

**Calvin, Weekly Communion,
and the Scottish Reformed Tradition**

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Grand Rapids, Michigan:
Torwood Press
2013

A Return to Tradition?

Several years ago, *U.S. News and World Report* published an article entitled, “A Return to Tradition,” by Jay Tolson. According to Tolson, an unprecedented number of Protestant churches are instituting “something that would have been considered almost heretical in most evangelical Protestant churches five or 10 years ago: a weekly Communion service.”¹ He also notes that this trend toward traditional liturgy – which appears “threatening to church members who strongly identify with the Reformation and the Protestant rejection of Catholic practices” – is heralded by its proponents as a return to God-centered worship.²

Not surprisingly, the ripple effect of this liturgical movement has made its way into Reformed circles as well, where many portray weekly communion as the only reasonable option for churches. Keith Mathison writes, “When we begin to understand the true nature and purpose of the Lord’s Supper, we wonder why any Christian wouldn’t want to receive all that God offers in it every time the church gathers for worship.”³ A common line of argument contends that weekly communion is simply a revival of John Calvin’s approach to the sacrament. Calvin, they assert, tried to institute weekly communion in Geneva but was forced by the city council to put up with a quarterly observance.⁴ Hence, they say, Calvinists of later generations “often had to settle for less than the ideal, and unfortunately what they settled for, rather than what they preferred, often became part of the received tradition in Reformed churches.”⁵

¹ Jay Tolson, “A Return to Tradition: A New Interest in Old Ways Takes Root in Catholicism and Many Other Faiths,” in *U.S. News and World Report* (December 13, 2007), 1.

² Tolson, “A Return to Tradition,” 3. Tolson goes on to note a similar liturgical trend among Emerging Church advocates, such as Brian McLaren, who “instituted a Eucharistic liturgy” to reach un-churched postmodern seekers. McLaren explains what Tolson calls his “almost intuitive attraction to liturgy, ritual, and symbol,” observing, “There is a certain kind of postmodern sensibility that loses confidence in the rational explanation of everything.”

³ Keith Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 293.

⁴ W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 71-72; N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power, Part Three: Renaissance and Reformation* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 2004), 214, 220-221.

⁵ Mathison, *Given For You*, 297.

On this view, later Reformed churches followed Geneva's sacramental frequency so blindly that "this ingrained tradition is the only thing preventing the Reformed churches from finally achieving the goal of such early Reformers as Calvin by returning to the ancient Christian practice of weekly communion."⁶ As common as this polemic is in the Reformed community today,⁷ the question remains as to whether it is truly accurate. Is this "return to tradition" really a revival of Calvin's overall perspective, or are these polemical appeals giving us only part of the story? The remainder of this paper will seek to answer this question by examining Calvin's understanding of communion frequency in the context of his own writings and experience.

⁶ Mathison, *Given For You*, 297.

⁷ Cf. R. Scott Clark, "The Evangelical Fall from the Means of Grace," in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998); John M. Mason, *Letters on Frequent Communion* (Belfast: Drummond Anderson, 1806); Mathison, *Given For You*; Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003); John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966).

Communion Frequency in Calvin's *Institutes*

Just before arriving in Geneva in 1536 at the request of William Farel, Calvin released the first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*,⁸ in which he specifically addressed the issue of communion frequency. At that time, the practice of the Roman Church contained a rather intriguing contrast of extremes. While priests performed public masses repeatedly throughout the week, the average layman actively communed just once a year (bread-only) on Easter. Calvin argued that such infrequent and incomplete participation stemmed from the rise of unbiblical ceremonies in the church. These ceremonies, he argued, were slowly displacing the simplicity of the Supper as commanded by Christ. Rather, “it should have been done far differently: the Lord’s Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians.”⁹ Indeed, “the Supper could have been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week,”¹⁰ since the Apostles, he maintained, had an “unvarying rule” that “no meeting of the church should take place without . . . partaking of the Supper.”¹¹

In the minds of some, these early statements prove that Calvin promoted weekly communion as a universal, divine mandate. For instance, Mathison presents Calvin’s view as opposed to the notion that “local churches are free to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as frequently as each church sees fit.”¹² However, nothing in these quotations from Calvin requires a universal, divine mandate. He merely asserted what the Church “could have” and “should have” done under certain circumstances. Certainly, he did believe that the Apostles celebrated weekly communion, but this does not necessarily mean that he viewed weekly communion as divinely mandated for the church in all ages. As we will see, Calvin’s nuanced position allowed him to cite the Apostles as precedent for his own preference, without suggesting that their practice was universally binding on the church.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 113.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 113.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 113.

¹² Mathison, *Given For You*, 295.

Communion Frequency in Relation to Efficacy

Some weekly communion advocates have suggested that Calvin's understanding of communion *efficacy* determined his position on communion *frequency*, invariably leading him to embrace weekly communion.¹³ In other words, they associate non-weekly communion with a denial of the Reformed and Calvinistic teaching that worthy communicants “feed upon the body and blood of Christ . . . in a spiritual manner . . . truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death.”¹⁴ Mathison writes, “It is not difficult to understand why Calvin desired weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper” since “his understanding of the nature of the sacrament naturally entailed frequent communion.”¹⁵ He then adds that “those like Calvin, who see the Lord's Supper as a real and effectual means of grace, understandably desire to celebrate it as often as possible.”¹⁶ Michael Horton, in an attempt to link non-weekly communion with a Zwinglian conception of the sacrament, writes, “If the sacrament is chiefly a matter of our remembering or our attesting to our faith and obedience, it is not surprising that it should be infrequent.”¹⁷

Calvin's view of communion *efficacy* could not help but impact his position on communion *frequency*. However, the claim that weekly communion logically follows the notion of “the Lord's Supper as a real and effectual means of grace” raises some serious questions. For instance, what about the frequency practiced by other sixteenth century Reformed churches that agreed with Calvin's view of sacramental efficacy? The Huguenots, for instance, adopted the *French Confession* (1559), which clearly echoed Calvin's view.¹⁸ In

¹³ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, Vol. 1: *God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 71; Needham, *2000 Years*, 3:214.

¹⁴ Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 170.

¹⁵ Mathison, *Given For You*, 293. He further asserts on p. 294, “The Lord's Supper is said by the apostle Paul to be the communion of the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). Here we encounter the central mystery of the Lord's Supper and probably the main reason why Calvin desired communion to be celebrated at least weekly.”

¹⁶ Mathison, *Given For You*, 294.

¹⁷ Michael S. Horton, “At Least Weekly: The Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper and of Its Frequent Celebration,” in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000), 156.

¹⁸ Article 36 asserts, “Although he be in heaven until he come to judge all the earth,

addition, the French Huguenots “in times of freedom” enjoyed “the administration of the Lord’s Supper on feast days” (i.e. three times per year).¹⁹ While much could be researched and written concerning communion frequency among the French Huguenots or within the illustrious Dutch Reformed tradition, we will now focus our attention on the Scottish Reformed tradition, from John Knox to the Second Reformation. Few theological traditions provide a more striking example of Reformed sacramental efficacy alongside less-than-weekly sacramental frequency.

still we believe that by the secret and incomprehensible power of his Spirit he feeds and strengthens us with the substance of his body and of his blood.” Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 3:380. The French Confession was almost certainly authored by Calvin himself.

¹⁹ Charles Washington Baird. *Eutaxia, or the Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1855), 85. Baird is here giving a translation of Guillaume de Félice, *Histoire des Protestants de France* (Paris: Librairie Protestante, 1850), 458.

Communion Frequency in Scotland (1560-1648)

Under John Knox, the Scottish church's understanding of frequency and efficacy was very similar to that of its sister churches in Geneva and among the French Huguenots. While the *Scots Confession* (1560) asserted Christ's spiritual presence in the Supper,²⁰ the *Book of Discipline* (1561) established communion frequency according to "the order of the Kirk of Geneva," ordaining that "the table of the Lord shall be ministered four times in the year."²¹ Horton, after observing that this document elsewhere called for "frequent" communion, comments that "in practice this was often thwarted by the lack of sufficiently trained Protestant ministers."²² Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that the Scots viewed non-weekly communion as something that "thwarted" their agenda. In their minds, quarterly communion *was* frequent communion. Whatever practical hindrances they encountered for lack of Protestant ministers, their goal was frequent communion on a quarterly basis.

The *Book of Discipline* contained an explicit statement concerning the Scots' rationale for quarterly communion. Far from denying a strong view of sacramental efficacy, the Scots were supremely motivated by their adherence to Calvin's teaching on this point. In order to prevent such vain participation as would bring God's judgment upon unworthy communicants, a stricter discipline was adopted. This stricter discipline, as detailed below, would be almost impossible to coordinate on a weekly basis.

²⁰ Chapter 21 declares, "... but this union and conjunction which we have with the body and blood of Christ Jesus in the right use of the sacraments is wrought by means of the Holy Spirit, who by true faith carries us above all things that are visible, carnal, and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, once broken and shed for us but now in heaven, and appearing for us in the presence of his Father. Notwithstanding the distance between his glorified body in heaven and mortal men on earth, yet we must assuredly believe that the bread which we break is the communion of Christ's body and the cup which we bless the communion of his blood. Thus we confess and believe without doubt that the faithful, in the right use of the Lord's Table, do so eat the body and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus." Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:468-469.

²¹ James K. Cameron, ed., *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1972), 184.

²² Horton, "At Least Weekly," 165.

All ministers must be admonished to be more careful to instruct the ignorant than ready to serve their appetite and to use more sharp examination than indulgence in admitting to that great Mystery such as be ignorant of the use and virtue of the same. And therefore we think that the administration of the Table ought never to be without examination passing before and specially of them whose knowledge is suspect.”²³

Scottish quarterly communion resulted not from a low view of communion efficacy, but from a robust sensitivity to the sacrament’s dual nature as a blessing to the prepared and a curse to the unprepared. By celebrating communion on a less-than-weekly basis, they thought to reduce unworthy participation and increase worthy participation. This was simply an application Calvin’s view of the Supper, pursuant to its most fruitful administration. Like Calvin, the Scots advocated frequent communion in general terms, while allowing the precise extent of this frequency to be determined by a myriad of pastoral and disciplinary factors.²⁴ In other words, they observed the Supper as frequently as the scriptural mandate for conscientious shepherding would allow.²⁵ Therefore, to characterize the Scots as blind followers of Geneva or would-be weekly communionists who lacked sufficient ministers is highly misleading. In reality, Scottish practices during this period represent a bridge of organic theological development between Calvin and the Westminster Assembly, whose documents the Scottish church ultimately adopted.

The Westminster Assembly’s *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, which was adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1645, contained the following statement on communion frequency.²⁶

²³ Horton, “At Least Weekly,” 184.

²⁴ As such, Wallace’s summary of the question is more helpful than most. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 252-253.

²⁵ Sherman Isbell, “The Lord’s Supper,” in *The Master’s Trumpet*, No. 4 (2006), 18-20.

²⁶ The seventeenth century Church of Scotland rejected weekly communion. As the only Church formally to adopt the Westminster *Directory*, its consistent practice is a helpful indicator of how this document was originally understood. For example, as Isbell observes, “The seriousness with which the authorities approached the Examination is indicated by a postponement of the communion at St. Andrews in 1600. After six weeks of examining the parish population, in which the

The communion, or supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated; but how often, may be considered and determined by the ministers, and other church-governors of each congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification of the people committed to their charge.²⁷

At the very least, the foregoing statement indicates a rejection of divinely-mandated weekly communion, since it leaves frequency up to the church courts. However, it is particularly helpful to consider the communion practices of the seventeenth century Church of Scotland, the only church to actually adopt and enforce the directory. Without a doubt, the seventeenth century Church of Scotland did not practice (or even attempt to practice) weekly communion. Rather, it embraced the quarterly practice and disciplinary rationale outlined by Knox in the *Book of Discipline*. Sherman Isbell observes,

The seriousness with which the authorities approached the Examination is indicated by a postponement of the communion at St. Andrews in 1600. After six weeks of examining the parish population, in which the communicants alone numbered over three thousand, the sacrament was delayed a week to allow the examination to be completed. In 1645 the General Assembly confirmed that this long-standing custom of examining congregations prior to communion was to be continued. Into the middle of the seventeenth century, the Examination constituted a demanding responsibility for ministers, who could be excused from meetings of Presbytery to allow them time for preparing the people in this way for the Lord's Supper.²⁸

Clearly, the Church of Scotland would never have adopted the Westminster Directory if it had understood it to mandate or even

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²⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith: The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 384.

²⁸ Isbell, "The Lord's Supper," 18.

encourage a level of communion frequency that would prevent the examination of communicants. Therefore, its adoption of the directory indicates that it understood this document to be perfectly suited for use within the context of quarterly communion.²⁹

At first glance, one may be tempted to see a strong contrast between Calvin and the Westminster Assembly on communion frequency, as though the former demanded weekly observance while the latter left it up to the discretion of church courts. However, a further examination of Calvin's view will demonstrate that the Westminster Assembly was actually following Calvin in viewing communion frequency as a circumstance of worship which is not authoritatively specified in Scripture.

²⁹ It should be noted that Scottish communion frequency is too often viewed in a simplistic manner. Some rural Scottish congregations celebrated the Lord's Supper only once or twice per year, while others kept a quarterly schedule. Nevertheless, the common practice of parishioners communing in adjacent parishes meant that many were able to commune *more* frequently than four times per year. This fact is often overlooked.

Communion Frequency in Calvin's Thought and Life

We know from the *Institutes* that Calvin viewed weekly communion as an *ideal* practice, over against medieval popish abuses. However, there is a wealth of data to suggest that he also felt quite comfortable administering non-weekly communion in order to accommodate the discipline of the church and the spiritual condition of the people.

Ministering in Geneva (1536-1538)

On January 16, 1537, Calvin made the following proposal to the ministers in Geneva:

It would be well to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be held every Sunday at least as a rule. When the Church assembles together for the great consolation which the faithful receive and the profit which proceeds from it, in every respect according to the promises which are there presented to our faith, then we are really made participants of the body and the blood of Jesus, of his death, of his life, of his Spirit, and of all his benefits . . . In fact, it was not instituted by Jesus for making a commemoration two or three times a year, but for a frequent exercise of our faith and charity, of which the congregation of Christians should make use as often as they be assembled, as we find written in Acts ch. 2, that the disciples of our Lord continued in the breaking of bread, which is the ordinance of the Lord's Supper . . . But because the frailty of the people is still so great, there is danger that this sacred and so excellent mystery be misunderstood if it be celebrated so often. In view of this, it seemed good to us, while hoping that the people who are still infirm will be the more strengthened, that use be made of this sacred Supper once a month . . . But the principal rule that is required, and for which it is necessary to have the greatest care, is that this Holy Supper, ordained and instituted for joining members of our Lord Jesus Christ with their Head and with one another in one body and one spirit, be not soiled and contaminated by those coming to it and communicating, who declare and manifest by their misconduct and evil life that they do not belong to Jesus Christ. For in this profanation of his sacrament our Lord is gravely dishonoured.³⁰

³⁰ J. K. S. Reid, ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1954), 49-50.

This proposal sheds light on Calvin's two-fold approach to the issue of communion frequency. On the one hand, he connected the Supper's efficacy with a general principle of frequency, as exemplified in the supposed weekly communion of the Apostles.³¹ On the other hand, the precise extent of this frequency was to be determined by pastoral discretion. Sensitive to the spiritual needs of his flock, Calvin proposed monthly communion, thereby minimizing dangers that could arise "if it be celebrated so often." Nevertheless, much to his chagrin, the Council opted to continue quarterly communion.

Soon afterward, further conflict arose over the Supper, as the Council forbade Calvin and Farel from fencing the Table. Both were eventually banished from Geneva in 1538 for delaying Easter communion to accommodate disciplinary procedures.³² It is significant that while Calvin was willing to comply with quarterly communion (instead of monthly), he was not so accommodating when asked to stop fencing the Lord's Table. This suggests that communion frequency was not as high a priority for him as Table-fencing.

Exiled in Strasbourg (1538-1541)

Not wasting any time, the newly-exiled Calvin and Farel took their grievances to the Synod of Zurich in the Spring of 1538. With the help of Martin Bucer of Strasbourg, they expressed several of their concerns, one of which related to communion frequency. "We demand," they said, "a more frequent administration of the supper; that it should be celebrated, if not according to the custom of the early Church, at least once a month."³³ We see here a reference to weekly communion as practiced in the early Church, but also a willingness to advocate monthly communion as a viable alternative.

Eventually, Calvin accepted an invitation to join Bucer in Strasbourg, where he became a professor and also shepherded a local French-speaking congregation. As a local pastor, he now had the freedom to conscientiously begin his "first known – and possibly

³¹ That the apostles practiced weekly communion is certainly a debatable exegetical point. Still, Calvin affirmed it.

³² J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The History of the Reformation in the Time of Calvin* (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1998), 6:319-320.

³³ *Ibid.*, 342.

finest – effort in formulating a liturgy.”³⁴ Some have contended that Calvin’s request for monthly communion in 1537 was nothing more than a strategic compromise with city officials in Geneva, who refused to allow communion every week.³⁵ Whether or not this is the case, the situation in Strasbourg appears to have been much different, since the city council permitted Bucer to serve weekly communion in the local cathedral.³⁶ There is no reason to believe that this willingness to permit weekly communion would not also have applied to Calvin’s congregation. Hence, Calvin’s choice of communion frequency in Strasbourg was certain to shed unique light upon the practical application of his perspective on communion efficacy, frequency, and administration.

It may surprise many to learn that Calvin chose to institute monthly communion in Strasbourg, not weekly. In a letter to Farel from Strasbourg in October of 1538, Calvin wrote, “For the first time, we have administered the sacrament of the Supper in our little church according to the custom of the place, which we purpose to repeat every month.”³⁷ The phrase “according to the custom of the

³⁴ Teresa Jane Lessor, *The Communion Service in the Reformed Churches in Switzerland, France, and Scotland in the Sixteenth Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pro Quest Company, 1968), 86.

³⁵ E.g., Godfrey, *John Calvin*, 71-72.

³⁶ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 402; William D. Maxwell, *Outlines of Christian Worship: Its Development and Forms* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 100-102; Keith F. Pecklers, *Worship: A Primer in Christian Ritual* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 70-71. In his article “At Least Weekly,” Horton asserts, “As in Geneva, the Strasbourg city council refused to grant weekly communion, despite the pleas of both Calvin and Bucer” (149). However, he cites no sources to back this up. N. R. Needham writes, “Contrary to Calvin’s wishes, the magistrates of Strasbourg permitted the French congregation to celebrate the Lord’s Supper only once a month” (Needham, 231). No primary source is cited for this either. And although he is likely following Maxwell (112) on this point, Maxwell’s reference also appears without primary source confirmation. After contacting each of these scholars privately and receiving a response from one of them, this writer still has yet to discover a primary source basis for the assertion that the Strasbourg city council prohibited weekly communion.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Jules Bonnet., trans. David Constable (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 4:92. It is important to note that Calvin here describes his *administration of the Supper* (not his *decision to do so monthly*) as being “according to the custom of the place.” In other words, as has been universally recognized, Calvin was highly influenced by the order of Bucer’s Strasbourg liturgy. Had the French congregation scheduled communion “according to the custom of

place” likely refers to the content of Calvin’s sacramental liturgy, which was heavily influenced by Bucer’s existing “customs”. In terms of the frequency of administration, we must simply take Calvin at his word, that monthly communion was something that “we purpose” to do, not something that was forced on him by local officials.

In April of 1539, Calvin wrote to Farel from Strasbourg about an ongoing discipline case, noting some advantages of less-than-weekly communion. “It is well,” he wrote, “that we have yet fifteen days before the Supper of the Lord, that we may have some trial of him beforehand.”³⁸ On December 31, 1539, Calvin wrote to Farel about the great importance of church discipline, regretting the “slender form of discipline at Basle,”³⁹ which also happened to be the only Reformed city in Switzerland to celebrate weekly communion at that time.⁴⁰ On March 29, 1540, Calvin addressed another letter to Farel, this time describing in detail his own practical synthesis of communion frequency and faithful shepherding.

In this place hitherto many individuals were in the habit of making a rash approach to the sacrament of the Supper. On Easter-day, when I gave out the intimation that we were to celebrate the Supper on next Lord’s-day, I announced, at the same time, that no one would be admitted to the table of the Lord by me, who had not beforehand presented himself for examination. The greatest difficulty will arise in correcting that silly eagerness to press forward which has taken possession of some Frenchmen, so that it can scarcely be driven out of them.⁴¹

Calvin consistently required the church to examine *every* communicant prior to *every* administration of the Lord’s supper.⁴² His

the place,” it would have been done weekly.

³⁸ Ibid., 138-139.

³⁹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:169.

⁴⁰ Cameron, *The First Book of Discipline*, XI:9.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 4:176.

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960) 1:638; G. S. M. Walker, *Calvin and the Church*, Vol. 10, in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 135; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as a Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 88; Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 174-175.

refusal to administer communion without this process shows that he prioritized conscientious shepherding above communion frequency. When one compares Calvin's Strasbourgian model with Knox's *Book of Discipline*, the procedures are strikingly similar.⁴³ Since Calvin and Knox shared a high view of the Supper's spiritual efficacy, both instituted a frequency which allowed for due preparation beforehand. By contrast, Calvin's Zwinglian and Anabaptist opponents – both viewing the supper as a mere *memorial* – strongly opposed communicant examination, deeming it “papist.”⁴⁴ In May of 1540, Calvin responded to these criticisms in a letter to Farel.

When the day of the sacrament of the Supper draws nigh, I give notice from the pulpit that those who are desirous to communicate must first of all let me know; at the same time I add for what purpose, that it is in order that those who are as yet uninstructed and inexperienced in religion may be better trained; besides, that those who need special admonition may hear it; and lastly, that if there are any persons who may be suffering under trouble of mind they may receive consolation . . . After that, I teach, that this in no way derogates from our Christian liberty, since I enjoin nothing whatever that Christ himself has not appointed. What shameless effrontery would it be for any one not even to condescend to avouch his faith in the face of the Church with whom he sought communion! and how wretched would be the state and condition of the Church if she could be compelled to receive to the partaking in so great a mystery, those of whom she is altogether ignorant, or, perhaps, regards with suspicion!⁴⁵

The similarities between this excerpt and the Scottish *Book of Discipline* are remarkable. Like Knox, Calvin held a deep-seated conviction that communicant examination was appointed by Christ for the peace and purity of His church. Though such a practice might reduce the frequency of the Supper, he believed it to be an essential

⁴³ And this despite Needham's attempt to divorce the two traditions: “Modern ‘Calvinists’,” he writes, “especially in Britain, may be surprised to see the strongly liturgical nature of Calvin's order of worship. . . This simply highlights the fact that much present-day Reformed worship in the English-speaking world is derived from 17th century Puritanism rather than from Calvin.” Needham, *2000 Years*, 3:232.

⁴⁴ Amy N. Burnett, “Church Discipline and Moral Reformation in the Thought of Martin Bucer,” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXII, No. 3 (1991), 442.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 4:184-185.

responsibility of the Church, when “partaking in so great a mystery” as the Lord’s Supper.

On October 23, 1540, Calvin accepted an invitation to attend the Assembly of Worms to consult with various church leaders.⁴⁶ During this time, Pastor Nicholas Parent ministered in his place. When Parent forgot to give Calvin’s congregation its usual one-week notice prior to the sacrament, Calvin advised him by letter from Worms to delay its administration “lest, in laying aside the usual probation before receiving the sacrament, that this speckled examination may give us some disturbance hereafter.”⁴⁷ Three weeks later, having learned of Parent’s compliance, Calvin responded, “I am well pleased that you have delayed the holy Supper for another month, for at the present time you could not administer it without neglecting that order which, for very sufficient reasons, I earnestly desire to be carefully attended to.” He then expressed his great delight “that no inconvenience is felt from my absence,” implying that the congregation’s failure to partake of monthly (much less weekly) communion would in no way harm or deprive them spiritually.⁴⁸

While in Strasbourg in 1540, Calvin wrote his *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, which was later published in 1541. Included in this work is a section entitled, *Times of Using the Supper: Propriety of Frequent Communion*, where he stated the following.

As to the time of using it, no certain rule can be prescribed for all . . . However, if we duly consider the end which our Lord has in view, we shall perceive that the use should be more frequent than many make it, for the more infirmity presses, the more necessary is it frequently to have recourse to what may and will serve to confirm our faith, and advance us in purity of life; and, therefore, the practice of all well ordered churches should be to celebrate the Supper frequently, so far as the capacity of the people will admit.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2:209.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4:221.

⁴⁸ Contrast this with the statement by R. C. Sproul (Mathison, *Given For You*, Foreword): “Without both Word and sacrament we face a spiritual famine.” This attitude contradicts the teachings of Calvin, who affirmed, “As the use of the sacraments will confer nothing more on unbelievers than if they had abstained from it, nay, is only destructive to them, so *without their use believers receive the reality which is there figured.*” Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:218 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2:179-180.

Rather than asserting a universal Scriptural mandate for weekly communion, Calvin here prescribed a *general* principle of frequency, modified by a certain measure of pastoral discretion relative to “the capacity of the people”. He explicitly asserted that “no rule can be prescribed for all,” thus distancing himself from the more dogmatic views of many contemporary weekly communion advocates. Indeed, during his brief pastorate in Strasbourg, an unfettered Calvin freely instituted and maintained less-than-weekly communion, out of love and concern for the well being of his flock.

Back to Geneva (1541-1564)

Upon accepting the City Council’s invitation to return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin began the process of helping his ministerial colleagues to develop ecclesiastical ordinances. On September 13, 1541 – prior to any emendations by the civil magistracy – the following statement was adopted by Calvin and the Council of Ministers.

Since the Supper was instituted for us by our Lord to be frequently used, and also was observed in the ancient Church until the devil turned everything upside down, erecting the mass in its place, it is a fault in need of correction, to celebrate it so seldom. Hence it will be proper that it be always administered in the city once a month, in such a way that every three months it take place in each parish. Besides, it should take place three times a year generally, that is to say at Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas, in such a way that it be not repeated in the parish in the month when it should take place by turn.⁵⁰

Whereas the Council of Ministers had rejected Calvin’s previous request for monthly communion, they now seemed ready to let him institute his Strasbourgian preference. The civil officials in Geneva, however, were not so accommodating. The final draft approved by both Genevan Councils included a revision reaffirming quarterly communion,⁵¹ clearly against Calvin’s wishes.⁵²

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 67.

⁵¹ Hughes provides us with the final magisterially-approved draft of this section, which reads as follows: “Since the Supper was instituted by our Lord to be more often observed by us and also since this was the case in the early Church until such time as the devil upset everything by setting up the mass in its place, the defect ought to be remedied by celebrating it a little more frequently. All the same, for the time being we have agreed and ordained that it should be administered four times a

Overall, the discipline in Geneva underwent vast improvement during Calvin's second tour of duty in Geneva. Ministers and elders met each week "to see whether there is any disorder in the church."⁵³ Moreover, "all strangers and newcomers" had to "present themselves first in church so that they may be instructed" prior to partaking of the supper.⁵⁴ On December 17, 1546, the Genevan Pastors solemnly declared that, "No one shall be admitted to the supper unless he has first made confession of his faith, that is to say, has declared before the minister that he wishes to live according to the Reformation of the Gospel and knows the creed, the Lord's prayer, and the commandments of God."⁵⁵ All of this was a great victory for Calvin, who had previously been banished from Geneva over the issue of fencing the Table. It was not, however, without its opponents. On several occasions, laws were proposed (though never finally implemented) to curb his Table-fencing measures, prompting him to defend the importance of the Church's disciplinary authority. In a letter to Pierre Viret on September 4, 1553, he asserts that "by this law my ministry is abandoned, if I suffer the authority of the Consistory to be trampled upon, and extend the Supper of Christ to open scoffers, who boast that pastors are nothing to them. In truth, I should rather die a hundred times, than subject Christ to such foul mockery."⁵⁶

Despite many great strides in ecclesiastical discipline, Calvin was not fully satisfied with what he had achieved in Geneva. While in Strasbourg, he had been free to require communicant examination prior to *every* sacrament. In Geneva, a one-time examination was deemed sufficient, so long as the communicant remained free from outward scandal. During Calvin's second dispute with Joachim Westphal in 1556, the Popish apologist accused him of admitting communicants to the Table without prior examination. In response,

year, i.e. at Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and the first Sunday in September in the autumn." Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, ed. *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 44.

⁵² Cf. Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 6:162.

⁵³ Hughes, *Register*, 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 5, 424.

the Reformer candidly acknowledged his dissatisfaction with the examination process in Geneva. He writes,

I deny not that we everywhere do wrong from excessive facility. The rule is, that the young do not come forward to the sacred table till they have given an account of their faith. Elder persons are examined, if they are not of known and ascertained piety. I admit, however, that we gain less by this discipline than I could wish, though it is most false to say that we knowingly and willingly offer the Supper indiscriminately to strangers and persons not approved.⁵⁷

It should be noted that the final edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, published in 1559, did include his earlier comments about apostolic weekly communion, but with virtually no further elaboration. Calvin also cited these passages in a debate with Romanist Tileman Hethusius in the late 1550s,⁵⁸ critiquing the Romish practice of annual communion, but making no specific appeal for weekly communion. In 1561, despite helping to bring further reformation to Geneva's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*,⁵⁹ Calvin lamented the perpetuation of quarterly communion. "I have taken care," he writes, "to record publicly that our custom is defective, so that those who come after me may be able to correct it the more freely and easily."⁶⁰ Conspicuously absent in all of these passages is the notion that weekly communion is the church's only alternative to Rome's annual observance or Geneva's quarterly observance.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4:321.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 556-557. Date via Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 257.

⁵⁹ Robert M. Kingdon, *Calvin's Ideas about the Diaconate: Social or Theological in Origin?* Vol. 10, in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 290-291.

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 92.

Communion Frequency and Preparation

Having surveyed the administration of the Lord's Supper throughout Calvin's ministry, it is evident that his views on communicant examination factored heavily into his practice. "If, therefore," he writes, "you would celebrate the Supper aright, you must bear in mind, that a profession of your faith is required from you."⁶¹ At the same time, Calvin also placed a high premium on personal preparation and self-examination prior to receiving the sacrament. Even if a person passed his communicant exam, he was still obligated to search his own heart and diligently prepare himself to commune in faith. Hence, the failure to engage in this personal preparation constituted unworthy participation in the sacrament.

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Calvin explains what it means for a communicant to eat and drink in an unworthy manner.

To eat unworthily, then, is to pervert the pure and right use of [the Supper] by our abuse of it. Hence there are various degrees of this unworthiness, so to speak; and some offend more grievously, others less so. Some fornicator, perhaps, or perjurer, or drunkard, or cheat (1 Cor. 5:11), intrudes himself without repentance ... Another, perhaps, will come forward, who is not addicted to any open or flagrant vice, but at the same time not so prepared in heart as became him. As this carelessness or negligence is a sign of irreverence, it is also deserving of punishment from God.⁶²

Calvin's definition of unworthy communication not only included the participation of unrepentant unbelievers, but also of repentant believers who neglect to prepare their hearts. Such unprepared believers "receive Christ truly in the Supper, and yet are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, then let no man approach who is not properly and duly prepared. Let everyone, therefore, take heed to himself, that he may not fall into this sacrilege through idleness or carelessness."⁶³ Thus, for both the unrepentant unbeliever and the unprepared believer, "this food, otherwise health-giving, will turn out to their destruction, and will be converted into poison."⁶⁴ It

⁶¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 20:384.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 385.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 387.

should be noted, of course, that Calvin understood the judgment of unprepared believers to constitute fatherly chastisement rather than judicial wrath. God brings temporal judgment upon careless communicants “to shake us out of our drowsiness, and arouse us to repentance... in such a way as not in the meantime to be forgetful of his mercy.”⁶⁵ Indeed, he added, God ultimately chastises unprepared believers “that he may consult their welfare.”⁶⁶

Anticipating various questions, Calvin provided some practical tips on how to engage in self-examination as a means of preparing for the sacrament.

But now it is asked, what sort of examination, that ought to be to which Paul exhorts us? ... If you would wish to use aright the benefit afforded by Christ, bring faith and repentance. As to these two things, therefore, the trial must be made, if you would come duly prepared... At the same time, it is not a perfect faith or repentance that is required, as some, by urging beyond due bounds, a perfection that can nowhere be found, would shut out for ever from the Supper every individual of mankind.⁶⁷

If, however, thou aspirest after the righteousness of God with the earnest desire of thy mind, and, trembled under a view of thy misery, dost wholly lean upon Christ’s grace, and rest upon it, know that thou art a worthy guest to approach the table — worthy I mean in this respect, that the Lord does not exclude thee...⁶⁸

Sadly, however, the neglect of personal preparation seems to have been a major problem in Calvin’s pastoral experience. Reflecting on these matters, he could not help but lament,

Nay even among ourselves, who have the pure administration of the Supper restored to us, in virtue of a return, as it were, from captivity, how much irreverence! How much hypocrisy on the part of many! What a disgraceful mixture, while, without any discrimination, wicked and openly abandoned persons intrude themselves, such as no man of character and decency would admit

⁶⁴ Ibid., 389.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 392-393.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 393.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 388.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 388.

to common intercourse! And yet after all, we wonder how it comes that there are so many wars, so many pestilences, so many failures of the crop, so many disasters and calamities — as if the cause were not manifest! And assuredly, we must not expect a termination to our calamities, until we have removed the occasion of them, by correcting our faults.⁶⁹

In addition to his commentary on 1 Corinthians, we find a wonderful summary of Calvin's approach to personal preparation in his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* (1540). This remarkable work outlines our duty as believers to "examine ourselves carefully,"⁷⁰ evaluating "whether we have true repentance in ourselves, and true faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."⁷¹ Not only must we look for the existence of faith and repentance, but also for the active exercise of these graces. Hence, Calvin stressed the necessity of self-consciously meditating upon personal sinfulness as well as the perfect righteousness of Christ.

If we think that all our felicity is in his grace, we must understand how miserable we are without it. If we have our rest in him, we must feel within ourselves only disquietude and torment. Now such feelings cannot exist without producing, first, dissatisfaction with our whole life; secondly, anxiety and fear; lastly, a desire and love of righteousness. For he who knows the turpitude of his sin and the wretchedness of his state and condition while alienated from God, is so ashamed that he is constrained to be dissatisfied with himself, to condemn himself, to sigh and groan in great sadness.⁷²

Calvin was, of course, quick to condemn the morbid, self-centered (rather than Christ-centered) introspection by which "sophistical doctors have brought poor consciences into perilous perplexity."⁷³ "It is a perilous mode of teaching which some adopt," he wrote, "when they require perfect reliance of heart and perfect penitence, and exclude all who have them not."⁷⁴ He went on to assert that "the faith which the children of God have is such that they

⁶⁹ Ibid., 392-392.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:174.

⁷¹ Ibid., 2:175.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2:177.

have ever occasion to pray, — Lord, help our unbelief.”⁷⁵ Recognizing the very real danger of erecting an unattainable standard of personal preparation, Calvin noted that, provided there be an exercise of true and repentant faith, the “weakness of faith which we feel in our heart, and the imperfections which are in our life, should admonish us to come to the Supper, as a special remedy to correct them.”⁷⁶ In his mind, when a true believer repeatedly neglects the regular administration of the sacrament due to feelings of personal unworthiness, this is a tragic misunderstanding of personal preparation.

Some say that they do not feel themselves to be worthy, and under this pretext, abstain for a whole year ... I ask ... how their conscience can allow them to remain more than a year in so poor a state, that they dare not invoke God directly ... I mean not to force consciences which are tormented with certain scruples which suggest themselves, they scarcely know how, but counsel them to wait till the Lord deliver them. Likewise, if there is a legitimate cause of hindrance, I deny not that it is lawful to delay. Only I wish to show that no one ought long to rest satisfied with abstaining on the ground of unworthiness, seeing that in so doing he deprives himself of the communion of the Church, in which all our well-being consists.⁷⁷

By the same token, said Calvin, worthy participation is inconsistent with a partial repentance, which remains unwilling to confess, repudiate, and seek to flee every known sin. Some professing Christians vainly assume “that it is enough if they condemn their vices, though they continue to persist in them, or rather, if they give them up for a time, to return to them immediately after.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he declares, “True repentance is firm and constant, and makes us war with the evil that is in us, not for a day or a week, but without end and without intermission.”⁷⁹ Hence, approaching the Lord’s Table without investigating the condition of one’s own

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2:177-178.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2:179.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 2:180.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2:178.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

personal repentance was, for Calvin, a mark of unworthy participation.

In addition, Calvin maintained that worthy eating and drinking is impossible without the sort of genuine spiritual hunger that can only be stirred up through diligent prayer and meditation. With this in mind, he commented,

And, in fact, what mockery would it be to go in search of food when we have no appetite? Now to have a good appetite it is not enough that the stomach be empty, it must also be in good order and capable of receiving its food. Hence it follows that our souls must be pressed with famine and have a desire and ardent longing to be fed, in order to find their proper nourishment in the Lord's Supper.⁸⁰

Given Calvin's understanding of communicant self-examination and personal preparation, is it any wonder that he decided against weekly communion in Strasbourg, or that he delayed the Supper when prior notice had not been given? Is it surprising that he told the Geneva Council that "because the frailty of the people is still so great, there is danger that this sacred and so excellent mystery be misunderstood if it be celebrated so often"? Should we be shocked that, when addressing communion frequency, he stated that "no certain rule can be prescribed for all" and that frequency should be ordered only "so far as the capacity of the people will admit"?

While Calvin described the average believer's inability to duly prepare himself each week as "frailty," the reality is that few believers since the time of the Reformation have ever been able to engage in such vigorous spiritual exercises on a weekly basis. Could it be that later Reformed churches have largely moved away from weekly communion for the same reason that Calvin himself seems to have decided against it? Did such churches recognize over time that most communicants are too "frail" to rightly prepare themselves for the sacrament each week? In light of the historical data, the "modified frequency" of the Westminster Divines appears less and less like a departure from Calvin. Instead, it appears to be nothing more than a balanced application of his views concerning examination and preparation.⁸¹ This same balance is perhaps best reflected in the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2:175.

position of later Dutch theologian Herman Witsius, who, after expressing some general sympathy toward Calvin's treatment of weekly communion in the *Institutes*, went on to write,

Yet as our Lord has determined nothing as to the time, and in general only recommended frequent communion, by that word, *as oft* [1 Cor. xi. 25, 26], a certain medium, especially amidst such a corruption of manners, should seem to be observed; lest, either by the too frequent use this sacred food should be disesteemed, or we should slight or neglect that august table of the Lord.⁸²

⁸¹ Few ecclesiastical documents capture Calvin's approach to communion preparation better than Questions 170-175 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism*. A careful perusal of this material makes it very difficult to imagine that the average communicant in a Reformed and confessional church would be able to engage in these disciplines on a weekly basis. Indeed, one gets the distinct impression that the Divines authored this material with a less-than-weekly communion schedule in mind.

⁸² Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1990), 2:459.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing evidence, there appears to be substantive agreement between Calvin and the later Scottish Reformed tradition as to the following tenets.

1. Christ's body and blood are spiritually present in the Lord's Supper, to be received by faith alone.
2. The Lord's Supper ought to be celebrated frequently.
3. Preparatory examination (both pastoral and personal) is a God-ordained means of fencing the Lord's Table.
4. Since the Scriptures do not mandate a particular 'frequency formula,' the *fencing* of the Lord's Table (both pastoral and personal) should determine its *frequency*.

In truth, if any have abandoned Calvin's legacy, it is those who champion the first two points in this list (efficacy and frequency) while discarding the latter two (Table-fencing). Congregations where the Lord's Supper is celebrated on a weekly basis without any form of communicant examination or without sufficient emphasis on personal self-examination⁸³ have departed significantly from the sacramental theology and practice of Calvin. Sadly, the tendency to downplay the disciplinary element in Calvin's ecclesiology is quite common among weekly communionists today. This fact makes their claim to be perpetuating *Calvin's* view highly misleading. As Philip Schaff observed concerning Calvin, "Discipline was the cause of his expulsion from Geneva, the basis of his flourishing French congregation at Strassburg, the chief reason for his recall, the condition of his acceptance, the struggle and triumph of his life, and the secret of his moral influence to this day."⁸⁴ Hopefully this fresh examination of the facts will enable more Reformed believers to appreciate the nuances of Calvin's perspective and to confess with him that "as doctrine is the soul of the Church for quickening, so

⁸³ This is commonly called "open communion," which J. G. Vos defines as a communion service in which, "all who wish to partake are admitted without any investigation of their faith or life." Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 502.

⁸⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 8:484.

discipline and the correction of vices are like the nerves to sustain the body in a state of health and vigor.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 5:197.