

Making the Lord's Supper Available on "Every Lord's Day and on Other Festivals": Prescriptive or Descriptive?

Confessional Lutherans, in their subscription to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as found in the *Book of Concord*, thereby declare that they accept these Symbolical Books as true and faithful statements and expositions of the doctrine of Holy Scripture. In his explanations of what is covered by the confessional obligation and what is not, C. F. W. Walther made a distinction between the doctrinal content of the Confessions and non-doctrinal content. This distinction was embraced by all the synods of the old Synodical Conference, and is reflected in the wording of the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* of 1932:

The confessional obligation covers all doctrines, not only those that are treated *ex professo*, but also those that are merely introduced in support of other doctrines. The obligation does not extend to historical questions, purely exegetical questions, and other matters not belonging to the doctrinal content of the symbols. All doctrines of the Symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture. (48)

Another distinction that is sometimes employed, with respect to the confessional obligation of those who subscribe the Symbolical Books, is a distinction between *prescriptive* statements and *descriptive* statements. This distinction carries with it the idea that what is prescribed in the Confessions as necessary for all Christians to believe or do, is binding on us according to our subscription; but that Confessional descriptions of what Christians in other times and places did or refrained from doing are not necessarily to be taken as requirements for what we must do or refrain from doing today. This distinction is sometimes helpful, but is often not helpful, and can be misleading. There are many places where the Symbolical Books simply confess something to be true, without using the terminology of either prescription or description. The category of prescription is also in essence a category of law, and does not align very well with the many gospel pronouncements that one sees in the Confessions.

In any case, with respect to discussions that are currently taking place among Confessional Lutherans regarding the frequency of Holy Communion, it is acknowledged by everyone that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession of 1531 does make the following declaration:

Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. (XXIV:1, K/W)

The question is then asked: Is this descriptive or prescriptive? Obviously it is descriptive. It is the Reformers telling us what they do, with respect to how and when the Lord's Supper is made available to properly-prepared communicants. Because this is, on its face, *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*, it is then taken by some to mean that the church today need not make the sacrament available at this level of frequency, and that a pastor who subscribes the

Apology is not therefore obligating himself to do so. But is this a fully accurate conclusion, and a fully faithful application? Should more questions be asked about *why* the Reformers did what they did?

The Apology here describes what was done in Lutheran churches in the Reformation era, not merely because this was the whim or personal habit of the pastors of that time, but because this was the consequence of the kind of preaching that Martin Luther said should be taking place in those Lutheran churches. In the Preface to his 1529 Small Catechism, Luther emphasizes that

we should not compel anyone to believe or to receive the sacrament and should not fix any law or time or place for it. Instead, we should preach in such a way that the people make themselves come without our law and just plain compel us pastors to administer the sacrament to them. (21-22, K/W).

Luther here prescribes – and does not merely describe – a kind of sacramental preaching that would include exhortations and admonitions similar to what he told his readers in the Large Catechism of 1529: “If you could see how many daggers, spears, and arrows are aimed at you every moment, you would be glad to come to the sacrament as often as you can” (V:82, K/W). As a result of this kind of preaching, the Reformers were indeed able to say elsewhere in the Apology that “Every Lord’s Day many in our circles use the Lord’s Supper, but only after they have been instructed, examined, and absolved” (XV:40, Tap). The prescribed sacramental preaching, when it had its intended effect, led by necessity to a certain kind of sacramental practice.

And this practice, as we might expect, was also the practice of the Christian church in the earliest and best times of its history. Our friends in the Wisconsin Synod point out that

There is a great deal of evidence from the history of the church that supports an every-Sunday communion in addition to an every-Sunday sermon. That the early Christians received the supper whenever they gathered on the Lord’s day is obvious as one reads in the Acts and 1 Corinthians. (CWH, 44)

Hermann Sasse summarizes the full and balanced sacramental piety of the ancient church in his observation that, for the apostles and early Fathers, the Lord’s Supper

was in every respect the life of the church. It was never to be separated from the Gospel. The church of the first centuries was the church of the Eucharist. A Sunday, a Lord’s Day, was unthinkable without the Lord’s Supper. But if ever the church was a preaching church, the church of the apostles and the Church Fathers was. The same is true of all great periods of the church. The sacrament and the sermon belong together, and it is always a sign of the decay of the church if one is emphasized at the expense of the other. (Sasse, 2)

And the Missouri Synod’s Friedrich Lochner, in his 1895 book on *The Chief Divine Service of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church*, helps us understand how our orthodox Lutheran forefathers sought to recapture this balance:

Having regard for the interconnectedness of Word and Sacrament, as well as for Christian antiquity – when even in the days of Augustine (AD 400) the Supper was received by the whole congregation every Sunday at least, assuming there was a longing for it – the *mid-morning service* which followed the early Matins service in the Reformation era and long afterward *was regularly a Communion service, and thus a Chief Divine Service*, at least in congregations of greater number. ...when for lack of communicants the Supper could not be celebrated in such a service, there was still an attempt to leave the form of the Divine Service intact in all other respects. In a number of places, however, the sermon was followed by the reading of a prescribed exhortation...or the delivery of a freer exhortation... In such exhortations, the lack of the communicants was lamented and a frequent use of the most worthy supper was exhorted and encouraged (yet without constraint of the Law). (Lochner, 5)

In the Apology, the Lutheran Reformers also provide for us a more detailed description of the kind of pastoral care that was offered to communicants in the sixteenth century, to help them prepare for their reception of the Lord's Supper:

...it is certain that most people in our churches use the sacraments – absolution and the Lord's Supper – many times during the course of a year. Moreover, those who instruct the people about the worth and fruits of the sacraments do so in such a way as to invite the people to use the sacraments frequently. ... Also, excommunication is pronounced on the openly wicked and on those who despise the sacraments. ... However, we do not prescribe a set time because not everyone is prepared in the same way at the same time. In fact, if everyone rushed in at the same time, they could not be heard or instructed in an orderly way. ... Christ says [1 Cor. 11:29] that “all who eat and drink unworthily, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” Our pastors, accordingly, do not force those who are not ready to use the sacraments. (XI:3-5, K/W)

The most common practice of the Reformation era – especially in view of the poor catechesis that the people had previously received under the papacy – involved each communicant meeting personally with the pastor for an examination of his faith, and for confession and absolution, before he was communed. Luther describes what this would have looked like in his 1523 *Formula Missae*, where he writes that the parish “bishop” or pastor should

be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord's Supper so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord's Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so that they may be consoled and comforted; this was Christ's purpose, when he in priceless love gave and instituted this Supper, and said, “Take and eat,” etc. (LW 53:32)

Lutheran pastoral practice, as it became established over the next few years, did usually involve a requirement or an expectation that a communicant would have such a meeting with the pastor each time he wished to commune. The result would be what the Apology describes, when it reports that “most people in our churches use the sacraments...many times during the course of a year.” Where these pastoral procedures were in place, it would not usually have been possible for everyone in a given parish to commune “at the same time,” every time the sacrament was offered, on every Sunday and festival.

What the Apology here describes is not, however, a prescription for what all Lutherans today must do, especially in a situation where the people have been well catechized. And so Luther, in his *Formula Missae*, goes on to say:

But I think it enough for the applicants for communion to be examined or explored once a year. Indeed, a man may be so understanding that he needs to be questioned only once in his lifetime or not at all. For, by this practice, we want to guard lest the worthy and unworthy alike rush to the Lord’s Supper... (LW 53:33)

And Luther writes, “concerning private confession before communion,” that “it neither is necessary nor should be demanded. Nevertheless, it is useful and should not be despised...” (LW 53:34). In a sermon from 1531 Luther also says that

To confess sin does not mean (as among the papists) to recite a long catalog of sins, but to desire absolution. This is in itself a sufficient confession, that is, acknowledging yourself guilty and confessing that you are a sinner. And no more should be demanded and required, no naming and recitation of all or some, many or a few sins, unless you of your own accord desire to indicate something that especially burdens your conscience and calls for instruction and advice or specific comfort... (quoted in WLS I:331)

Before the Biblical teaching on justification by faith was restored to its proper place in the life and consciousness of the church, the laity in general were afraid to go to communion, believing that they would receive it to their judgment due to their personal unworthiness. Papal canons required them to go anyway – and also to go to confession – at least once per year, at or near Easter. Luther and the other Reformers committed themselves to correcting these confusions, through sound evangelical preaching and catechesis. We can see in the Large Catechism an example of how Luther seeks to draw weak and troubled Christians to the Lord’s Supper, when he writes that in this sacrament God’s Son

offers us all the treasures he brought from heaven for us, to which he most graciously invites us in other places, as when he says in Matthew 11[:28]: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Surely it is a sin and a shame that, when he so tenderly and faithfully summons and exhorts us for our highest and greatest good, we regard it with such disdain, neglecting it so long that we grow quite cold and callous and lose all desire and love for it. We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body. (V:66-68, K/W)

The Reformers expected that eventually, as God would bless their efforts, a more balanced and healthy sacramental piety would emerge among the Lutheran laity, which would be similar to the kind of sacramental devotion that could have been found in the apostolic and ancient church. They therefore prepared the church for, and looked forward to, a time when more people would be communing more often, under the guidance and encouragement of their pastors. Martin Chemnitz, in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, spells this out:

Christ...did not want to permit believers to use Communion arbitrarily, so that it would make no difference whether they used it occasionally or not at all or when they pleased, as one does in matters indifferent. For He does not say: "When it pleases you," as in indifferent matters, but says: "As often as you do this." ...He says: "As often as," in order that we may eat of that bread and drink of that cup as often as we recognize and feel that that medicine and remedy which our Good Samaritan pours into our wounds is useful and necessary to us, so long only as we examine ourselves lest we receive it to judgment. For the rule about when and how often one should go to Communion must be taken: I. From the teaching about the fruit and power of the Eucharist, namely, when and as often as we recognize that we have need of this power; II. From the teaching about self-examination, lest we receive it unworthily. On this basis people are to be taught, admonished, and exhorted to more diligent and frequent use of the Eucharist. For because Christ says: "As often as you do this," it is wholly His will that those who are His disciples should do this frequently. Therefore those are not true and faithful ministers of Christ who in any manner whatever lead or frighten people away from more frequent use and reception of the Eucharist. There are beautiful examples of frequent use of the Eucharist from the true antiquity. Some had the custom of receiving the Eucharist daily, some twice a week, some on the Lord's day, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, some only on the Lord's Day. (Chemnitz, II:330-31)

The political and military upheavals that followed the Reformation era, combined with the influence of Pietism and then of Rationalism, altered the trajectory of maturation and improvement in sacramental piety, that Luther and Chemnitz no doubt expected would have continued on into the future, beyond their lifetimes. Regarding Luther's sacramental teaching in particular, Luther D. Reed recounts that

veneration for the Sacrament as the seal of forgiveness and a means of grace...kept him in accord with the historic church in concluding the chief service of every Lord's Day and festival with the Lord's Supper. The custom which became general in Lutheran churches two centuries later of reducing the Sunday morning service to a preaching service and only infrequently celebrating Holy Communion, as in the Zwinglian and Calvinistic churches, must not be laid at Luther's door. (Reed, 79-80)

Since the Confessional Awakening of the nineteenth century, however, Lutherans have once again been growing in their appreciation of the importance and great blessings of this Holy Supper, and have been celebrating and receiving it more often. Today we are able to build on this and to move forward even further – by more fully *moving back* to the principles and practices of the Reformers and of the early church.

We can let it be known that the sacrament is, in principle, available on every Lord's Day and festival, if there are properly-prepared communicants present who wish to receive it (and if there is a properly-called pastor present who is able to administer it). And pastors today can preach the kind of sermons that Luther, in the Small Catechism, tells them to preach. Such preaching, we pray, would result in the people coming to see their deep need not only for the gospel in general, but also for the Lord's Supper in particular. Such preaching, we pray, would result in the people's yearning for an ever more frequent reception of Christ's Supper; and for the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that Jesus offers and bestows, in a most intimate and tangible way, in that sacred meal.

We should remember what Luther also prescribed in the Small Catechism – or more precisely what he *proscribed* – when he said that we should not compel anyone to receive the sacrament; and when he said that we should not fix any law or time for the sacrament to be received (with the implication that it is not supposed to be received at other times). If communicant members who are prepared to commune wish to do so on any given Sunday, then that Sunday should be, for them, a “Communion Sunday.” Everyone does not need to commune just because some are communing. Luther himself, while calling for the sacrament to be *available* every week, did not himself *commune* every week. His friend Veit Dietrich remembered in 1548 that “it was always Luther's practice that he generally went to the sacrament every 14 days or at least every 3 weeks and desired absolution beforehand...” (quoted in WA 48:326). And while Luther did usually seek out an opportunity for private confession and absolution before going to communion, he also declared in 1528: “And I, Doctor Martin Luther myself, sometimes go unconfessed, just so that I shall not myself make it a necessary habit in my conscience” (quoted in Preuss, 195).

But If our Lutheran sacramental preaching has indeed led at least some of our people to “compel us pastors to administer the sacrament to them” – either on certain Sundays and festivals, or on every Sunday and festival – we pastors should respond as Luther tells us to respond in his 1528 letter to the city of Nürnberg:

...one or two masses should be celebrated on Sundays or on the days of the saints in the two parish churches, depending on whether there is a great or small number of communicants. ...during the week mass could be celebrated on whatever day there is a need for it, that is, if there are some communicants present who ask for it and desire it. In this way no one would be forced to come to the sacrament, and yet everyone would be served [with the sacrament] in an orderly and sufficient way. If the ministers complain about this, however, alleging that they are thus forced [to celebrate the Lord's Supper], or lamenting that they are unworthy [to celebrate the Lord's Supper], I would tell them that no one compels them except God himself through his call. For since they have the office, they are already obliged and compelled (on the basis of their calling and office) to administer the sacrament when it is requested of them; thus their excuses are void. This is the same as their obligation to preach, comfort, absolve, help the poor, and visit the sick, as often as these services are needed and demanded. (LW 49:206-07)

Among the Michigan Franconian congregations of the early Missouri Synod, the Reformation ideal regarding the frequency of Holy Communion was recaptured more successfully

than among most adherents of the Confessional Awakening in America. In 1890 Pastor Johann Heinrich Philipp Graebner recalled his ministry, in earlier years, in Frankentrost, Michigan:

In general our public worship services and also our daily Matins and Vespers followed the liturgical method as given in the Loehe agenda. According to the constitution which Rev. [Wilhelm] Loehe sent along with us, [in] all Sunday [services] as well as [in] all special festival services, on the first day thereof, holy communion shall be observed and the exclusive use of private confession shall be practised. During the six years that I was in Frankentrost it was very rare that there were no Communicants on Sunday or high festivals. (Graebner)

In the old Norwegian Synod – in keeping with the Danish-Norwegian Church Order – it was understood that the Lord’s Supper was “theoretically a part of every Lutheran service,” and was “to be administered at any church service at the demand of five.” As a matter of history we know that this did not happen very often, apart from the relatively few “stated seasons of the year” when the sacrament “was usually administered” (Rohne, 87). But what if five or more of the communicant members of a Confessional Lutheran congregation today are not satisfied with receiving communion only on certain pre-designated Sundays? What if their faith and devotion crave a more frequent reception of Christ’s body and blood, so that they would wish that what is “theoretically a part of every service” would become for them an *actual* part of every service? How should their pastor respond if they “demand” that the sacrament be administered to them on a Sunday or festival when it was not otherwise scheduled to be celebrated, or even on *every* Sunday and festival? Perhaps this description of Reformation-era practice, from the Apology, gives us the best answer:

Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord’s day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. (XXIV:1, K/W)

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St. Bartholomew’s Day,
August 24, 2025

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Illustration from an early edition of Luther's Small Catechism