

# Historical Origins of Monthly Communion in Reformed Churches

The practice of observing the Lord's Supper only once a month in many conservative Reformed (Congregational/Presbyterian) churches has roots in post-Reformation developments, rather than in New Testament prescription. The early Christian church gathered **weekly** (e.g. Acts 20:7) and the Reformers generally advocated frequent communion. Luther and Calvin both urged *regular* celebration of the sacrament. Calvin explicitly wrote that the Supper should be set "before the church very often, and at least once a week" <sup>1</sup>. He noted that in the Apostolic church, worship (including "breaking of bread") regularly accompanied the Word (Acts 2:42 <sup>2</sup>), and lamented that the Roman Catholic Mass had reduced communion to "only once or twice a year" <sup>3</sup>. In Calvin's Geneva the **official practice** remained about three or four times a year in the mid-1500s; Calvin repeatedly asked for weekly Communion but was overruled by civic authorities <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup>.

Across Reformed Europe, Synods and church orders encouraged frequent Supper, though not mandating a fixed weekly pattern. The **Church Order of Dort** (1618–19) prescribed Communion "once every two months, wherever possible," with a special emphasis on Easter, Pentecost and Christmas <sup>4</sup>. (Dort's art. 63 thus implied six administrations per year.) Scottish Reformation documents similarly envisaged regular observance: the First Book of Discipline (1560) concluded that "**four times in the year we think sufficient**" <sup>5</sup> – partly to avoid "superstitious" fixation on dates, but allowed any church to hold it more often. In England, Archbishop Cranmer's 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* had set the Supper for every Lord's Day, but Elizabeth's 1559 Prayer Book and successive Acts of Uniformity relaxed that to **quarterly or less**. The Westminster Assembly (1644–48) debated frequency at length; Presbyterians wanted to fix four times a year, Independents (Congregationalists) advocated every week. Fearing division, the Assembly's *Directory for Worship* settled on the non-committal term "**frequently**", leaving the timetable to each congregation's rulers <sup>6</sup> <sup>7</sup>.

Thus in the 16th–17th centuries **no Protestant standard mandated monthly** celebration. British Puritans and Congregationalists typically observed Lord's Day Communion in New England and England, or at least monthly, but Presbyterian churches often administered it only seasonally. One historian notes that "Newcomen [a Westminster divine of Independent leaning] said that 'all the new gathered churches' (i.e. Independents) observed the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day, while the [Presbyterian] majority thought that four times a year fulfilled the scriptural requirement for 'frequent' Communion." <sup>6</sup> In practice, English Puritan "Independents" (Congregationalists) did hold weekly Communion services, whereas English and Scottish **Presbyterians** tended toward quarterly observance. For example, by the early 1700s one Puritan writer noted "*English Independents celebrated the Supper every Lord's Day; the Baptists once a month; and the Presbyterians four times a year.*" <sup>8</sup>.

By the 18th century the **once-a-month observance** was well established among many dissenting churches. Indeed, James Owen (1654–1706), an ex-Puritan who conformed to Anglican orders, observed that many Anglican ministers were taking Communion "once a month, in imitation of the dissenters" <sup>9</sup>. His comment implies that **Puritan Nonconformists** by 1700 typically met for Communion monthly. Similarly, in the Dutch

Reformed tradition, although Dort's Church Order called for bi-monthly Communion, in practice many congregations settled on monthly as a convenient compromise between the weekly ideal and the quarterly minimum.

## Biblical and Theological Rationale

Reformed churches grounded their practice in scripture, but disagreed on its implications. Pro-**frequent** Communion appeals to passages like 1 Corinthians 11:26 – “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death*” – and Acts 2:42, 20:7, which show the early church “devoted themselves... to the breaking of bread” on the first day of the week. Calvin and others argued that these texts imply the sacrament was a regular part of worship <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup>. Calvin in his *Institutes* insisted that frequent Supper was “most becoming” and consistent with apostolic practice <sup>1</sup>. For example, he pointed out that Luke's account (Acts 2:42) indicates the church “continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” <sup>2</sup>.

By contrast, churches emphasizing a **memorial/ordinance** view tended to space out the observance. The Dutch and Scots, for instance, were wary of too much “superstition” around dates. The Scottish First Book of Discipline explicitly aimed to avoid people “*running superstitiously*” to the table at Easter only, and encouraged instruction over sacramental frequency <sup>5</sup>. Similarly, some American and British Presbyterian ministers warned that over-familiarity might dull the sacrament's significance, a concern later voiced in the 19th–20th centuries (the fear that “if the Lord's Supper will be taken weekly, it will lose its significance”) <sup>10</sup>. The **Regulative Principle** also plays a role: since scripture does not command a fixed number, Presbyteries allowed each church to decide. The *Westminster Directory* simply speaks of administering Communion “frequently...as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification” of believers <sup>7</sup>, implying no divinely mandated schedule.

Scriptural references have been marshaled for both sides. Proponents of monthly/quarterly communion might cite the fact that Christ instituted the Supper “*in the night He was betrayed*” (Mark 14:22–25) and Paul's account of it (1 Cor 11:23–26) as an ongoing memorial “*till He come*”, without specifying frequency. Opponents argue that passages like Luke 22:19 (“*Do this in remembrance of me*”) inherently suggest repetition, and that early Christians kept the Lord's Day and Holy Communion together. Reformed theologians like Calvin and later Presbyterian divines (e.g. George Gillespie) interpreted Acts and 1 Corinthians to support regular (even weekly) observance. As one modern writer observed, the balance of scriptural evidence and Reformation thought points to the **apostolic pattern of weekly communion** <sup>11</sup>, though circumstances (e.g. minister scarcity) sometimes forced longer intervals.

## Pastoral and Pragmatic Factors

Beyond theology, **practical concerns** often drove the shift to monthly Communion. In preindustrial times, factors included: - **Pastoral preparation**: Ministers and elders required lengthy examination of candidates. The Book of Discipline in Scotland cautioned that only fully instructed communicants should come, implying time between communions for preparation <sup>12</sup>. One Scottish pre-1700s catechism writer argued that even godly Christians will “not...for ordinary adventure approach the table except he has...set apart some considerable time for that purpose” <sup>13</sup>. - **Liturgical solemnity**: Less frequent celebrations were thought to heighten reverence. Many clergy believed Communion should coincide with major feasts or seasons (e.g.

Easter, Pentecost, Christmas) as noted in Dort's Church Order <sup>4</sup> . Thus, once a month provided a sense of special occasion without crowding the calendar. - **Shortage of ministers:** In 17th-century Scotland and later in colonial America, clergy were few. Covenanters during the Restoration era often held infrequent sacramental "**communion seasons**" only when itinerant ministers were available <sup>14</sup> . Even where weekly was idealized, necessity limited practice. - **Distinctiveness from Catholicism:** For some Reformed leaders, moving communion away from weekly Sunday use helped distance their churches from the Roman Mass. (The Assemblies of God note that after the Reformation, many Protestants made Communion an "*ordinance*" rather than a sacrament, partly by reducing its frequency <sup>15</sup> .) This anti-Roman polemic influenced early Puritans too; they often adhered strictly to New Testament forms and so did not institute extra feasts.

In the New England Puritan context, monthly communion was embraced partly as a means of **catechetical care**. Congregations would set aside a Lord's Day each month as "*the Lord's Supper Sunday*," dedicating prior preparation (lectures, fasting) to ensure communicants' readiness. This pattern balanced Cranmer's weekly ideal with a pastoral rhythm. Indeed, as noted above, by the 18th century even dissenting Anglicans observed monthly the Sacrament, explicitly imitating the nonconformists <sup>9</sup> .

## Evolution and Debates within Reformed Churches

Over time the monthly pattern became routine in many Reformed denominations, though it was not without dispute. In the British Isles and America, differing practices coexisted. After 1660, the Church of Scotland largely abandoned weekly/seasonal Communion in favor of semiannual or quarterly *communion seasons*, but figures like the Covenanter John Willison (1703) still praised "frequent" Communion – albeit he counted quarterly as sufficiently frequent <sup>12</sup> . By the 19th century, many Presbyterian and Congregational churches (in Britain and the U.S.) standardized on **monthly or bimonthly celebrations**. For example, the Dutch Reformed tradition originally set LS every two months, but some branches relaxed that to quarterly (as in later Canadian or American churches following the Dutch Church Order, which required at least every three months).

Controversies have flared occasionally over this frequency. In 1640s England, the Westminster Assembly's compromise ("frequently" rather than giving a number) masked deep division: Independents wanted weekly, Presbyterians only quarterly <sup>6</sup> . In the 20th century, some conservative pastors (drawing on Calvin) have argued for returning to weekly Communion, while others defend monthly as a balanced tradition. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church formally allowed weekly Communion in 1978 (though did not require it), partly in response to renewed interest among younger ministers <sup>16</sup> . Today, debates continue: proponents of weekly highlight 1 Cor 11:26 and the Reformation emphasis on the sacraments' power to nourish faith <sup>1</sup> ; advocates of monthly point to pastoral prudence and historical practice. But both sides agree that the frequency is ultimately a matter of *expedience* and desire, not doctrine. As one modern Presbyterian writer put it, the church is free to celebrate "as often as it deems appropriate...There is no binding requirement. However, the degree to which the church desires it is a reliable gauge of how eagerly it wants Christ" <sup>16</sup> .

## Contemporary Reflections

In recent decades many Reformed theologians and pastors have revisited the question. Some lament that infrequent Communion contributes to a diminished sense of the sacrament's importance. For example, R. Scott Clark and others note that the biblical and early church pattern points to *weekly* observance <sup>11</sup> , and

they argue that modern pastors often fear losing congregants' interest by weekly celebration <sup>10</sup>. In contrast, defenders of less frequent observance emphasize contextual factors: they argue that a monthly feast still provides regular nourishment and stands in dramatic contrast to everyday life, encouraging proper preparation.

Official denominational statements vary. The *Westminster Standards* (in Confession 23.5) classify the Lord's Supper as part of "ordinary" worship <sup>17</sup>, implying it should be as habitual as preaching. At the same time, these standards (and the *Directory for Worship*) leave scheduling to sessional discretion <sup>7</sup>. In practice, many conservative Presbyterian bodies today observe Communion monthly; others (following Augustine or early Puritan practice) hold it quarterly or even less often. For example, the conservative Assemblies of God (Pentecostal) admit regional variety but note that monthly communion is common in their tradition <sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, among Reformed Protestants in the OPC or PCA, there is a vocal weekly-communion movement, often citing passages like 1 Cor 10–11 and Luke 22:19–20.

In summary, **monthly Communion in conservative Reformed churches has no single origin** but emerged as a pastoral compromise in the centuries after the Reformation. Its rationale has drawn on scripture (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 11:26), Reformed theology (sacramental vs. memorial views), and practical concerns (preparation, solemnity). Over time it became a widespread custom—endorsed or permitted by various church orders and liturgical directives <sup>4</sup> <sup>7</sup>—though always with the understanding that *"the church is free to hold the Lord's Supper as often as it deems appropriate"* <sup>16</sup>.

**Sources:** Historical church orders and confessions (Westminster Directory, Church Order of Dort, Cambridge Platform, etc.), Reformed theologians (Calvin, Owen, Willison), and denominational writings have been consulted to trace these developments <sup>1</sup> <sup>4</sup> <sup>6</sup> <sup>9</sup>. Contemporary reflections (e.g. R. Scott Clark, P. Aasman) illustrate ongoing debates. All cited statements are drawn from these sources.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> Calvin On The Proper Practice Of The Lord's Supper | The Heidelberg

<https://heidelberg.net/2013/10/calvin-on-the-proper-practice-of-the-lords-supper/>

<sup>3</sup> On the Nature and Frequency of the Celebration of the Lord's Supper — The Riddleblog

<https://www.kimriddlebarger.com/the-riddleblog/3kyx1fkjy2uqcsevlf67ekobbaxqm>

<sup>4</sup> Church Order of Dort | Reformed Standards

<https://reformedstandards.com/three-forms-of-unity/church-order-dort.html>

<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> <sup>9</sup> <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> <sup>17</sup> The Frequency of the Lord's Supper | Reformed Books Online

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

<sup>7</sup> <sup>14</sup> <sup>16</sup> Reformed Theologians on the Frequency of Communion: Past & Present — Resurrection Presbyterian Church

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

<sup>8</sup> The Puritans on the Lord's Supper (4) - Place For Truth

<https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-puritans-on-the-lords-supper-4>

<sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> For Weekly Communion | The Heidelberg

<https://heidelberg.net/2022/11/for-weekly-communion/>

<sup>15</sup> Influence Magazine | What We Believe About Communion

<https://influencemagazine.com/en/Practice/What-We-Believe-About-Communion>