

On Frequent Communicating

John Erskine

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

STROMATA 174

Downloaded from The Stromata (thestromata.com). Free for personal, educational, and ministry use.

INTRODUCTION

A minister defending an unpopular proposal to the Church of Scotland's General Assembly: that congregations should celebrate the Lord's Supper more than once a year, against a culture that had come to treat rare communion as itself a mark of reverence. Erskine works through the practical objections one by one, is there scriptural warrant, does frequency breed familiarity and irreverence, with the patient, point-by-point method of a man used to defending a synod's decisions to a skeptical congregation. It's a useful window into a real 18th-century pastoral dispute rather than abstract doctrine, arguing for a practice many modern readers will simply assume. Expect measured, deliberative prose addressed to genuine objections, not polemic.

Section 1 - Scripture and The Eucharist

The prejudices of many pious and well-disposed people, against the late overture of the synod of Glasgow and Air, concerning frequent communicating make it necessary to acquaint them with the reasons on which that overture was founded, that men of honest minds may see if there is cause for that strange and hideous outcry which has been raised against it.

Others, better qualified for such a talk, have thought fit to decline it. Several of my Fathers and brethren, both at the meeting of synod, and since, have urged me to undertake it: But their solicitations would scarce have moved me to publish any thing on the subject, so crude and indigested as what follows, had not To me circumstances convinced me, that the silence of those who are convinced of the goodness of the overture has had much worse effects, than could have flowed from even the weaker defence.

The question, whether the synod's overture should be rejected or approved, depends on two subordinate enquiries. Is the design of dispensing the Lord's Supper in every congregation, at least four times a year, in itself good? And are the means proposed for gaining that end, the moft proper, and lead exceptionable?

Let us begin with enquiring if the design of dispensing the Sacrament thus often is in itself a good one. — And here let us for once suppose, that there is no Scripture precept or pattern obliging us to frequent communicating.

Supposing this, it must at least be allowed, there is no restraint laid upon us, in the word of God, from partaking frequently of the Lord's Supper. If no precise time is fixed in Scripture for dispensing and receiving it, and if no precise degree of frequency is enjoined, yet none dare allege, that there is any time in which we are prohibited to dispense and receive that ordinance, or that any degree of frequency is absolutely prohibited. From this it follows, that we are left at liberty to dispense the Lord's Supper as often as is consistent with the right performance of other religious exercises, and the due discharge of the common duties of life.

And if such a measure of frequency is lawful, may I venture a step further, and pronounce it, if not necessary, yet at least in the highest degree expedient? If the Lord's Supper is an ordinance of so comforting and improving a nature, as almost all acknowledge it, should we not account the frequent enjoyment of it a privilege?

And if God has not deprived us of that privilege, do we act a wise and friendly part for our own souls, in depriving ourselves of it?

To give this argument its due force, let us consider a little the nature and design of the Lord's Supper, and what benefits may be expected by those who worthily receive it.

It is the ordinance our Lord Jesus has peculiarly set apart to keep up the remembrance of his sufferings and death. There we see the loving and lovely "Jesus laying down his life as a sacrifice and atonement for our sins; and shedding his precious blood to purchase for us a happiness large as our wishes, and lasting as eternity. We see the Lord of Life suffering a painful, an ignominious, an accursed Death; that by thus fulfilling the condition of the covenant of redemption, he might secure grace and glory, and every good thing, not to us only, but to an innumerable multitude, which no man can number, of all tongues and kindreds, and nations and languages. We behold the height and depth, the length and breadth of divine love to a perishing world: Of the Father's love in inflicting upon him such unparalleled sufferings, that we might not suffer of his own love and condescension in cheerfully bearing them. We behold the Son of Man glorified, in bearing that load of wrath, without fainting under it, which would have sunk a whole world in irrecoverable misery. We behold God glorified in him, and all the divine perfections shining with united lustre, the joy of God sweetly combining with his mercy to punish our Surety, that we the offenders might be forgiven. From a deep and heart affecting sense, that we, and all the children of Men, who obtain salvation, must be wholly indebted to that amazing transaction for obtaining it; we are made to say, "God forbid that we should glory, save in the cross of Christ. We will remember thy love more than wine: We will rejoice in thy salvation; and in the name of thee our God will we lift up our banners: For thou, Lord, hast made us glad through thy work, and we will triumph in the works of thy hands. Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift: And blessed be he who hath come in the name of the Lord to save us. Hosannah in the highest."

Ask your own hearts, O Christians, are you in any danger of remembering these things too much? And if you remember them at all, can you do it in any better method than that which infinite wisdom has prescribed?

Suppose a Friend, who had received a deadly wound in defending us from danger, should, when about to expire, present us with his picture, and recommend it to us with his dying breath, to keep it as a token and remembrance of his friendship and affection. What would gratitude oblige us to do? Would we cast it into some by-corner out of sight? Would we suffer it to be sullied with dust? or buried under lumber, neglected and forgotten? Would we not rather hang it in our chief room? Would we not honour it, not only by care to preserve it from abuse, but by frequent looks, thereby to renew, and, if possible, to increase an affectionate remembrance how much we were indebted to our departed Friend? Can we then pretend to honour our Redeemer, when we answer his care in providing and recommending his supper as a representative of his death, by a contrary care, in seeking pretences to lay it aside?

The Lord's Supper is a visible badge of our christian profession. — Nature has taught mankind, and God himself has confirmed it, that every religion should have some solemn rite whereby it may be known to the very eye, from other religions. Circumcision, the passover, etc. under the Mosaic economy, were all intended, (not excluding other ends) to be signs between God and his people, i. e. rites whereby they might be distinguished from idolaters: And therefore a terrible threatening was levelled against the neglecters of these rites, that soul must be cut off from his people: He has put off the badge of my people, and therefore muft not share in their privileges. All this being highly rational, Christianity has its distinguishing rites, as well as Judaism had.

Prayer, thanksgiving, and such-like holy exercises, are common to almost all religions, and observed by the Jew, the Turk, and the Heathen as well as the christian. — Baptism we receive in our infancy, and without our own consent ; and therefore it cannot be the principal criterion of our christian profession. — But by partaking of the Lord's Supper, we distinguish ourselves from all who despite the gospel of Christ, and testify, in the most public manner, our regard to a crucified Saviour, our concern to keep up the remembrance of his death,' and our resolutions to adhere to him and his cause, while by others he is disregarded and set at naught,

Our Lord well knowing how loath we are to undertake any thing difficult, although for the sake of him who was our best benefactor, would not burden us with any number of troublesome ceremonies : And therefore he only appointed this one ordinance, by which we mould openly declare ourselves on christ's side, and proclaim to the world our grateful, affectionate sense of his unparalleled love. Ought we not then to be frequent in thus openly confessing christ before men, while too many are ashamed of him and his words in this adulterous and perverse generation?

The Lord's Supper is also intended as a seal and confirmation of the fulness and freedom of the offers of grace in the everlasting gospel. For as really as the minister offers the bread and wine to the communicants, so really God the Father offers christ, the bread of life, to every one of us for the' nourishment of our souls. — And are there any, whose faith is so lively and vigorous, that they feldom need the help of this ordinance to strengthen and increase it?

Is not the Lord's Supper an ordinance, in which God is often pleased to vouchsafe special communion with himself, and his Son jesus christ? Does it not greatly tend, through the divine blessing, to strengthen the communion of the mystical body of christ, and to warm and enlarge our affection to all who love our Lord jesus in sincerity? Does it not often prove meat indeed, and drink indeed to the fainting

foul a means to convey large measures of spiritual nourishment and growth in grace? Indeed suitable impressions of Christ's loving us, and giving himself for us a sacrifice and an offering to God, of a sweet smelling favour, are the great means by which holy dispositions are begun, carried on, and perfected in the soul. And what can tend more to awaken a lively sense of these things, than beholding the symbols of the broken body and shed blood of christ? How many, who went to the Lord's table feeble and faint-hearted, have received such plenteous communications of light and life from the glorious head of influences, that they have been made to renew their strength, to mount up with wings as eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint?

Who is there amongst us, whose need of the Lord's Supper, for one or other of the above purposes, does not frequently return? Has then God provided for us so rich an entertainment? Does he allow us often to regale ourselves with it? Yea, even invite us in the moft warm and earned manner? And, is it not a contempt of the goodness and condescension of God, and injuring our own spiritual interests, to neglect any opportunity of fitting down at the table of the Lord? Our soul necessities, says the judicious Mr, Willison do call for frequency in partaking:

“For we are oft ready to forget christ, and therefore we oft need this ordinance to bring him to our remembrance. We are oft subject to spiritual deadness, weakness of faith, and decays of grace and therefore have frequent need of this ordinance for strength and quickening.. There is ground to fear, that the infrequent celebration and participation of this blessed feast, which Christ hath prepared for us, is an evil that many in this church are chargeable with, and for which the Lord may plead a controversy with us. How can we expect but he will depart from us, when we stand at such a distance from him, and come so seldom near him in the method he hath appointed? Can we look for the smiles of christ's countenance, when we live so much in the neglect of his dying words? Is it any wonder our hearts are so hard, when we are so seldom applying the blood of christ for softening them ; or that our graces be so weak and withered, when we so little use the means for Strengthening and cherishing them? Is not the frequent use of this ordinance, in the way christ hath appointed, an excellent help to soften our hearts, renew our repentance, strengthen our faith, inflame our love, increase our thankfulness, animate our resolutions against sin, and encourage us to holy duties; and shall we willingly neglect it? It is no wonder that we complain we miss what we aim at and expect in this ordinance, when we are so little sensible of former neglects. It is a sad sign our receiving of the sacrament is not right, when it leaves not in us earned breathings for the like opportunity. It is impossible for us to meet with christ, and taste of his sweetness and fullness in this ordinance, and not long for another meeting.”

Sacramental Catechism, p. 86. and Preface, p. 9.

Thus far Mr. Wiliison. Many excellent reflections to the same purpose may be found in Charnock's Works' vol. II. p. 758. — 768, which those who have the book would do well to per use.

The two preceding paragraphs abundantly prove, that if frequent communicating cannot be urged as absolutely necessary, it may safely be recommended as highly expedient and beneficial. But, perhaps, upon inquiry we shall find in Scripture an express injunction of frequency nay, of a precise degree of frequency in partaking of the Lord's Supper. For, that a prince should require a tribute to be paid him by every one of his subjects, and yet never express what sum should be paid, and at what time, is incredible. In like manner, I cannot easily bring myself to believe, that our Lord should require his church, to the end of the world, to eat bread, and drink wine in commemoration of his death, without specifying how often he would have it done. The Jews, though they understood not the utmost significance of the Paschal rite, yet had full directions how often, and in what day they were to sacrifice and eat the Lamb. If then the word of God has assigned no precise time for partaking of the Lord's Supper, will it not follow, that the gospel is more obscure than the law; and that our Lord, when he took the veil from off Moses's face, covered with a thicker vail his own?

1 Corinthians 11:26. bids fair for containing such a special direction. As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show forth the Lord's death till he come. Dr. Bury observes (Constant Communicant, p. 33.), that the words, this bread, and this cup, must refer to some particular bread and cup, well known among the Jews, of which, as often as they eat and drank, they were bound to remember the sufferings of Christ: That accordingly (if we may credit Buxtorf and Leo Modena) it was usual at their feasts, for the master of the house, to take a loaf of bread, and bless and break it, and give to each person about the bigness of an olive; and if there were three or more eating together, to take a glass

from off the table, and bless it also, and give to each of the guests a little of the wine in the glass. — If these remarks be well founded, it will follow, that if the Jews knew how often they had such festivals, that was direction sufficient how often to partake of the Lord's Supper.

But I mention this, rather as a subject of inquiry, than a hypothesis with which I am fully satisfied. There are many natural and obvious objections against it, which I do not think that ingenious writer has removed.

Dr. Wettenhall has offered another conjecture (Due Frequency, p. 6—13.), that a certain determinate frequency in communicating is enjoined in these words, 1 Corinthians 11:25. This do ye, as oft as ye drink, in remembrance of me. He observes, that the particle *it* is not in the original, and is not supplied in the vulgar Latin, the Syriac, or any of the old versions. He then goes on to argue thus:

"If with our own, and most modern translations, we supply the particle, and thereby understand the cup in the sacrament, this makes the command to signify juft nothing. For, what sense is there in this form of speech, Drink this cup, as oft as ye drink. Or, if we repeat the noun, inflead of using the pronoun, Drink this cup in remembrance of me, as often as ye drink this cup in remembrance of me. We must therefore conclude, that the verb stands here absolutely, or by itself. And probably it is used in the Hellenistical sense of the word for feasting or banqueting, and so the text will run thus, Do this in remembrance of me, as often as you feast, or, on all your holy feast. Now, for as much as every Lord's Day was, even when this epistle was writ, already among the christians a holy feast, therefore the command will come to thus much, Do this, or celebrate my supper every Lord's Day at least. At least, I said, for other holy feasts they might have besides the Lord's Day, but this most ii surely they all had. See 2 Pet 11:13. Jude ver. 12. compared with 1 Cor 11:20, 21. The plain meaning then of the command, This' do, as oft as ye drink, in remembrance of me, is, I know that you, my disciples, will keep every first day of the week as a holy feast, with joy and gladness, in memory of my resurrection and I intend to to order it. Now, see that every such day you remember my sufferings too, as well as my resurrection."

These are the only passages that look like an injunction of any precise degree of frequency in partaking of the Lord's Supper. Mr. Charnock has indeed cited one from the Old Testament for the same purpose.

"The practice, says he (g), of weekly communicating perhaps was grounded on Ezek. 43:27. And it shall be upon the eighth day, and so forward, the priest shall make your burnt offerings upon the altar, and your peace - offerings, and I will accept you, saith the Lord." A prophecy of gospel times, and the cessation of the ceremonial law of daily sacrifices: By burnt-offerings being meant the Lord's Supper, the remembrance of the great burnt-offering whereby our peace was made: And by "peace-offerings, prayer and thanksgiving, which are called sacrifices, Heb. 8:15. And on the Lord's Day, being the eighth day, following upon the feventh, the Jewish Sabbath."

Charnock's Works, vol. II. p. 756,

But I much doubt if the primitive christians, fond as some of them were of allegorizing and mystical interpretations, ever carried their regard for these to the ridiculous height of building upon them a practice of such importance as weekly communicating. It is more probable their practice was founded on a New Testament precept, plain to them, tho' to us dark and obscure.

But that obscurity will be no plea for our seldom communicating. For whatever difficulty there may be in finding an express precept, the Apostolical Example, which is as binding as a precept, is so clear and obvious, that he who runs may read it. And to me it seems something strange, that those who suppose the apostolical practice sufficient to change the Sabbath from that day on which God, in the fourth Commandment had enjoined it to be kept, should pay so small regard to it in this instance, where it alters no command moral or positive, but serves to clear-up a material circumstance in observing a precept which otherwise might seem indeterminate. — Let us therefore take a survey of such passages of Scripture as throw any light on this important subject.

The sacrament was instituted by our Lord that night in which he was betrayed. From this circumstance, allow me to remark, that it may lawfully be dispensed on other days, as well as die Sabbath

Less than a week after, even the very day of our Lord's resurrection, being the first day of the week, and the Christian Sabbath, the Lord's Supper is again dispensed by Jesus himself. For that day, while two of the disciples are walking together to Emmaus, Jesus comes up with them, and takes occasion, beginning at Moses and all the prophets, to expound to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. But tho' this heavenly preacher speaks to them as never man spoke, still they were ignorant it was he : fond however, of his company, they constrained him to abide with them, as the day was far spent. And it came to pass, says Luke, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them : and their eyes were opened, and they knew him. Jesus could have discovered himself to them how and when he pleased. Sure then, he who does nothing in vain had some wise reason for choosing to do it in these, rather than in other circumstances. And what reason so probable, as to put a distinguishing respect on the sacrament of the supper, by making it the first means of manifesting himself to these disciples? Why else were the disciples so careful to report this circumstance? And why was the evangelist so punctual to record, that they reported not only the thing, but the manner, in what manner he was known to them by the breaking of the bread? Must then our Lord's choosing this manner of manifesting himself to them preferably to all others ; null the care of the disciples in reporting this manner and null the care of the evangelist in recording both the one and the other : must all this, I say, be imputed to mere chance? Did they account this an insignificant circumstance tho' they appear to lay particular stress upon it? And tho' they seem to honour it, did they intend that we should pass it by without the least regard? I know not how a rational answer can be given these questions by such who interpret the passage of common bread. Cartwright betakes himself to a strange shift. It was not, says he, the breaking of bread itself, by which Jesus was known to his disciples, but something peculiar in his manner of asking a blessing before meat. Is not this commentary, a plainly contradicting the text? And can that cause be a good one, which reduces so able a critic to so poor an evasion?

The expressions used by Luke in this passage (Luke 24:19) seem so parallel to his expressions when recording the original institution of the sacrament (Luke 22:19), that I am persuaded few would have

mistaken his meaning, had not the church of Rome misapplied this passage, to prove from the example of our Lord, that it is sufficient to distribute the bread in the sacrament without the wine. But would it not have been easy to have confused that formula, by observing, that eating of bread, is a phrase for the whole of a feast, and therefore the mention of it does not exclude other ingredients of a feast, besides, the Papists themselves allow, that tho' the bread may be distributed without the wine, it is never to be consecrated apart. But here is no mention even of the consecration of the wine. If then the evangelists' silence is no proof that the wine was not consecrated, it is as little proof that it was not distributed.

From this passage I remark,

That the Lord's Supper was the first religious institution, in which our Lord, after his resurrection, manifested himself to his disciples.

That this ordinance was twice dispensed by Jesus himself in the space of a week.

The evangelist's remarking, that it was dispensed to the two disciples the first day of the week, seems an intimation, that our Lord intended it mould be a principal part of the sanctification of the Christian Sabbath.

Acts 2:42. we are told of Peter's converts that they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, and in fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in prayer. The words, *ἠκολούθησαν ἀσπασίως* continued steadfastly, properly denotes constancy, or perseverance in an exercise, or waiting continually upon any thing, as appears from the use of the same word, Acts 1:14, 6:4, 8:13 and 10:7, Romans 8:12. and 13:6. And therefore whatever is meant by breaking of bread, it is plain they were as constant in that, as in attending on the apostle's doctrine, and public prayer. All then we have to inquire is, if the expression relates to the Lord's Supper, or to a common meal.

Dr. Whitby explains it of the latter, in his notes on this passage.

"I see, says he, no necessity to think these words relate to the receiving of the sacrament, for the phrase of the breaking of bread is used by the evangelist, Matthew 15:36. and Mark 8:19, 20. when they relate christ's miraculous feeding the multitude."

But in answer to this, I would observe,

That the argument does not require us to maintain, that the breaking of bread must always relate to the sacrament. It is enough to our purpose, if the expression is capable of that sense, and if the scope of this passage makes it necessary here.

That the phrase is capable of being understood of the sacrament, is universally allowed and Dr. Whitby himself explains it of the sacrament, Acts 20:7, 11. It is used by Luke eight times, and by Paul thrice and in all these passages, except Acts 27:35 it is almost certain it relates to the Lord's Supper and even that passage is applied by Tertullian to that ordinance. Ignatius, a writer in the apostolic times, uses the same phrase of breaking of bread, where he is plainly speaking of the Lord's Supper.

The other exercises mentioned here, in conjunction with breaking of bread, are all of them religious exercises, attendance on the apostle's doctrine, fellowship, prayer. What then has breaking of common bread to do in such company? It adds strength to this argument, that Justin Martyr (2nd Apology) and Tertullian (Apology Chap 39) mention the Lord's Supper, and the other exercises of which Luke here speaks, as stated exercises of the worshipping assemblies of christians. '

The Syriac version of the New Testament, which is the best and oldest extant, and probably was composed in the apostolic times, if not by the apostles themselves, as Mr. Jones has strongly shown, in his excellent book on the canon that version, I say, interprets the breaking of bread, of the eucharist and most of the fathers were of the same opinion. From all this we may infer, that in the public assemblies of the primitive christians, breaking of bread in remembrance of Christ, was as stated an exercise as attending on the apostle's doctrine, joining in prayer together, or communicating to the necessities of their poor brethren.

It is said of the same persons, Acts 2:46. And they continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread in a house, did participate in the food with gladness and singleness of heart.

Suppose we were to retain the common translation, breaking of bread from house to house, that Would be no conclusive argument, that the Lord's supper is not intended: for the multitude of the faithful might render it inconvenient for all to partake of the sacrament in one house, and on that account, it might have been dispensed fucceffively, in different houses.

But our translation is plainly faulty, and the cause of the mistake is easily traced out: בְּכָל הַבַּיִת the first clause of the verse, signifies daily, or from day to day and hence it was imagined, בְּכָל הַבַּיִת signify, in every house, or from house to house : whereas it is evident, from the use of the preposition בְּ when applied to place, that it denotes some precise determinate place. See Luke 8:39, 10:32,33, 15:14, and 23:5. Acts 9:42. 11:1, 13:1. and 16:7. 1 Corinthians 16:19. Colossians 4:15. Philemon ver. 2, and never relates to more places than one, except the substantive to which it is joined be in the plural number, as Luke 8:22. Acts 5:15. 8:1, 3. and 20:20. or be connected with an adjective denoting universality, as Acts 15:36. Accordingly Scaliger observes, that in an old Roman inscription, $\text{AUGUSTUS AEDILIS AGRARIS}$ cannot signify the treasurer of every town, or the treasurer from town to town, but the treasurer of the town, viz. Rome. To confirm, these remarks, I might observe, that neither the Arabic nor Syriac version renders בְּכָל הַבַּיִת house to house, but only at home, or in a house.

The temple being a house of prayer for all nations, that part of worship the disciples were at liberty to perform there, and accordingly they continued daily with one accord in the temple. But they could not dispense the sacrament there, without drawing upon themselves certain deduction. They were therefore under a necessity of holding private conventicles for that purpose, in places where they might be in less danger of disturbance.

Both Jews and Proselytes were careful to provide a large upper room in their houses for religious exercises. What more probable than that the primitive christians having performed their daily devotions in the temple, at the hour of prayer, should then repair to a large upper room to partake of the Lord's supper, perhaps that very upper room in which our Lord instituted the sacrament, Mark 14:15, 22. and where the eleven continued, with Mary, in prayer and supplication, Acts 1:13, 14. This is the more likely from what we are told, Acts 5:42. Daily in the temple and in a house, (for so it should be rendered) they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. In the temple, to convert infidels in the private house, to strengthen and confirm believers.

From this passage, it is probable, that the church at Jerusalem received the Lord's Supper every Day.

The next passage, to our purpose, is Acts 20:7. And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, &c.

From this passage it is plain:

That it was the custom of the first christians to keep the Lord's day holy, or as a day appointed for religious worship, and accordingly to hold their public solemn assemblies on that day. St. Paul did not call them together as he did the elders of the church, ver. 17. but the disciples were themselves

in their assembly. The context informs, that Paul tarried at Troas seven days. Tho' he was hasting to Jerusalem, he did not, as he easily might have done, summon an extraordinary assembly on any of these days, but contented himself with more private labours and chose rather to delay his journey till the return of the first day of the week, when he was sure of a full assembly of christians.

The great design of their meeting was to break bread, i. e. to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This was with them a constant branch of the sanctification of the sabbath : and perhaps their thus remembering the death of christ on that day, is none of the least causes of its being termed the Lord's day. It adds probability to this, that Chrysostom (Chrysost. Hom. v. de Refur) terms the Sabbath the day of bread. Shall we then, on the Lord's day, omit an exercise from which it principally derives so honourable a name?

That in all church meetings the Lord's Supper was dispensed, is further evident from 1 Cor. 11:20, 21. The apostle had said a little before, that their meeting together was not for the better, but for the worse : this he proves from their behaving themselves so in these meetings, that they neither did nor could eat the Lord's Supper as became that holy institution. When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper , i.e. it is not so to do it as that sacred action ought to be performed. Now, this argument evidently supposes, that whenever they assembled together, they came to eat the Lord's Supper ; for otherwise their coming together, so as not to eat the Lord's Supper, would be no proof that their coming together was for the worse. Had the apostle charged the Corinthians as guilty in some particular meetings in which the Lord's Supper was immediately concerned, we had then understood that it was not a constant exercise in their worshipping assemblies : but on the contrary he charges them with profaning the Lord's supper in all their meetings : and what is termed coming together, ver. 17. coming to the church, ver. 18. coming to one place, ver. 19. is termed coming together to eat, ver. 33 (w.) Which shows, that whenever the christians met together in one place for religious exercises, eating of bread was a part of their employment.

Section 2 - Church Practice Historically and At The Time Of Writing

We have, in the preceding fashion, demonstrated, from the sacred oracles, that, in the days of the apostles, dispensing the sacrament was as stated an exercise in the meetings of the faithful, as Prayer, hearing the word, or collecting for the supply of their needy brethren and that accordingly in the church at Jerusalem, they had daily communions, and in every church communion at least once a week. Let us next view how this pattern has been regarded or flighted in after ages, and with what success.

How the first ages of the church conducted themselves in this matter, is well known to all in the least conversant with church history of that I need only refer to a few of the many who have written on this subject and save myself the trouble of saying anything about it. But, for the fake of my unlearned readers, I shall give a short abridgment of what may be found more at large in these writers.

The practice of those who lived in the very infancy of the church, must deserve peculiar regard. Their thorough acquaintance with the style in which the New Testament was written, the customs to which it alludes, and with many other peculiarities which are now almost buried in obscurity ; but especially their conversing with the apostles, or their immediate disciples, must give them great advantages for

understanding the religion of Jesus. And as many of them sealed their doctrine with their blood, we cannot reasonably entertain the least suspicion, that they would dare knowingly to alter the least circumstance in the last, the dying command of their dear master.

Pliny, in his epistle to the emperor Trajan, wrote about the year of christ 110, which was only fix years after the death of the evangelist St. John, acquaints the emperor, that he had found nothing to alledge against the christians, but their obstinacy in their superstition : and that it was their custom to meet together on a set day before it was light, and to sing a hymn to christ as God, and to bind themselves by the sacrament, that they would commit no wickedness.

Justin Martyr, who wrote, AD. 155. is another witness. On the day, says he, that is called Sunday, all the christians meet together, because that is the day of our Saviour's resurrection, and then we have read to us the writings of the prophets and apostles. This done, the president makes a speech, exhorting the people to practice what they have heard. Then we all join in prayer : then bread, wine, and water are brought forth, and the president having again poured out prayers and praises to God, there is a distribution and communication made of the sacramental elements. Last of all, those that are willing and able to contribute what they think fit for the relief of the indigent. How exactly does this account of the worship of the primitive church tally with that of St. Luke, Acts 2:42?

Tertullian, who lived about A. D. 200, takes notice of some, who declined receiving the sacrament on the stationary days (Wednesdays and Fridays) for fear of breaking their fast and blames them for this as a foolish scruples. — This passage not only proves that he thought it a duty incumbent on the faithful to communicate as often as possible, but that it was then a common practice, to communicate on other days as well as Sundays (Tertullian de Orat. cap. 14. p. 136).

Minutius Felix, who flourished A. D. 230. speaks of the christians assembling to eat on a solemn day (Epulas die Solenni coeunt. Min.Fel. p. 30.).

Cyprian (A. D. 250.) tells us, that daily communions were the common practice of his time. And Fortunatus, his contemporary, made use of the fourth petition of the Lord's prayer as an argument for communicating daily (Cyprian de Orat. Domin. p. 209, 210. ed. Bened. Euchaitiam quotidie ad cibum salutis accipimus, etc.).

Victorinus Petavionensis (A. D. 290.) tells us, that it was usual on the Lord's day to receive the sacrament (Vict. Petav. de Fabric. Mundi ap. Cave, p. 103. Die dominico cum gratiarum actione ad panem exeamus).

Basil, about the year 372, recommends communicating every day and informs us, that it was the practice of the church of Caesarea, where he was, to celebrate the sacrament four times a week, viz. on Sunday, wednesday, Friday, and Saturday (Basil, ep. 289.).

Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who was contemporary with Basil, or whoever is author of the tract, in his works, de Sacramentis, justly blames the infrequent use of the sacrament among the Greeks, where some communicated only once a year and seems to intimate that daily communions were in use at Milan (Ambros. de sacram. lib. v.

rap. 4. P. 449.).

St. Hierom tells us that they were likewise kept up in his time, (i. e. about the year 390.) in the churches of Spain, and at Rome (Hieronym. ep. 52. ad Lucin).

Augustin (about the year 410) tells us that the eucharist was received by many on Saturday, as well as the Lord's day, every week; and by some even daily (Augustin. ep. 118. ad Januar).

These passages are more than sufficient to prove, that during the first four centuries the sacrament of the Lord's supper was dispensed even more than once a week, and that it was a constant branch of the sanctification of the sabbath. Let us next show how it came to be otherwise, and what was the consequence.

The learned Dr. Waterland observes, that during the first three centuries we meet with no canons made to enforce frequent communion scarce so much as exhortations to it, or any complaints of neglect in that article, which is an argument, that Christians in those times were not tardy in that respect, but rather forward and pressing, under a high notion of the privilege and comfort of partaking of the holy communion (Waterland, On The Eucharist, chap. 14.). Tertullian, who lived in the close of the second century, observes, as I remarked in the former Paragraph, that there were some who scrupled to com-

municate Wednesdays and Fridays. But even that shows, they had no scruple at communicating every Lord's day.

But in the fourth century, defection from the primitive purity of the church began more and more to appear. The most probable cause, I can assign for this, is, that till then the religion of Christ being persecuted, few professed it who had not felt the power of it on their hearts. But soon after, Christianity became the established religion of the Roman empire, a greater number of hypocrites, from views of worldly interest, intermingled themselves with the true disciples of Christ and in a century or two more, this little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Such nominal Christians could have no just sense of the use and benefit of the Lord's supper, and the obligations to frequent it. Having only a form of godliness, without the power of it, it is no wonder that the frequent return of religious exercises should be uneasy and disagreeable to them. Their example would soon be followed by lukewarm Christians, who had fallen from their first love.

About the year 324, it was decreed at a council held at Elibris in Spain, that no offerings should be received from such as did not receive the Lord's supper (Council. Illiberit. can. 28.): which shows, that some who called themselves Christians, were beginning to neglect the dying command of their professed Lord.

About the year 341, a council at Antioch decreed, that all who came to church and heard the scriptures read, but afterwards joined not in prayer and receiving the sacrament, mould be cast out of the church, till such time as they gave public proof of their repentance (Council. Antioch. can. 2.).

Towards the close of the fourth century, men grew more and more cold and indifferent about the Lord's supper so that the eloquent Chrysostom complains, "In vain stand we at the altar, none care to receive" (Chrysostom, Homily 3 on Ephesians.) And in another place, after he had represented the danger of unworthy receiving, he adds, "I speak not this, to deter you from coming, but from coming carelessly; for as there is danger in coming carelessly, so there is famine and death in the not partaking at all. This table is, as it were, the sinews of our soul, the girding up of the mind, the support of our confidence, our hope, our health, our light, our life (Chrysostom in 1 Cor. 10 Hom. 24.).

The first council of Toledo, in the year 400, enacted, that those who were observed never to come to the communion, should be admonished and if they did not reform, obliged to submit to penance and that such of the clergy as came not to the daily prayers and communion mould be deposed, if they did not reform after admonition (Council. Toledo. 1. can. 5.8).

From this decree it is plain, that tho' the sacrament was daily dispensed to such as were willing to receive, yet, that the neglect of that ordinance had begun to infect the clergy as well as the people. Yet hitherto this was a fault, with which only particular persons were chargeable, and warmly testified against, not only by the most eminent fathers, but by the public canons of the church.

But about the year 410, St. Augustine being consulted, whether it was best to communicate daily, or on such particular days when we were best prepared, gave this answer:

“Neither he of who communicates daily, nor he who does not, really dishonours the Lord's body and blood, while both contend only in a different way, who shall do most honour to the blessed sacrament. For neither did Zaccheus and the centurion strive together, or one prefer himself before the other, when the former gladly received our Lord into his house, and the latter said, ‘I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof’. Both did honour to our Saviour, tho' in contrary ways, and both found mercy. So here, one out of reverence dares not partake every day ; another from the same reverence dares not omit it a single day. All is well, so long as in either case the ordinance is not condemned.”

Augustine, Letter 54 to Januarius

It is probable this decision gave the first rise to the notion, that men might pay their reverence to the sacrament by turning their back upon it; and that our Lord's command, Do this in remembrance of me was as much honoured by forbearing his table as by frequenting it. And indeed it is strange, that even the name of St. Augustin could make such a notion blindly followed. However we must observe, as some excuse for that worthy Father, that the question proposed to him was, Shall a man communicate every day? But had the question been, Is communicating once or thrice a year sufficient? He, no doubt, would have answered, ‘No!’ and recommended weekly communions, as Gennadius did, in the close of the same century, tho' he would give no decision as to daily communion(s), I might add, it is plain, from Socrates' and Sozomenes' church histories (f), that weekly communions were greatly kept up til the last year

- Socrates, however, tells us of two exceptions. "Whereas, says he, all 'churches through the world, on the Sabbath day, in every revolution of the week, celebrate the mysteries, they of Alexandria, and they of Rome, on a certain, ancient tradition, have refused to do it." Probably the church of Rome was principal, that of Alexandria only accessory, in this peculiarity : For Alexandria drawing considerable sums of Rome, for the corn with which she furnished the city, might the easier be led to imitate ihs Roman customs. However others too soon followed this pattern. We see then to what we owe the neglect of weekly communions, even to the pretended traditions of the church of Rome.

At length communicating weekly, or even monthly, begins to appear burdensome. The greatest part received the sacrament only three times a year, and some not so often. This occasioned the council of Agde or Agatha in Languedoc, met in the year 506, to decree, that none should be esteemed good christians who did not communicate at left at the three great festivals, Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday (Council Agath. Cant. 8) and accordingly, from that time forward, those of the church of Rome esteemed themselves, in so far good enough Christians, if they communicated thrice a year, and that it was presumption to receive oftener (Bedaep ad Egbert p311). But in the Greek church, which was more distant from the fountain of corruption, it was usual to communicate weekly, even so low as the seventh century; and such as neglected three Weeks together were excommunicated (Theodor. Penitent, p. 40). And in the eighth Century, Bede gave it as his opinion, that daily communions would be highly salutary to christians (Vide Let. 5). But that opinion not being very confident with the doctrine of transubstantiation, which now began to be broached in the church, met with but small regard; so that

in a short time it became the general practice to communicate only once a year, at Easter; and this the council of Trent seem to account sufficient (Council of Trent Session 13 Canon 9).

It was then the church of Rome which introduced seldom communicating for which, as for all their Innovations they pretended an ancient Tradition and by which they alleged men's reverence for that ordinance would be heightened; And indeed so it was, till Veneration gradually increasing, at length produced Adoration and the blasphemous absurdity of a Wafer God. A striking instance how dangerous it is for christians to pretend to secure reverence to the institutions of their Lord, by methods different from those which he himself has appointed and that it is our only safety to adhere to the plan delivered us in the writings and practice of those who were under the infallible guidance of the Spirit, without turning aside to the right-hand or to the left. If we do otherwise, how prudent soever our measures may seem, and however pious our intentions may really be, we have in so far rejected the word of the Lord ; and what wisdom can there be in us?

The reader may possibly now expect an account what has been the practice of the purest reformed churches in this matter : But my small acquaintance with books, which can throw light on this inquiry, permits me to say but little on this head.

In Bohemia the holy supper is usually celebrated four times a year. They dispense it oftener when the need of the faithful requires it but thus often they enjoin it to be dispensed for the sake of uniformity (Account of the church order and discipline in the unity of the brethren of Bohemia, chap. 3).

A national synod of the Protestants in France, met at Charinton 1644, give it as their judgment,

"That though the Lord's Supper is dispensed in their church only four times a year, greater frequency would be desirable, the reverence requisite at the Lord's Table being preserved, that so Saints might increase in faith, through frequent partaking of the sacrament, as the primitive church did (La Discipline des Eglises Réformées de France, cap. 7)."

The Lutherans have a communion every Sunday and Holiday throughout the year (Joiinfon's unbloody Sacrifice, part 2. p. 151.). And though the number of communicants is often but small (Calvoer de tit. ecl. t. i. p. 75,8), yet it is usual among them to communicate three or four times a year (Buddei Inft. Theol. Dogm. lib. v. cap. 1).

The church of England enjoins, that:

“in every parish church and chapel, where sacraments are to be administered within this realm, the holy communion shall be ministered by the parson, vicar, or minister, so often, and at such times, as every parishioner may communicate at least thrice in the year (Canon 21, of the Province of Canterbury).” It is well known, that many of the clergy in that church have recommended, and that many of the well-disposed among their laity practice, a much, greater frequency. This has given occasion, to, some, to asperse the Synod of Glasgow's overture, as paving the way to Episcopacy. But is it not abundantly confident with the most rigid Presbyterian principles, to take a lesson from our; sister church, where her practice approaches nearer the Scripture standard than ours? Is her observing an institution of Christ any reason for our neglecting it? The purest church on earth may learn something from churches less pure. And whatever some do, I shall never esteem it a mark, of purity, to say to others, Stand by, come not near me, for I am holier than thou. The more we have, of true religion, the more will we have of a humble, teachable disposition, and a willingness to be instructed, even by our weaker brethren. I wish 1 Corinthians 7:21 were more considered. Progress in reformation can never be expected, when the best things are rejected that other churches practice, under pretence of guarding against their corruptions. I cannot but observe, that Cartwright (Reply to Whitgift, p. 117) and Calderwood (Altare Damascenum) charged the church of England with too seldom communicating. So different was the opinion of these great and good men, from that which now prevails. And I am well informed, that a great part of those who were ejected for non-conformity in Charles II's time, dispensed the sacrament monthly. I have now in my custody, manuscript Memoirs of a private Christian, who lived in the time of the civil wars in England, who, I find, received the sacrament, with great profit, the first Lord's Day of every month at the meeting where Mr. Ash, a member of the Westminster assembly, and Mr. Robrough, one of their scribes, were ministers: And that if any incident prevented the dispensing of the sacrament on the first Sabbath of the month, it was done, if possible, the Sabbath next following (The Growth of a Christian and was lent to me by Mr. William Hog, merchant in Edinburgh).

The churches in New England have no times universally stated for their celebration of the Eucharist. Some have it once in four weeks some in six, some in eight: Some the first Lord's Day in every calendar month, and some the last. And the pastors reserve to themselves a liberty of altering the times as they judge fit upon emergencies. The pastor gives notice a week beforehand, that the Lord's Supper is to be dispensed. In most places there are held private meetings of christians on some day of the week preparatory' to the communion: And it is a frequent thing for the pastor to be present at some or other of them or else, perhaps, to hold a public lecture (Cotton Mather's Account of the Discipline in the Churches in New England, p. 95, 96.).

From the form of dispensing the Sacraments, composed by Calvin for the use of the church of Geneva (Apud Calvini Trad. Theolog. p. 39, 40), it appears, that the Lord's Day preceding, intimation was

made to the people, that they might prepare for that holy ordinance ; and that strangers, who inclined to communicate, might converse with the minister. On the Sacrament Day, the minister, at the end of the Sermon, explained the design of that ordinance, and how it ought to be received : Or, if he judged it necessary, spent his whole sermon on that subject How often in the year the Sacrament was dispensed, is not there mentioned ; but from Calvin's zeal to revive even weekly communicating, it is probable it was at least once a month: especially as Calvin approved the Book' of Common Order of the English church at Geneva, where Knox was minister ; which Book takes notice, that the Lord's Supper was commonly used by them once a month, So oft as the congregation think expedient (Book of Common Order, Preamble to Chapter 10).

I had almost forgotten to take notice, that the Greek church celebrate the sacrament every Sunday, and solemn festival, in their great churches, and that the laity are obliged to receive it four times a year (Smith's Account of the Greek Church).

I now go on to represent the practice of our own church in her best times.

Before the reformation, in the year 1558, the godly preachers that were in the kingdom, were forced by persecution (like the primitive christians, Acts 2:46.) to teach God's word, and administer the sacrament in the fields, or in private houses : so that their situation did not admit of stated times for communicating.

The 29th of April 1560, the great council of Scotland, laid their orders upon six ministers, whereof Mr. John Knox was one, to commit to writing their judgment touching the reformation of religion. Upon this they drew up the first book of discipline, and presented it to the great council, May 20th, 1560. Mr. Knox warmly urged, that it should be publicly approved. And though he could not obtain this, yet, as private men, the whole body of the first Reformers signed it, the 17th January, 1561, acknowledging it to be good, and according to God's word, and promising to set it forward to the uttermost of their power. The general assemblies, July 30th 1562, December 25th, 1562, and December 25th 1563, seem to consider it as binding on the church. Their opinion touching the times of dispensing the Lord's Supper, they give in these words:

Four times in the year we think sufficient to the administration of the Lord's Table, which we desire to be distinguished, that the superstitions of times may be avoided so far as may be ; for your honours are not ignorant how superstitiously the people run to that action at Pasche (Easter), even as if that time gave virtue to the sacrament; and how the rest of the whole year they are careless and negligent, as if it pertained not unto them, but at that time only. We think therefore most expedient, that the first Sunday of March be appointed for one time to that service : the first Sunday of June for another the first Sunday of September for the third ; and the first Sunday of December for the fourth. We do not deny, but any several kirk, for reasonable causes, may change the time, and may minister oftener ; but we study to repress superstition."

First Book of Discipline, Chapter 11

An injunction follows to catechize, especially such whose knowledge was suspect, before the administration of the sacrament. But there is not the least hint of week-day's sermons before or after the communion.

At the fourth general assembly which was holden at Edinburgh, December 25th, 1562, and of which Mr. John Knox was moderator, it was concluded:

That a uniform order should be kept in the administration of the sacraments, solemnisation of marriage, and burial of the dead, according to the book of Geneva. Item, That the communion be minified four times in the year within burrows, and twice in the year in the country parishes. The superintendents were appointed to confer with the Lords of Secret Council amend the charges to be bestowed for the elements at the Lord's Supper.

Calderwood's Manuscript History, vol. I. p. 792

It being reported in the general assembly held at Montrofe, in March 1600, that some abstained from the communion, under colour of deadly feuds, and other light causes, it was ordained: That the presbyteries command every particular minister, within their bounds, to take up the names of all within their parish, that they may communicate every year once at least and thereafter summon them to compare before the presbyteries, to hear and see themselves ordained to communicate within three months after the charge."

Calderwood's Manuscript History, vol. I. p. 816

From this it seems plain, that the sacrament was then dispensed once every three months and this is my only design in mentioning it; for in other respects it was highly blame-worthy.

The general assembly met at glasgow, 1638, appointed a committee to consider what constitutions should be revived or made of new. The 12th article of their report was

"Anent order to be taken that the Lord's Supper be more frequently administered both in burgh and landward, than it hath been these years bygone it were expedient that the act at Edinburgh, December 25th, 1562, be renewed, and some course be taken for furnishing the elements, where the minister of the parish hath allowance only for once in the year."

Acts of the General Assembly from 1638 to 1649

This shows, that in the times betwixt 1600 and 1638, seldom communicating had again crept in. We all know these times were none of the bed. However, even then there were some, and these the best friends of the Presbyterian interest, who dispensed the communion oftener than once a year. I need only mention the celebrated Mr. David Dickson, then at Irvin, who dispensed the communion twice in the year ; and Mr. Robert Blair, who dispensed it four times in the year, at least after he went over to Bangor, in the county of Down in Ireland, where he was a chief Instrument of the great revival of religion in that corner. If I had leisure to consult the printed or manuscript lives of other eminent men in these times, I doubt not but many such instances could be given. But to return; the good men concerned in the Reformation 1638, were sincerely desirous to promote greater frequency in remembering the dying

love of Jesus. And accordingly the Assembly referred the above-mentioned article to the Committee 's report to the consideration of presbyteries and declared that the charges should rather be paid out of that day's collection, than that the congregation want the more frequent use of the sacrament.

A pamphlet was printed at Edinburgh, 1641, entitled, The Order and Discipline of the Church of Scotland. The author only observes in the general, that the Lord's Supper is more frequently ministered in some congregations than in others, but he does not mention how often in any. He informs us, p, 21. "The Sabbath next, before the communion shall be celebrated, public warning thereof is made by the pastor, and of the doctrine of preparation to be taught the last day of the week, or at least towards the end of the week, that the communicants may be the better prepared by the use of the means both in public and private." Here is no mention of any other minister's assisting the minister of the parish, nor of any Fast-Days or Thanksgiving-Days regularly observed before and after the sacrament. On the contrary, it is said, p. 24. The communion being thus celebrated in the forenoon, the people meet again in the afternoon, at which time the minister teacheth the doctrine of thanksgiving, and closeth the public and solemn worship of that day, from which the people use to depart refreshed with the grace and peace of God and strengthened with new and fresh resolution to serve the Lord"

In the 14th Session of the Assembly met at Edinburgh 1645, of which Mr. Robert Douglass was Moderator, the opinion of the committee for keeping the greater uniformity in this Kirk was said before them, and, after serious consideration, approved in all its articles, and ordained to be observed in all time hereafter. Among other things they enjoined, "That there be no reading in the time of communicating, but the minister make a short exhortation at every Table 3 that thereafter there be silence during the time of the communicants receiving, except only when the minister exprefTeth some few short sentences, suitable to the present condition of the communicants in their receiving, that they may be incited and quickened in their meditations in the action. That when the communion is to be celebrated in a parith, one minister may be employed for assisting the minister of the parish, or, at the most, two. That there be one Sermon of preparation, delivered in the ordinary place of public worship, upon the day immediately preceding. That before the ferving of the tables, there be only one fermon delivered to those who are to communicate, and that in the fame Kirk there be one sermon of thanksgiving after the communion is ended. That the minister who cometh to aftift, have a special care to provide his own parim, left otherwise while he is about to minister comfort to others, his own flock be left destitute of preaching."

Acts of the General Assembly from 1638 to 1649, p. 267, 268.

It is now time to enquire, how the present rareness of communions, and the multitude of week-days fermons before and- after them, was first introduced. And all I can do, is to mention two or three probable conjectures, as I know no certain account of that matter.

It began, says one, in the persecuting times, when many ministers under hiding, and the whole Presbyterians of a country, by stealth, got together. And when they met for this end, it may be once in several years, they knew not how often to preach ; and the people had a boundless appetite to hear, so long as they could be substituted and fafe. But though the persecution they were under sufficiently excused their so seldom receiving the Lord's Supper, is it possible for us to vindicate our conduct, who live in quiet and peaceable times? It was a necessity with them, and therefore not blame-worthy : It must be choice with us, and therefore criminal.

The author of Dan in Beersheba, gives the following account of the matter, from two books printed at London, 1657, (viz. Uldericus Veridicus sive de statu Ecclesiae Scoticae. And, A true Representation of the Rise, Progress and State of the Division in the Church of Scotland.) both of them writ by public Resolutioners. The General Assembly say they, in the year 1645, did establish an order for preventing confusion in the celebration of the sacrament, with which the whole church were satisfied. Yet, since our divisions, our diffenting brethren have taken up a new and irregular way of dispensing the holy Supper, whereby they have turned it, either into a theatrical pomp, or into the Popish error of opus operatum. It is but seldom they dispense this ordinance. But when it comes to be administered in a church where any of them is minister, even they who are in the remotest parts of the kingdom, being warned, flock to them. To those of their own party, of whatever parish, the heavenly bread is distributed, while most of their own parishioners are excluded. 'They have a great many ministers assisting them, six or seven, nay, sometimes double that number, whole congregations are generally left destitute of preaching that day. Every day of their meeting, viz. Saturday, the Lord's Day, and Monday, (N. B. They had then no Fast-Days), many of these ministers do preach successively one after another ; so that three

or four, or sometimes more, do preach at their Preparation, and as many on the Monday following. And on the Sabbath sometimes three or four preach before they go to the Action, besides those who preach to the multitude of the people, who cannot be contained in the church. Never before were there so many sermons in any church in so short a time. these practices, as they are a clear violation of the order unanimously established in the church, and do occasion great animosity and alienation of fimple people against those mini-tiers who will not imitate those irregular courses; so uninterested observers perceive a clear design in all this, to set up themselves as the only zealous and pious people, worthy to be trusted and followed in our public differences i Which if it be not an injury to that sacred ordinance, and an improving that, which should be a bond of unity and communion, to be a wedge to drive and fix a rent, let the judicious and sober judge. — Possibly some of these reflections were too severe, and dictated by Party Spirit; yet there is ground to think they were not wholly without foundation.

It is not improbable, that the practice of the ministers of the counties of Down and Antrim, about 1626, many of whom afterwards came over to Scotland, might contribute to multiply fermons, particularly in the fields, before and after communions. But when the spirit is carrying on a remarkable work of conviction and conversion, as he then was in these counties, things may be fit, which at other times would be highly unreasonable.

After the Revolution, the Lord's Supper continued to be seldom administered ; sermons on the Fast-Day, Saturday, and Monday, were kept up, and many ministers employed to affitt. The general assembly 1701, to remedy these things, recommended it to presbyteries:

“To take care, that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper be more frequently administered in their bounds ; and that the number of ministers to serve "there to be restricted, so that neighbouring churches be not thereby cast desolate on the Lord's Day."

The sixth act of the assembly 1711, gives so strong a proof of the zeal of our church for frequent communicating, that I cannot but insert it entire.

"The general assembly considering, that, in some places, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered only in the Summer season, where-through people are deprived of the benefit of that holy ordinance during the rest of the year, do therefore recommend to presbyteries to do what they can to get it so ordered, that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper may be administered in their bounds, thro' the several months of the year"

The general assembly 1712, "considering that the assembly of this national church have, by several acts, appointed the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper in all the congregation of this church, and judging that the due observation of these acts will greatly tend to the glory of God, and edification of foulds ; therefore did enjoin all presbyteries to inquire if the faid acts be duly observed by all the brethren."

By the sixth act of the assembly 1724, act 6th, assembly 1711, is revived and renewed; presbyteries are appointed to do all they can to have the Lord's Supper more frequently administered in their bounds, throughout the several months of the year; and enjoined to take care, that on the Lord's Day on which the sacrament is to be administered in any congregation, the neighbouring congregations be supplied

with fermons. Presbyteries are appointed to call their respective brethren in their bounds to an account as to the observance of this: And synods to call their respective presbyteries to an account as to what is enjoined them.

The presbytery of Edinburgh, by an act. made the 27th of April 1720, did recommend the sacrament to be celebrated in their respective churches, at least the months after mentioned, viz. January in Canon-gate, February in North-Leith, March in all the churches of Edinburgh, April in Corflorphen, May in South-Leith and Kirk-Newton, June in Weft-Kirk and Curry, July in Collington and Ratho, and again in Canongate, Auguft in Libberton and Cramond, September again in Weft-Kirk, O&ober in Duddington, and again in all the churches of Edinburgh, and in November again in South-Leith; and that any parish which cannot conveniently keep their diets above-mentioned, do it in the month of December that year. And that communicants might have more time for private preparation, and that as few ministers as possible might be taken from their own parim work, and so their congregations left without sermon, whereby people, that do not communicate, come and inconvenience communicants, and profane the Lord's Day by arguing, idle discourse, and otherwise: They also agreed, that there be only two sermons on the Fast-day, one on Saturday, two on the Lord's Day, and one on Monday ; that neighbouring ministers should provide their churches with sermon, and exhort such as were not to communicate to keep their own parish churches; and gave it as their opinion, that there mould be no Church-yard sermons on-such occasions. These alterations, inconsiderable as they were, caused a terrible outcry : And many elders and private christians left their own ministers. But, in a short time, this heat subsided, and the best and greatest part of them saw that a separation on such grounds would be criminal. This was the more remarkable, as the number of sermons was greatly lessened, without increasing in any reasonable proportion the number of communions, which it is no wonder some should be uncharitable enough to ascribe to the laziness of ministers. Whereas the synod of Glasgow's overture is not liable to such a misrepresentation, the number of communions in every congregation being increased, and at the same time as many sermons on weekdays, in the course of a year, as there are in our present way,

I shall only ask my reader, are our times better than the reformation and covenanting periods, when our church approached much nearer to the primitive simplicity in defending the Supper of the Lord? Has our church gained any thing, has practical religion been increased by the change of the old for our present way? Does it not deserve inquiry, if our neglect of frequently communicating, be not one cause, why the love of many has waxed cold?

Section 3 - Objections Against Frequent Communicating

Now proceed to consider some of the principal objections against frequent communicating. And:

First Objection

It is alleged that "The primitive christians were so eminent in religion, and so well prepared for the sacrament, that weekly communions might, in their time, be highly expedient; but that in our degenerate times, the case is altered, and our frequently partaking, considering our low attainments in grace, would be highly dangerous."

But, if our attainments are so low, is there not a cause? And what cause more probable, than our seldom attendance on that ordinance, which our Lord intended as the principal means of keeping up a lively sense of his dying love? Besides, as Calvin well observes (Tract. Theol. Genev. 1617. fol. p. 5), the weaker our graces are, the greater is our need of frequent attendance on this ordinance, to strengthen and increase them. It ought also to be remembered, that even the primitive church had spots in their feats of charity, St. Paul does not describe a christian deportment in the church meetings of the Corinthians: but he nowhere advises them to communicate seldomer, but only enjoins them to do it in a more becoming manner.

Second Objection

The Jewish Passover was celebrated only once a year therefore, say some, the Lord's Supper, which comes in its place, should be dispensed no oftener. To this I reply, in the words of Mr. Charnock (Charnock's works, vol. II. p. 756), the passover indeed was annual. God fixed it to that time; but they had their daily sacrifices in the temple, which were types of christ, and remembrancers to them of what was in time to be exhibited. We have no ordinance fettled by christ in commemoration of his death but this only.

Third Objection

But the argument on which most stress is laid, is, that frequency will lessen the solemnity of the ordinance, and bring it into contempt. They argue thus:

"Affections are wound up to a higher pitch by the novelty and rarity of any thing, whereas the commonness of a thing, however excellent it may be, causes them to flag and cool. Scarcity advances, plenty abateth, the value of everything. Those acts of worship, which are frequently, are also slightly performed: and since we cannot preserve both, we had better part with frequency than reverence. For we shall more honour our Lord, by partaking of his supper more reverently, tho' less frequently, than more frequently with less reverence. Accordingly, how poor are the fruits of the ordinance in the Church of England, where it is so frequently dispensed?"

To this I reply:

(1.) If frequent communicating is a duty, then the danger of doing it with less advantage does not lessen our obligations to that duty. For whatever danger there is, God foresaw it, but yet did not see meet to guard against it, by enjoining us to communicate seldom. Shall we then pretend to be wiser than God? Have we found out better means for securing the honour of his institutions, than the means prescribed and practised by those who were under the infallible guidance of his spirit? Have not attempts of this kind proved the source of the worst corruptions in popery? Reason has no power to dispense with, or to derogate from the positive laws of God, on pretence of doing them a service. It is blasphemous presumption, tho' it may put on a cloak of humility, to judge that a sufficient reason to hinder thee from frequent communicating, which our Lord did not judge a sufficient reason to hinder him from commanding it. If thou thus judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. Is there in the whole Bible, any express or tacit dispensation from frequent communicating, if we happen to imagine, that frequency will lessen our reverence? Disobedience to Christ is no part of the respect: we owe to the Lord's table. To obey is better than sacrifice. Our Lord did not say, honour the sacrament, or dread it, or admire it, or adore it, but partake of it. We are not therefore at liberty to substitute any other mark of respect to this ordinance, in room of partaking of it. How singularly unfortunate is the command, Do this in remembrance of me to be disobeyed from too much regard?

(2.) Conjecture is lighter than experience. Let us then see, whether the objection is verified or disproved by matter of fact. And here on the one side, the history of the primitive church, for more than three hundred years, proves, that constancy and reverence happily conspired together to God's glory and his churches benefit. But on the other hand, when succeeding ages attempted, by lessening the frequency to increase the reverence, the consequence was, that, by degrees, the very being of the ordinance was in danger of being lost, and a multitude of the most terrible mischiefs, and particularly a general decay of the power of godliness, overspread the Christian world. Was there not more religion in Scotland, at the reformation and covenanting periods, when communions were more frequent? Since that ordinance began to be seldom dispensed amongst us, has religion been a gainer? Does not the gospel thrive as well, and are not communions as much honoured with the Redeemer's presence in New-England (where, in some places, the communion is dispensed once every month, and in all at least once in the two months) as it does with us? — As to the church of England, I can prove from the writings of some of their divines that tho' they absurdly enough read the communion service almost every sabbath and holiday yet that,

in most parish churches, it is only dispensed thrice a year, and even then the communicants few. Nay, as I remarked in the preceding section, so early as the time of Cartwright and Calderwood, infrequency in communicating was objected to the church of England. So that whatever contempt may be poured on the Lord's table by any in that church, will never prove the objection well grounded.

(3.) Does not the Bible speak strongly on the solemnity of prayer, and the danger of roughness in speaking to God? And does it not tell us that the word when heard unworthily is a favour of death unto death? Shall we then pray seldom, and hear the word seldom, that we may do it with the greater solemnity; and so not expose ourselves to the danger of praying unworthily, and hearing unworthily? Would not this way of reasoning be fallacious, if applied to prayer, and hearing the word? And is it not equally so, when applied to the sacrament? The godly will not quit their reverence to the Lord's table upon any the greater frequency, as appears by their uniting frequency and reverence in other religious institutions. And the show of reverence the ungodly bring to it, is not worth the preferving; and much less is it worth the purchasing at so dear a rate, as the depriving saints of this ordinance.

Fourth Objection

Prayer, hearing the word, etc. are not less useful by reason of their frequency. Those who abound in them most, find most benefit in them. The same may be said of meditation, self-examination, and other religious exercises. Why then should it be supposed, that rareness in remembering christ's death in the sacrament, should add to the effect: of that ordinance? — Novelty, it must be owned, adds a force to every thing. Fullness brings cheapness on the very bread of life : yet who would infer from this, that it ought to be withheld till famine enhance the price? Or that we ought to be seldom in preaching the great and heart-affecting truths of the gospel, left by oftener insisting on them, they should affect, less?

I shall conclude this head with the words of Mr. Charnock:

"To be frequent in communicating is agreeable to the nature of the ordinance, and necessary for the wants of a christian. By too much fasting we often lose our stomachs. Too much deferring does more hurt than frequent communicating. The oftener we carefully and believingly communicate, the more disposed we shall be for it. If it be worthily received, it increaseth our reverence of God, and affection to him. And that is the best reverence of God which owneth his authority. Christ's death is to be everyday fixed in our thoughts, and to help our weakness, there should be a frequent representation of it to our senses, in such a way as Chist has instituted, not as men may prescribe."

Charnock, ubi fupia, and p. 747,

But it will still be urged:

"That partaking of the Lord's Supper is the nearest approach we can make on earth to the great and dreadful Gcd, and therefore requires such awe and reverence, and such degrees of solemn preparation, as would be utterly impossible, were that ordinance frequently dispensed."

I grant many pious and excellent divines have said this and a great deal more. But where does the Scripture say so? To the law, and to the testimony, if they do not speak according to this word, it is because, in so far, there is no light in them.

We ought never to approach God in any ordinance without a reverent, penitent, humble frame, and a heart broken for sin. But it would be a strange inference, that therefore there ought to be a fast-day, with three sermons, and a 'preparation day, with two sermons, before every time the sacrament is dispensed. these dispositions are necessary in every approach to God in other ordinances, and therefore if public fasts and preparations are necessary before the sacrament, they are necessary before them also. We seem to have made a distinction in this matter, beyond what we have warrant for in the word of God, as if this ordinance were placed at a greater distance from others, than it really is.

The vast preparations the people of the Jews were obliged to make before the promulgation of the law, are urged in support of this notion (Exod. 19-20). And from the misapplication of such passages of scripture, many of the best of Christians approach their reconciled God and father with a slavish awe, like that of the Israelites, that even approaching the mount that burned with fire ; or that of Peter, when he said to our Lord, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. They sit down at the table of the Lord, with as great terror as the high priest entered the holiest of all on the day of atonement, when, for the very least accidental miscarriage or inadvertency, during his short stay there, he was in danger of being struck dead. Doubtless the seldom dispensing this ordinance has led many of the less judicious into such melancholy superstitious apprehensions, and raised such terrors in their mind, that they could not attend upon God in this institution without distraction, and thus were deprived of much of the comfort and benefit, which otherwise they would have reaped from it. Such I would intreat to consider the differences of the legal and evangelical dispensation, and of the spirit of bondage flowing from the one, and the spirit of adoption which suits the other, as represented to us, Rom 8:15. Gal 4:25, 26. Heb 4:16. Heb 10:19—22. and 12:18—24.

And here I cannot but take occasion to remark, that the day of atonement was the only anniversary day of fasting, humiliation, and confession of sins which God enjoined the Israelites. All their other annual holidays, except these which they themselves appointed, after their return from the Babylonian captivity, were days of joy and thanksgiving (Universal History, vol. 3. Octavio edition, p. 44.). If then the Jews had more thanksgivings than fasts, why should not the christians? Is not our cause of joy greater?

Fifth Objection

But we are told that "introducing frequent communions is an innovation and that all innovations are dangerous." - But it is an innovation in no other sense, than the doctrine of justification by faith was in the days of Luther. The truest and purest antiquity is on our side : whereas our present practice is a plain defection from the primitive pattern.

Sixth Objection

It is further argued, that “the greatest part of well-disposed people in Scotland are averse to this change.”

But in matters of doctrine and worship, we should take our direction only from the word of God, since the best and wisest of Men have erred, and may err; and it is natural to most people, to be prejudiced against any thing in religion, to which they have not been accustomed. In the present question, I have met with many of the most solid and experienced christians, who have declared, that frequent communions in the way proposed, would be highly desirable. But they added that the bulk of good people were so keen against it, that they thought it should not be attempted. Whereas, I have reason to think, that if good men who approve the overture, were but half as honest in telling their sentiments, and half as zealous to make proselytes, as those who disapprove of it, in a very short time, most who have any relish for religion, would drop their opposition, and pray for its success. But generally those on the wrong side of a question, are most clamorous and noisy.

If great names were of any weight in such a debate, I could easily multiply authorities. But I shall content myself with mentioning the few that follow.

Calvin handles this subject with great accuracy in his institutions, (Book 4, Chapter 17, Sections 44-46). He tells us it was then the practice, to receive the communion but once a year, and that in a formal, superficial manner. And after having urged frequent communicating from the design of the ordinance, and the practice of the apostolic and primitive church, he adds: "And doubtless the custom of communicating only once a year, is the invention of the devil, whoever was the instrument of introducing it." And a little after. " Our practice ought to be the very reverse. Every week at least, the Lord's table should be spread before the assembly of christians, and the promises upon which they should feed there opened up to them. None indeed should be forced to it, but all should be exhorted and encouraged"

Mr. Baxter in his Christian Directory, (part 2. p.101.) having proposed the question, how often should the sacrament be now administered, that it neither grow into contempt nor strangeness? He thus answers it.

“Ordinarily, in well disciplined churches, it should be still every Lord's day. For, (1.) We have no reason to prove, that the apostles example and appointment in this case was proper to those times, any more than that praise and thanksgiving daily is proper to them : and we may as well deny the obligation of other institutions or apostolical orders, as that. (2.) It is a part of the settled order for the Lord's day's worship, and omitting it, maims and alters the worship of the day and occasions the omission of thanksgiving and praise, and lively commemorations of christ, which should be then most performed ; and so Christians, by use, grow habited to sadness, and a mourning melancholy religion, and grow unacquainted with much of the worship and spirit of the gospel. (3.) Hereby the Papists lamentable corruptions of this ordinance have grown up, even by an excess of reverence and fear, which seldom receiving doth increase, till they are come to worship bread as their God. (4.) By seldom communicating, men are seduced to think all proper communion of churches lieth in that sacrament, and to be more profanely bold in abusing many other parts of worship. (5.) There are better means, by teaching and discipline, to keep the sacrament from contempt than the omitting or displacing of it. (6.) Every Lord's day is no oftener than christians need it. (7.) The frequency will teach them to live prepared, and not only to make much ado once a month, or quarter, when the same work is neglected all the year beside ; even as one that liveth in continual expectation of death, will live in continual preparation : when he that experiences it but in some grievous sickness, will then be frighted into some seeming preparations, which are not the habit of his soul, but laid by again when the disease is over.

But yet I must add, that in some undisciplined churches, and upon some occasions, it may be longer omitted, or seldom used. No duty is a duty at all times. And therefore extraordinary cases may raise such impediments, as may hinder us a long time from this, and many other privileges. But the ordinary faultiness of our imperfect hearts, that are apt to grow customary and dull, is no good reason why it should be seldom, any more than why other special duties of worship and church communion should be seldom. Read well the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, and you will find that they were then as bad as the true christians are now, and that even in the sacrament they were very culpable and yet Paul seeketh not to cure them by their seldom communicating.”

Richard Baxter, Christian Directory, Part 2. p. 101

Thus far Mr. Baxter.

A worthy minister in the shire of Air, in a letter to me, dated October 10th, argues thus:

"What a reproach is it to the church of Scotland, which boasts of a farther degree of reformation than even some other protestant churches, to fall so far, I had almost said, so scandalously short of them all, in commemorating the dying love of our blessed redeemer? I know it is alledged, frequently communicating will lessen our reverence for the sacrament. But the contrary will, I presume, abundantly appear, by comparing those who do now communicate four times, and oftener, in the year, with those who never think of it above once. And whatever may be the case with respect to those who do not perform religious duties in a serious manner at all, yet as to those who do, I believe it will be found, that the more frequently real christians are exercised in them, whether praying, reading, hearing, meditating, or communicating, they are apt to acquire still higher degrees of perfection, in these useful exercises.

As to abridging the number of fermons, etc. besides the obvious necessity of this, in order to the greater frequency of that ordinance, I think it seems to be allowed, by most thinking people, that we have got into a rather too mobish way, I may call it, of administering that serious and solemn ordinance. I dare say, that if a computation were to be made, it would be found, that in some places where there are not above 500 or 600 communicants, there will be at least upon the Lord's day, near as many thousand people, most of whom must be at least idle and irreverent spectators, or rather disturbers; not only crowding the passages, so as renders it next to impossible for weak and infirm people to go to and from the table with due composure, but in a constant motion to and from ale-houses, yards, and other places, where barrels are kept for the entertainment of successive companies, whose conversation generally gives offence to every serious christian, that accidentally over-hears it."

Let none think, says Mr. Willison of Dundee, that frequency of the administration would expose to contempt: for I am sure no worthy communicant will undervalue this ordinance because of a frequent repetition, but rather prize it the more. Did the primitive christians bring it into contempt by partaking every Lord's day? Nay, was not their esteem of it much higher than these who dispense or receive it only once in two years? I wish the words of our dying Saviour, and the acts of our general assembly, relative to this matter, were more adverted to by one and all of us (Willison's preface to his? Sacramental Catechism, p.9.) — And in another place, he thus answers the question, Are we as much obliged to frequent communicating as the apostles and primitive christians were? Tho' they were in a much better frame for it, as having had more recent and warm impressions of the love and death of their redeemer constantly upon their spirits than we have; yet certainly we are under as strong obligations to frequent partaking as the first: Chrifians were, for we have the same Lord and Saviour that they had, and are under the fame obligations of love and gratitude to him. We have the same need of the application of christ's blood, and a confirmed interest in his meritorious death, that they had and consequently the same need of this memorial feast and steeling ordinance (Sacramental Catechism p. 86.). And answering the question. Is not frequency apt to breed formality in this duty he observes. The same thing may be alledged with respect to other duties, which yet is no good argument for the infrequent practice of them. (2.) This fault is now chargeable upon the holy ordinance and institution of Christ, but upon the corruption and carelessness of our hearts, which we ought diligently to watch and strive against;

endeavouring, in christ's strength, as often as we partake, so often to prepare for it. with all due care and solemnity (Sacramental Catechism, p. 87).

Mr. Jonathan Edwards, of Northampton in New-England, in a book, entitled, Some thoughts concerning the present revival of religion, p. 214. of the Edinburgh edition, says, "It seems plain, by the scripture, that the primitive christians were wont to celebrate this memorial of the sufferings of their dear Redeemer every Lord's day; and so, I believe, it will be again in the church of Christ, in the days that are approaching."

Seventh Objection

It is alledged, increasing the frequency of communions, especially in the way proposed in the synod's overture, will occasion a new and formidable secession.

But, as Mr. Randal has well observed, in a paper referred to, Section IV. "Most who would leave a church on so frivolous a pretence, are in the secession already: and probably the present way of administering the sacrament may be one cause of it. Too nice a picking of ministers at these times, taught the people to despise some, whom now the best amongst us would willingly pull out of their graves, if they could. The secession is now less formidable through their division." And the party of them who befriend the burgess oath, have, of late, expressed so much moderation and charity to the church of Scotland, in some of their printed papers, that I cannot bring myself to think they would condemn an overture so highly reasonable. When people see that it is not laziness, but a subjection to the authority of Christ, and regard to their edification, that make us desirous of more frequent communions, their prejudices will subside. And should it be otherwise, the affections of our people, valuable as they are, would be too dearly purchased, by disregard to the commands of Jesus.

Section 4 - The Means To Promote Frequent Communicating

I am now to enquire, whether the synod's overture is not the moft proper, and least exceptionable means to promote frequent communicating. I shall not be stiff in asserting this: but hitherto no better plan has been proposed, that I know of.

Part 1

I chose, in this part of the subject: to deliver my sentiments in the words of two worthy ministers, who have thought much on the question.

The one is Mr. Willifon of Dundee, preface to his Sacramental Catechism, p. 12:

"I confess there is one thing amongst us, which is a great obstruction to the frequent celebration of this ordinance, viz. the great numbers of ministers and preachers now ufed on such occasions, which truly makes that solemn work a buisness of such outward toil and labour to the administrators, as discourages them frequently to undertake it. So that till some regulation be made in the aforesaid respect, I despair of seeing this holy ordinance dispensed (o frequently amongst us as it ought to be. In the days

of old, there was less preaching at communions, but much power and life in them; but in our days there is much preaching, but little power. Not that I am against much preaching at these occasions, where there is an appetite among the hearers, and where plenty of ministers may be had, without laying the neighbouring congregations desolate, or proving any let to the frequency of this ordinance: but to make it a standing order, that there will be so many preachings, whether there be an appetite or no, or whatever inconveniences should follow, I apprehend cannot be so easily justified. I acknowledge, about the time of our late happy revolution, when so much preaching at communions began to be a settled practice, there were such vehement desires among the people after the ordinances, and lively preaching of the word, that had been so scarce for so many years before, that it was necessary to gratify them, with much preaching, at these solemn occasions but it is not to be expected, that these longings would always continue. In the primitive times of christianity, when the disciples hearts flowed with love to their lately crucified and ascended Redeemer, they had such burning desires after the ordinances, and preaching of the gospel, that the apostle Paul, at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Acts xx. 7. was encouraged to continue preaching with the people till midnight ; yet none ever pled, that the apostle's practice, on that occasion, should be a standing rule for the church, in all time coming."

The other is Mr. Randal of Inchtute, in a written paper, where a plan much like that of our synod is proposed. And as that paper first engaged me to apply my thoughts to this important subject:, 1 shall infer the greatest part of it.

"Our present manner, fays he, of partaking of the sacrament, by employing three working days in attendance on preaching, on every such occasion, renders the frequent partaking of that ordinance inconvenient, if not impossible. For:

(1.) It is hard to bring our people to relish a frequent administration, if it muft deprive them of so many days of labour. And as industry and improvement increase, that difficulty will increase alfo ; especially, as some concerned in these things, have not so great a respect, as might be wished, for religious institutions. But if all were willing to attend, there are not many feafons where, in landward parishes, they can have leisure, especially as the lint improvement goes on, which much shortens the leisure time in summer.

(2.) Tho' ministers may not speak it out the expense, with which dispensing the sacrament frequently in our way would be attended, will ever be an effectual stop to it.

(3.) Our present way is very inconvenient to every fingle minister. As almost all have the sacrament once a year, each muft affift five or fix neighbours 5 and this hurries and hinders, in a great measure, from that solemnity of thought, which is only to be found in calm retirement. In the parish where the sacrament is dispensed, the minister's wife and family mud be all Marthas, and no time allowed them to look after the better part.

(4.) It is equally inconvenient to ministers as a society. It often proves the source of heart-burning, mi-funderitanding, party, and faction amongst us. Tho' we have a regard to a neighbour, yet the aversion of our parish to him, sometimes not well founded too, tempts us to purchase peace at home, by overlooking him on such occasions : and this proves a wound that can scarcely be healed, But by dispensing this ordinance in its primitive simplicity, one occasion of distance and interference will be removed, and brotherly love promoted. Sometimes jealousies, that such a candidate for a vacant congregation would not employ us, but popular men from a diflance, at his communions, occasions us, underhand to oppose his settlement. Every new settlement is half my own, fays the neighbour: half my peace and comfort depends upon it. In the way now proposed, there could be no room for such suspicions, and therefore it is probable candor and friendship would more prevail.

(5.) In our present way, there can, in most places, be no feast in the winter.

"If it be alleged. That this will prevent peoples being edified as they now are by a diversity of gifts. I answer:

(1.) We cannot expect the church mould be edified by neglecting the means the head of the church has appointed for their edification, (of which frequent remembering him in the breaking of bread is one) and substituting, in their room, means of our own devising. For our Lord has nowhere prescribed a multitude of sermons on such occasions, as a means of our edification. Whereas, in receiving the bread and wine, he has promised his special presence.

(2.) Four preparation days in the course of a year, may procure as great a variety of gifts as we now have. besides, congregations may and ought to fast often, in which way diversity of gifts may be obtained, without neglecting the dying command of christ.

Part 2

It was hinted to me, by a worthy and judicious friend, that communions might be had in our present way, if ministers were confined to one assistant ; and if the minister of the parish, and that one assistant preached each of them three or four times : or if that should be reckoned burdensome, week-days sermons might be got from probationers, or even from neighbouring ministers, without asking their assistance, and thus throwing their churches vacant on the Lord's day.

If I can be convinced, that frequent communions may be had in this way, without danger of superstition, or hurt to society, I shall not be the first to decline such a plan. I own, it is free from some objections which startle people at our synod's overture : but, to me, it seems liable to greater difficulties of another kind.

(1.) Would not this take up ministers as much, or more, from private preparation, as our present way, which I have heard many complain of on that account?

(2.) How few probationers are there in many corners? And could their assistance be more easily procured, how disagreeable would our employing of them be to some congregations?

(3.) Would it not be hard on poor people, and occasion the murmurs of others, that a parish, four times every year, should spend three entire working days, in the space of a week, in religious exercises? And would not this hardship appear greater to people, when there was little variety of gifts, only their own minister and one assistant?

(4.) Employing neighbouring ministers will not remove the difficulties mentioned in the last head. — But I own, tho' some may think it a paradox, it is my judgment, that neighbours ought never to be employed at sacraments. For there are some who will not, and others who dare not, employ their neighbours. And this being looked on as a piece of contempt, is an unhappy source of division amongst us. Whereas, if it were the custom, always to employ people from a distance, every one, without giving umbrage to any of his brethren, would employ whom he pleased.

Part 3

It is objected, that a multitude of congregations will be thrown vacant by our overture : for if the sacrament be dispensed through a whole presbytery on the same day, sixteen or eighteen parishes in neighbouring presbyteries must be thrown vacant to supply them with assistants. But:

(1.) Though many congregations will, no doubt, be thrown vacant, even by our overture; yet it will not be a whole countryside of contiguous congregations, as is the case at present; for the assistants will be got, from different presbyteries, and some ministers will seek none.

(2.) In our present way, the same parish is often vacant five Sabbaths in the space of ten or twelve weeks : But if the overture succeed, this can scarce ever happen.

Part 4

It has been urged, that celebrating the sacrament four times in the year, will scarce be practicable in some parts of the Highlands, and therefore ought not to be bound upon them by an act : And that it would be highly inconvenient for a whole presbytery there to have the sacrament the same day, as they would find it hard to be supplied with assistants from neighbouring presbyteries, considering the great distance. — I believe, none will oppose altering or amending the overture in this respect, if once it were known what is the alteration which northern synods would judge most for their benefit.

Part 5

Some were of opinion, that abridging the number of sermons more gradually might perhaps prevent the opposition which the overture, in its present form, will undoubtedly meet with. To this I reply, in the words of a worthy Member of this Synod.

"As to correcting these abuses gradually, it is highly probable, that any such half or faint attempt, would defeat its own design. Pusillanimous assailants are easily beat back. The abuses complained of are such, as we may boldly avow our design to correct: Whereas, if we conceal this design, or seem ashamed to profess it, this very conduct will harden such of our people as may be wedded to the present way, in their prejudices. Palliatives will look more like slothfulness in ourselves : Whereas, if we boldly avow the whole design at once, the abuses which we aim at will be allowed, I believe, to be indefensible, and the remedy proposed must be admitted to be the only cure: And, by that means, a conviction, I think, will be more easily fastened upon our people. besides, as nobody proposes to stop at the first step, the very slowness of our procedure will encourage and occasion opposition, at least protract: and lengthen it out. Every new step may be expected to raise as great a clamour as the whole would do, which in the one case would be over at once, whereas in the other case it would be constantly fed by fresh springs. And the people having once declared themselves, as this would involve them in a constant opposition to every further alteration, before they really could perceive the reasonableness of the whole that was intended, so it would render it more unpopular in ministers, to be so often flying in the face of what is already discovered to be so unpopular. What happened at the first establishment of the present Version of the psalms is an evidence what an advantage it is to accomplish any considerable alteration all at once. It was extremely unpopular, as it may easily be imagined, anything that had the appearance of altering the Bible would be. But as the thing was boldly begun over all Scotland on the same day, and ministers were united among themselves, the noise made against it was very soon over."

Part 6

Some have observed, that providential incidents or a remarkable down-pouring of the Spirit, may make it reasonable to have week-days sermons, at a communion, on other days, as well as the Saturday; and that therefore it is a strange overture, that for four weeks of the year Christ may not be preached on a

week-day, except once let it be never so convenient, I heartily agree, that though ten thousand general assemblies would make such an act, our obedience to it would be sinful. But, did the Presbyterians, by abolishing christmas, etc. enjoin, that christ should never be preached on these days? No doubt, that was far from their intention. A positive injunction, that there should be no sermons on the Thursday before, or the Monday after the communion, would be criminal. And so would a positive injunction, that there should be no sermon on the 30th of January, or the 25th of December. But it would not be unworthy of our church, to give it as her judgment, that the stated week-days sermons, which have been in use in Scotland before and after communions, have not a great deal more foundation in the word of God, than the anniversaries of the Church of England.

Time will not allow me to consider other objections. The public may expect soon a more distinct defence of the synod's overture, by the Reverend Mr. Randal. I have perused, with pleasure, since part of this essay was sent to the press, and almost all of it composed, the first three sheets of his manuscript, in which are many new and ingenious proofs, that communicating as often as the primitive church did, is our duty.

May God send forth his light and his truth, to lead us, and guide us, and to bring us to his holy habitation. May we be willing meekly and humbly to receive the law from his mouth. And if our eye be thus single, our whole body shall be full of light.

Source: From Theological Dissertations by John Erskine. Source scan: archive.org/stream/theologicaldisse00ersk.

Previously prepared for an earlier version of The Stromata. Accessed July 2026.

Translation: Original English composition, not a translation. Erskine (1721-1803) is long public domain.

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/on-frequent-communicating>