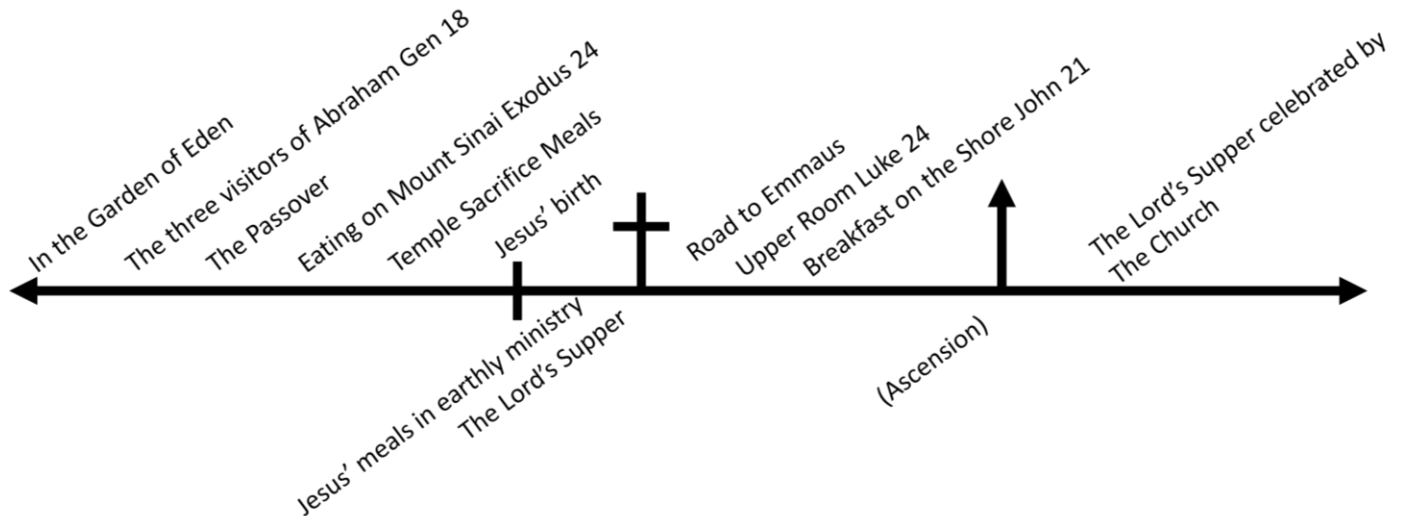


Table Fellowship Throughout Time

History and practice of the Lord's Supper



Big idea: As we look at church history, we see the Lord's Supper as a continuation of Jesus' table fellowship with His faithful.

Ingredients for Table Fellowship

Jesus'

1. Teaching
2. Meal
3. Presence

The Early Church (before 325 A.D.)

Setting: Houses of wealthy benefactors.

"And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts," (Acts 2:46, ESV)

"And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." (Acts 5:42, ESV)

"Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia." (Romans 16:5, ESV)

"The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 16:19, ESV)

"Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house." (Colossians 4:15, ESV)

"and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:" (Philemon 2, ESV)

Blessings: This era saw a tight-knit community that had a higher level of commitment to the Church than many future eras. The celebration of the Lord's Supper was central to the gathering of this community.

The *Didache* is one of our earliest documents outside of the Bible, written before 100 A.D. “But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.”¹ We also see in chapter 9 of this same document teaching closed communion. That is, only the baptized could partake of this meal.

Justin Martyr writes in the second century: “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.”²

Challenges: The close-knit community led to suspicion from the outside. The early Christians were accused by the Romans of incest, infant sacrifice, and cannibalism.³ Many Christians were persecuted by the Romans in this time.

There were still many challenges to the Church's teaching at this time. Things like which books were included in the New Testament, understanding how Jesus can be both God and man, and the Trinity were items that some sects sought to confuse the Apostle's Teaching. Practices of the Lord's Supper were in some places incorrect. Some sects used bread and water and others used bread only.⁴ Other early church documents were written to condemn those who followed those practices.

The Church in the Roman Era (313–750 A.D.)

Setting: The Edict of Milan of 313 legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire. The houses in which people worshipped became dedicated churches, and they started building dedicated church buildings.

Blessings: A national recognition of Christianity gave it the “world's stage.” It soon became the dominant religion in the Roman empire. Official recognition of this religion gave the opportunity for councils such as the Council of Nicaea to meet and discuss false teaching that plagued the church.

Challenges: Philosopher Soren Kirkegaard once quipped about the influence of the state church in his country. “In Denmark everyone is a Christian, and nobody is a Christian.” As the Church in the Roman empire became mainstream, there became an increasing core of believers who were not well taught the truths of Christianity.

At the same time, as the leaders of the Church gathered from the corners of the Roman Empire, they compared notes and saw that some did not adhere to the teachings of the Apostles. Doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, and what books were in the Bible were ratified and confirmed through such meetings as the Council of Nicaea from which we get the Nicene Creed.

¹ The *Didache*, accessed online 9/20/2022 <<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>>

² Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, see chapters 67 <<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>>

³ “An infant covered over with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily — O horror! — they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with this consciousness of wickedness they are covenanted to mutual silence” Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, <<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0410.htm>>

⁴ Edward. Foley, *From Age to Age : How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist*, Revised and expanded edition. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 65–66.

As the Church got bigger, weekly communion was not the problem. The problem was laypeople not receiving it often.

The Church in the Middle Ages (750 A.D. – 1500 A.D.)

Setting: The worship setting saw churches get bigger, but the altar got further and further away. In the front of the church walls or screens were erected to separate the clergy from the laity.⁵ At the same time, there was the multiplication of altars for priests to say masses when nobody else was around.

Blessings: The Middle Ages saw a Europe that was almost entirely Christian. Spirituality played a huge role in the lives of many people. Monasticism gave the opportunity to copy many manuscripts from which we draw to get a reliable Bible. Likewise, the writings of theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury and William of Ockham provide the basis for much of our modern analytical thought.

Challenges: In many ways, the Church lost the picture of the Lord's Supper being primarily one of table fellowship. As worship remained in Latin, people no longer could understand the teaching of the Church and the leading of the Church was left to the "experts." The Church divorced the celebration of the Lord's Supper from Christ's command to take and to eat. In its place were many superstitions: devoted laity would go from church to church to simply look at the Eucharist being raised, Christians would pray to and worship the bread and the wine instead of eating and drinking, they would go on pilgrimages, worship relics, and spend money on indulgences. Many of the abuses that we hear so much about from the Reformation era were born after the fall of the Roman Empire, but before Martin Luther.

The Reformation and Early Modern Era

Much of the Lutheran Reformation was a struggle not to throw the baby out with the bath water. On the one hand Luther hated the Papal abuses of the Medieval Period such as Private Masses (communion services where nobody but the priest was present), the adoration of the sacrament (praying to consecrated bread and wine instead of consuming them), and the view of the Lord's Supper as something mankind did to appease God. On the other hand, he desired to keep the Lord's Supper as a precious central part of the worship life of the Church. In a letter to a Lazarus Spengler, he recommended weekly communion.⁶ This coincides with the Apology to the Augsburg Confession which states, "At the outset it is again necessary, by way of preface, to point out that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. 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. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things" (Ap XXIV 1). The key caveat was that there had to be

⁵ Foley, 147–48.

⁶ "Should anyone request my counsel in this way, then I would give this advice:... Secondly, that you should celebrate one or two Masses in the two parish churches on Sundays or holy days, depending on whether there are few or many communicants. Should it be regarded as needful or good, you might do the same in the hospital too. Thirdly, you might celebrate Mass during the week on whichever days it would be needful, that is, if any communicants would be present and would ask for and request the Sacrament. This way we should compel no one to receive the Sacrament, and yet everyone would be adequately served in an orderly manner. If the Ministers of the Church would fall to griping at this point, maintaining that they were being placed under duress or complaining that they are unfitted to face such demands, then I would demonstrate to them that no merely human compulsion is at work here, but on the contrary they are being compelled by God Himself through His Call. For because they have the Office, they are already, in virtue of their Call and Office, obliged and compelled to administer the Sacrament whenever people request it of them, so that their excuses amount to nothing; just as they are under obligation to preach, comfort, absolve, help the poor, and visit the sick as often as people need or ask for these services" Luther in WA Br 4 534, 14-533, 34; Aug 15th 1528 translated by John R. Stephenson, "The Holy Eucharist: At the Center or Periphery of the Church's Life in Luther's Thinking?," in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1985), 161–62.

laity who were interested in receiving this gift. It is fair to say that Luther's battle was not the lack of communion services, but the lack of communicants.

Luther writes in the Large Catechism, "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. For where the soul is healed, the body is helped as well. Why, then, do we act as if the sacrament were a poison that would kill us if we ate of it? Of course, it is true that those who despise the sacrament and lead unchristian lives receive it to their harm and damnation. To such people nothing can be good or wholesome, just as when a sick person willfully eats and drinks what is forbidden by the physician. But those who feel their weakness, who are anxious to be rid of it and desire help, should regard and use the sacrament as a precious antidote against the poison in their systems" (Luther's Large Catechism V 68–70).

The Sacrament in the New World

The 1700s saw a precipitous drop in communion attendance in Europe. Two main forces that Pastor Wieting ties this to are Pietism and Rationalism. Wieting writes, "[t]he intention of each of these movements was entirely different. Pietism sought to rescue religion and restore true worship. Rationalism sought to elevate human reason over religion and relegated worship to its own purposes. Yet each in its own way had negative effects upon God-given Word and Sacrament worship. Each in its own way had negative effects upon the opportunity to receive the Lord's Supper in weekly worship and the desire to receive it.

Pietism rightly stressed Luther's arguments for the inner spiritual life of faith in a period when worship could sometimes be legalistically rigid. But its popular expression often neglected the sacramental basis of worship. Despite retaining the "external forms," Pietism emptied them from the inside and thus theologically destroyed the forms of worship. Rationalism, on the other hand, was an assault on the supernatural. Miracles were considered beyond proof and superstitious. God's gifts in water and word, bread and wine—things Lutherans confessed as great New Testament miracles—were considered irrational and therefore irrelevant. Thus, Rationalism attacked from the outside the sacramental presence of Christ in the flesh."⁷

Many of these attitudes in Europe were carried across the Atlantic to the Americas. Pietism and Rationalism, as well as the influence of non-Catholic Protestant Christians became the air the early Lutherans in America breathed. Pietism made the celebration of the Lord's Supper less frequent while also increasing the level of examination required to participate. Rationalism bred an indifference to what would be considered superstition. Protestant theology informed by Zwingli and Calvin downplayed the importance of the Lord's Supper and that rubbed off on Lutherans in America. Frontier conditions made it hard for a remote American Lutheran congregation to see an ordained minister on a regular basis, further limiting the opportunity for frequent communion. In the early days of American history, it was not unusual for communion to be offered only two to four times a year.⁸ Even in the era of 1930–1950, the LCMS recorded that an average communicant would commune two to three times a year with communion being offered at congregations four to six times a year.⁹ Anti-Catholic sentiment had its effect in American Lutheran circles. Pastor Wieting took a sample of twelve random years of the *Lutheran Witness* articles throughout the 1800s and 1900s. Of those twelve years, there were 230 articles discussing negative concerns about Roman Catholics, only fifteen discussed Holy Communion.¹⁰ The protestant-catholic divide in America is something that many of us have experienced especially in the 20th century.

⁷ Wieting, *The Blessings of Weekly Communion*, 129.

⁸ Wieting, 136–37.

⁹ Wieting, 147.

¹⁰ Wieting, 171.