

Gregory David Soderberg

# *As Often As You Eat This Bread*

Communion Frequency in English, Scottish, and  
Early American Churches



# Reformed Historical Theology

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Gregory David Soderberg

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# Chapter 1

## Communion Frequency and Reformed Identity

### 1.1 Introduction

The Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff once claimed that there was “no more fundamental liturgical issue facing the Reformed churches today” than the issue of weekly communion.<sup>1</sup> Other sources suggest a growing interest in this issue. The introduction to a series of blogs on The Gospel Coalition’s website noted that weekly communion was “becoming a badge of honor in a growing number of Presbyterian and Baptist churches.”<sup>2</sup> The issue of communion frequency continues to be debated in the American Reformed churches.<sup>3</sup> While this is not just a “Reformed” issue, it raises fundamental questions about the nature of the Reformed tradition.<sup>4</sup> Does the historic Reformed tradition elevate the “Word” too

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1 Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, “The Reformed Liturgy,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 295.

2 Ray Van Neste, “Three Arguments for Weekly Communion,” April 18, 2012 <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/three-arguments-for-weekly-communion> [accessed May 5, 2015], Kenneth J. Stewart, “The Frequency of Communion Calmly Considered,” April 18, 2012 <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-frequency-of-communion-calmly-considered> [accessed May 5, 2015], Eric Bancroft, “We Celebrate the Lord’s Supper Frequently But Not Weekly,” April 18, 2012 <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/we-celebrate-the-lords-supper-frequently-but-not-weekly> [accessed May 5, 2015].

3 In his study, J. Todd Billings stresses the importance of frequent communion: “At the Lord’s Supper, nourishment is absolutely necessary for those who feed upon and abide in Christ, and if nourishment is central to a congregational practice of the Lord’s Supper, then it is very hard to justify an infrequent celebration.” *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord’s Table* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 182.

4 See Kenneth W. Wieting, *The Blessings of Weekly Communion* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006) for a treatment of communion frequency from a Lutheran perspective. Joseph Dougherty traces the growth of frequent communion in the Roman Catholic communion in *From Altar-Throne to Table: The Campaign for Frequent Holy Communion in the Catholic Church*, ATLA Monograph Series, no. 50 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press and American Theological Library Association, 2010). Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann lamented the pattern of infrequent communion prevalent in most Orthodox churches, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 299–245. Robert Taft provides a far-ranging survey of communion frequency in history, including evidence from all branches of the Orthodox churches. He indicates that most Eastern Orthodox receive communion annually, or a few times a year. See Robert A. Taft, “The Frequency of the Eucharist Throughout History,” in Maxwell Johnson, ed., *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 93.

far above the “Sacraments”? What does it mean to partake of communion in a meaningful way? Has the Reformed tradition interpreted Paul’s exhortation to “examine yourself” in an overly intellectualistic fashion? Can a ritual be repeated frequently, and yet not lose any sense of its profound meaning? On both sides of the issue, we find voices that critique, or affirm, various aspects of the Reformed tradition. The debate over communion frequency takes us to the heart of questions about religious identity.<sup>5</sup>

Questions about communion frequency also inevitably raise questions about history. Authors appeal to various practices or principles in Scriptural texts, to justify both frequent and infrequent communion. This study does not explore the Biblical data about the nature or ideal frequency of the Eucharist. Other studies have done that, though many fruitful lines of research still remain.<sup>6</sup> The goal here is to illuminate the historical backgrounds and contexts of communion frequency debates in the American Reformed tradition, especially in the Scottish frequency debates of the 1700s and early 1800s. In these debates, the main texts used in discussions about communion frequency are found in the New Testament books of Acts and 1 Corinthians, although many writers in favor of frequent communion appeal to the “dying words” of Jesus (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-34). Since we typically respect the dying words of our friends, how much more should we respect Jesus’ last command to observe a meal in his remembrance? The examples of the early church’s eating and worshipping together in Acts are also key texts in this debate. Although Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 20:7 depict the early disciples engaged in worship, fellowship, care for each other, and the “breaking of bread,” interpreters disagree on whether these early gatherings are normative for the church, and whether they set a pattern that should be followed every time the church gathers. Authors also debate whether the “breaking of bread” refers

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5 It should be noted that I personally favor the practice of frequent communion. This project began as a defense of the practice of weekly communion. However, through further research, and following the suggestions of my advisers, the project became one of historical analysis. It is hoped that this study will enable others to dispassionately study the development of communion frequency patterns and polemics in Reformed churches and, ultimately, make informed choices on communion frequency within their own contexts.

6 In addition to Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, see Max Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, trans. J.G. Davies, Ecumenical Studies in Worship, no. 7 and 8 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 2:125–128; J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 147–157, 238–39, 312–314; Peter J. Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1993), chap. 6; Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), chap. 12; Michael S. Horton, “At Least Weekly: The Reformed Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper and of Its Frequent Celebration,” *MJT* 11 (2000), 147–169; *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 135–141.

to communion, a regular meal, or both. 1 Cor. 11 plays an especially prominent role in communion frequency polemics. The phrase “as often” in 1 Cor. 11:25-26 is interpreted in various ways. Paul’s warning to observe the Lord’s Supper in a “worthy” manner makes this discussion a matter of great importance. Many authors cite 1 Cor. 11:29-30 as they warn their readers of the dire consequences of not coming to communion in a worthy manner. The Passover and other feast days of the Old Testament also figure prominently in arguments about frequency. Patterns of fasting and feasting in the Old Testament are interpreted in various ways, depending on the aims of each writer.

All of this might sound subjective and arbitrary. How can different authors interpret the same texts in such diverse ways? Examining the history of communion frequency debates is thus a helpful case study of hermeneutical priorities and the interpretive lens that authors bring to the text of Scripture. It also illustrates the fact that liturgical practices are inextricably connected with specific historical times, and certain places. To appeal to the past reveals a certain understanding about the claim of the past on our present. For theologians, pastors, and preachers Scripture is not merely history, of course. Christians have always looked upon the Scriptures as divinely revealed precepts and principles that must inform their lives. However, interpreters do not agree on exactly how the past impinges upon the present. For example, how do the rituals of the Jews relate to the worship of the Christian church? In the communion frequency debates that disturbed Scottish Reformed churches in the eighteenth century, opponents of frequent communion felt most at home in the Old Testament. For authors like John Thompson, John Anderson, and Alexander Duncan, the Passover stood as a divinely instituted *infrequent* sacrament. Since they also accepted the notion that the Lord’s Supper primarily fulfills the Passover, then the details of Passover observance become prototypical of Christian participation in the Eucharist.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, Scots Reformed authors who argued for *frequent* communion focused primarily on New Testament texts and argumentation, and tended to view any appeal to the Old Testament as a return to the “shadows” of the Law.<sup>8</sup> Some, like Thomas Randall, went so far as to claim some form of “special revelation” from Christ to the apostles regarding communion frequency.<sup>9</sup> Randall

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7 John Thomson, *Letters addressed to the Rev. John Mason, M.A. of New-York, in Answer to his Letters on Frequent Communion* (Glasgow: William Paton, 1799; Troy: R. Moffitt & Co., 1801), 25–26; John Anderson, *Communion Seasons Defended: A Scriptural Response to John M. Mason’s “Letters on Frequent Communion”* ed. Sean McDonald (Grand Rapids: Torwood Press, 2013), 8–9; Alexander Duncan, *A Disquisition on the Observance of the Lord’s Supper* (Edinburgh: George Kline, 1807), 8–14.

8 John Erskine, *An Attempt to Promote the Frequent Dispensing of the Lord’s Supper* (Kilmarnock: J. Wilson, 1803), 55.

9 Thomas Randall, *A Letter to A Minister from his Friend, Concerning Frequent Communicating, Occasioned by the late Overture of the Synod of Glasgow and Air upon that Subject* (Glasgow, 1749), 7.

was able to make this claim because, to him, the New Testament texts definitely portray the apostolic church observing weekly communion.

Nor does the question of history and its claim on the present apply only to Scriptural history. Since rituals define religious communities, our rituals can connect us to a “family of faith” in the past. Some Christian authors writing about communion frequency are quick to identify with their historical family, while others want to distance themselves from the past. Proponents of frequent communion tend to have a more positive view of the church in history and point to many examples of frequent communion in the early church, as well as in certain Protestant Reformers. Those who question frequent communion typically have a dim view of the historical church, at least before the Reformation. They quickly point out the many “errors” (judging from a strict Protestant perspective) that also existed in the early church, tendencies that seemed to culminate in the medieval Catholic church. They note, quite rightly, that Roman Catholic apologists also appeal to early traditions (whether written or unwritten), and so are skeptical of nebulous appeals to the “early church.” This difference in views of history also affects how current churches make sense of their own “family history” in the more recent past.

This dynamic plays out when considering the influence and example of John Calvin, as it relates to contemporary communion practice and the theology of the Eucharist. It is common knowledge that John Calvin expressed his desire for weekly communion in various publications but was unable to persuade the magistrates of Geneva to implement it.<sup>10</sup> However, does this argument presuppose a certain understanding about Reformed identity? Are Reformed churches all “Calvinian”? Should Reformed communities desire to identify so closely with just *one* theologian, no matter how brilliant or influential? Reformed churches are not named after a single man (like Luther) and the tradition has always been more diverse, with many equally influential theologians. For a tradition that prides itself on its supposed reliance on the Scriptures, a simple appeal to the opinions of only one theological authority can seem precarious. Opponents of frequent communion are quick to point to other Reformers who did not share Calvin’s opinion on weekly communion.

The question of communion frequency, then, inevitably involves us in questions of church history and historical theology.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore valuable to survey arguments about communion frequency from a historical perspective. The goal is not

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10 In treating Calvin below, his more nuanced view of communion frequency and preparation for communion will be highlighted.

11 On the topics of “church history” and “historical theology” see James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995) as well as Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, Theological Resources (New York: Corpus Instrumentorum, 1971).

to proclaim either side as the “winner.” Christian theology is always a conversation with the past, and historical theology is a record of that conversation. Ideally, if pastors, ministers, church leaders, and lay people can listen sympathetically to the conversation about frequent communion in the past, they will be enabled to make wise decisions about communion frequency in the churches of the present.

## 1.2 Research Goals, Methodology, and the Significance of the Project

The goal of this research project is to analyze the backgrounds of the debate over weekly/frequent communion in Anglo Saxon parts of the Reformed tradition, from the perspective of historical theology. The movement towards weekly communion gained significant traction in American Presbyterian churches during the twentieth century, but it remains controversial in some circles. A vocal minority of popular authors, as well as several scholars, advocate for the institution of weekly communion. While the official documents and liturgies of mainline Presbyterian and Reformed churches in recent years have tended to move in the direction of more frequent communion, actual liturgical practice tends to lag.<sup>12</sup> In more conservative churches, weekly communion can be seen as “sacramental” and dangerously reminiscent of Roman Catholicism. For many, to practice weekly communion contradicts essential features of the Reformed tradition.

From the perspective of historical theology, this study is relevant because it will provide the first systematic examination of the debate, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition. For Reformed theology, this study is significant because it re-examines many of the standard assumptions about the purpose of communion by revisiting the sources. For Reformed churches, this study will provide a much-needed resource for conducting the ongoing debate on weekly communion in a historically sound and informed way. For ecumenical theology, the issue is significant because many branches of the Christian church, such as Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox, have struggled with the issue of communion frequency as well, and this study makes it possible to compare the causes and backgrounds of this phenomenon.

This study focuses on a central research question: *What patterns of communion frequency characterized the sixteenth-century Swiss Reformed, English Puritan,*

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12 See James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Faith and Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 88 and Ronald P. Byars, *Come and See: Presbyterian Congregations Celebrating Weekly Communion* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014).

*Scottish Reformed, and early American Reformed communities?*<sup>13</sup> This entails a consideration of three sub-questions:

1. How were patterns of communion frequency shaped and impacted by historical, political, and ecclesial considerations?
2. Since the desire for church discipline and proper participation have also been key concerns for Reformed communities, how did these priorities impact communion frequency?
3. Although communion frequency was a concern for many in the Reformed tradition, it assumed central importance in a series of pamphlets and essays written by Scottish Reformed authors in the 1700-1800s. What were the key exegetical and polemical strategies of these debates? What can contemporary churches learn from them, as leaders today seek to make wise choices in the matter of communion frequency?

This project adopts a geographical and chronological approach, since this unearths some of the differences and similarities in argumentative strategies as well as the lines of influence across various parts of the Reformed communities in the Continent, the British Isles and in the American colonies. It focuses on original sources that dealt with the issue of frequent communion, with one exception: to survey attitudes towards frequent communion in the Reformation period, it mainly relies on Reformation scholars, sampling the results of sound research that has already been done. Thus, in order not to re-do the work of previous scholars, I have not investigated the primary sources of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers whose views are rendered in Chapter 2. However, primary sources from the English Puritan and Scottish Reformed traditions form the backbone and largest portion of material, since the issues of communion frequency and proper participation in the Eucharist were an important aspect of these movements.

### 1.3 Scope of Research

During the course of research, it became apparent that the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century were pivotal moments for communion frequency debates in Scottish Protestant churches and English reforming churches, on both sides of the Atlantic.

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13 Unfortunately, the Dutch tradition cannot be examined here. There are many fruitful areas of influence and correlation between the Dutch Reformed churches and every aspect of this research project, but that work must be taken up by those more familiar with the sources in the Netherlands. The same applies to other trajectories of the Reformed tradition, such as in France, Germany, Hungary, South Africa, South Korea, and other parts of the world.

Thus, this period is crucial for understanding the backgrounds of communion frequency practices, and polemics, in contemporary American Reformed churches. The issue of communion frequency usually centers on a perceived tension between purity and frequency. It is the tension caused by emphasizing two things at the same time—the need to commune more frequently, as well as the need to be morally and spiritually prepared for communion. This tension has manifested itself in all branches of the Christian church but was thrown into high relief because of various priorities and emphases of the Reformation and the reforming movements it inspired.

Focusing on the late 1600s, the 1700s, and early 1800s, yields a wealth of material and provides realistic and logical bookends for this project. Additionally, focusing on the tension between purity and frequency brought further definition to the research question, because it was then easier to sift through the various arguments and polemics on both sides of the communion frequency issue. Rather than attempting to analyze every single argument, or source, this project surveys and summarizes the interplay of the ideals and priorities of authors and traditions in the matter of communion frequency, especially as it relates to spiritual preparation and ecclesiastical discipline. As Amy Plantinga Pauw notes, the Lord's Supper became a primary locus where the dual priorities of the Reformed communities were held in a somewhat uneasy tension.<sup>14</sup>

This project focuses specifically on sources that explicitly argue either for, or against, frequent communion in the Scottish, English, and early American Reformed churches. It also utilizes sources that illuminate the broader questions of church discipline, ecclesial purity, and proper preparation for communion. Since most of these sources proliferated in the 1700s and late 1800s, this forms the central period of the research project.<sup>15</sup> The issue of communion frequency became more

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14 "In Calvin's Geneva and in the Puritan society Edwards longed to restore in New England, the church was to exist both as an established institution demanding the allegiance of everyone *and* as a community set apart by its distinctive life. The church strives for comprehensive membership *and* for visible holiness. The interplay of these aims can be seen in Reformed theologies of the Lord's Supper. The emphasis on church as mother led Calvin to call for frequent celebrations of communion to nurture and strengthen faith, while the stress on church as bride encouraged an ongoing concern, though variably enacted, to fence the table against all who would pollute it by their unworthiness. In Edwards's church in Northampton, the clash between views of the Lord's Supper as nourishment for the spiritually weak and as love feast for none but the truly faithful brought an acrimonious end to his pastorate." Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Practical Ecclesiology in Calvin and Edwards," in Thomas Davis, ed., *John Calvin's American Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.

15 Unless otherwise indicated, the spelling of early modern sources has been standardized. Additionally, texts in the 1700s and 1800s made generous use of italics. Most of these have been changed into regular font.

pressing in the late nineteenth century, gained momentum with the liturgical renewal movements of the twentieth century, and shows no signs of abating. However, fully analyzing those sources and that era must wait for a further research project. This project lays the foundation for future research by surveying the tensions between purity/preparation and frequency, stemming from the Reformation, and exploding into widespread controversy in the 1700 and early 1800s. This period of debate and controversy forms part of the essential backdrop for later developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This study begins with a presentation of the views of representative Continental Reformers on the issues of communion frequency and church discipline (Chapter 2). It continues with the beginnings of the Reformation movement in England and Scotland (Chapter 3), examining the origins of the differences between the respective reform movements in both countries, especially in relation to communion frequency and the role of church discipline in the Church of Scotland. Further developments in post-Reformation England and Scotland are treated next (Chapter 4), with particular attention to the growth of the Puritan movement and its stress on preparation for communion. The growth of Reformed churches and Puritan communities on both sides of the Atlantic are summarized next (Chapter 5), highlighting the influence of Scottish immigrants to the Americas. The communion frequency debates within various Scottish Reformed churches, which included writers in America, is then surveyed (Chapter 7), along with a comparative analysis of the rhetorical and polemical strategies utilized in the debates. The conclusion (Chapter 7) summarizes the study and offers a final analysis and reflection on the relevance of this research for contemporary churches and church leaders.

There are many areas for further research. This study only sketches a broad outline, and many gaps remain to be filled. For instance, further research can also explore the similarities and contrasts between English Dissenters/Puritans and authors within the Established church on the issue of communion frequency. As scholars continue to notice shared concerns and beliefs between Dissenters and the developing Anglican church, beliefs and practices about communion frequency are a promising field that could demonstrate commonalities on the level of everyday experience in parishes, and not just in theology and ecclesiology.<sup>16</sup>

More research is also needed on developments in America. As Doug Adams comments, “[W]e know that communion was very frequent in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and infrequent as churches developed in the nineteenth century; but we do not know fully enough when and how such changes occurred across

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16 See Hunt, “The Lord’s Supper in Early Modern England,” 39–83 for more on the similar concerns of those who remained within the Church of England and Puritans on the issue of communion frequency. Further research can explore these connections and contrasts.

the country.”<sup>17</sup> In the same way, the Dutch tradition (as well as many other branches of the Reformed tradition) have not been treated here.

Further studies should examine how communion frequency changed, or was impacted, in other Reformed communities throughout Europe, and beyond. In particular, the relationships between the English Puritans and the Dutch are numerous. Are there parallels, and/or contrasts, with how English Puritans and the Dutch Reformed thought about and practiced communion? This study lays the foundation for many other fruitful lines of research.

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17 Doug Adams, *Meeting House to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship From 1620 to 1835* (Saratoga: Modern Liturgy-Resource Publications and Austin: The Sharing Company, 1981), 16.



## Chapter 2

# Communion Frequency in the Late Medieval Period and the Sixteenth-Century Continental Reformed Reformation

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss both the eucharistic theologies and the communion practices of some key figures of the Reformed Reformation.<sup>1</sup> The overall focus of this book is the history of communion frequency debates, especially as they came into sharp focus in the 1700s in Reformed churches in Scotland, England, and the Americas. This necessitates a limited scope for this introductory overview.<sup>2</sup> It is

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1 Since Carter Lindberg introduced the term “Reformations” in 1996, scholars have continued to debate the appropriate terminology to describe the momentous religio-political changes in sixteenth-century Europe. See Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xii–xiii, xv, 1–22. Carlos Eire notes that the emphasis on multiplicity “emerged principally from historians who ceased focusing on theology and the institutional history of churches and turned their attention instead to social, cultural, economic, and political issues” and from “historians who no longer sought to prove that a particular church or tradition was in sole possession of the Truth, with a capital T,” in *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), x. Although acknowledging the complexity and interrelatedness of reform movements in the early modern period, my sympathies lie with Euan Cameron, who uses “the Reformation” to indicate “a particular process of change, integrating cultural, political, and theological factors in a way never seen before and rarely since.” He argues that “this process cannot simply be equated with the corresponding movements in Catholicism,” in *The European Reformation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1. At the end of his study, Cameron notes the existence of many “paradoxes” in the “course of the Reformation.” Yet, “[d]espite its internal feuds and inconsistencies, and the infinitely diverse social and political contexts in which it was adopted, there was an essential, underlying coherence to the Reformation process” (436). So also, Markus Wriedt, “I opt for the use of the term Reformation in its singular sense to describe the complex developments within the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There might be parallels in other times and locations, but I would not like to extend the meaning of Reformation to these contexts, for it weakens the limiting structure of the definition and with that its effective use.” “How to Bring About a Reformation: A critical re-consideration about most recent theories in Historiography,” Public Lecture: Marquette University, Milwaukee WI, October 13, 2005, 24. Here, I will endeavor to use terms that reflect both the plurality, as well as the basic underlying unity of vision, among the Protestant Reformers. This is similar to Diarmaid MacCulloch’s usage of “Reformation,” with the stated understanding that it includes both Protestant and Catholic reforms, in *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), xix.

2 To speak of the “Reformed tradition” is an unfortunate necessity. Obviously, there is a great deal of diversity and multiformity among Reformed churches, yet there is a basic family resemblance. In this book, “Reformed” refers to churches that trace their ancestry to the Swiss reform movement,

impossible to thoroughly examine every sixteenth-century figure on the issue of communion frequency here. The research focus entails selection of those Reformation thinkers who figure prominently in the developing tradition. In other words, this overview of the sixteenth century Reformation is limited to those thinkers who had the most impact on later polemics and practices. This can be determined—however imprecisely—by how often they are quoted in later polemics, and also by the lasting influence of ecclesiastical structures or liturgical practices that they and their followers instituted. Much as the “early church,” or “apostolic church” functioned as a norm for the Reformers, so Calvin, or the “best Reformed churches” functioned as norm in later communion frequency polemics.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter, then, is an exercise in “Reformation reception history.” The emphasis is not on exhaustively detailing the views of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, or on arriving at new conclusions. Rather, the focus is on sketching some of the main points of their beliefs on eucharistic frequency, on the importance of preparation before receiving the Eucharist, and how those beliefs were transmitted to later generations of pastors, theologians, and laypeople in churches that identified with the Reformed tradition.

Accordingly, John Calvin’s eucharistic theology will be briefly outlined and his desire for weekly communion will be explored in depth. Other key figures, such as Huldrych Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius and Martin Bucer, will also be surveyed. In doing so, the close relationship between theological argumentation, socio-political contexts—often the local government played a crucial role in settling the frequency debate—and the weight of liturgical traditions will be considered. However, the issue of communion frequency must also be situated firmly in the context of the proper reception of the sacrament, which requires an understanding of theories of “Reformed Church Discipline.”<sup>4</sup> The Reformers struggled with a con-

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influenced especially by Calvin and Zwingli. Indeed, the tensions between these two figures continue to manifest themselves in current communion frequency debates in American Reformed churches. For an attempt to define “Reformed theology” in a way that does justice both to its unity and plurality, see Gijsbert van den Brink and Johan Smits, “The Reformed Stance: Distinctive Commitments and Concerns,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9 (2015): 325–347.

3 See Esther Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority: The Use of the Church Fathers in Reformation Debates over the Eucharist* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011) and also Gregory Soderberg, “Ancient Discipline and Pristine Doctrine: Appeals to Antiquity in the Developing Reformation,” (M.A. thesis, University of Pretoria, 2006). Specific examples of how later Reformed and Protestant polemicists appealed to Calvin and the sixteenth-century Reformers will be given below.

4 The term “Calvinist” misleads here because it “obscures the fact that its true origins lie not with Calvin but in the writings of Johannes Oecolampadius and Bucer, and in their attempts to recreate what they considered to have been the institutions of the primitive Christian Church.” Michael F. Graham, *The Uses of Reform: ‘Godly Discipline’ and Popular Behavior in Scotland and Beyond, 1560–1610* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 1.

stant tension between advocating more frequent communion, while also desiring people to commune properly. As a result, the issue of *how* one should commune tended to assume priority over the question of *how often*.

Because of its limited focus, this chapter makes generous use of secondary sources, while endeavoring to let various sixteenth-century figures speak for themselves when possible. Because of this project's overall focus on the backgrounds of the communion frequency debate in American Reformed churches, the emphasis is on sources in English.

## 2.2 Aspects of Communion Frequency in the Context of the Protestant Reformation

To understand the issue of communion frequency in the various Protestant movements, we must briefly sketch the pre-Reformation context.<sup>5</sup> Since patterns of worship and communion frequency were quite similar throughout late medieval Europe, this section will take a broad perspective, while also highlighting specific features of worship in the British Isles. While several factors contributed to the religious upheavals in sixteenth-century Europe, the issue of worship played a central role. According to McKee “[t]he sixteenth-century Reformation is most often remembered as a reform of theology or church politics, but it was also and especially a reform of worship.”<sup>6</sup> Those who eventually became labeled as “Protestants” viewed the medieval Mass as a corrupt and blasphemous act. In their efforts to “purify” this rite, the Reformers focused on what the rite did, and what it was, rather than issues of frequency. However, most of the Reformers argued for frequent communion in one sense, because they generally proposed more frequent communion than the customary annual reception.

As the Reformers pursued their vision of creating a renewed Christian society, they faced the daunting task of restructuring the beliefs and rituals that held communities together.<sup>7</sup> Cameron writes “[m]edieval Christianity formed a vast,

5 For more detail, see Gary Macy “The Medieval Inheritance,” in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel (Brill: Leiden, 2014), 15–37.

6 Elsie Ann McKee, “Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century,” in Lukas Vischer, ed., *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 3.

7 This was especially true of community festivals like Corpus Christi. See John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 71. So also Cameron: “In general, many of the most popular activities of late medieval religion depended on doing something, on participation, activity, movement, essentially on experiencing an event fraught with sacral power, more than on learning or understanding a message.” *The European Reformation*, 14.

diverse, and seamless texture.”<sup>8</sup> At the center of it all was the Eucharist. Bossy rejects Protestant-centric interpretations of the traditional mass: “Despite the complaints of liturgists and reformers, it was not a contradiction that mass should be offered by the priest alone, in a ritual language, largely in silence and partly out of sight, and yet embody or create the sense of collective identity.”<sup>9</sup> This sense of collective identity increasingly took the form of the identification of the priest with Christ, and the identification of the people with the priest. Therefore, as the priest communed daily with Christ, the people present at the mass also communed with Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The origins of infrequent communion in the Christian church are somewhat shrouded in mystery.<sup>11</sup> Assuming the weekly, or even perhaps daily, patterns of communion in the early Christian communities, what accounts for its decline? The complete history of communion frequency is outside the scope of this project, but several factors contributed to the decline of oral reception of the Eucharist. Rigorist standards for worthy reception in the patristic era probably played a role.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the institutionalization of the church after Constantine created a substantial group of catechumens who delayed baptism and thus were dismissed from the church gatherings before the Eucharist.

To partake in communion was a serious undertaking in late medieval Christianity. It required proper preparation, which included confession to a priest, performing

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8 Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 11.

9 Bossy, *Christianity in the West*, 67.

10 “Increasingly, limitation of celebration to one mass a day, except on Christmas, was developing ... And it was also increasingly necessary to claim that the mass had effect *ex opere operato*, as a ritual which was effective independently from the priest’s character and virtue. Throughout the next centuries this regular priestly celebration was used as an argument for infrequent communion by the laity, inasmuch as the priest communicated daily for all Christians.” Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 50. Wandel agrees, “The ever closer identification of the priest with the Eucharist seems to have had as one of its consequences the decline in lay participation in the Mass.” *The Eucharist in the Reformation*, 32–33.

11 See Taft, “The Frequency of the Eucharist Throughout History,” 77–96.

12 “Saints Jerome and Augustine deferred to the communicant’s own judgment. Jerome, however, may have insisted upon abstinence from sexual intercourse as a way to prepare oneself for Communion; this very notion could easily have contributed to the decline in recourse to the sacrament, yet the notion prevailed in the Middle Ages. John Chrysostom demanded of the communicant ‘sincerity and purity of soul’ (Hom. III in Eph.): He was combating pervasive Arianism and so emphasized the divinity and remoteness of Christ.” Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table*, 2. Dougherty relies here on Thomas Scannel, “The History of Daily Communion,” in *Report of the Nineteenth Eucharistic Congress, Held at Westminster from 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> September 1908* (London: Sands, 1909) and E. Dublanchy, “Communion eucharistique (fréquent).” *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1929.

any penance that was prescribed by the priest, and fasting before communion.<sup>13</sup> This point is important because sixteenth century reforms took place in a context in which people were accustomed to a process of preparation before communion. One aspect that made the Protestant movement different than previous reform movements was its insistence that every baptized adult should commune, and that they should do so more frequently than had been the custom in medieval Europe.

In late medieval Europe and the British Isles, lay participation in communion fell to such an extent that the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) had to mandate annual participation.<sup>14</sup> Aside from priests and some mystics, most Christians did not commune frequently.<sup>15</sup> Although a precise pattern of cause and effect is difficult to prove with certainty, a theology of visual reception (or “spiritual communion”) of the Eucharist also developed in the late medieval period. As Ellwood states: “The host was for most people a divine epiphany, and the infrequency of actual reception of the sacrament only increased the popular sense of reverence for the eucharist.”<sup>16</sup> This understanding of visual reception stemmed from an Augustinian and neo-Platonic physiology. According to Miles, Augustine (drawing on Plato) believed vision was made possible by a “ray” projected through the human eye, creating a back-and-forth movement.<sup>17</sup> Such a belief obviously would render the act of gazing upon the Eucharist a deeply spiritual, and physical, event. As Davies summarizes: “To see the sacred Host became the principal, if not the exclusive,

13 Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Reformation: The Tudor and Stewart Realms 1485–1603* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 18.

14 Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. I, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 245.

15 According to Cameron: “Penance was typically administered yearly to laypeople; those same laypeople might take the Eucharist (as opposed to hearing and watching Mass said without receiving) once a year in the Easter season or, for the very committed, perhaps three or four times a year.” *The European Reformation*, 12. Ryrie summarizes: “All this meant that receiving communion was a rarity. The obligation on all good Christians was to do so once a year, at Easter; more frequent communion was a rarefied practice for the unusually pious.” *The Age of Reformation*, 18.

16 Christopher Ellwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14.

17 “In the theory of vision described by Augustine, the most influential Christian author of the medieval and reformation periods, a fire within the body—the same fire that animates and warms the body—is collected with unique intensity behind the eyes; for an object to be seen by a viewer, this fire must be projected in the form of a ray that is focused on the object, thereby establishing a two-way street along which the attention and energy of the viewer passes to touch its object. A representation of the object, in turn, returns to the eye and is bonded to the soul and retained in the memory.” Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Christianity and Secular Culture* (1985; repr., Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 7. See also Miles, “Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and Other Works,” *Journal of Religion*, no. 2 (April 1983): 125–142.