The situation since 1930

During the last century, more and more evangelical Protestants came to accept what they had not previously accepted: that the Lord’s Supper is the “central act of Christian worship.” Such an assertion entails more than an affirmation that the Lord’s Supper should be frequently observed; it in fact holds this rite to be so indispensable that it must be central in the service. This conviction spread under a number of influences, the chief of which was the Oxford or Tractarian Movement. This early nineteenth-century movement influenced first Anglicans, then Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists in the direction of heightened frequency of administration of the Supper and the recovery of pre-Reformation ideas about worship and ministry. Yet,  

200 years ago, even Anglicans—known today for their weekly observance of “Holy Communion”—would have maintained this rite between two or four times annually. David Bebbington has argued in his *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, that the Oxford movement had a more pervasive influence in the English-speaking world in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II (of our time) than it did in the reign of Victoria.² The relaying of these impulses to wider Protestantism was accomplished nowhere as effectively as through W.D. Maxwell’s manual of 1936, *An Outline of Christian Worship*.³

It is important to grant that this renewed emphasis has also come in the wake of nineteenth-century “restorationist” Christianity. Rooted in the small Glasite/Sandemanian movement of eighteenth-century Scotland and continuing into the Churches of Christ and the Plymouth Brethren Movement, this stream also championed the idea that the Lord’s Supper—if not the central act of Christian worship—was at least an essential part, such that it ought to be a weekly observance.⁴

The aim of this paper is to show that responsible evangelical theologians of the eighteenth century had begun to review the question of the frequency of observance of the Lord’s Supper quite in advance of these two “stimuli,” for quite distinct reasons and that they reached distinct conclusions—worthy of our current consideration.

⁴ John Glas (1695–1773) was ordained as a Church of Scotland minister in 1719 and proceeded into Independency in 1730. While he had upheld a monthly practice of communion as a Presbyterian (a high frequency given the ‘status quo’ in that time), he introduced weekly communion in the 1730’s. Robert Sandeman (1718–1771) became Glas’ son-in-law and transmitted his ideas into England and America. See entries for each in Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*. For the early roots of the Churches of Christ movement, see David M. Thompson, *Let Sects and Parties Fall* (London: Berean Press, 1980), ch. 1.
Ambitious early Reformation practice gives way to seasonal observance

In both Reformation Europe and Reformation Scotland, the expectation was that each believer would participate in the Lord’s Supper between four and twelve times per year. But this standard was hard to achieve both because of the initial shortage of pastors (only a fraction of pre-Reformation priests and monks had entered the ministry of the Reformed churches) and because of the low expectations regarding the holy meal that rank-and-file Protestants (all former Roman Catholics) brought with them in the first generations after the Reformation. It was hard to explain to such “novice” Protestants that their minimalist expectation of participating only once-annually in communion (though masses had been celebrated at least weekly) suggested a lack of spiritual vitality.

A further complication was that pre-Reformation Catholicism had often linked this prevailing infrequent participation in communion with seasonal festivals and pageantry such as the feast of Corpus Christi and especially of Easter. These festivals had served to glamorize the rite, by associating it with pageantry. The multi-generational “project” of working to uproot and displace a lingering Catholic mythology surrounding the administration of the Lord’s Supper entailed seventeenth-century Presbyterians in Scotland and Northern Ireland taking over the Catholic practice of such seasonal communion festivals and turning them into large-scale public events involving gospel preaching.

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and administration of the Supper. This interesting adaptation carried with it certain unforeseen ripple effects, among which were these:

1. Communion festivals tied to particular seasons required multiple preachers drawn from a wide region for a long weekend. The staging of a communion festival in one place meant that church services (and the availability of the Lord’s Supper) in other places took a back seat. Peter was robbed to pay Paul, as we would say.

2. Communion seasons promoted on this scale could not be staged even the four times yearly mandated in light of distances travelled, personnel required and the expectation that communicants be free from a Thursday through a Monday.

3. By the early 1700s, there was a growing sense of unease over the negative effects of these practices. While communion festivals had “morphed” into evangelistic events, they had, for the two reasons just named, made the Lord’s Supper less accessible as an ordinary means of grace. Communion festivals were, by definition, only periodic and seasonal. And against this, protests began in earnest. We read that already by 1708 at Glasgow, the regional Synod (a regional aggregate of presbyteries) commended to its churches a somewhat more energetic practice of four times yearly communion. The commendation was renewed in 1748.

We will look at two men, one from each side of the Atlantic, who protested against the prevailing infrequency of the Lord’s Supper: John Erskine (Church of Scotland) and John Mitchell Mason (Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in America).

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7 This adaptation of Reformation principle regarding the Supper to long-established Scottish Catholic custom is detailed in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), chap. 1. An important alteration introduced with these Protestant festivals was the change of season (usually summer or autumn) so that there would be clear differentiation between the old and the new festivals.
John Erskine

John Erskine (1721–1803) was a well-born Edinburgh native who had been encouraged by his family to prepare for a career in law, a discipline of which his father was a professor at Edinburgh University. Nevertheless, young Erskine was redirected toward theological studies and the Christian ministry. After theological studies at Edinburgh University where he had earlier pursued studies in law, Erskine entered the pastoral ministry in 1743 at Kirkintilloch, some ten miles east of Glasgow. This placed him in the vicinity of the earliest Scottish venues where George Whitefield (1714–1770) had, in the year previous, preached in conjunction with outdoor communion festivals. Erskine made it his business to defend the Anglican evangelist’s reputation against some criticisms which were levelled.  

In that same decade, however, and in a manner unrelated to Whitefield’s activity, there began to be a fresh attempt (just as in 1708) to encourage congregations of the Church of Scotland to celebrate more frequent communions. Kirkintilloch was within the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr and, in 1748, that body went on record as urging its churches to aim at recovering the Reformation-era standard of communion four times yearly, in the face of lackadaisical practice which had seen frequency decline to once or twice per year. Young Erskine went into print in 1749 to add such arguments as he could muster in support of this stance.

Especially of note is the fact that this treatise, Dissertation on Frequent Communicating, was composed in his twenty-seventh year, the fifth year of his pastoral ministry at Kirkintilloch and at, what was by the standards of that time, an inconvenient distance from theological libraries at Glasgow or Edinburgh. In the treatise of seventy pages are displayed the considerable theological skills which would eventually secure for him the Doctor of Divinity degree from Glasgow University in 1766.  

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9 We cannot rule out that Erskine went, at intervals, to draw on the theological holdings of Glasgow or Edinburgh Universities.

10 N.R. Needham, “John Erskine,” in Cameron, ed., Scottish Dictionary of Church History and Theology, 300–301. The doctorate was conferred in the aftermath of the publication, in two volumes, of Erskine’s Theological Dissertations in the year preceding.
Erskine began by addressing two important preliminary issues related to the frequency of communion. He insisted that: (1) The motivation behind the determination to see communion frequency increased to four times annually was wholesome and commendable, and (2) There was no denying that the means designated for securing more frequent observance (simpler, less-extended weekends, not requiring extra visiting preachers, and with all congregations observing on the same Sundays) were proper and unexceptionable.\textsuperscript{11} With these fundamentals in place, he posed the searching question: “And are there any whose faith is so lively and vigorous, that they seldom need the help of this ordinance to strengthen and increase it?”\textsuperscript{12}

But he knew better than to leave matters there, at the level of reckoning up of practical benefits; he understood that his case would be made or broken by his supplying biblical and theological reasoning in support of communion frequency, and to that he next turned.

Like a good number of evangelical Christians in the eighteenth century, Erskine took the view that the church in the apostolic and post-apostolic age had enjoyed the Lord’s Supper at least weekly. He believed this to be supported by the “as often” language of 1 Corinthians 11:26 and still more certainly by Acts 2:42, 46 (where he took the “breaking of bread” language to be an unambiguous reference to the Supper). While acknowledging that we have no apostolic command to uphold weekly observance, he reminded his readers that we do not have a command from the apostles regarding the alteration of our day of rest from the seventh to the first day either.\textsuperscript{13} He showed himself familiar with the rejoinder of those, like Daniel Whitby (a standard commentator of that era), that the “breaking of bread” language of the New Testament has a much wider usage than references to the Lord’s Supper; \textsuperscript{14} however

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} John Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” in Theological Dissertations, vol. 2 (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1765), 244.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 248.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 256–257, 265.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Whitby’s well-founded caution about the range of occurrences of New Testament “breaking of bread language” came in his commentary on Acts 2:42; mysteriously, he took the opposite view when treating the same phrase in his comment on Acts 20:7.
\end{itemize}
he believed that the “scope” or context of the passages he cited required this meaning. He also found strong New Testament support for weekly communion in Acts 20:7 and 11.\(^{15}\)

From this New Testament material, he passed naturally to the period of the church fathers, and showed by appeals to Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome and Augustine that frequent and even weekly communion was widespread in the second through fourth-century church.\(^{16}\) In order to undergird this historical-theological point, he then showed how such Protestant authorities as John Calvin, Johann Franz Buddæus and Daniel Waterland had cited these same church fathers in their own descriptions of the early church’s practice of frequent communion.

**SEEDS OF DECLINE**

Yet, having done so, Erskine needed to deal with the evident fact that this frequency of observance in the early Christian centuries had disappeared.\(^{17}\) Where did he lay the blame for this decline? Erskine proposed that it was the official toleration opening the way for the eventual adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire:

> 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

\(^{15}\) Appeals to this passage in favour of weekly observance suppose that the “breaking of bread” (which itself may only indicate a common meal) was a Lord’s Supper and that this constituted the central purpose of this assembly. Given the range of usage of this terminology across the New Testament, it is not possible to be dogmatic in upholding the interpretation which Erskine favoured. That second century writers understood these passages in such a sense was evident to Erskine, and this may have coloured his interpretation of this New Testament language.

\(^{16}\) Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 258. His access to these church fathers in Greek editions, while a pastor in a country town, either implies an impressive private library or regular visits to Glasgow University.

\(^{17}\) Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 266.
number of hypocrites, from views of worldly interest, inter-mingled themselves with the true disciples of Christ. And in a century or two more, this little leaven leavened the whole lump…. Such nominal Christians could have no just sense of the use and benefits of the Lord’s Supper and the obligation to frequent it…. Their example would soon be followed by lukewarm Christians who had fallen from their first love.\(^{18}\)

Erskine is asserting more here than that the Imperial toleration and eventual recognition of the early church contributed to a decline in frequency of communion; it is that this toleration and eventual recognition contributed to a decay of piety, and the decay of piety showed itself in indifference to the holy meal. He cited conciliar decisions from Elipris (Spain) in A.D. 324 that forbade monetary contributions to the church from those who declined to participate in the Supper. Another council, held at Antioch in A.D. 341, agreed that those who came to services only to hear the Scripture read and then departed before the administration of the Supper were to be “cast out of the church, till such time as they gave public proof of their repentance.” He noted that this problem only intensified over time; by the late fourth century, Chrysostom had lamented that at the administration of the holy meal “we stand in vain at the altar and none care to receive.” The Council of Toledo in A.D. 400 had needed to depose clergy who absented themselves from “daily prayers and communion.”\(^{19}\)

Thus far, Erskine had sketched a trajectory depicting a weekly administration of the Lord’s Supper from apostolic times to A.D. 450, yet with a steadily diminishing regular participation of the bulk of professed Christians. In reliance on the early Christian historian, Socrates (born A.D. 380), he took the view that the first church to abandon this weekly standard was Rome, followed by Alexandria. By A.D. 506, he found that in the West the stated expectation for a professed Christian’s participation in the Lord’s Supper had been lowered to three times per year; for a further two centuries the principle of

\(^{18}\) Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 267;\(^{19}\) Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 268. Such a policy indicates the existence of a widely-divergent dual policy, with very lofty expectations on the clergy in comparison with those laid on ordinary believers.
weekly communion was upheld in the churches of the East. The process of decline had gone on, almost unchecked, so that by the time of the Council of Trent (1546–1560), the Church of Rome had stipulated that a once-annual participation in the Supper was sufficient.  

**REFORMATION SEEDS OF RECOVERY**

Erskine took special pains in demonstrating that the reformers and Puritans, while determined to distance themselves from the errors of the Roman Mass, were united in zeal to far surpass the actual frequency of participation insisted on by Rome. In Erskine’s day, the Church of Rome, despite its many Eucharistic services (offered even on behalf of the dead), still upheld the minimalist expectation that once-annual participation was sufficient.

Situated in the west of Scotland, Erskine lamented that he did not have at his fingertips all the information about Europe’s Protestant churches that he desired. He entered into correspondence with European pastors to try to fill lacunae in his understanding. On this basis, he could tell his readers that the Bohemian Brethren and the French Reformed were insisting on four celebrations of the Supper per year and the Church of England three. Lutherans, he understood to be still maintaining a weekly Lord’s Supper. Erskine knew of Puritans in Old and New England upholding the practice of the Lord’s Supper on the first Sunday of each month, or eight times per year.  

It was his understanding that Calvin, who personally had preferred the early church practice of weekly communion, had settled for a monthly administration, as had the English congregation at Geneva led by John Knox during the persecuting reign of Queen Mary Tudor.

Now, having reached the career and example of Knox, Erskine had his opportunity to detail the expectations regarding administration of the Supper, set out at the enactment of the Scottish Reformation in 1560. The *First Book of Discipline* (1560) had set out the expectation that each congregation would celebrate the Supper four times annually. This policy had been modified only slightly, two years later.

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22 Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 275. See also footnote 5.
23 See footnote 4.
Given the shortage of ministers, it was agreed that rural congregations might have the Supper twice annually and that those in towns would be expected to maintain quarterly administration. But the combination of shortage of ministers, political turmoil pitting the young King James VI against the General Assembly, and the long-established medieval pattern of neglect of regular participation, meant that these Reformation expectations were as often honoured in the breach as in the observance. The whole question needed to be revisited in 1638 and 1641.

As to why, even in the second half of that century, the problem of infrequent communion seemed so intractable, Erskine pinpointed issues already mentioned in passing. First was political and religious turmoil with the Stuart monarchy which, both before and after the Commonwealth period (when there was no monarch), meddled too much in the government and liturgy of the Scottish Church and which polarized churches and ministers by these efforts. Second was the practice (alluded to in our introduction) adopted by pastors who sought to capitalize on the evangelistic possibilities of regional communion festivals, stretching from a Thursday through a Monday and involving as many as ten preachers. Whatever these festivals achieved in exposing vast crowds to the preaching of the gospel and admitting many hundreds in attendance to participation in the Lord’s Supper, came at the expense of other nearby congregations which lost their preachers and people to the mass rallies. Whatever these communion festivals were, they were not an effective method of instilling stated, frequent congregational communions, community by community. Erskine noted that the General Assembly of 1701, surveying the ongoing popularity of these festivals, recommended that congregations and pastors give higher priority to the administration of the Supper “in their bounds.”

He concluded his historical survey by pressing the question:

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27 Erskine, “Dissertation on Frequent Communicating,” 284. This stance was reiterated once more in 1712 and 1724.
Are our times better than the Reformation and coven-anting periods, when our church approached much nearer to the primitive simplicity in dispensing the Supper of the Lord? Has our church gained anything, 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"?  

ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS

Erskine could not leave his subject without dealing with objections that his support for more frequent communion provoked. One, which will strike us as rather "from the blue," insisted that Christian believers in primitive times had lived at a higher plane and could benefit from frequent participation in the Supper without the more extensive preparations which had grown customary of late. Erskine turned this aside by insisting that this argument failed to reckon with how more frequent communion could elevate rank-and-file Christians of modern times. A second argued that as the Jewish Passover was observed but once a year, the Lord’s Supper might be administered appropriately on that same plan. In reply, Erskine, relying on the late Puritan, Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), maintained that Passover did not stand so solitarily as this objection maintained, inasmuch as the Jewish sacrificial system was ongoing: weekly, monthly and annually. Thus, the Passover as an offering of sacrifice was not utterly solitary in the cycle of the Jewish calendar.  

A third argument insisted that too-frequent participation in the Supper lessened its solemnity, whereas participation at long intervals preserved this. Erskine responded by warning against trying to be wiser than God: if it was God’s will that we participate frequently, then the question of hypothetical ill effects was his to deal with. Other means of grace, such as prayer, and hearing the Word did not suffer from frequent use; why suggest this of the Supper? Fourth, and as we can imagine, Erskine needed to respond to the insistence that more

frequent communion—even if it be quarterly—represented a clear innovation. This he turned aside with the reminder that the eighteenth-century practice fell below that recommended at the Reformation, and before it in the primitive church.  

Fifth, he needed to address the insistence that the Christian population of Scotland did not favour the recommended frequency. This objection, which may have been very well-founded, he turned aside with a proper insistence that the church is to decide such matters on biblical grounds, not on the basis of popular sentiment. That great Christian pastors and writers in previous days had argued for frequent participation in the Supper, Erskine demonstrated by providing details regarding the biblical arguments of John Calvin and Richard Baxter (1615–1691), and his own contemporaries John Willison (1680–1750) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758).  

There was, last of all, the veiled threat that the General Assembly’s policy of proposing not less than quarterly communions might drive people out of the Church of Scotland and into the breakaway Secession movement (begun in 1733), where the administration of the Supper was also still following the “festival” pattern. To this, Erskine calmly replied that as the reason for the Secession two decades earlier had nothing to do with communion practice and, as its leaders were very reasonable people who could not find fault with the Church of Scotland’s determination to address this problem, this threat was exaggerated.

**John Mitchell Mason**  
Our second eighteenth-century Presbyterian to press the case for more frequent communion was a full generation younger than our first—and clearly in his debt. John Mitchell Mason (1770–1829) was born in New York City and was the son of a prominent immigrant Presbyterian minister (also named John Mason). Educated in his native city's

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Columbia College (now University) as well as Edinburgh University, he was, from 1793, successor to his late father as pastor of the city’s Associate Reformed Presbyterian congregation. It is clear from correspondence between father and son, conducted while young John matriculated at Edinburgh, that John Erskine, by then a minister of Old Greyfriars Church, very near the university, was familiar to them.

Though John M. Mason (like his deceased father) served a congregation of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (the American denomination descended from a division in the Scottish Church in 1733), it is evident that in the matter of the administration of the Lord’s Supper, there was little or no distinction between the mother church and the congregations which had stood apart from her since 1733. The frequency of communion was, in neither, in excess of once or twice annually. And the crossing of the Atlantic by the various branches of the Scottish Presbyterian family had, if anything exacerbated this infrequency due to the ongoing shortage of ministers. It was in his first decade of pastoral ministry at New York and while not yet thirty years old that Mason took up his pen to write *Letters on Frequent Communion*.

**THE ARGUMENT IN OUTLINE**

Mason’s approach to the question of communion frequency could be described as pastoral and practical. He maintained that Holy Communion as practiced (especially) in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was embraced by the people with neither “that frequency nor simplicity which were the delight and ornament of the primitive churches.” He described a current communion practice of “once in twelve months or once in six”; moreover, this practice was

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37 The publication of 1798 was issued by T. & J. Swords, Pearl Street, New York. An Edinburgh edition, published by J. Ritchie was issued in the same year. I have consulted the work as it is printed in volume 1 of Ebenezer Mason, ed., *Complete Works of John M. Mason, D.D.*, 4 vols. (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849).
also “loaded with encumbrances which lack scriptural warrant.”

He was focusing, in late-eighteenth-century New York, on the identical practices which had motivated Erskine to write almost half-a-century before. Mason would take the two issues in turn.

THE NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

Mason was very quick to admit that Jesus himself had left no explicit indication in the Gospels of the frequency he intended his followers to remember him in the Lord’s Supper. “Something is, no doubt, to be left to Christian prudence.” This restraint on Jesus’ part, he took to be the basis for a reasonable flexibility on the church’s part. “Incidental hindrances” could, in this way, be honestly accommodated.

Yet with this admission in place, Mason went on to lament the fact that the Presbyterian churches of his time—far from simply dealing with the question of frequency in light of Jesus’ reserve—had fallen into carelessness. He attributed to many an attitude which supposed that “whether we communicate twice in a year, or once; or only every other year is…indifferent.” At root, this casual attitude toward the frequency of the Supper sidestepped the expectation of frequent communion services. The apostle Paul had instructed, “as often as you eat and drink” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Pressing the issue further, he asked:

And does not the tenor of this command teach thee, that the frequency of thy sacramental commemorations of him will be in proportion to the ardor of thy love? Alas, brethren, if this is a criterion of love to our Lord, the pretentions of most of us are low indeed.

OBJections needing answers

a) What is advocated represents innovation over common practice

Having acknowledged, initially, the fact that Jesus himself left us with no firm policy on frequency of communion, and then personally advocated a heightened frequency of administration as an expression of

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love to him, Mason first faced an objection that represents his proposal as an unwarranted innovation. In response, he will only allow that if innovation is found in his argument, it is of a kind which challenges recent rather than ancient custom. In sum, Mason argues that the infant church practiced a frequent communion which was only lost because of the advance of the carnality in the church after Rome’s decree of toleration of Christianity in the year A.D. 312.42

He found evidence of this frequency of observance in New Testament Scriptures now familiar to us. They are “proofs” still being cited: Acts 20:7,11 where “breaking bread” is named as a central purpose of the assembly in which Paul preached until nearly midnight. He found similar support in 1 Corinthians 11:20; there also he claimed to find that participation in the communion meal was central to the assembling of the believers of that city.43 Explicitly following an earlier author, Erskine, he went on to claim that the weekly communion associated with Paul and his churches continued as the practice of the early churches for “above two centuries” and as universal practice.44 Declension from this uniformity was observable “toward the close of the fourth century.” By A.D. 506, he found that the expectation of the early church had been lowered; believers were by then expected to participate in the Lord’s Supper at “Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday.” By the time of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, this expectation had been lowered to a mere once-annual participation in the Supper.45

It was this shrunken conception of participation in the Lord’s Supper which had confronted the reformers of the sixteenth century. John Calvin had denounced such a practice as “a contrivance of the

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43 “Letters on Frequent Communion,” in Works of Mason, 1:400, 402. This interpretation of the signification of the verb “sunerchomai,” still remarkably widespread in the Christian world, does not properly take into account that even in 1 Corinthians 11–14, the verb and its cognates need imply no more than an assembling for religious purposes. Thus, for example, in 1 Corinthians 14:26, the verb is used to introduce the idea of a highly participatory church service which will include numerous elements. There is no mention of the Lord’s Supper occurring in the church service Paul describes there.
Mason was aware that Calvin’s own preference would have been to institute a weekly observance of the Supper; he also found that Calvin’s contemporary, the Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz, was of the same mind. He reported that the Belgic Confession of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands had stipulated a six-times-yearly cycle for the Supper, while the Reformed Churches of France had set a minimum number of observances at four. Scotland’s own Reformed Church had set a similar standard at the enactment of her Reformation in 1560. As for the seventeenth century, he reported that a monthly communion had been the practice of many of the ministers who participated in the sessions of the Westminster Assembly (1643–1647).

With all this in place, Mason could confidently plead that “the facts will convince every honest inquirer that frequent communion is not an innovation…. Let us return to the old way in which the first confessors of the cross have walked before us.”

b) The proposal encourages irreverence
Mason knew that he must also deal with the protest that the consequence of very frequent participation in the Lord’s Supper would “deaden affection, destroy solemnity, banish reverence and thus be injurious.” He was utterly unimpressed by such an objection inasmuch as he judged it to be the sentiment not of the person who was truly seeking to advance reverence for God but “of the formalist, who goes to the communion table only once or twice a year to save appearances, or to quiet conscience…. That such (an opinion) should ever be proposed by a living Christian is truly astonishing.”

To this seemingly perennial line of reasoning, Mason countered with another question: “Do other duties grow contemptible by their frequency? Is the Sabbath vile because of its weekly return? The
Divine Scriptures, family religion, secret prayer?” No. Believers, entrusted with the Lord’s Supper for their spiritual nourishment “should not refuse, and justify their refusal by pleading that it would (if frequent) diminish their reverence.” Could it really be possible that “the seldomer we communicate the better?”

c) The proposal would disturb long-established “fasts” and “thanksgivings”

Both in Scotland and early America, annual or semi-annual Presbyterian communion festivals had incorporated into their extended weekend formats a preliminary day of fasting and a concluding day of thanksgiving. Mason could well anticipate that the proposal for more frequent communion would encounter a serious objection that more frequent communions would threaten these now-hallowed days which were like prelude and postlude to the main event. It would do so by making unsustainable (through a quarterly or still more frequent communion schedule) that extended Thursday through Monday program, which had come to be considered inseparable from the communion itself. People could simply not be away from their daily toil (Thursday through Monday) multiple times during the yearly round. And any argument for frequency of communion (such as made by Mason) thus threatened to strip away these revered practices associated with the ordinance.

To this considerable objection, Mason abruptly emphasized, “They have no warrant in the book of God.” Neither Jesus or the apostles had done anything to encumber the Lord’s Supper with these additional practices. To this he added, “They are contrary to the judgment of almost the whole Christian church.” However venerated these fasts and thanksgivings had come to be regarded among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestants, they were not part of the practice of the church of the ages.

He went on to add, that though days of fasting and of thanksgiving are innocent enough in and of themselves, “the question is whether (these) are divine ordinances with the holy supper.” By extending the number of days necessary to be spent in attending the established communion festivals, these fasts and thanksgivings in effect served as

barriers to the frequent observance of the Supper provided for by Jesus and the apostles. The multiplying of services in which sermons needed to be preached necessitated the calling away from their congregations of additional ministers who, by their assisting in communion festivals away from home, deprived whole congregations of their regular diet of the preached Word on given Lord’s Days.54

**Analysis**

Though both treatises were written by young pastor-theologians not yet thirty years of age, and in overwhelming agreement, it is not difficult, at the same time, to draw distinctions between them. The treatises differed as to setting, depth of investigation and form of argument. Erskine had written in open support of his denomination’s repeated appeals for greater frequency of administration. Mason dealt with the same practical realities, yet had no existing denominational initiative to strengthen by his writing. The treatise of Mason deserves to be seen as the less original work, when compared with the writing of Erskine on this subject; Mason showed a clear literary dependency on that work of 1749 (as recirculated in Erskine’s *Theological Dissertations of 1765*).55 Erskine was one of the two near-contemporary theological writers on whom Mason leaned most heavily. Thus, when Mason referred to Patristic writers, he seems only to have cited these opinions to the extent that they were provided in the named authors.56 Yet while the “laurels” for depth of research would fall to Erskine, it can honestly be said that it was Mason who took the fruits of the research of others and set them out in the compelling way which was more likely to be consulted by laymen and church officers. His answers to potential

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54 Mason’s treatise, though written in North America was read on both sides of the Atlantic. A reply was composed by a Glasgow minister of his denomination, John Thomson, entitled *Letters Addressed to the Rev. John Mason M.A. of New York*. Of this, an American edition was prepared at Troy, N.Y. in 1801.

55 Note that Erskine’s treatise is explicitly cited in Works of Mason, 1: 404, 406, 412.

56 The other authority was that of Joseph Bingham (1668–1723), *Origines Ecclesiasticæ* (Halle, 1738). Intriguingly, both the Bingham and the Erskine volumes are among the holdings of the Burke Theological Library associated with today’s Columbia University, New York. John Mitchell Mason was founding professor of theology in the first American theological seminary of his denomination, begun at New York in 1805 and enduring until 1821.
objections came earlier in his treatise and were more extensive than comparable material offered by the earlier writer.

If the two treatises on frequency of communion can be contrasted in these ways, they may also be viewed aggregately (since of largely overlapping sentiments). The following commonalities can be observed:

1. Each writer granted, from the outset, that neither Jesus nor his apostles left to the church any actual pronouncement on the subject of frequency of communion. At best, there are inferences which may be drawn from the New Testament.

2. Each agreed that a primitive high frequency of communion in the first Christian centuries had gradually given way in medieval Catholicism to a minimalist expectation of once-annual participation.

3. Each accepted that the now-hallowed practice of annual or semi-annual communion festivals represented an innovation of the early seventeenth century, and as such represented a departure from the original Reformation expectation of an at least quarterly administration.

4. The annual or semi-annual communion festival—whatever might be said about its evangelistic potentialities for preaching the gospel to the mixed multitudes which gathered—was inadequate to the spiritual needs of ordinary Christians and provided to these insufficient opportunities for communing with their Lord.

5. The annual or semi-annual communion festival was not only inadequate to the needs of the ordinary Christian believer, it was also injurious to the health of neighbouring congregations which—forfeiting their preachers who went to assist in these weekend events—had no Sunday services of any kind.

6. While each writer was personally convinced that the primitive church had enjoyed the Lord’s Supper weekly and knew that the restoration of that primitive frequency had been the
desire of John Calvin, they also accepted that, from the time of Constantine, the church had declined from its original purity and cohesiveness. The mixed nature of the church from Constantine forward rendered it less capable of delighting in the frequency of practice enjoyed in earlier times. Sadly, that mixed character continued to their own day, two-and-a-half centuries after the Reformation.

7. The common position of Erskine and Mason, therefore, was that evangelical churches and believers needed to resort to the Lord’s Supper more frequently than the communion festival practice had allowed—while not attempting to recover precisely the practices they believed were characteristic of apostolic times. A quarterly, six-times-yearly or monthly communion all represented a giant step in the desired direction, and they asked for no more at that time.

No one will suggest that our ecclesiastical situation is identical to that faced by Erskine and Mason. Since their times, the case for weekly administration of the Supper has been forcefully made twice by the dawning of nineteenth-century “restorationist” initiatives, such as the Plymouth Brethren and the Stone-Campbell movements, and by the percolation into evangelical Protestantism of ideas whose genesis lay in the nineteenth-century Oxford movement. In our own time, one also regularly hears appeal being made to the preference of John Calvin for weekly communion.

To this writer, the literary efforts of Erskine and Mason are salutary in three respects. First, we should note that both men were renowned for their evangelical zeal and pan-denominational interests. No one could charge either with a love of ritual or liturgical embroidery at the expense of gospel proclamation. Let those who want to contend for

57 The contemporary influence of these two nineteenth-century movements has been alluded to in the introduction to this paper.

58 The biographers of Erskine, Moncreiff-Wellwood and Yeager, make it plain that Erskine was the forthright leader of the rising “popular” or evangelical party in the Church of Scotland in the period up to his death and, as well, an evangelical leader of trans-Atlantic significance. He had been the means of the publication of most of the works of Jonathan Edwards in Edinburgh and was the benefactor of numerous American
heightened frequency of administration of the Supper in our time demonstrate the same multiple zeal, lest heightened sacramental observance be brought in at the expense of the proclamation of the gospel which is so necessary for encouraging the pious hunger and aspiration which the Lord’s Supper presupposes to exist.

Second, they show themselves to be vitally concerned that evangelical practice surrounding the Lord’s Supper be at least informed by early church practice. That is not the same thing as to say that evangelical practice must be only that of the early church. Our evangelical Protestant tradition is being faulted in our day for having shown itself to be so utterly unconcerned with conformity to the early church as to be “threadbare.” Erskine and Mason stand as important examples of how ancient Christian practice was consulted with care in the very period when our evangelical movement is alleged to have slipped from its moorings. Yet their consultation of Christian antiquity did not lead them to endorse wooden conformity to it.

Third, Erskine and Mason are important examples of how the study of early Christian practice by Christians in a later age must involve more than simple imitation of the practices of an earlier time. They illustrate an understanding that the early church’s communion practices had been seriously compromised by the transformation of the church begun in Constantine’s time. By this transformation, which cost the fourth-century church much of its zeal and purity, the existing high frequency of administration of the Supper came to be perceived as burdensome and intrusive. It followed (for Erskine and Mason) that unless this loss of zeal and purity was addressed, an increase of frequency of the Supper (in and of itself) would face opposition all over again for similar reasons. They sensed a reciprocal relationship between two factors which modern Christians are perhaps more likely
to take separately. A survey of the current practices of the various denominations on the question of frequency of administration of the Lord’s Supper will illustrate that weekly administration, does not itself engender health and zeal. The Supper presupposes at least a measure of spiritual hunger and some desire to grow in grace in those who partake. Where these spiritual appetites are present, good can result from a more frequent resort to the Supper; but where they are lacking it is not so much these symbols of Christ that are needed, but Christ himself—available to us now through the Word preached and applied. The infrequent communion festivals which both Erskine and Mason sought to curtail had at least upheld this important priority: the gospel itself was first preached to gathered multitudes present and the Supper subsequently administered to that portion of hearers who demonstrated the requisite faith and zeal.