

REFLECTIONS



Why Does Your Church Have Communion So Often?

BY RICK STEDMAN

After our new church began weekly Sunday services, I was shocked at how often visitors asked, “Why does your church have Communion so often?” Actually, I was shocked not just by the question, but also by the tone: incredulous, confused, sometimes even slightly demeaning.

THE ODD ONES

After a while, I realized I was the odd man out. The rest of the evangelical world seems to be accustomed to the practice of occasional Communion—once a month, once a quarter, or even once a year. In their minds, occasional Communion is the *norm*, and our weekly observance strikes them as *abnormal*. Since our new church was in a rapidly growing community, we had many visitors to our services who were churchgoers before moving to our area. They loved our church, but they just didn’t understand the Communion-every-week thing.

I remember one woman, a relatively new Christian, who asked me this question. I responded, “Well, since Christians aren’t perfect and sin each week. . . .” I stopped the sentence without finishing it, thinking it would be better to speak in the first person: “Let me rephrase that. I am a committed Christian and a pastor, but I am still far from perfect. Even though I try not to sin, I still sin a lot—as does every person this side of Heaven—so a weekly Communion time allows me to thank Jesus for dying on the cross for me, and to remember that my righteousness before God is based on Jesus’ sacrifice. I love having Communion with the Lord each week,

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and I hope you grow to love it too.”

She nodded appreciatively and went on to other matters, but in our lobby a few weeks later I overheard her explaining to another new person why we have weekly Communion. She said, “Well, we have Communion here every week because our minister sins a lot. Actually, we all do, so we need the weekly reminder of Jesus’ sacrifice.”

My first thought was to interrupt. But then I realized, even though her words weren’t flattering, she had told the truth. So I just let it go, and hoped no one would ask her again.

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Since I had been raised in a church that celebrated the Lord’s Supper weekly, it has never appeared to be an odd tradition to me. But I was struck, especially after studying biblical and church history, by the number of dedicated, educated believers who now consider weekly Communion odd. How did the assumption develop that occasional Communion is the normal way for a church to function?

Surprisingly, the practice of occasional Communion is largely an American invention. In the Bible, it appears as if regular Communion, at least weekly, was the apostolic practice (Acts 2:42; 20:7). Then throughout most of church history, the Lord’s Supper (also called the Eucharist, or

Communion) was the center of the church’s weekly worship services.

But in frontier America, a new situation arose. As towns and communities were settled during the westward expansion of the United States, little churches sprouted everywhere. There weren’t enough trained ministers to serve in each new church, and the churches were too small to support a minister anyway, so there developed in frontier America the phenomenon known as circuit-riding ministers.

Since most of these new churches were started with a denominational orientation, and since only ordained clergy could officiate at the Eucharist in most denominations at that time, the practice of occasional Communion developed out of necessity. A minister would ride into a town, officiate at whatever marrying or burying needs were at hand since his last visit, and hold a church service. Of course, he would celebrate Communion as a part of the Sunday worship service, and on Monday he would ride on to the next town.

Depending on the size of his circuit, he might not return for a month or even several months. While the minister was gone, the congregation would still meet on Sundays for a church service, but without the minister they could only have singing, an offering, and a sermon.

This abbreviated order of service, necessitated by the minister’s absence, became the norm in frontier America. With the American missionary movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, this format was exported around the world, so the practice of occasional Communion is now truly worldwide.

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IT BECOMES A RITUAL

I remember one conversation with the minister of an established church in our area, soon after we began Sunday services. When I mentioned weekly Communion, he pounced. In a patronizing tone he said, “Well, that will never go over here. If you have Communion too often, it loses its impact. It just becomes a ritual if you do it more than once a month. You’ll see.”

“Well, that’s an interesting point,” I responded, “but I wonder if you are consistent about it. By the same logic, singing every week would become ritualized—do you sing only once a month? Preaching too—do you only preach once a month? Hey, I’ll bet you take an offering more than once a month!”

Of course, my point was that many things can be ritualized and degraded into meaningless, mindless repetition. But there is a converse side to this claim: there is great value in establishing positive patterns and healthy habits. Just because something is done routinely, it does not necessarily follow that it is done without meaning (think of a parent kissing a child good night or friends greeting one another with a hug). In fact, a habit of remembering the cross and the price Jesus paid for our sins is exactly what is sometimes missing in modern evangelicalism.

BENEFITS OF WEEKLY COMMUNION

For instance, consider a church worship service in which the theme is marriage or parenting (two often-used, seeker-sensitive themes). If the music, prayers, and sermon all build on a certain theme, is it possible that Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins on the cross might never even be mentioned? Will

people ever be confronted with the fact of their own sinfulness and their need for a redeemer? But with weekly Communion, at least once in every service, time is taken to focus on the blood shed at Calvary. There is a cumulative benefit here.

One thing I love about weekly Communion is it reminds each of us, over and over until it really sinks in, that Jesus died on the cross for *us*. This is why it is a pastoral goal of mine that no one will ever attend one of our church services and leave without at some point hearing that Jesus had to die in order for us to live, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22).

In addition, weekly Communion is, over time, a spiritual discipline that trains us unto godliness. Participating in Communion every week trains us to

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take the focus off of ourselves and to place it squarely on Jesus. Then it trains us to trust in Jesus and not in ourselves for our righteousness. In the hustle and bustle of contemporary life and ministry, I love to slow down for a few moments and remember that the central reason I am a Christian is that Jesus was willing to die in my place on the cross and that he rose again.

As a preaching pastor, how I love being able to take Communion before the sermon! For me, Communion before the sermon provides a sensory message in bread and juice that it’s not about me, and it’s not about whether anyone likes my sermon. It’s about Jesus and his incredible sacrifice for us. After Communion, I feel ready to preach; without Communion, I feel unprepared.

Because of limited facilities, at one time our church had 11 services a week-end (I usually preached only six to eight of them). I was sometimes asked, “At which service do you take Communion?” My enthusiastic answer always was, “As many as I can.” It is the Communion alone that helps me love multiple services: over and over and over again I am taken to the cross and led to focus on Jesus.

I also love to take Communion with my family. I love sitting with my wife or with one of my children by my side, leaning head to head, and praying a simple prayer together before we partake. We usually say, “Thank you Jesus, for being crucified for us. Please help us live crucified lives for you this week.” There it is, the gospel in a nutshell! I’m praying that this routine and memorized prayer will burrow deeply into my children’s souls, so that later in their adult lives, they will love the crucified one, and they will desire to lead crucified lives.

COMMUNION IN THE FUTURE

Will weekly Communion remain an oddity in 21st-century Christianity? I don’t know, but I am sensing some winds of change. There is a movement toward elements of liturgical worship in many different groups today, most notably among young, college-age

adults who are joining liturgical churches in surprising numbers. There is also a movement toward a deeper appreciation for the Lord's Supper in the emphasis on spiritual formation.

I am beginning to hear of more and more churches that are moving toward celebrating Communion more often. The entertainment-driven '80s and '90s have left believers thirsty for deep nourishment of the soul.

So if someone asks me, "Wow, you

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sure do take Communion a lot here; what's the deal?" I let them know it is

my favorite time of the service, that as a sinner I need a weekly reminder that I can't forgive my own sins. I also tell them to try it for a while, and they too will probably grow to love weekly Communion.

In the 10 years since our church was started, I have heard hundreds of times, "You know, when I first came here, I thought this weekly Communion thing was a bit strange. But now I love it. It's my favorite time in the service!"