

## Anthony Dallison's First Response to David Sherwood

In a recent issue of the Advocate (*May 1992*) Pastor David Sherwood made a lengthy and reasoned plea for the practice of weekly Communion Services in our churches and expressed his amazement that "Protestant churches in general, and Reformed churches in particular, celebrate the Lord's Supper relatively infrequently. Once a month or once a quarter seems to be the norm."

Some of us are becoming a little tired of hearing these repeated calls for changes in the observation of this second of the sacraments instituted by our Lord when, in fact, the "traditional" Presbyterian and Reformed practice of relatively infrequent Communion is very satisfactory to many of our Sessions and congregations and, moreover, has clear biblical warrant in a way that the other position would seem seriously to lack. I, for one, cannot for a moment accept Pastor Sherwood's claim that *"The biblical and preferred practice is to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis"* (italics mine). And for these reasons:

First, any careful or even casual reader of the New Testament scriptures must quickly observe a very striking and instructive fact regarding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Namely, the comparatively infrequent references to it in the pages of the New Testament. It is mentioned, for example, only in three out of the four gospels (i.e. completely omitted in John's gospel) and the only other place in the entire New Testament where the sacrament is treated occurs in I Corinthians chapter eleven. (There is a possible reference in John chapter six, although I personally dispute whether our Lord had in mind the connection between "eating" His flesh and "drinking" His blood and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper). Surely the very infrequency of the mention of this sacrament underlines the clear New Testament teaching that however wonderful and blessed this "visible Word" (setting forth the truths of the gospel by signs and symbols) may be to believers, it is never to be regarded as the chief means of grace to believers but is always subordinate and secondary to the preaching of the Word. We need to remember this vital observation when we think of increasing the frequency of this supper to a weekly observation.

Secondly, if the first observation and deduction is correct, the second follows logically. There would appear to be no direct evidence whatever in the New Testament that the early Church observed a weekly participation in the Lord's table. Pastor Sherwood himself admits this point when he says..."we don't have any clear-cut command," though he goes on to say "the New Testament evidence does seem to point in the direction of weekly communion, especially if one understands 'the breaking of bread' to be a reference to the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7; I Cor. 11:17-20; cf. 14:26)". However, our Lord's words of institution ("As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup") are sufficiently indefinite as to provide no clear indication of the frequency with which He intended the ordinance to be observed by His followers. Since the occasion was the Passover meal, an annual observance, there may even be grounds to reason that He intended only an annual observation of the simple supper that replaced the elaborate ritual of the old covenant ordinance. There is certainly no indication of a weekly or even a daily observance as mandatory upon the Church. Further, the references cited in the Book of Acts should not be interpreted as always implying the observation of the sacrament merely because "the breaking of bread" is mentioned. This may have been a fellowship meal at which the sacrament may, or may not, have been administered. We really do not know and the best commentators on the Book of Acts wisely caution us in this regard.

Third, we must surely notice that at the one point in the entire New Testament where there is detailed instruction regarding the correction of abuses of the sacrament, Paul is notably silent regarding the frequency of the observation. ["In the first place, I hear that when you come together"... "when you come together" (I Cor. 11:18,20)]. We are not to assume something that the New Testament does not tell us, namely, that the sacrament was observed at every gathering of the church for worship or fellowship (the "when" is quite indefinite as to frequency). And Paul's failure to include such direction as to frequency is a surprising omission if, as is alleged by so many today, weekly (or similarly more frequent access to the Lord's table) is so fundamental and essential.

Fourth, we can attribute the rising wave of concern in the modern Reformed churches over the frequency of communion to the other alarming trend, namely the downgrading of the ministry of the Word. In spite of all protestations to the contrary, surely the history of the Christian Church teaches us that it is at the periods when the Word of God has been set aside as the chief "means of grace" for the Church that there arises, in its place, a new and supposedly "more scriptural" emphasis on the sacraments. The rise of the Roman Catholic Church from the fourth century, through the Middle Ages demonstrates this truth, as does the Tractarian movement in English Anglicanism in the 19th century. The end result of an un-Scriptural over-emphasis on the sacraments is always the same, and that is why we need the clear reminder of the New Testament in the cases cited above that show on the one hand the importance of the sacraments as "sealing" ordinances to the gospel, but their entire subordination to the gospel at every point. Hence, we would argue, the reason for the comparative obscurity of the Lord's supper in the New Testament. Why should we seek a different emphasis? Are we wiser than God, or better informed than His apostles?

Finally, I hope we are all agreed that the Lord's Supper should never become the principal act of worship upon the Lord's

Day, whether it is weekly or less frequent communion that is practiced.

The Scottish Reformers stated in the *First Book of Discipline* (1560), "Four times in the year we think sufficient to the administration of the Lord's Table". Two years later the General Assembly decided that four times a year in the towns and twice a year in rural areas were sufficient. The historian John Row tells us that the Scots "took not their pattern from any kirk (church) in the world, no, not from Geneva itself; but laying God's word before them, made Reformation according thereunto, both in doctrine first, and then in discipline". At the Westminster Assembly in 1643, George Gillespie, a Scottish commissioner, objected to the English proposal that there should be four ministrations in the year on the ground that Scripture itself laid down no such rule and that Scottish opinion was unfavorable to such frequent observance.

I am convinced that these worthy forefathers in the faith were right, even over John Calvin's judgment that communion should be more frequently administered (and John Knox was with Calvin in Geneva, you remember!!). When we begin to discover again the richness of the Word preached and the powerfulness of a faithful pulpit ministry which unashamedly and fully declares the whole counsel of God in Scripture to the edifying and satisfying of the Lord's flock, both we as Pastors and they as God's people will be more thoroughly (and biblically!) content, like our Scottish forebears, to "lay God's Word before them and make Reformation according thereunto," including the matter of the frequency of that secondary but glorious means of grace, the Lord's Supper.

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