

Frequency of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed/ Calvinist Tradition

Early Church and Church Fathers: From the New Testament onward, the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the context of the weekly (Sunday) assembly. Acts 20:7 notes the believers "came together on the first day of the week to break bread," and 1 Corinthians 11:26 implies regular commemoration ("as often as you eat this bread"). The earliest Christian writings confirm this pattern. The Didache (ca. AD 110–120) instructs Christians to "come together on the Lord's day to break bread" ¹. Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD) likewise describes a Sunday gathering: "*on the day called Sunday... the president... offers prayers and thanksgivings, and there is a distribution to each... and a participation of that over which thanks have been given*" ². In other words, the Eucharist was a routine part of the Lord's Day worship because "on the day... Jesus Christ our Saviour... rose from the dead" (first day of the week) ³. Subsequent Fathers (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, etc.) likewise assume Sunday communion as the norm. (Some Fathers note private "daily" communions by fervent Christians, but the *corporate* pattern was weekly.)

The biblical rationale centers on Christ's institution and the resurrection: the Lord's Supper is a memorial and **proclamation** of Christ's death (1 Cor 11:26), given to believers "till He comes." By celebrating it each Lord's Day, the church both remembers the cross and affirms the risen Christ (Heb 9:16–17; John 6). The early church also drew on Old Testament analogies (the daily manna) and Jesus' words (John 6:35) to see the meal as **spiritual nourishment** for the believing community. Thus early teachers taught that each Lord's Day assembly should include the Supper. For example, Justin notes that they bless bread and wine "as we have been taught... and the people assent, saying Amen" ⁴ – a clear weekly family meal imagery. In practice, this meant *every* Lord's Day observance. The Didache and Justin speak of **weekly Sunday** communion with no mention of rarer schedules ¹ ². (Augustine later observes various practices – some churches even daily, some only on festivals – but the apostolic example and second-century consensus were Sunday assemblies with the Eucharist.)

Reformation Period

Continental Reformed (Calvin, Zwingli, etc.)

Reformers in the 1500s strongly criticized the medieval habit of annual or infrequent communion and sought to restore more frequent celebration. **John Calvin** (Geneva) insisted that the Lord's Table belonged in **every Lord's Day** service. He wrote that mandating communion only once a year was "a veritable invention of the devil," emphasizing that in the early church the Supper "was set before the believers every time they met together" ⁵. He urged that "the Lord's Table should have been spread at least once a week" so that Christ's promises would "feed us spiritually" ⁶. In Calvin's theology, the Supper is a sign that seals the promises of the covenant; frequent meals repeatedly reinforce faith. In Institutes IV.XVII.46 he argues that Word and sacrament belong together and that weekly communion sustains and strengthens the believer.

Calvin's ideal went unmet in his day. The Geneva town council, wary of weekly observance (they had to rigorously examine each communicant), only approved quarterly celebrations. Late in life Calvin noted this compromise: Geneva settled on **four communions per year** ⁷. In a letter of 1561 he lamented that prior to his arrival the Supper had been held only three times a year, and although he pushed for *monthly* communion, he could not secure it immediately ⁸ ⁷. (He had "it recorded in the public records... that our way was wrong, so that correcting it might be easier for future generations." ⁸.) Thus, Calvin taught weekly in theory, but Geneva practiced quarterly during the 16th century.

Elsewhere on the Continent, practices varied. In Zürich, **Ulrich Zwingli** and Heinrich Bullinger generally met for communion on the great festivals (roughly Easter, Pentecost, Christmas) – about **3–4 times a year** ⁹. In Switzerland (1559) one liturgy actually omits one of the festivals, mentioning only three communions yearly. In Strasbourg and the Palatinate (Reformed churches of Germany), monthly communion was envisaged but often not fully realized. As one historian notes, Reformed Geneva and its cognate churches adopted four times per year, Zwingli's Zurich still four (nominally), and Knox's Geneva order of 1556 even aimed at monthly ⁹. In practice, Scotland's First Book of Discipline (1560) provided **four communions per year** as standard ⁹.

Despite differences, the theological arguments were similar across Reformed Europe: the Supper is a **"communion" with Christ (1 Cor 10:16)** and a reaffirmation of covenant promises. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) answers that by these signs "we share in [Christ's] true body and blood" ¹⁰, assuring us of salvation. Reformers stressed that nothing in Scripture limits the frequency, and that weekly celebration best aligns with the apostolic example and the phrase "as often as you eat this bread" (1 Cor 11:26). Zwingli's more memorial view led him to fewer communions, whereas the Reformed (Calvin, Knox, Palatinate) generally saw the Sacrament as a **means of grace** to be used often.

Reformation Summary

- **Pre-Reformation (Medieval):** Communion (Mass) was weekly in theology but by tradition laity rarely received it; Fourth Lateran Council (1215) even mandated *at least once a year*.
- **Calvin (Geneva):** Advocated *weekly* (Lord's Day) communion ⁶.
- **Geneva 1560s:** Practiced *quarterly* (four times/year) ⁷.
- **Zwingli/Bullinger (Zurich):** Communions on major festivals (ca. 3–4/year) ⁹.
- **Knox (Scotland):** Initially monthly (Geneva Order 1556), but Scottish practice set *4/year* in the Book of Discipline ⁹.
- **Westminster Reformers:** In the 1640s the Presbyterian majority regarded four times/year as sufficiently "frequent," while Independents kept weekly; Westminster Directory finally settled on "frequently" (no number) ¹¹.

Puritan Era (English and New England)

English and New England Puritans, steeped in Calvinist theology, generally argued for very frequent Communion. The **Westminster Confession** (1647) classifies the sacraments as parts of "ordinary religious worship" (XXIII.5), implying they can occur regularly alongside preaching. Notably, Puritan divine John Owen (1655) insisted that the Supper be held "every first day of the week" – in effect, weekly – or at the very least whenever opportunity and convenience allowed ¹². Richard Baxter similarly wrote that "ordinarily in well disciplined churches it should be... every Lord's day," giving many reasons (citing 1 Corinthians 11, spiritual sustenance, countering superstition, etc.) for weekly frequency ¹³. Puritan commentators like William

Gouge and Thomas Goodwin also associated the Lord's Day with communion. (The Westminster Assembly itself did not require weekly, but Puritan pastors often preached the ideal of weekly observance.)

In practice, however, Puritan congregations often stretched to monthly communion. New England churches especially experimented with set schedules. One recorded church debate resolved: *"that the Lord's Supper be celebrated every first Sunday of every month."*¹⁴ This monthly pattern was common into the 17th century, partly because Puritan discipline required intensive preparation (examination, confession, public self-examination) for all communicants. Ministers like Increase Mather and John Cotton noted the spiritual "severity" of repeated preparation (testimonies, fasting, catechesis) and sometimes opted for monthly or quarterly celebrations to allow proper due preparation¹⁵ ¹⁴. (By contrast, the later Great Awakening "communion seasons" in the 1700s – week-long festivals with baptisms and preaching – were an outgrowth of Scottish practice, not typical of early Puritan usage.)

Biblical/Theological basis: Puritans echoed Calvin's arguments: communion is a covenant pledge and means of grace (Belgic Confession Art. 35, WCF 27.1). They emphasized 1 Corinthians 10–11's commands to "eat and drink... in a worthy manner," which presuppose regular partaking (cf. 1 Cor 11:28–30 on self-examination). The Heidelberg Catechism's description of the Supper as a sealing ordinance (Lord's Day 28–30) was accepted by Puritans, and they insisted that neglecting the Supper (or barely touching it) weakened faith. Thus, many Puritans chided congregations for "carelessness" if communion was too infrequent. Nevertheless, they balanced zeal for frequency with pastoral caution about making it "common" or perfunctory. Baxter warns against treating the Supper as routine, but still held that scarce communion fosters neglect; his guidelines actually urge weekly unless practical reasons (immaturity, guilt, lack of people) intervene¹⁶.

Practice: Puritan worship included careful "fencing of the Table" (admitting only professing, examined believers). Sermons often included lengthy communion catecheses and preparatory prayers. Post-communion thanksgiving sermons were common. When held monthly, services devoted the **entire Lord's Day** to worship (with morning Word, afternoon Supper, evening psalm). By century's end, some congregations increased frequency again: John Owen's 1665 *Of Communion* and Baxter's 1673 *Catholic Communion* show a shift toward weekly ideal. After the English Restoration, dissenting Presbyterians and Independents often continued monthly or quarterly communion, citing Westminster's "frequently" to justify both.

Modern Conservative Reformed Churches

Today's conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations typically define communion as a "frequent" or "normal" part of worship but leave exact scheduling to local church authorities. For example, the PCA Book of Church Order declares that the Supper "is to be observed frequently" with "times... determined by the Session" for edification¹⁷. The OPC Directory of Worship likewise states: "The Lord's Supper is to be celebrated frequently, but the frequency may be determined by each session"¹⁸. In practice, however, most conservative Reformed bodies conduct communion monthly or quarterly. A 1990 survey observed that in "most Reformed and Presbyterian churches" the Supper is currently **"celebrated infrequently – perhaps four to six times a year,"** viewed as a special occasion rather than a weekly rite¹⁹. This low frequency reflects the inherited pattern of the post-Reformation era and practical considerations of preparation and order.

That said, there is a growing movement among some conservative congregations to restore more regular communion. In recent decades certain Reformed churches (including some CRC and PCA congregations) have adopted bi-monthly or even weekly schedules, arguing that frequent communion best honors the Lord's command (Lk 22:19) and the covenant character of worship. Others hold an intermediate pattern: e.g. monthly, or monthly in rural churches and twice-monthly in city churches. But it remains common for bodies like the Reformed Church in America, Christian Reformed Church, RCA, and many Presbyterian churches (PCA, EPC) to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a fixed monthly or quarterly cycle. (Notably, the United Reformed Churches in North America historically encouraged weekly communion, though practice varies by congregation.)

Comparison: In summary, the **historical norm** in conservative Reformed theology was **weekly Lord's Day communion**, based on Acts 20 and the pattern of the early church, and Calvin (backed by many Puritans) urged it. Yet most Reformed churches quickly settled on **monthly or quarterly** practice for centuries. By contrast, many modern congregations have maintained the latter schedule. Thus, Reformed praxis has tended toward *less* frequent communion than its own founders desired. (Some modern pastors argue the opposite – that the church has grown “Zwinglian” by treating the Supper as occasional.) In either case, the theological arguments remain: advocates of frequent communion cite the Supper's covenantal, nourishing role (as in Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, WCF) and the early church's first-day gatherings, while those favoring less-frequent observance appeal to pastoral preparation, pastoral oversight, and distinguishing the Supper as a special feast.

Throughout, Reformed tradition has held that Scripture never prescribes an exact interval, only that the Sacrament be part of **ordinary worship**. The Westminster Confession explicitly places “due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments” in the category of “*ordinary religious worship*” (WCF XXIII.5) ²⁰. What varies is how congregations put that into practice. In all eras, even the most frequent schedules required careful preaching, teaching, and self-examination (1 Cor 11:27–34). But the consensus of early Reformers and Puritans was that nothing in the Word limits us to mere festivals – Christ's command “do this in remembrance of me” implies readiness to celebrate whenever the church meets. Modern Reformed churches continue to apply these principles in light of their own contexts, with many now reconsidering whether to move again toward weekly or biweekly Table fellowship as their forebears originally envisioned.

Sources: Early Christian practice is documented in the Didache and Justin Martyr ¹ ². Reformation and Puritan positions are found in Calvin's *Institutes* and letters ⁵ ⁶ ⁷, the writings of Zwingli, Knox, Owen and Baxter ⁹ ¹² ¹³ ¹⁴. Modern practice is described in denominational standards and worship guides ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ¹⁹. (Cited sources are above in brackets with line numbers.)

¹ Did the Early Church Observe the Lord's Supper on a Daily Basis? | Christian Courier
<https://christiancourier.com/articles/did-the-early-church-observe-the-lords-supper-on-a-daily-basis>

² ³ ⁴ CHURCH FATHERS: The First Apology (St. Justin Martyr)
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>

⁵ ⁶ ⁷ ¹⁰ ¹⁹ The Lord's Supper: How Often? | Reformed Worship
<http://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1990/lords-supper-how-often>

⁸ Calvin on the actual frequency of the Lord's Supper in Geneva | The Puritan Board
<https://puritanboard.com/threads/calvin-on-the-actual-frequency-of-the-lords-supper-in-geneva.9111/>

9 11 20 The Frequency of the Lord's Supper | Reformed Books Online

<https://reformedbooksonline.com/the-frequency-of-the-lords-supper-2/>

12 13 16 Reformed Theologians on the Frequency of Communion: Past & Present — Resurrection Presbyterian Church

<https://www.rpcmattthews.org/articles/reformed-theologians-on-the-frequency-of-communion-past-amp-present>

14 15 The Lord's Supper: Foundations and Practice in Puritan Liturgy – Mark 12:30

<https://thinkingaboutworship.wordpress.com/2018/12/17/the-lords-supper-foundations-and-practice-in-puritan-liturgy/>

17 BCO 58.1

<https://www.pcahistory.org/bco/dfw/58/01.html>

18 The Directory for the Public Worship of God: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church

<https://opc.org/BCO/DPW.html>