forced to it, but left to each one's free will." Pieper draws from the St. Louis edition a quotation which shows that Luther felt he and other pastors or laymen could attend the Sacrament without going to confession. In the Small Catechism Luther makes it clear that not confession, but faith is the essential pre-communion preparation... I will maintain that Luther, like St. Paul, while stressing the value of a living confession, did not attach to the reception of the Sacrament the necessity of confession...⁹⁰

Does having confession and absolution in a service prior to the Sacrament serve a good purpose? Certainly it does, particularly for those people with whom the pastor has not been in direct contact recently (as may be common in a large congregation). And when private confession and absolution is not practiced, a corporate confession may be the only opportunity some people take to confess their sins and receive absolution. Yet the sermon (providing it proclaims clear law and gospel) will also serve a preparatory purpose. So will the lessons, the living and active Word of the Lord. The canticles of the Liturgy will do the same; Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei lead worshipers to confess their sins and absolute need for grace, and they point to the mercy of the Triune God, particularly to the person and work of the Son of God, as life and salvation. Think also of how they address Christ as one really present to save. The service of the Sacrament prepares people to receive the Lord's body and blood in repentance and faith.

Another point is worth mentioning. Private absolution is a salutary practice in and of itself. While it obviously prepares people well for reception of the Supper, it need not be confined to that use. One can sense this point in Luther's "Brief Admonition." He notes the importance of confessing to God and to neighbor, as outlined in the Fifth Petition.

We maybe are sure to include a confession prior to the Sacrament with this reasoning: the full strength gospel of the Supper should be preceded by the full strength law of a confession of sins. (This full strength law also is followed, of course, by the gospel of the absolution.) Or this reasoning may come into play: in order to let the gospel predominate in a special service, say, on Ash Wednesday, we should follow a pointed or extended confession of sins with the gospel of the Sacrament later in the service. Both of these trains of thought are valid. But we should beware of unintended consequences. In the first case, care should be taken that the joyful evangelical emphasis of the Sacrament not be unnecessarily dampened by the notion that a confession of sins always must be

⁹⁰ James Tiefel. "A Comparative Study of the Principles of Confession and Absolution in the Format of our Lutheran Liturgy." Electronic version; no page numbers. Essay delivered at the Michigan District Pastor-Teacher Conference, 1987. Available on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary website.

attached to it. In the second case, while the Supper is certainly fitting on a day with a penitential emphasis, so would be a service focusing on the blessings of confession and absolution. Tiefel cautions:

Organized confession has, in fact, often hindered the purposes of the Lord's Supper. It has given to the Sacrament a somber rather than a joyful ambience and has, in many cases, actually discouraged pious but troubled Christians from attending. Where confession included a confessional address the Sacrament was separated from the Word and made communion seen to be only an occasional part of a Christian's life. Still today, many of those customs remain.⁹¹

On a day like the Festival of the Nativity, a responsorial Scripture dialogue might begin the service. No law should be made here; we cannot say that a corporate confession must be included in the service or that it must be omitted at certain times. Rather, pastoral care must be exercised. We recall the Lutheran Confessions: "Confession in the churches is not abolished among us; for it is not usual to give the body of the Lord, except to them that have been previously examined and absolved." A pastor may well conclude that general confession and absolution in each service prior to the Sacrament is the best course of action for his congregation. Examination and absolution can take place, though, in more settings than just the general confession and absolution.

Nowhere in the New Testament do Jesus, Paul, or any of the other writers attach confession/absolution to the Lord's Supper nor do any of the early church fathers nor any of the first liturgical orders. Rather, both Jesus and Paul stress that preparation of one's heart and purity of one's life is the proper preparation and prerequisite for corporate worship in general and the Lord's Supper specifically. To this the fathers, Luther, and the Confessions heartily agree.

To achieve the proper preparation of the heart Luther saw no better means than an on-going and thorough training in Scripture. In the highest periods of orthodoxy we find similar points of view. Pastoral care and concern find their greatest ability in personal contact. The timing for such training was, in Luther's mind, dependant on an individual's private circumstances.⁹²

Peter Brunner, author of *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, issues this call to appreciate both absolution and the Supper, the gospel in Word and in Sacrament:

Thus we have cut the cord which ties the reception of the Lord's Supper to communion by law and by custom to a preceding reception of absolution. It is surely true that we stand in great need of absolution. No line dare be written which questions this need or which minimizes the magnitude of

⁹¹ Tiefel, op. cit.

⁹² Ibid.

this gift. But the reception of Holy Communion may be made absolutely dependent on a preceding confession with resultant absolution only when that ultimate boundary has been crossed, when a commandment has been transgressed which effects the exclusion from the living membership of the body of Christ. In all other instances I dare not demand of myself or of others that confession be made and absolution received prior to the reception of the Sacrament. Of course, opportunity for confession must be offered on, or better before each Sunday or holy day on which Holy Communion is administered. But we must maintain the independence of confession over against Holy Communion and the independence of Holy Communion over against confession.⁹³

⁹³ Peter Brunner. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. M.H. Bertram, trans. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972. p.289. Qtd. in Tiefel, op. cit.