

CALVIN'S OBJECTIVE: LORD'S SUPPER EACH LORD'S DAY

An excerpt from Harold M. Daniels, *To God Alone Be Glory: The Story and Sources of the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2003) 96-97.

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Within months after Calvin's arrival in Geneva, Calvin and Farel presented "Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and Worship at Geneva." Edification of the community was proposed by two means: frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, and discipline. The proposal stated (emphasis added):

When the Church assembles together for the great consolation which the faithful receive and the profit which proceeds from it, in every respect according to the promises which proceeds from it, in every respect according to the promises which are the presented to our faith, then *we are really made participants of the body and the blood of Jesus, of his death, of his life, of his Spirit and of all his benefits.*

On this basis, the proposal stated clearly that the Sacrament was

Not instituted by Jesus for making a commemoration two or three times a year, but for a frequent exercise of our faith and charity, of which the congregation of Christians should make use as often as they be assembled, as we find written in Acts ch. 2, that the disciples of our Lord continued in the breaking of bread, which is the ordinance of the Supper. Such also was always the practice of the ancient Church, until the abomination of the mass was introduced....

It is apparent in this document that Farel, whose reformation ideas initially had been shaped by Zwingli, had come finally to subscribe to this view of Calvin.

We need to recognize that restoration of communing by the people each Lord's Day (i.e., actual *reception* of the Eucharistic elements by the communicants) was an essential part of the changes the Reformers sought in sacramental practice. Even though weekly *celebration* of the Mass was part of the medieval church, *communing* at each celebration (except by the priest) had long been lost, the result of the particular doctrines upon which the medieval Mass was built. In the medieval church the people were required to commune only once a year. For the Reformers, communing each Lord's Day was no less important than those reforms they were able to achieve, namely, restoration of the cup, use of the vernacular, and setting aside particular doctrines associated with the medieval Mass.

Even though it was firmly rooted in the ancient church, the idea of a weekly Eucharist was something the magistrates of Geneva would not accept. The Zwinglian pattern of Communion once every three months was already established before Calvin arrived. To those who had never been expected to commune more than once each year, the idea of communing each week was simply more than they could accept. Communing quarterly was quite enough.

Calvin and Farel therefore acquiesced to the magistrates' wishes, conceding that because "the frailty of the people" was "still so great," there was "danger that this sacred and so excellent mystery be misunderstood" if weekly Communion were to be required. So, a compromise was reached. That the people may be strengthened, the Sacrament was celebrated in each parish church in Geneva once each month, with the schedule arranged so that on each Lord's Day the Sacrament was celebrated in at least one of the churches. Furthermore, on a given Sunday the celebration was not just for that particular part of the city, but for "all of the Church." It was to

be at a convenient hour so that persons from every quarter of the city could attend. The location of the celebration was to be announced in each church on the Sunday prior. This meant that anyone desiring to commune weekly could do so, but would have to rotate attendance between the churches of the city.

Frequency continued to be a major issue. When ecclesiastical ordinances were drawn up in September 1541, the issue of frequency was a source of contention. In the section of the Lord's Supper, after declaring the importance of frequent celebration, the following compromise sentence was inserted (emphasis added), "*For the present*, let it be advised and ordained that it always be administered four times in the year." The proposal evidences the inability to set in place the proposals of 1537, since the articles state that frequency of celebrating the Sacrament would be once a quarter in a given parish, but so scheduled in the parishes so that it would be once each month in the city. Furthermore, it was to be celebrated at Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas (but not again in the month in which these festivities occurred).

Calvin was not at ease with this concession. He once noted, "I have taken care to record publicly that our custom is defective, so that those who come after me may be able to correct it the more freely and easily." To his death Calvin insisted that the Lord's Supper was to be celebrated each Lord's Day and that the faithful were expected to commune.