

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

## SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

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Volume 30

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Consistent with Protestant churches, Churches of Christ have rejected the five so-called false sacraments and accepted baptism and the Lord's Supper as the proper sacraments of the church. Last year's issue of *Christian Studies* was focused on the theme of baptism. As a follow-up to those reflections, this issue is devoted to the "Eucharist," the early church's favorite word for holy communion. To distinguish it from the self-centered meal that the Corinthian Christians were celebrating, Paul called this meal the Lord's Supper, reminding the church who should be at the center of this practice.

Again, like other Protestant churches, churches of the American Restoration Movement rejected important aspects of the Roman Catholic Church's sacramental theology. As good Protestants, they have taken for granted that communion is to be given in both kinds (bread and cup). Furthermore, with other Protestants, Churches of Christ have rejected transubstantiation.

Where Restorationist churches have generally differed with other Protestants, especially those of Reformed and evangelical backgrounds, is in the frequency of the meal. Traditionally, Restorationist churches have insisted on participating in communion every Lord's Day and only on the Lord's Day. Because this practice has been distinctive among most of their American Protestant neighbors, Restorationist churches have concentrated much of their Eucharistic theology on the question of frequency—specifically, on defending weekly communion against its many detractors. It should be noted that the opponents of weekly communion are now fewer and farther between, since more frequent communion has become the ecumenical consensus. At any rate, as a result of the focus on frequency, other significant questions about the Lord's Supper have often been neglected or pushed aside in Churches of Christ.

Although the question of frequency is certainly important in its own right, this issue of *Christian Studies* intends to address other important issues related to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What is it? How should we think about it? How should we practice it? How can our theology and practice of the Lord's Supper be improved? The result is a collection of articles that are biblical, historical, theological, and practical. Collectively, they examine a variety of

matters connected to the Eucharist, including related biblical themes, the presence of Christ, historical insights, and the proper communicants.

It is my hope that these articles will be beneficial to you in your own study and reflection on this central rite of the church's life. May the considerations in the following pages help us all be more faithful and thoughtful as we seek to practice and pass on the most holy faith.

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*To Know, Understand, and Practice the Christian Faith*

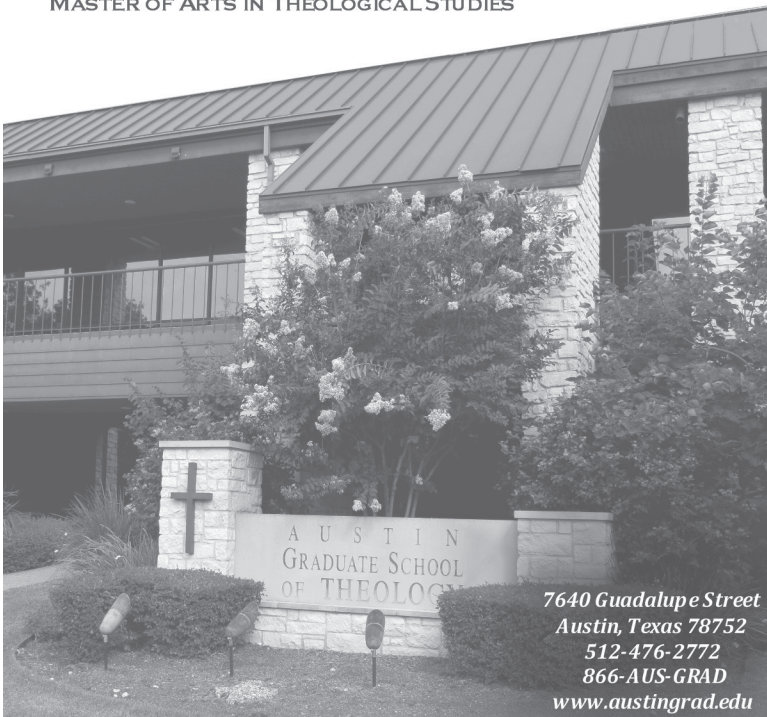


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# Proclaiming the Gospel at the Table\*

Mark E. Powell

When I grew up in the 1980s, nearly all of the communion meditations I heard followed a predictable pattern. The one presiding at the Table would read one of the Lord's Supper institution narratives (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Cor 11:23–26), say a few words of general instruction, and then pray for the bread and the cup before distributing the elements.

In the early 1990s I heard my first extended communion devotional thought. For many, including myself, these longer reflections, approximately five minutes in length, were a breath of fresh air and made the Lord's Supper come alive in new ways. These extended devotional thoughts are now the standard practice in the churches where I worship.

In recent years, however, I have heard an increasing number of communion devotions that, while creative and even emotionally moving, did not proclaim the basic gospel message or prepare the church to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Not long ago I heard the following: "Last night I was watching the football game, trying to decide what to say for the Lord's Supper..." Next, the congregation was treated to a football analogy with a spiritual point before the prayer for the elements. In this instance and in others like it, the communion meditation is a "mini-sermon" or brief spiritual reflection with no clear and distinct rationale. It is worth asking if such devotional thoughts are an improvement over an unadorned reading of an institution narrative.

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\* Mac Sandlin, my colleague at Harding University, and Kip Long, worship minister at the Sycamore View Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, provided valuable feedback and recommendations for this article.

The purpose of this article is not to belittle those who lead Lord's Supper celebrations. In fact, I empathize with these leaders. I too have wondered what to say when asked to lead communion meditations, and I too have put the finishing touches on communion thoughts while watching a Saturday-night football game. Rather, my goal is to relieve some of the pressure of leading communion and to provide some guidance for those who are asked to serve in this way. What should we say when leading the assembly at the Lord's Supper?

### **The Lord's Supper and the Worship Assembly**

The primary theological conviction guiding the following recommendations is this: the Lord's Supper should be the one place in the worship assembly where the church can expect to hear and experience the basic gospel message week after week. No matter which sermon is preached, which songs are sung, or which prayers are prayed, at the Table the church proclaims, enacts, and celebrates the gospel and what God has done for us through Christ. The ongoing, weekly rehearsal of the gospel has always been important, but it is even more so now that fewer and fewer Christians, not to mention non-Christians, actually know the gospel story.

Let me unpack this theological conviction in several ways. A thoughtful minister recently suggested to me that the church should preach more about sex, and I agree. So imagine a worship service where the sermon is about sex (or another important topic like money, prayer, suffering, or evangelism), and the Lord's Supper is celebrated in such a way that the gospel is not clearly proclaimed. Songs will be sung, prayers will be prayed, and an important sermon that is both biblical and relevant will be preached. People will even be more attentive than usual if the sermon is about sex. Yet is it possible that the church could go through an entire worship service and not clearly proclaim and celebrate the gospel? Could the church forget to clearly confess that the Son of God became human, died for our sins, was raised by the Father, ascended and reigns as Lord, poured out the Holy Spirit on the church, and is coming back one day? What about the searching unbeliever who decides to visit the worship assembly that Sunday? The unbeliever would better understand a Christian view of sex or some other relevant topic, but would he or she hear the basic gospel message? Perhaps a song or two might proclaim the gospel (God is gracious and works in spite of us), but did we intentionally remind

ourselves and proclaim to the world the good news at the Table? The point of the communion meditation is simple yet profound: the Lord's Supper is the place where the church proclaims, enacts, and experiences the gospel week after week.

We can further unpack this central theological conviction by noting that, despite our shortcomings, the Lord's Supper always proclaims and enacts the gospel in tactile and symbolic ways. At the Table the church feeds on and remains in our risen Lord when we eat the bread ("This is my body") and drink the cup ("This is my blood"). The elements offer a material reminder of Christ's death, resurrection, and exaltation on our behalf. At the Lord's Supper the church shares table fellowship with God through our risen Lord and anticipates the feast to come in the new creation. Since the Lord's Supper is a rich, symbolic presentation and experience of the gospel, the words we say at the Table should reinforce the symbols and actions that proclaim and enact the good news.

There is a need for creativity in how the church tells "the old, old story," and the gospel is rich and multifaceted. Those presiding at the Table should emphasize different aspects of the gospel from week to week, but the basic message of communion devotions need not and should not be novel. We already have the topic, the gospel message. What remains is to discern how best to proclaim it in our time and place. In this case, weekly repetition is important and formative.

### **Word and Table**

Before offering specific suggestions for leading communion devotions, it is helpful to reflect on the order of worship and especially the relationship between the sermon (Word) and the Lord's Supper (Table). Word and Table have been the two central loci of Christian worship since the writing of the New Testament. In the history of Christianity, Word has typically come before Table, although in Churches of Christ Table often precedes Word.<sup>1</sup> Either order is acceptable, and congregations may want to alternate the order from time to time.

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise and accessible history of Christian worship, see James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

When the Word proclaims the indicative of the gospel—that is, when the sermon emphasizes what God has done for us in Christ—then I suggest that Table naturally follows Word. Here the sermon proclaims the gospel and God’s promises, and the Lord’s Supper is a celebration and experience of what God has done for us in Christ. At the Lord’s Supper the church, filled with the Spirit, enjoys table fellowship with God through the risen Lord and celebrates the forgiveness of sins and the hope of new creation.

When the Word proclaims the imperative of the gospel—that is, when the sermon emphasizes how God calls us to live in Christ—then I suggest that Word naturally follows Table.<sup>2</sup> Such sermons include those on topics like sex, money, prayer, suffering, and evangelism. Here the gospel is proclaimed at the Table, and the sermon expounds upon the implications of the gospel for Christian living.

It is helpful for the preacher of the Word and the one presiding at the Table to communicate about the sermon topic. This communication is important, not so that the communion devotion will flow from and support the sermon *per se*, but so that both the communion devotion and the sermon, as well as other worship activities, will flow from and proclaim the gospel. In other words, the Table should not merely “set up” the Word. Rather, both Table and Word should “drive home” the gospel.

### **Confessing the Faith**

When the Word stresses the imperative of the gospel, then I suggest that Word naturally follows Table, and the Table should clearly proclaim the gospel and God’s promises. There are numerous ways to proclaim the gospel at the Table, one of which is to simply recite a concise statement of belief. There are several New Testament passages that summarize the gospel, and these passages could be read with or without additional comment. For instance, some biblical scholars believe that Philippians 2:6–11 is an early Christian hymn or

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between the indicative and imperative of the gospel is clearly illustrated in some of the Pauline letters. For instance, Ephesians 1–3 stresses the indicative of the gospel, and Ephesians 4–6 stresses the imperative. Colossians 1–2 stresses the indicative, and Colossians 3–4 the imperative.

confessional statement.<sup>3</sup> If so, this hymn or confessional statement may be the earliest extant statement of Christian belief.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
   did not regard equality with God  
   as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
   taking the form of a slave,  
   being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
   he humbled himself  
   and became obedient to the point of death—  
   even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
 and gave him the name  
 that is above every name,  
 so that at the name of Jesus  
 every knee should bend,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 and every tongue should confess  
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5–11, NRSV)

In this passage Paul concisely rehearses the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation, and second coming of Christ. Furthermore, Paul models how the indicative of the gospel shapes the imperative of Christian living. Just as Jesus humbled himself for our salvation (2:6–11), so we should humble ourselves for the sake of one-another (2:3–5). Paul quite naturally proclaimed and lived out of the basic gospel message (incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation, and second coming of Jesus), and the church is called to do the same. Representative texts that summarize the gospel message include Acts 10:34–43; Acts 13:26–39; Romans 5:6–11; Romans 8:31–39; 1 Corinthians

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<sup>3</sup> See Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, rev. ed, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 99–104; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 191–97; and Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary 11 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 115–21.

15:1–11; 2 Corinthians 5:14–19; Galatians 4:4–7; Colossians 1:15–22; and 1 John 4:9–11.

In addition to proto-creedal material in the New Testament, there are numerous creedal statements from the patristic era, including baptismal creeds and informal “rules of faith” from authors like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen.<sup>4</sup> Two early creeds that, throughout history and today, have enjoyed widespread support are the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. Historically, leaders in the Stone-Campbell Movement in general and Churches of Christ in particular have had an aversion to creeds, especially to later, more-detailed statements like the Westminster Confession of Faith. We should reconsider, however, the importance of earlier statements like the Nicene Creed and Apostles’ Creed and how these creeds were used in patristic worship.<sup>5</sup>

As an example of early creedal statements, consider the Nicene Creed, which is structured around the headings of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and follows the narrative of salvation history from creation to new creation.

We believe in one God the Father all-powerful, Maker of heaven and of earth, and of all things both seen and unseen.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only –begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came to be; for us humans and for our salvation he came down from heaven and became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, became human and was crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried and rose up on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures; and he went up into the heavens and is seated at the Father’s right hand; he is coming again with glory to judge the living and the dead; his kingdom will have no end.

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<sup>4</sup> For a presentation and discussion of patristic rules of faith, see Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015). The confessional statements of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen are found in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1:46–50, 56–57, 63–65.

<sup>5</sup> See Keith D. Stanglin, “The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity,” *Christian Studies* 28 (2016): 7–20, and Daniel A. Napier, “A Sound Beginning: Retrieving an Ancient Model of Christian Conversion,” *Christian Studies* 27 (2013–2014): 47–63 for further exploration of the role of the creeds in the ancient church and ways they might be appropriated today.

And in the Spirit, the holy, the lordly, and life-giving one, proceeding forth from the Father, co-worshiped and co-glorified with Father and Son, the one who spoke through the prophets; in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. We confess one baptism for the forgiving of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and life in the age to come. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

The Nicene Creed concisely rehearses the biblical narrative and confesses the triune God; creation; the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, coronation, and second coming of Jesus; the church; baptism for the forgiveness of sins; and the general resurrection. The Nicene Creed, therefore, provides an outline of the faith that Christians have confessed throughout history. A congregational recitation of the Nicene Creed or Apostles' Creed before the Lord's Supper provides a powerful summary of the gospel and unites our confession with that of other Christians throughout time and space.

Congregational singing before the Lord's Supper is a familiar practice in Churches of Christ. In fact, Alexander Campbell noted that the hymnbook is "our creed in metre."<sup>7</sup> It is common to sing hymns about the cross before the Lord's Supper, but the song selections could be expanded to include those that offer a broader summary of the faith. Such songs include "In Christ Alone" (Keith Getty and Stuart Townend), "For All You've Done" (Reuben Morgan), "Because We Believe" (Nancy N. Gordon and Jamie Harvill), "There is a Redeemer" (Melody Green), "That's Why We Praise Him" (Tommy Walker), and the numerous songs based on the Apostles' Creed.

### **Experiencing the Faith**

When the Word proclaims the indicative of the gospel, then I suggest that Table naturally follows Word and facilitates an experience of and response to salvation. Five central themes that deserve brief reflection, and that unpack the experience of and response to salvation at the Table, are (1) communion with God and God's people, (2) thanksgiving, (3) remembrance, (4) covenant

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<sup>6</sup> *The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*, in *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 1:163. I discuss the Nicene Creed in more detail in *Centered in God: The Trinity and Christian Spirituality* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2014), 36–38.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Bethany: Alexander Campbell, 1829), 12.



Representative texts that emphasize communion with God and God's people, other than the institution narratives, include Matthew 9:9–13; Luke 24:13–35; John 6:35–40, John 6:53–57; 1 Corinthians 10:14–17; and Revelation 3:20. Representative songs include “Come Share the Lord” (Bryan Jeffery Leech), “We are the Body of Christ” (David B. Hampton and Scott Wesley Brown), “Bind us Together” (Bob Gillman), “Here in this Place” (Chris Davis), and “Come to the Table” (Claire Cloninger and Martin Nystrom).

The Lord's Supper is a time of thanksgiving to God for our salvation and our many blessings. The term *Eucharisteō*, “to give thanks,” is used in reference to Jesus' prayer of blessing for the bread and the cup, and “Eucharist” is the most common term for the Lord's Supper in the early church.<sup>10</sup> The Lord's Supper is a time of thanksgiving because of the salvation we have through Christ. In Christ our sin has been forgiven, we have been reconciled to God, and we have received the Spirit. Representative texts that emphasize thanksgiving, other than the institution narratives, include Ephesians 1:3–6 and 1 Peter 1:3–7. Representative songs include “Worthy is the Lamb” (Darlene Zschech), “Give Thanks” (Henry Smith), “Listen to our Hearts” (Geoff Moore and Steven Curtis Chapman), “Thank You Lord” (Gary L. Mabry), and “Thank You Lord” (Dennis Jernigan).

The Lord's Supper is a time of remembrance of what God has done for us in Jesus. Such remembering, however, is not simply bringing to mind events from the distant past but recognizing and participating in the significance of these events today. Jesus died for our sins, but he is also risen from the dead, reigns as Lord, serves as host at the Table, and is coming back one day. At the Table we remember the cross as well as the full implications of Jesus' work for us. Representative texts that emphasize remembrance, other than the institution narratives, include 2 Timothy 2:8 and the texts listed earlier that summarize the gospel message. Representative songs include “Above All” (Lenny LeBlanc and Paul Baloche), “The Old Rugged Cross” (George Bennard), “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (Isaac Watts), “Hallelujah! What a Savior” (Phillip P. Bliss), and “Had It Not Been the Lord” (Debbie Dorman).

The Lord's Supper is a time of covenant renewal. All the institution narratives speak of the “new covenant,” especially in relation to the cup. When

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, see *Didache* 9.1 and Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66.



## **Technology as Messiah**

...[T]he question, “What will a new technology do?” is no more important than the question, “What will a new technology undo?” Indeed, the latter question is more important, precisely because it is asked so infrequently. One might say, then, that a sophisticated perspective on technological change includes one's being skeptical of Utopian and Messianic visions drawn by those who have no sense of history or of the precarious balances on which culture depends. In fact, if it were up to me, I would forbid anyone from talking about the new information technologies unless the person can demonstrate that he or she knows something about the social and psychic effects of the alphabet, the mechanical clock, the printing press, and telegraphy—in other words, knows something about the costs of great technologies....

Our unspoken slogan has been “technology über alles,” and we have been willing to shape our lives to fit the requirements of technology, not the requirements of culture. This is a form of stupidity, especially in an age of vast technological change. We need to proceed with our eyes wide open so that we many use technology rather than be used by it.

Neil Postman, “Five Things We Need to Know about Technological Change”

## **Didache on the Eucharist**

Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks as follows. First, concerning the cup: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever.” And concerning the broken bread: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge that you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever. Just as this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and then was gathered together and

became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.” But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord, for the Lord has also spoken concerning this: “Do not give what is holy to dogs.”

*Didache* (ca. 70)

### **Justin on the Eucharist**

...[B]read and a chalice containing wine mixed with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of all, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and he recites lengthy prayers of thanksgiving to God in the name of those to whom He granted such favors.

We call this food the Eucharist, of which only he can partake who has acknowledged the truth of our teachings, who has been cleansed by baptism for the remission of his sins and for his regeneration, and who regulates his life upon the principles laid down by Christ. Not as ordinary bread or as ordinary drink do we partake of them, but just as, through the word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ became Incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* (ca. 150)

### **Peter Lombard on the Eucharist**

We are cleansed by baptism; we are perfected in the good by the Eucharist. Baptism extinguishes the ardour of the vices; the Eucharist restores us spiritually. And so it is excellently called ‘Eucharist,’ that is, good grace, because in this sacrament not only is there an increase of virtue and grace, but he who is the fount and origin of all grace is wholly received.

Peter Lombard, *Sentences* (ca. 1150)

## **Robert Milligan on the Eucharist**

We must, therefore, simultaneously eat of the commemoration loaf and of the bread of life; and while we literally drink of the symbolic cup, we must also, at the same time, drink spiritually of that blood, which alone can supply the wants of the thirsty soul. *Unless we do this, the bread that we eat, can in no sense be to us the body of the Son of God; nor can the wine that we drink be in any sense the blood of the New Covenant, which was shed for the remission of the sins of many.*

Robert Milligan, *Millennial Harbinger* (1859)

## **Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry**

The Eucharist, which always includes both word and sacrament, is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God. It is the great thanksgiving to the Father for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, for everything accomplished by God now in the Church and in the world in spite of the sins of human beings, for everything that God will accomplish in bringing the Kingdom to fulfilment....

Christ himself with all that he has accomplished for us and for all creation (in his incarnation, servant-hood, ministry, teaching, suffering, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit) is present in this *anamnesis*, granting us communion with himself. The Eucharist is also the foretaste of his *parousia* and of the final kingdom....

As the Eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday. As it is the new sacramental meal of the people of God, every Christian should be encouraged to receive communion frequently.

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982)

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