

COMMUNION IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

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In this paper, we shall explore the practices surrounding the Lord's Supper in the Apostolic Church. We will not deal with theological issues, such as the sacrament vs. memorial controversy, but will confine ourselves to questions related to practice.

We shall examine the following questions:

1. What was the pattern of frequency of observance in the Apostolic Church?
2. Who was permitted to take communion?
3. Was foot washing a part of the communion service?

The reason for choosing these questions for examination is because they have been posed to us by churches that have faced these questions. We do not approach this subject with a legalistic mind-set, i.e., that all of the patterns are binding. We do, however, feel the obligation to present an objective look at the practices on the basis of available data.

For the purposes of this paper, we are defining the term, *Apostolic Church*, as that period of Church History, that extends from Pentecost to the time of death of those post-Biblical leaders who were instructed by the apostles and their companions.

Bishop Lightfoot defines the Apostolic Fathers as,

"...those who are known, or may reasonably be presumed, to have associated with and derived their teaching directly from some Apostle or at least those who were coeval (i.e., contemporaries of equal standing- JWG) with the Apostles".¹

He includes in this definition Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. To this list we would add the writings of Justin Martyr, who was a student of Polycarp; and the anonymous, *Teaching of the Apostles* (popularly called, "The Didache").² Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp wrote their documents no later than the first decade of the Second Century. Justin's writings were composed c. 140 AD. *The Teaching of the Apostles* has been dated no later than 120 AD, and some date it as early as the last quarter of the First Century. Of course, our definition includes the New Testament.

¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol.I, pg. 4, Hendrickson Publishers, 1989,

² Other documents, such as, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and , *The Expositions of Papias*, might contend for inclusion, but they are not relevant to our subject.

THE FIRST QUESTION: WHAT WAS THE FREQUENCY OF OBSERVANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH?

At the time of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus said, *This do in remembrance of me,*³ and Paul quoted this statement by adding, *..do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*⁴ No statement is made as to when or how often this sacred ceremony was to be observed. The apostles could have understood the instruction in many ways. Jesus could have meant that they were to do this annually, as a conclusion to some sort of paschal meal. He also could have meant daily, weekly, monthly, or intermittently.

Since Our Lord did not make this clear, we must look to the Apostolic Church to see how the Apostles led the Church in the matter of frequency of the observance. We look to the practice of the Apostolic Church because Our Lord promised the Apostles,

*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you....But when He the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak.*⁵

We assume therefore that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles fulfilled the instructions of Jesus and his plans for the Church. That being true, we look to the practice of the Apostolic Church for the answer to the question of frequency.

Before we can address the question of frequency, another question must be answered. Because the phrase, *the breaking of bread*, can refer on the one hand to a common meal, and on the other hand also is used to refer to the Lord's Supper (communion), we must determine which passages of Scripture use the term in reference to the Lord's Supper, and which ones use the term to refer to the routine act of eating a meal.

We note that when the term is used for eating a meal, the term, *breaking bread*, would include all items included in the meal, both food and drink. The separate items in the meal are not listed. In like manner, in describing the Lord's Supper, the expression, *The breaking of the bread*, would

³. Luke 22:19; The latter portion of this verse, containing the words, "which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me," is not included in some ancient manuscripts.

⁴. I Corinthians 11: 25

⁵. John 14:26; 16:13

be sufficient to include both the loaf and the cup.

Acts 2:42

The most obvious use of the term, *breaking of bread*, in reference to the Lord's Supper, occurs in Acts 2:42. This passage refers to the ongoing ecclesiastical activity of the new believers.

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42 NAS)

The Greek text of this verse is not well rendered by most English versions. The text literally reads,

and they were continually devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.

The definite article, *the*, is of utmost importance in exegeting this verse:

- **The** teaching of **the** apostles refers to the specific teaching of specific apostles
- **The** fellowship refers to the local assembly
- **The** breaking of **the** bread refers to a particular act of breaking a particular bread
- **The** prayers refers to specific prayers – possibly the special times of prayer in the church.

The use of the definite article indicates a particular item of a class, rather than any indiscriminate item of that class. Thus, *the breaking of the bread*, indicates a particular breaking of a particular loaf. It is difficult to think of anything to which this could refer other than the communion loaf.

As an aside, note that Acts 2:46, in its continued description of life in the first church states,

And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, (Acts 2:46 NAS)

This verse, describing the social life experienced by the new converts uses the expression, *breaking bread*, to describe the meals that they enjoyed in one another's homes. No definite article is attached to the term in this verse – it is *breaking bread*, not, *the breaking of the bread*.

The statement that they *were continually devoting themselves to...the breaking of the bread* has relevance to our quest. Even though there is ambiguity as to frequency, the intense nature of the Greek term rendered, *continually devoting*, (προσκαρτέω *proskarteo*), which implies “to persist in adherence to a thing,” plus the fact that the intensity of the persistency is heightened by

the form of the verb (present participle), leads us to conclude that the Lord's Supper was a constant experience, rather than an intermittent one.⁶

Thus, the only conclusions that we can reach concerning the statement made in this verse are:

1. This verse refers to the Lord's Supper
2. The Lord's Supper was a very frequent experience in the life of the Jerusalem Church.

I Corinthians 11:17-22

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.¹⁹ For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.²⁰ Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper,²¹ for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.²² What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. (1 Corinthians 11:17-22 NAS)

This entire passage (Verses 17-34) addresses the faulty manner in which the Corinthians observed the Lord's Supper. Verses 23-34 impress upon us the awe and reverence that should attend the communion rite.

In the verses quoted above, (17-22), Paul rebuked the Corinthian Church for having wrong motives for assembling. In verse 20, he wrote, *Therefore, when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.* The scolding tone of the context indicates that they should have been assembling to partake of the Lord's Supper but that they were assembling for another reason. The divisive spirit, described in verses 18-19, and the callous satiating of fleshly appetites, described in the verse 21, reveal the ungodly spirit of their meeting. They met together to argue on the one hand, and to participate in gluttony on the other. Not only were these evils in themselves, but the gluttony was made more sinful by the fact that the poor among them (verse 22) – those who had no food were ignored.

Some of the early Greek churches had instituted an "agape feast" as a part of the weekly meeting. This came to be associated with the Lord's Supper. In Corinth, at least, this was not a "carry-in

⁶ The same term in the same tense is used in verse 46, *And day by day, continually devoting themselves with one mind in the temple...* (literal translation). Here the frequency is made clear by the addition of *day to day*.

pot luck dinner" in which each family brought food to be served as a part of a common meal. Instead, each person brought his own food and drink, consuming it himself. Thus, the prosperous, in a display of wantonness, gorged themselves in food and drink. They had no regard for the poor and hungry among them.

Because of this wrong spirit, they could not partake of the Lord's Supper, even if they had gone through the motions. Thus, Paul rebukes them, *...I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse...when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.*

The clear conclusion from this passage is that the purpose of the church's coming together should have been to observe in the rite of the Lord's Supper.

If when the church gathered it was to partake of the Lord's Supper, the question has to be asked, "What was the frequency of their formal gathering?" Not only do we have Scriptures that lead us to conclude that the Church settled into a routine of meeting on Sunday (Acts 20:7, for example), but the testimony of extra-Biblical documents of the Apostolic Church indicate the same.

The most forthright of these is found in Justin Martyr's *Firs Apology*. Justin Martyr (c.140 A.D.), even uses the pagan term, "Sunday," for the first day of the week, since he is writing an apology to a Roman Emperor, seeking to explain to him the nature and practices of Christianity:⁷

"On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites <us> to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated <elements> by each one takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. ...Sunday, indeed is the day on which we all hold our common

⁷ Justin began the document with this address: "To the Emperor Titus Ælius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, and to his son Verissimus the Philosopher, and to Lucius the Philosopher, the natural son of Caesar, and the adopted son of Pius, a lover of learning, and to the sacred Senate, with the whole People of the Romans, I, Justin, the son of Priscus and grandson of Bacchius, natives of Flavia Neapolis in Palestine, present this address and petition in behalf of those of all nations who are unjustly hated and wantonly abused, myself being one of them."

assembly because it is the first day on which God, transforming the darkness and prime matter, created the world; and our Saviour Jesus Christ arose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before that of Saturn, and on the day after, which is Sunday, he appeared to his Apostles and disciples, and taught them the things which we have passed on to you also for consideration." (*I Apology* 67, 3-7)

As Justin states, the reasons why the Church observed the first day of the week as the day of Christian assembly are obvious. It was on the first day of the week that Jesus came forth from the grave. The post-resurrection appearances that can be dated were on the first day of the week, with the exception of His ascension. Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, was on Sunday. The Revelation is given to John the Apostle on the Lord's Day. So, it would seem natural that under apostolic guidance, churches met weekly, on the first day of the week. This does not deny that they met at other times in addition to the Sunday gathering.

In harmony with Justin's writings, the *Teaching of the Apostles*, (c.120 A.D.) - popularly known as *The Didache* - Chapter 14, contains this description.

"But every Lord's Day ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanks after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice be not profaned. For that is that which was spoken by the Lord, 'In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great King, saith the Lord, and My name is wonderful among the nations.'"

Beyond these documents there continues to be consistent testimony that the early church met weekly to participate in the Lord's Supper and to sing hymns to God (Pliny,⁸ *Epistles*, Book 10; Tertullian,⁹ *Apology*, Chapter XVI, and elsewhere.)

⁸. Pliny was a Roman official in Asia Minor who wrote to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D., asking advice on what to do about Christians. In his correspondence he described the Christian life, the church practices, etc.

⁹. Tertullian is the "father of Latin theology." Born in 150 A.D., he lived and wrote from Carthage during the last half of the Second Century. Tertullian was a lawyer. Thirty-one of his Latin writings are extant. None of his extensive Greek writings remain. Here are two quotes relevant to our quest: "We solemnize the day after Saturday in contradistinction to those who call this day their Sabbath" (Tertullian's Apology, Ch 16) . . . it is well-known that we regard Sunday as a day of joy. (To the Nations 1: 133)

Thus, we conclude that Paul rebuked the Corinthian Church for gathering on Sunday for a purpose other than to commemorate the Lord's Supper.

I Corinthians 10:15-21

This portion of Paul's first letter to Corinth is another clear example of "breaking of bread" as referring to the Lord's Supper, but it sheds no light on the question of frequency.

Acts 20:7

And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. (Acts 20:7 NAS)

Upon reading this text, two things immediately grasp our attention:

1. The Troas Church met on Sunday;
2. The purpose of the meeting was to break bread

From the preceding verses, we learn that Paul's company had traveled five days from Philippi to Troas. They had arrived at Troas on Monday. They had missed the weekly meeting of the church. They remained in Troas for seven days, the final day of their stay being Sunday. The apostolic team left town immediately after the service (verses 7, 11, 13). What was the breaking of bread that caused the Church to gather together on Sunday? Was it an "all church dinner"?

Although there is nothing in verse 7 (quoted above) to indicate the nature of the "breaking of bread," verse 11 does help us in our quest. As noted above, the definite article in Greek denotes a particular item of a class. There is no definite article in verse 7, but in verse 11, there is. This would lead us to believe that the reference in this passage is to the Lord's Supper. Literally, verse 11 states,

And going up and breaking the bread, and tasting¹⁰...

Thus, it seems that Paul and the Troas Christians had a communal/agape meal. Then Paul preached. Afterward, he partook of the Lord's Supper... he broke *the bread* and *tasted by sipping* the cup (see footnote 10).

¹⁰ The Greek term which we have rendered as *taste*, is γεύομαι. The Friberg Lexicon (Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, *Analytical Greek New Testament* (GNM) 2nd ed. n.p., 1994 BibleWorks 8) states, (1) literally, as testing a liquid by sipping *taste* (MT 27.34); as partaking of food *eat, partake of, enjoy* (AC 10.10); (2) figuratively *come to know, experience, partake of* (HE 2.9)

From these passages of Scripture and post-Biblical literature, we conclude the following:

1. The Apostolic Church continually partook of the Lord's Supper;
2. Paul considered the Lord's Supper as the appropriate reason for the Corinthian Church to gather in formal assembly;
3. The Church at Troas met on Sunday to participate in the Lord's Supper;
4. Post-Biblical literature consistently states that the practice of the early Church was to gather on Sunday to observe the Lord's Supper;

THE SECOND QUESTION: WHO PARTOOK OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH?

The question posed in many churches today, especially those who practice "open communion," is, "should unbaptized believers be allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper and should baptized believers who are not members of the local church be allowed to partake?"¹¹

This question must be faced by many American churches because they have abandoned the New Testament practice of baptism as a part of the salvation event and because the Sunday services have become something other than a "body meeting." Some churches use their Sunday gathering as an evangelistic tool. Also, in our culture, "going to church" is what good people do, even if they are not members of the church.

Such a situation was not present in the Apostolic Church. The Sunday meeting was a believers' meeting and all believers were baptized. All who were baptized automatically were a part of the church. We note Paul's comment to the Corinthians, "If an unbeliever enters..." (I Corinthians 14:23), indicating that it may happen, but that the presence of unbelievers was not assumed.

Because the situation faced today was not one faced by the Apostolic Church, we must look to silence as one aspect of our quest.

The passages that we have examined (Acts 2:42, Acts 20:7, and the I Corinthians references) were addressed to Christians, seeming to assume that only Christians would be participating.

¹¹ Traditionally, Southern Baptist Churches have restricted communion to those Baptists who were baptized in the particular local congregation where communion was being offered. This is one Protestant version of, "close communion."

I Corinthians 10:14ff emphasizes that communion is only for those who have separated themselves from the world. Although this section treats the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols, a principle is put forth that has a more general application.

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. ...You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (I Corinthians 10:16-17, 21)

Baptism is the event in the life of the convert whereby he separates himself from the world. This is the clear teaching of Romans 6.¹² The *Didache* indicates that in the earliest First Century churches, only the baptized were permitted to share in the Lord's Supper.

"You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's Name. For in reference to this, the Lord said, `Do not give what is sacred to dogs.'" (Didache, Chap. 9 paragraph 5)¹³

Justin Martyr gives the following admonition,

"No one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things we teach are true and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and rebirth and who lives as Christ handed down to us." (Chapter 66)

Justin Martyr states that immediately after the new convert has been baptized, he is immediately brought into the assembly of the brethren for prayers. After the prayers the brothers were greeted with a kiss and the new converts were served the elements of the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ Hippolytus of Rome, writing fifty years after Justin, describes the same practice.¹⁵ Thus, independent testimony from different geographical areas, make clear that in the early church the Lord's Supper was reserved for baptized believers. With rare exceptions, this has been the traditional position of all streams of Christianity. In recent decades, some churches, especially those related to the Charismatic Movement have had a lower standard.

¹². Also see Galatians 3:27-28; Colossians 2:11-14, and other related passages.

¹³. In the section immediately preceding this comment, the washing is defined as baptism by immersion.

¹⁴ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter LXI, "Christian Baptism"

¹⁵ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hypolitus*, XX1, 27

**QUESTION THREE:
WAS FOOT-WASHING A PART OF THE COMMUNION CEREMONY
IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH?**

John's description of the Last Supper/Passover meal contains the only record of Jesus' washing of the disciples feet (John 13:3-17). Neither Matthew, Mark, Luke, nor Paul mention this event in their descriptions of the Last Supper. Neither does the historical record of the early church contained in Acts of the Apostles mention foot-washing.

Because of this, most Christian groups have concluded that foot-washing was a cultural practice that Jesus used to teach a lesson of humility. He was not establishing an ordinance.

Those who do practice foot-washing point to Jesus words in John 13:14-15,

If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

It is important to note that John's Gospel omits the description of Jesus' instituting the Lord's Supper. In his description of Jesus' washing of the disciples feet, John states that Jesus, *rises out of (from) the supper*. Since only the Passover meal is described in John, we would conclude that Jesus interrupted the meal at some point to wash the disciples' feet, including the feet of Judas. Jesus then returned to the couch and the Passover meal continued. At one point, Jesus dipped the sop and served it to Judas. Judas departed shortly thereafter.

Luke tells us that the Lord's Supper was instituted after the Passover meal (Luke 22:19-20). The final cup of the Passover meal was called the "cup of blessing." Paul identifies this as the cup that Jesus used to inaugurate the new ordinance (I Corinthians 10:16).

Thus, since foot-washing occurred at some point in the Passover and the institution of the Lord's Supper occurred at the close of the Passover, foot-washing is not connected sequentially to the Lord's Supper.

Here is the pattern that results from harmonizing John's account with that of the Synoptics:

- Passover meal begins
- Foot-washing
- Passover meal continues
- Judas departs
- Passover meal ends
- Lord`s Supper instituted

Thus, it is clear that the act of foot-washing was not a part of the Lord's Supper but rather, an unusual interruption of the Passover meal.

Further, we note that the post-Biblical Apostolic Church did not practice foot-washing as a part of the Lord's Supper. This is apparent from the very detailed descriptions of the Lord's Supper, as practiced in the century immediately following the close of the New Testament. Both the *Didache* and Justin Martyr describe step by step what took place, even recording the wording of the prayers. None of these accounts contain foot-washing in their descriptions.

The only conclusion that we can reach, upon the basis of the data available, is that the Apostolic Church did not consider Jesus to have instituted foot-washing as a part of the Lord's Supper ceremony.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the data examined, the following conclusions are reached:

1. Communion was central to the Sunday gathering of the Apostolic Church. There were other special times, such as following the baptism of converts, that communion was observed.
2. Communion was reserved for those who had been baptized and who continued living Godly lives.
3. Foot-washing was not observed as a part of the communion service in the Apostolic Church.

NOTE: See *Christian History Magazine* issue 21 page 15, 17, concerning Schwenckfeld's suspension of the lord's supper