

## **"My Flesh Is Food Indeed and My Blood Is Drink Indeed":**

### **A pastoral letter from the Session of Trinity Presbyterian Church to the congregation concerning the frequency of the Lord's Supper**

It is indeed a profound honor to be the shepherds of the flock at Trinity Presbyterian Church, to have had the care of your souls entrusted to us by the Chief Shepherd of the sheep, Christ Jesus Himself (1 Peter 5:1-4). As such, we pray and long for you all, that you would grow in your knowledge of Him, so that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of the glorious inheritance He has for you, and the exceeding greatness of His power toward those who believe (Ephesians 1:15ff).

But **how** are you to grow in your knowledge of Him; and **how** are your elders called to help you to grow in hope and spiritual riches and power? Another way of asking these questions is, what are the means of grace that Christ gives to His Church, that we may know Him better and receive the riches of His grace and power of His salvation? What a good question; we're glad you asked! In fact, our Shorter Catechism answers that very question for us:

**"The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, His ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation" (Q. 88).**

Thus, your Session is tasked by God with seeing to it that the Word, sacraments, and prayer here at Trinity are effectually ministered to you, His chosen ones. It is our responsibility to ensure, as far as it depends upon us, that the ministries of the Word, sacraments, and prayer never become rote, perfunctory, dull, dreary, mundane, meaningless, lifeless, false, or ineffectual, but that, instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word, sacraments, and prayer actually and truly be "made effectual to salvation" for you week after week. We labor to see that the saving grace that is found in Christ alone be truly and genuinely offered to you, in as rich and full and biblical and holistic a manner as possible, each Lord's Day.

It is our privilege and responsibility to ensure that the Word of God is preached to you each Lord's Day, for in New Testament worship there is a primacy to the ministry of the Word. It is also our privilege and responsibility to ensure that we minister in prayer together each Lord's Day. In this same vein, for over a year now your Session has been giving careful and prayerful consideration to the needs of our church with respect to the question of the frequency of the Lord's Supper.

Our Book of Church Order teaches that "the Communion, or Supper of the Lord, is to be observed frequently; the stated times to be determined by the Session of each congregation, as it may judge most for edification" (58-1). Your Session is therefore called to make a determination and judgement about the frequency of the Lord's Supper, with your edification being our chief concern. In the past, we had determined that monthly celebration would be most edifying. Now, however, we believe that moving towards weekly celebration is most wise and appropriate. As we make this transition towards the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, we earnestly desire your comments and prayers. We will be docketing time for discussion about this transition at our upcoming Stated Meetings of the Session (held on the second Mondays of each month), and, to assist us in our deliberations as your elders, we invite your correspondence and/or attendance.

#### **Our Reasoning:**

We would like to explain to you why we believe that feeding on the spiritual body and blood of our Lord Jesus each Lord's Day would be most edifying for our congregation. (Incidentally, we do not presume to make such a judgement for any other congregation of Christ's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Our determination and judgment applies only to the flock over which Christ has made us overseers.)

It must be pointed out from the start that the Scriptures do not explicitly teach or require that the Lord's Supper be celebrated each Lord's Day. A worship service may certainly still be a true worship service, honoring and well pleasing to the Lord even without the Lord's Supper. Our Lord Jesus lovingly commands us to celebrate His Supper, but He does not command us with respect to frequency. Thus, this question of the frequency of the Lord's Supper is an area of Christian liberty which is to be "ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed" (*The Westminster Confession of Faith I-VI*).

In keeping with that freedom for which Christ has set us free, here are our reasons, which we believe to be consistent with the light of nature, Christian prudence, and the general rules of the Word of God, for determining to celebrate the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day here at Trinity Presbyterian Church:

1. As we look to the Word of God, we are compelled by **the paradigm of the very first Lord's Day**. On the first Lord's Day, after His glorious resurrection, the Lord Jesus Himself led in worship with a sermon, prayer, and the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:25-32). We believe that the revelation of this first Easter Sunday was given to us in the Scriptures in order to serve as a model and framework for worship services on every Lord's Day thereafter.
2. In fact, on this first Lord's Day it is interesting to note that the sermon alone did not open the eyes of the disciples! Christ Himself was the preacher, and His sermon was the most amazing redemptive-historical sermon in the history of the Church, and still **their eyes were not opened until He broke the bread!** As this is an example from a historical text, and not a binding doctrinal precept (as may be found, for example, in the epistles), we of course want to remember that the preached Word alone has effectual power, and does not require the sacrament to drive it home (Isaiah 55:11; John 15:3). Yet, it is worth asking, do you ever leave church not understanding the sermon, wondering what it was all about, not sure that you got anything out of it? On the first Lord's Day, the grace given to these disciples in the breaking of the bread enabled them to then understand the sermon! Word and sacrament were joined together most sweetly and most powerfully. The preached Word does not require the sacrament, but it is wonderfully signified to the senses and sealed to the heart by the sacrament.
3. This frequent and regular joining together of Word and sacrament seems to have been **the understanding and practice of the first century Church**. In Acts 2:42 we read that the early Church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer," and in 20:7 we read that the first day of the week was when the disciples came together to break bread. I Corinthians 11:17-20 shows us that the church in Corinth celebrated the Lord's Supper each week, but that their celebrations were marred by selfishness. To be sure, the early Church's example teaches us that mere ceremony, and frequency for frequency's sake, are never sufficient. All true worship must be in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Yet, it also seems apparent that the early Church felt the freedom to

celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly, even daily at first (Acts 2:42). With the Corinthian church's abuses of the Lord's Supper, it may be fairly assumed that Paul would have corrected them about "over frequency" if that had been even part of the problem. Yet, he does not command, nor even caution against "over frequency." His commands and corrections have to do with their hearts and attitudes, not with frequency.

4. Again, our church's standards give us both freedom and guidance when they teach us that the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated "frequently." Frequency of celebration is made all the more compelling when we look to the words Christ used to institute the Supper. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). With these words we believe that Christ was **intentionally linking the celebration of the Lord's Supper to the weekly celebration of the Lord's Day**. In other words, He was authoritatively and explicitly interpreting and fulfilling the fourth commandment, "**Remember** the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8), intending for His people to "**remember**" the sabbath day thereafter (even as He transformed it to the Lord's Day) by "**remembering**" His death and resurrection in the Lord's Supper.
5. As we consider this question of how frequently we may celebrate the Lord's Supper, we of course look for a biblical pattern to guide and instruct us. Is there a biblical pattern undergirding monthly celebration, bi-monthly celebration, or quarterly celebration? It does not seem so. It seems that the only biblical patterns undergirding the Lord's Supper are the yearly celebration of the Passover from the Old Testament, and the weekly celebration of the Lord's Day. As we consider these two patterns, we remember that worship in the Old Testament (such as Passover) was, "for that time, sufficient and efficacious" to build up believers as they looked forward to Christ (*WCF VII:V*), but that **worship in the New Testament era, now that Christ has been revealed, "is held forth in more fullness"** (*WCF VII:VI*), with "**greater boldness of access to the throne of grace**" and "**fuller communications of the free Spirit of God than believers under the Law did ordinarily partake of**" (*WCF XX-I*). Would "more fullness," "greater boldness of access," and "fuller communications" be an encouragement to partake of the Lord's Supper merely once per year (like Passover), or weekly? We believe that the fullness of New Testament worship makes the arguments for weekly celebration all the more compelling.
6. Our doctrinal standards provide rich teaching for us about worship and the Lord's Day. One thing the Westminster Confession teaches is that there is a distinction between those ordinances which are part of the "**ordinary religious worship of God**," and those which are to be used "in several times and seasons" (i.e. religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions) (*XXI:V*). In making this distinction (which our Book of Church Order does as well), our standards specifically and intentionally refer to the sacraments instituted by Christ as part of the **ordinary** worship of God. As profoundly powerful, and as appropriate for special occasions as baptism and the Lord's Supper may be, unlike oaths and vows and fastings and special thanksgivings, the sacraments are not to be reserved merely for special occasions!
7. Why is it that throughout Church history, God's people have been especially prone to treat the ministry of the sacraments superstitiously, looking for "magic" in them (and when the magic doesn't come, often growing either disillusioned and cynical, or withdrawn and despairing)? Why haven't more of God's people, instead, by faith, simply and humbly looked to God to bless them with His grace? One reason would be that the Church has tended to

forget that the sacraments are not magic, but are part of the "ordinary" worship of God, and thus not "extra-ordinary" in that sense. The Scriptures do not teach that God is a god who keeps us impoverished most of our lives, Sunday after Sunday withholding the riches of his grace, only occasionally agreeing to give us "extra-ordinary" grace on "special" or "meaningful" occasions. No, dear brothers and sisters, the Scriptures teach about "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ**. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will -- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has **freely given us** in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, **in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding**" (Ephesians 1:3-8). The "ordinary" truths found in Christ are your riches every day. Therefore, each Lord's Day we are to be led to these riches "by our ears in the Word proclaimed, and by our eyes in the sacraments administered" (Robert Bruce).

8. Since we do not wait for special occasions to celebrate the sacraments and receive the riches of God's grace, when do we celebrate them? The answer is, we celebrate Christian baptism as often as we need to, and we celebrate the Lord's Supper as often as we need to. Whenever a Christian parent is blessed with a child, and whenever an unbaptized person confesses Christ as his Savior and Lord, we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. This question of "need" also guides us with respect to the frequency of the Lord's Supper. We are, all of us (especially your pastors and elders!), in **desperate need of God's saving grace** each moment of every day, and each Lord's Day. Students of the Scriptures know that "salvation" is used in the Bible not only with respect to our conversions to Christ (being saved in the past) and our final redemption (being saved in the future), but also of God's daily saving mercies to us (being saved in the present B see Psalm 6:4, 7:1, 9:14; Titus 2:11-12; and 1 Peter 1:9 for starters). The judgement of your elders as we look at our own hearts, and at the hearts of our fellow sheep, is this: All of us need His present saving grace quite desperately, all of us come to worship each Sunday in a most desperate and needy state, whether we recognize it or not. We are thirsty because of our sin (Jeremiah 2:13); we are thirsty because we have been sinned against (Job 24:11); we are thirsty simply by nature of the fact that we are human beings, dependent creatures and not the Creator (2 Samuel 17:29; Acts 17:28). Whatever the cause, Jesus says to us each Lord's Day, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37). Those who come to worship unaware of their parched state and unwilling to be shown their parched state, are unprepared to worship Christ. The elders are called to prepare and lead worship services for the spiritually thirsty, however small or imperceptible that thirst may be (Psalm 107:8-9), not for those with no hunger or thirst for Christ.
9. We believe that the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper provides a **natural and most profound "method" of weekly evangelism**, both for our children who have yet to profess their faith publicly, and for any present who may be unbelievers. The weekly "fencing" of the Lord's Table serves as a most gracious and powerful invitation to Christ. "Come to me," Christ says to all who are weary and burdened, but with the condition that the weary come with a willingness to take Christ's yoke upon them--an easy yoke to be sure, for He is gentle and humble in heart (Matthew 11:28-30). Some "evangelism" erects barriers to the Kingdom, by placing cruel and burdensome yokes on people. Other types of "evangelism" make no mention of Christ's yoke, and so manipulate and trick people into a kingdom which is not the Kingdom of Christ. Instead, we simply and sincerely proclaim Christ crucified, and warmly

invite all who are present to come to the table through Him alone. In this way we "fence the table", for Jesus tells us, "I am the gate" (John 10:7-10). Thus, the weekly invitation to, and fencing of, the Lord's Table makes visible and audible the true nature of the gospel invitation of our Savior.

10. Though God is most free indeed, and free to work without means at His good pleasure (*WCF V-III*), we must remember that **the ordinary means of grace that He has explicitly purposed to bless are the Word, sacraments, and prayer**. In light of all that we have said, we cannot think of a good and compelling reason why we ought to withhold any one of these ordinary means from God's people assembled for corporate worship on any Lord's Day! In fact, we believe that the burden of proof belongs to any Session that has determined to withhold any one of the ordinary means of grace from their congregation assembled for corporate worship on the Lord's Day. We would not (we hope!) think of worshiping together without the preached Word; we would not (we hope!) think of worshiping together without prayer; why would we want to worship on the Lord's Day without sharing at the Lord's Table together?
11. Some Protestants, in reaction to a superstitious view of the sacraments, believe that the Lord's Supper is merely a memorial or ceremony, and not an actual means of grace. As such, mere ceremonies, where no grace is to be had and Christ is not present, can (and should!) be expected to become boring. However, such a view of the Lord's Supper is not an option for us. On the one hand, we do not believe that the Scriptures teach that Christ is physically present when we celebrate His Supper. On the other hand, we do not believe that the Scriptures teach that Christ is absent when we celebrate at His table. Instead, along with our Confession, we believe that the Scriptures teach that **Christ is truly and Spiritually present to our faith in the Lord's Supper** (*WCF XXIX-VII*), and that He actually and truly "communicateth to us the benefits of redemption" therein (*Q. 88*). Nothing superstitious or boring about that at all!
12. There is so much more that could be said about our union with Christ through the presence of His Holy Spirit! Since Christ Himself visits us Spiritually in the Lord's Supper, the potential benefits both in your life and in the life of Trinity Presbyterian Church cannot be overemphasized! In addition to all that has been said so far, we believe that the faithful weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper brings us back, again and again, to the Gospel of grace, which is **the power of salvation** (Romans 1:17). It **appeals to our whole man**, body and soul, intellect and emotions, logic and imagination. It **personalizes the gospel** for each one of us each and every week. It provides the healthiest possible environment for **covenant renewal**, renewing your love and obedience to God and each other, which is the fundamental purpose of the sabbath day to begin with. The faithful celebration of the Supper of the Lord provides a precious aid to **assure you of your salvation**, which assurance is more precious than gold. It **strengthens your hope in your ongoing sanctification** by the Spirit. It **strengthens your hope in Christ's soon return**. It is a corporate and personal **proclamation of the gospel** of Christ to ourselves, to our covenant children, and to unbelievers. It identifies and **unites you to the people of God** locally, universally, and throughout all the ages. In the Supper we also hear our Savior humble and encourage us by reminding us of the **high and holy mystery of our election** from out of the world (Malachi 1:2-3; John 17:9). In these and innumerable other ways, we believe that **the Lord's Supper administered to the Lord's people each Lord's Day will feed and nourish and counsel and encourage your souls**.

## **Our Perspective:**

How ought we to view this decision to celebrate the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day? Here is our perspective. Subservient to the **essential teachings** of the gospel that all true Churches confess, and subservient to the more descriptive and **important teachings** of biblical Reformed theology that all churches in the Presbyterian Church in America also confess, each particular congregation of Christ's Church is given freedom by Christ to believe and practice **distinctive applications** of the Word of God (Romans 14:4, Galatians 5:1; James 4:12; see also *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter XX, and the *Book of Church Order*, preface, chapters 1-3, and 12-5e). Every Session determines how frequently the Lord's Supper ought to be celebrated, and thus, by definition, makes "distinctive applications" of the Word of God. We have simply determined, for all the reasons outlined above, that our "distinctive" (though certainly not unique, for there are vast numbers of churches that apply the Word of God this way!) application of the Word of God's teaching on the Lord's Supper will be to invite you to partake of the broken body and shed blood of Christ each Lord's Day.

So, dear brothers and sisters, as we labor to present you spotless on the glorious Day of Christ's appearing, we desire to make use of the freedom for which Christ has set us free to shepherd you with all the riches of saving grace that we have been so richly given in the Word, sacraments, and prayer by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8), for "My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed" (John 6:55).

*Chuck Andrews*

*Larry Harris*

*Gary Purvis*

*Bob Beasley*

*Jeff Hutchinson*

*David Ruland*

*Woodie Dyches*

*Chuck Linkston*

*Donnie Williams*

*Bill Fidler*

*Calvin Marshall*

*Allan Wingfield*

## **The Session of Trinity Presbyterian Church, December 2001**

*For further study and thought on this question we commend to you the passages of Scripture referred to in this letter [including Exodus 12:1-28 (The institution of the Passover), Exodus 24 (The renewal of the covenant), Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, and Luke 22:7-23 (The institution of the Lord's Supper), John 6:26-69 (Jesus teaching us that He is our Spiritual food and drink), John 7:37-39 (Jesus teaching us that in drinking of Him we drink of the Holy Spirit), and John 15:1-8 (Constant abiding in Christ)], our Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms' summaries of the teachings of Scripture concerning the Lord's Supper, and Robert Letham's short work, The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread. (P&R Publishing, 2001).*