



KENNETH W. WIETING

THE BLESSINGS  
OF WEEKLY  
COMMUNION





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## Preface



It was a simple question: “Pastor, if the Lord’s Supper is everything that Scripture and the catechism say it is, why don’t we have the opportunity to receive it when we come for worship each week?” I had conducted the same pastoral visit with this young man and his wife that I had with numerous families, but I had never been asked this question before. At that time I had spent four years as a pastor in the LCMS, but the thought had never occurred to me.

My initial reaction was that he was asking the wrong question. I remember saying something about our schedule of offering Communion on the first and third Sundays of the month. I told him I would investigate the reasons for our practice and give him an answer in a week or two. It would be easy. I would come back and explain why it was good that members were only offered the Sacrament once or twice each month. Surely I could justify our practice.

That was more than eighteen years ago. Finding an answer to that simple question led to a great deal of study and also to the recovery of every Sunday Communion in that congregation and in the one I now serve. It has also led to a great deal of conversa-

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tion about weekly Communion with pastors and laypeople in the decade and a half since that interview.

I wanted to understand more completely the place of this treasure in the Divine Service. The pursuit of that fuller understanding led me also to see how much is connected to this Gospel gift. The reason for this book is to share scriptural, confessional, and historical insights with you concerning Holy Communion and its presence in weekly worship. It is also to share issues related to the Lord's Supper—some theological, some practical, some raised by pastors, some raised by laypeople, some raised by personal study. For example, weekly Communion has an intimate connection with worthy preparation, with closed Communion, with the sermon, with the liturgy, and even with the pastoral office. On the other hand, weekly Communion may also have an intimate connection with such practical matters as church architecture, the service of the altar guild, and the length and times of the worship service. It is my hope that these pages will enlighten you concerning the treasure of weekly Communion and will encourage its recovery in our midst.

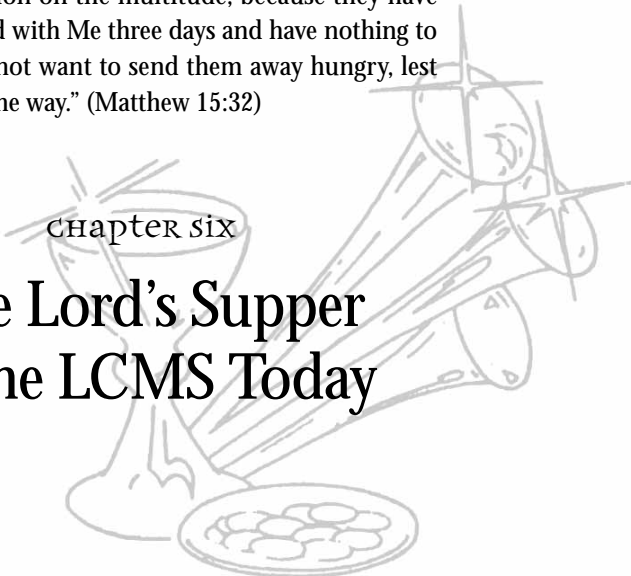
I would like to thank Mr. Matt Renner of Trinity Lutheran Church, Wautoma, Wisconsin, for his “simple” question. He was hearing the Word of God more deeply than his pastor when he asked about the opportunity to receive this gift in weekly worship. The members of Trinity, Wautoma, and Grace, Hancock, Wisconsin, gave a great deal of support and encouragement in the initial years of study. The members of Luther Memorial Chapel, Shorewood, Wisconsin, have provided hundreds of hours to facilitate the survey conducted throughout the LCMS, which is referenced herein. They also provided critical feedback during the writing process. Their kind understanding and ongoing congregational support of this study has been essential for its completion. The vicars they so willingly support have also been helpful in this endeavor.

## PREFACE

I desire also to convey my sincere appreciation to two anonymous donors who provided the thousands of dollars needed for the survey. I thank my dear wife, Barbara, for the love and understanding she shows each day. As Scripture says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 18:22). My children, Hannah, Luke, Ben, and Mark, are gifts from God that have enriched my life. God’s undeserved Fourth Petition gifts through my wife and children; through my parents, Norbert and Lillian; through a brother and sister; and through Aunt Bertha have been instrumental in advancing this study.

Finally, let me thank professors, teachers, editors, and my fellow pastors. Dissertation advice, weekly sermon studies, continuing education classes, personal conversations, presentations, papers, courses, and books by professors of both the Fort Wayne and St. Louis seminaries and Concordia University Wisconsin have all helped shape this study. As we cover up our pastors with robes in the Divine Service in part to emphasize their office and not their person, so I thank all of you not by name but as gifts of Christ to teach and serve His church. To Him, Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is one God, be honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

Now Jesus called His disciples to Himself and said, “I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” (Matthew 15:32)



CHAPTER SIX

## The Lord's Supper in the LCMS Today

During the 1999 Easter season, I conducted a survey of all LCMS pastors. Its intent was to measure the frequency of the opportunity to commune in the worship of LCMS congregations. I also wanted to determine if there was any change in understanding of the scriptural, historical, and confessional witness to weekly Communion. Finally, I wanted to identify the major barriers to recovering the opportunity for weekly Communion in the LCMS. Following are the survey questions:

1. How frequently is the Lord's Supper available in the congregation you serve?
2. If your congregation offers the Lord's Supper in each Lord's Day service (and weekly alternative), for how many years has this been the case?

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3. If such is not the practice, are you at this time attempting to teach and lead your congregation in the recovery of the Lord's Supper in each weekly Divine Service?
4. If such instructional effort is not taking place presently, is such your desire for the future?
5. If such is not a focus of attention now nor your desire for the future, would you briefly express your thoughts concerning its importance or lack thereof?
6. What percentage (to the nearest 10 percent) of your sermons would you estimate proclaim God's grace in the Sacrament of the Altar?
7. Within your congregation, which concerns would you anticipate in recovering the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day?
8. Does your congregation offer a routine time for individual confession and absolution?<sup>1</sup>

A total of 2,494 responses were tabulated from pastors serving in parish settings. This was more than 48 percent of the total parish pastors at the time (5,187) the surveys were received. The percentage returned from each of the nine geographic regions of the LCMS provided an acceptable representation of the congregations in those areas. Thus the rate of response and the geographic representation comprised a helpful statistical sample. The general information of active pastors concerning the frequency of Communion in their parishes was as follows:

Each Sunday service and weekly alternative	495 (19.8 percent)
Each Sunday in rotating services	403 (16.2 percent)
Twice monthly	428 (17.2 percent)
Twice monthly and fifth Sundays	153 (6.1 percent)
Twice monthly and major feasts	564 (22.6 percent)
Monthly	57 (2.3 percent)
Other variations and combinations	369 (14.8 percent)
Not indicating	25 (1.0 percent)

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Of eleven possible concerns listed on the survey that pastors would anticipate in recovering the opportunity for weekly Communion, four were noted by more than 40 percent of the respondents:

1. The concern of members that the opportunity to receive the Lord's Supper weekly would make it too common (1,363 or 55 percent)
2. Length of service concerns (1,315 or 53 percent)
3. The lack of understanding of the scriptural, confessional, and historical witness to every Sunday Communion at this time (1,235 or 50 percent)
4. The tradition of the last two and a half centuries of occasional Communion that is now understood to be the Lutheran tradition (1,003 or 40 percent).

Before discussing the pastoral practices and perspectives reflected in the survey, let's examine the four chief concerns anticipated by pastors as barriers to recovering weekly Communion. The first concern, noted by 55 percent of the pastors responding, has also been the foremost concern expressed to me during eighteen years of conversations concerning weekly Communion.

### The Major Concerns

#### The Sacrament Will Become Too Common

In one sense the primary concern listed here is understandable because it holds true for many things in life. Whether it is leftover turkey in the days after Thanksgiving or our favorite dessert served daily for a month, too much of a good thing quickly becomes wearisome. It is the way of our sinful human nature to become satiated and desire change, even from good things. It is in our sinful human nature to take good gifts for granted: our spouse, our family, our work, our country, freedom.

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But the Lord's Supper is no ordinary "good thing." It is the body and blood of Him who alone is good—God (Luke 18:19). It is heavenly food that is every bit as holy and healing as God's holy Word. As noted earlier, Luther described it as the sum and substance of the Gospel. Therefore the frequency of its use should not be compared to other good things of this life. The frequency of its use should only be reasoned out the same way we would reason out the use of God's holy Word. What would you think if someone argued that we should not have a sermon each week because it would become too common? Indeed, this is the real temptation that Luther confronts in his explanation of the Third Commandment: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it."<sup>2</sup> Satan does tempt us to be inattentive to the preached Word, to treat it in a common way. But this does not change the sermon's proper place when Jesus comes into the midst of His gathered church to serve her. The potential misuse of God's forgiving and life-giving Word should not lessen the opportunity to hear it.

In the same way, Satan's tempted misuse of Christ's forgiving and life-giving Meal should not lessen the opportunity to receive it. There is no question that Satan tempts us to treat the visible Word, the Lord's Supper, in a common way, just as He tempts us to treat the preached Word in a common way. But this does not change the Sacrament's proper place when Jesus comes into the midst of His gathered church to serve her.

Potential misuse should not lead to disuse of the apostles' doctrine, for in the Divine Service Christ is present to teach us and strengthen our faith, which comes by hearing. Potential misuse should not lead to disuse of the breaking of the bread. In the Divine Service, Christ is present to feed us, and His food brings forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. As Luther explains: "What is the benefit of this eating and drinking? These words, 'Given

and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,' show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the problem with abuse or treating the Lord's Supper in a common way lies in our sinful hearts, not in the availability of the gift. Baptism indicates that we are given grace to drown those sinful desires that tempt us to treat the Sacrament in a common way, just as we are given grace to drown those sinful desires that tempt us to treat the sermon in a common manner. The battle is real. It will go on until the day we die. Along our earthly journey, the heavenly food of our Lord's body and blood is not the problem; rather, it is the nourishment we need to help deal with the problems of sin, death, and the devil.

### The Sacrament Will Take Too Much Time

The second major concern—that the Lord's Supper would make the service too long—is one that is best handled by each pastor and parish in planning service times. This concern was expressed by 53 percent of the pastors responding. Timing and scheduling can become a problem when there are numerous services on a Sunday morning, when there are parking considerations, when there are Bible classes and Sunday School classes to juggle, when there is a dual parish being served by one pastor, or when there are any number of factors that squeeze the clock. Time is like money in our day—valuable and in short supply.

Thorough planning and preparation are called for in all these areas. Congregations might also want to look at Communion distribution practice. Such planning and preparation also would extend to the liturgy and the sermon so maximum attention is given to the central treasure of making available Christ's Word and Sacrament. There are extra and unnecessary things—announcements, stage directions, summarizing speeches, awards,

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and so on—that sometimes squeeze their way into the service. What is central to weekly worship is the true presence of the risen Christ to teach and feed His people.

Because the presence of the Lord's Supper is already scheduled on some Sundays in each parish, it would seem that such consideration has already been given to starting times, service length, and so on. Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament each Sunday is exceedingly worthy of whatever other adjustments are necessary. Someone has said that in our hurried, overcommitted, hyperactive age, time is the new currency. Indeed, time is a precious gift from God. In examining our own Christian piety and use of time, the question must be asked, "Is a Divine Service that runs 65 to 75 minutes really the noble sacrifice our flesh tells us it is?" In view of the time we spend at our children's sports or music events, the time we spend reading the paper, the time we spend watching a movie or television, and the time we spend for ourselves and others, is the real problem an additional fifteen minutes on Sunday morning?

The liturgy should be well planned and flow smoothly. The King of kings is in our midst. His people have come to hear Him. They are dying people in a dying world. Their greatest need is His Word and Meal of life. Of all the voices in the world, only His can renew their hearts. Of all the food in the world, only His can refresh their souls and prepare their bodies for the resurrection of all flesh. The eternal purpose of what He is present to do will govern the reverent and joyful focus of receiving His gifts and the responding prayer and praise.

Church architecture can occasionally aggravate the concern of service length. It can also be a barrier to frequent Communion. If the membership is large and the altar area at which to kneel is small, Communion may take much longer. It may be necessary to restructure the altar area or adjust the logistics of distribution.

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What better reason than to give God's flock more opportunity to eat from the Table that the Good Shepherd prepares for them?

In the early church, until well into the fourth century, communicants stood to receive the Lord's Supper. A more efficient Communion distribution that does not involve kneeling need not be irreverent. A congregation could have continuous distribution without harming people's faith. This may not be the first choice, but would the posture of the first four centuries of the church not be preferable if the only other alternative was denying God's people the opportunity to commune when they come for weekly worship?

### People Do Not Understand the Witness to Every Sunday Communion

The third greatest concern, expressed by 50 percent of the pastors, was the lack of understanding of the scriptural, confessional, and historical witness for every Sunday Communion. For this, the best remedy is for pastors to patiently teach. Perhaps a study of the history of the Sacrament through the centuries and its recovery at the time of the Reformation would be helpful. The LCMS Commission on Worship also has excellent resources on the Divine Service. The questions at the end of the chapters in this book may prove helpful. Sensitivity and patience is needed but so is serious purpose and persistence. Recovering the weekly opportunity to commune is not a program or a policy of an organization but the presence of the Lord of the Sabbath to teach and feed His people.

### Occasional Communion Is Considered the Lutheran Tradition

The fourth concern, expressed by 40 percent of the pastors responding to the survey, is closely related to the concern just noted—understanding the scriptural, historical, and confessional

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witness to weekly Communion. When the young man asked me the question noted at the beginning of this book, I, too, thought that occasional Communion was the Lutheran tradition. I was confident it would only take a little research to answer in defense of that perspective.

A careful look at the Lutheran Confessions, along with the teachings and writings of Luther outside the Confessions, will help alleviate this concern. As this is done, it is important not to disparage the teaching and ministry of former pastors who served God's people in former decades. For example, my grandfather was a pastor on the South Dakota prairie from the late 1800s until the 1940s. To hear of his struggles with horses and blizzards and traveling between parishes and ministering to the dying in sod huts and losing three teenagers to typhus and the transition from German to English and receiving hardly any pay throughout the Depression and having no Concordia Retirement Plan helps me more fully appreciate the lack of those particular hardships in pastoral service today. Grandpa also served in decades of high anti-Roman Catholic sentiment in the nation and also in the Lutheran Church.<sup>4</sup> Communion was offered in the churches he served about four times a year. For me to find fault with his service in the ministry and say he should have taught and recovered weekly Communion would show pride and ignorance. Let us not find fault with what has occurred in LCMS history or any pastor's service in the ministry as they fought the battles of their time. We honor those who went before while we foster the recovery in our present time of what was at work after Pentecost and in the early church and at the time of the Reformation.

The pastor that served before me in my present congregation came in 1970. Because of the doctrinal threats so prevalent in the LCMS at the time, the congregation wanted to be assured that he believed the Bible was the written Word of God, that he believed that God created the world, that he believed Jonah was

swallowed by a great fish, and that he believed Christ rose bodily from the grave. For me to find fault with the battles he fought in his generation and say he should have done this or that would show pride and ignorance. I am thankful that he and others did confess the truthfulness of the Scriptures against threats that have harmed so many denominations. Let us not find fault with the service of others but foster recovery of Word and Sacrament in regular weekly worship today.

### Other Concerns

The only other concerns expressed by more than 20 percent of the pastors were increased preparation and cleaning for the altar guild, concern over more frequent pressures of closed Communion coming with the weekly Eucharist, and the lack of understanding of sin as our greatest problem and of understanding the desire to receive forgiveness as the highest worship in the Gospel.

The concerns of the altar guild may perhaps be addressed in a study regarding the opportunity for every Sunday Communion. Some members who may be led to see its importance may also be inclined to assist with the preparations that the altar guild oversees. It may well be that the altar guild grows through such study. The preparation of individual cups and reverent care of them after Holy Communion certainly multiplies the work of the altar guild. A discussion of the common chalice may help alleviate this concern.<sup>5</sup> The kindness shown to altar guild workers in using the common chalice could also be part of the discussion.

The concerns about more intense pressures on the faithful practice of closed Communion will not lessen in our age. Understanding the loving nature of this practice is perhaps the best help to explain it and practice it with joy and thankfulness. As has been noted, it is the historic practice of the church through the centuries.<sup>6</sup>