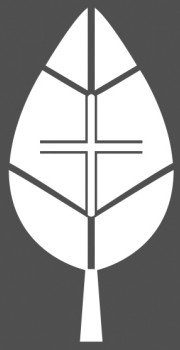

ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians

The Lord's Supper

Theology and Resources

2021 edition

The Lord's Supper—Theology and Resources

ECO Theology Series

Standing Theology Committee

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Introduction to ECO Theology Series

> "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."
> — Romans 12:2

> "Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life." (ECO Essential Tenets III.D).

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians is committed to the renewal of our minds in the twenty-first century. This century is unprecedented in the church's history. Christianity is moving from its medieval centers in European countries and those places Europeans settled to countries of the global south. Churches do not enjoy the same power in the secular arena they did in ages past. Secular humanism, the rise and dominance of a technological environment, and mass globalization have transformed the way Christians have to think. These are the patterns of the world. They are facts on the ground. But this is a radically different world than that of Jesus's time, the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the high middle ages, the Reformation, or even of the period of revivalism. Although our theological traditions have equipped us in some ways, we need to confront our new world head-on, understand it, and seek to bring the message of the reconciliation of all things in Christ to this world. To do that, we must have our minds renewed.

This series of books is designed to equip you in the process of having your mind renewed. This renewal is never easy. It requires that we analyze the normal patterns of thinking around us. We have to reevaluate our traditional beliefs according to the Word of God. We have to ask where our forebears have been blind in the past due to their cultural situation, and discern how we might be blinded by our own cultural beliefs. With confidence in beliefs that are thoroughly rooted in the Word of God that are communicable to the people of this present evil age, we can shine the light of the kingdom of God to a dark and dying world.

We have hope: hope in the kingdom of God, hope in the resurrection of the dead, hope in the renewal of all creation. We are a people of hope with a message of hope. But we must be able to communicate that hope. These books aim to equip you to explain the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

The Lord's Supper Introduction

This book on the Lord's Supper is designed to equip you with tools to understand this sacrament in much greater depth and to provide resources for your church. This series is about equipping, not dictation. This book is not about producing official ECO policy on the Lord's Supper. We have sought to answer common questions with tools for further study and so to grow the church in wisdom. This is the Apostle Paul's calling to each of us. We, teachers among God's people, exist to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to full human maturity which is measured by the full stature of Christ. We do this so that your church may become a stable vessel among a billowing sea of shifting doctrines and theological fads (see Ephesians 4:11–14).

We pray this book succeeds in glorifying God by building up his church to greater unity through greater understanding. Through the Lord's Supper we are united to one another by union with Jesus. Therefore it is imperative that we understand the Lord's Supper as it was in Jesus's and Paul's day, rather than simply explaining what Presbyterians or Evangelicals have always done. The most truly Reformed position on sacraments begins with the great call of the early Reformation, *ad fontes!* To the sources!

Views expressed in each of these articles represent the views of their authors. Although written by members of ECO's Standing Theology Committee, these articles do not represent official denominational perspectives. Official denominational perspectives are limited to ECO's Constitution.

Part I: Understanding The Lord's Supper

Biblical and Cultural Sources of The Lord's Supper

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

Old Testament Foundations: Passover or *Pesach* (Exodus 12)

The first major foundation of the Lord's Supper is the event and later festival of Passover. Passover commemorates the liberation of the people of God from slavery in Egypt when the angel of death passed over the houses of the Hebrews who had painted their doorposts with the blood of a lamb. The Passover lamb, it must be remembered, is not a sin-offering. Passover is not a celebration of forgiveness for personal moral wrongdoing, but the liberation of a people from slavery to a major world empire. The lamb's blood provided a barrier of protection against the wrath of God.

This festival was established as a "memorial day" (12:14). It was, like July 4, 1776, a day when a nation's founding is celebrated by its independence from a former power. The people of God were to retell the story of the exodus every year and use symbols to help explain its purposes. The Passover is not a sacrament. There are no sacraments, so called, in the Old Testament.[1] But the Passover is a holy day, or set of days, with consequences enumerated for failing to keep the feast rightly. And so, the Passover was to be reenacted or retold in each household, with children being integrated into the story of Israel by their inquiring about the reason for the feast.

Each Jew was to recite the Seder of Pesach so that he or she was made to feel as though they had personally come out of Egypt. The elements of the festival were supposed to be explained since their purpose is entirely symbolic. Nothing about the Pesach offers union with God or actual liberation from bondage. Nevertheless, each person should join in the community's story and see in the story of Egypt their own personal story.

It was this memorial day Jesus was celebrating with his disciples in the upper room. The bread that he broke was unleavened bread, *matzah,* as they would have been retelling the story of the liberation of God's people from slavery. The disciples would believe that they had personally come out of Egypt in union with God's people. The radical point Jesus was making here is that he was and is their liberator. A new exodus was beginning in him. His death as the Passover Lamb was the means by which freedom would come to those who have his blood. His blood would cover his people from the wrath of God unveiled upon a wicked people that enslave his people and creation.[2]

1 This suggests that sacraments properly belong to a later period of time with the incorporation of Hellenistic ideas.
2 See Revelation 19.

Old Testament Foundations: Covenants

God made covenants with his people throughout their history, according to means that made sense to them in their time. The first explicit covenant in the Bible is made with Noah and the whole creation. God does not explicitly make a covenant with Adam. The covenant of Noah in Genesis 9 is that God will not destroy his creation with a flood again. The sign of this covenant was the rainbow. It served as a visual reminder of the agreement made, and potentially the consequences of breaking the agreement.

The second covenant God made was with Abram/Abraham that established his tribe as the people of God. This covenant was first made in Genesis 15, and the signs that accompanied its ratification sound odd to us—the division of animals. However, it seems as though this were an implicit threat, that breaking the terms of the contract would result in being divided (as Israel was in its civil war, and Jesus' flesh was in crucifixion). God alone passed between these divided animals suggesting that the covenant of Abraham was unconditional on Abraham, only on God. But the covenant of Abraham is restated in Genesis 17 with another sign, that of circumcision of all male Israelites. This sign of the covenant was permanently part of the flesh of these men and a constant reminder. Perhaps it was also a threat of disobedience, that God would not make Abraham's offspring numerous if the covenant was broken. Thus, this sign also sealed the covenant, confirming it with a permanent mark.

The third covenant God made was with Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai. This covenant is by far the longest and is what is referred to by the title "Old Testament." The sign of the ratification of this covenant was with blood. Blood was put on the altar and sprinkled on the people in Exodus 24. This was to indicate that their very lives were put on the line in this covenant. Hence, the book of Hebrews understands Jesus' death as the blood that fulfilled this covenant. God's blood shed for us fulfilled the terms and so it was no longer binding.[3] The blood here was both a sign and a seal, for it sealed the terms of the agreement.

Although we talk about the "Davidic Covenant" the promise of God to David in 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17 lacks many of the features of other covenants, including a sign and seal.

The New Covenant

Israel's disobedience and continued idolatry broke the covenant of Moses. Because of this violation of the agreement, the promised land was taken away and the people of God were exiled. It is within this context that a cry came out for a renewed covenant, one that would be better than the one made with Moses wherein God would be known personally and the law of God would become the natural expression of the people.[4] This was the covenant Jesus was claiming to be making at the Last Supper. And here the link between Passover and the covenant

[3] Cf. Hebrews 9.

[4] See Jeremiah 31.

is made more clear. Passover was the founding event of liberation, the Israelite's Independence Day. And Passover led to Sinai, where the covenant was made through Moses that constituted the relationship between God and his people. Think of it like the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America. One established the fact of a separate nation, the other established the terms by which it would be governed.

As Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples he would soon ascend Golgotha and there seal the new covenant with the shedding of his blood. It was both an act of liberation from sin, conclusion of the Mosaic covenant, and inauguration of a new people under a new commandment sealed with Jesus' blood.

Old Testament Foundations: Eating Flesh but not Blood

The Torah contains a number of laws against the eating of blood, or meat with blood still in it. Uncommonly it also gives the reason for this, the blood is where the life (*nephesh* is also translated as "soul" or "self") resides.[5] The OT's understanding of a "soul" is not the same as medieval or modern Christians. That is a complicated topic for another time.

So also at the Passover meal, the lamb which was slain had its blood drained and used for the purpose of sign-marking. The flesh of the animal was eaten, though only roasted. At other times, the Jews were permitted to eat meat whose blood had been drained onto the ground.

It is curious, then, that Jesus commands his followers to not only eat his flesh but also drink his blood, something expressly forbidden in the Torah. Eating his body symbolized by the bread separately from the wine representing his blood shows that feast is also a service of Jesus' death, for the blood has been "poured out," signifying death. The blood carries the *nephesh*[6] of Jesus, and so drinking the wine symbolizes the life of Jesus being given to us. Also, the reunion of the body and blood within us therefore symbolizes the resurrection within us, as life is being returned to dead flesh.

Cultural Background: Greco-Roman Feasts[7]

The early church's practice of the Lord's Supper were nearly identical in format to traditional Roman banquets.[8] The meal that Jesus ate with his disciples and the early church

[5] See Deut. 12.

[6] *Nephesh* does not mean "spirit" but "soul" or life-essence. Blood carried *nephesh* while breath carried *ruach* or spirit.

[7] This section, apart from the analysis, is a summary of Streett, R. Alan, *Subversive Meals.*

[8] Members of the SBL "Meals in the Greco-Roman World" have a consensus view that Christian meals were similar, if not identical, to Roman meals. The distinctions came in who was included and how. Streett, R. Alan, *Subversive Meals*, 7.

shared with one another bear almost no resemblance to our contemporary practices of the Lord's Supper. Our modern practices have been far more shaped by a later turn or return to sacrificial logic and ceremony.

Roman feasts were many course meals with people reclining in specific places according to social status. They were one of the major social institutions that modelled and reinforced the social structure of the Roman Empire. Rome was built upon a system of patronage in which the wealthy would become patrons (from Latin *patronus*, related to *pater* or father) of the lower classes. In exchange for service, work, and honor, the patron would provide the lower class with financial help and gifts.

These feasts followed a conventional format with a full meal first, a *deipnon* (or supper), followed by a transitional libation (drink offering to a god or gods like a toast), and then to the *symposium* or dessert part with entertainment and drinking. The entertainment could be musicians, philosophers and guest speakers, local celebrities, or just discussion about specific predetermined topics. Meals such as this would have a *symposiarch* (leader of the party) and a host. The libation would often include a hymn sung to one or more of Rome's gods, or an ethnic god. There were no secular feasts, and in the first century these feasts were required to include a hymn or offering to the emperor.

All social classes held these feasts for various reasons: weddings, funerals, coming-of-age, religious occasions, send-offs of family members, or to host a guest like a travelling philosopher or orator (or prophet or preacher, like Paul). The lower classes would gather together in associations or *collegia*. Nearly every craftsman (women were generally not allowed) was part of some guild, and these guilds would hold a these feasts once a month for their members. Other associations existed too, like religious cults organized around ethnic gods that helped preserve the ethnicities of exiled peoples, funeral societies that operated a bit like burial insurance cooperatives, and even volunteer fire departments. These feasts served as the major meeting place where these kinds of business were conducted.

Many modern scholars who have investigated Roman practices see that the earliest churches, as with the Jews, followed this standard dinner format. Christian worship seems to have originated here. The earliest Christian acts of worship, then, were shared meals in private homes.

Thus, it is likely that the "Lord's Supper" referred to this *deipnon-libation-symposium* format of a meal celebrated by Christians in honor of Christ. Although Christians probably did not perform a libation to Christ in the same way pagans did, there certainly was a hymn and a toast to king Jesus that took the place of praising Caesar. Rather than the meal being a small part of a singing-preaching-praying service as it is for us, the singing, preaching, and praying were integral elements of the primary thing: the meal. Christian meals like this would be used to distribute wealth and provide for the widows, orphans, and the poor, but *without creating patron-client relations!*

Thus, early Christians adapted a standard Roman cultural format while radically changing the content of the feasts. The Jews before them had long done this too. Jesus' Last Supper was probably a big festal meal like this. They reclined and ate. After they ate the *deipnon* Jesus took the cup just as a Roman would for a libation. But Jesus, instead of dumping some of it on the ground in honor of a pagan god, explained that this cup was his blood which would be poured out for his people. This was an act of declaring himself divine.

We know that Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, is addressing a church in which the wealthy who didn't have to work would come to the feast early, eat most of the food, drink a fair amount, and leave little for the poor when they could come after work. The Lord's Supper was to be a place where dividing walls of human hierarchies would be broken down and a new people would be forged under the headship of Christ.

Older scholars had argued that the Lord's Supper was distinct from the love-feasts Christians shared. Many more modern scholars argue that they were the same thing, both from historical evidence and from the evidence of Scripture itself, particularly 1 Corinthians 11.

Little has been done among sacramental theologians to take account of this Roman background. For one thing, it would radically transform Reformation era debates about the real presence of Christ in the elements. Jesus himself might have poured out a cup of wine onto the floor, as was customary in a libation, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."[9] This is unconscionable to a Lutheran or Roman Catholic. Luther himself is said to have wept and got down on his knees and lapped up wine spilled from a chalice.[10] Jesus was not pouring the cup out to a god, but transforming the practice of libation from honoring a god to confirming a covenant in himself as God.

This has raised the question as to whether Jesus was instituting a sacrament as later theologians understood it, or whether sacramentalism was a later development of the church. Jesus was living in and among the people of his day, doing the cultural practices of the day, and investing them with new meaning, as God has done throughout Scripture (including Scripture itself). What was Jesus intending to do with his Last Supper? What did the earliest Christians do with this? We know from Acts 2 that this practice seems to have continued. Much of what the church after Pentecost did was very much in line with other associations in that time, including the sharing and emphasis on equality. But the Christians took this to the extreme, using the meal to overturn fixed Roman social categories and Jewish requirements of not mixing with Gentiles.

What we might say is that the early church was formed around the dinner table, as a new family with Christ as the *host* of the meal. Christ was the only patron Christians should serve. There was no sense in which these meals were sacrifices, or re-presentations of a sacrifice as later Roman Catholicism argued. But Jesus' Last Supper was a foundational event in which he radically transformed the Passover and the Roman feast by making himself the host and the

[9] Luke 22:20.

[10] Scaer, "A Lutheran Response to the Reformed View" in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, 76.

God who both gave and received the libation or toast. So, sharing in the body of Christ was not simply eating the unleavened Passover bread that is his body, it was the act of coming together in this particular kind of practice that tore down traditional social identities and barriers, where the teaching of the apostles was shared, where hymns were sung to Jesus. Jesus founded the church around the dinner table.

New Testament Sources for The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper has four primary places in which it is described as an event.

- Matthew 26
- Mark 14
- Luke 22
- 1 Corinthians 11 is Paul's discussion and expansion of Jesus' words of institution. Note that Paul adds the line, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again." This teaching comes within the context of discipline. It seems that the wealthy Corinthians were getting drunk at the meal while some were going hungry.

Other passages that have significantly influenced the church's reflection on what the sacrament means include:

- Luke 24:13–35: Road to Emmaus wherein Jesus was known in the breaking of bread.
- Acts 2:42–47: The post-Pentecost church continues the practice of "breaking bread" together.
- John 2: The Wedding at Cana in which Jesus turns the water of purification into wine, thus symbolizing and foreshadowing the meaning of his own death uniting purification and atonement. See ECO's *Baptism* book for more on the importance of blood and water.
- John 6: Bread from heaven. Here Jesus has a long teaching about how his body is true food and his blood true drink and that all who want eternal life must eat and drink his flesh.
- 1 Corinthians 10: comparison of the Lord's Supper with pagan sacrifices.
- Revelation 19: The great marriage feast of the Lamb.

"The Depth Behind Things": Toward a Calvinist Sacramental Theology

Rev. Dr. Laura Smit

Originally published in James K. A. Smith & James Olthuis, eds. *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). Here ABRIDGED.

"[T]o be human means, primarily, that we must reckon with an immense depth behind things."[11]
John Milbank

John Calvin's theology of the eucharist (or – as Calvin more commonly names it – the Lord's Supper[12]) differs sharply from Roman Catholic and Lutheran teaching on the one hand, in that he denies the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation, and from Zwinglian teaching on the other hand, in that he believes the supper is more than a memorial of a past event. Calvin believes that Jesus Christ is truly present in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and that believers truly feed on His body and blood, but it is a spiritual presence and a spiritual feeding. Calvin's key points are these:

1. Through the incarnation, the human body of Jesus Christ becomes a source of life for us.
2. Both the incarnation and the sacraments are examples of God's accommodation of His self-revelation to our human finiteness.
3. Since Jesus Christ is fully human and truly embodied, His risen and ascended body is locally and spatially present in heaven, at the right hand of the Father.
4. The celebration of the sacrament must always be initiated by the proclamation of the Word.
5. The movement of the supper is not a downward movement, of Christ being drawn to us, but an upward movement, as we are lifted to Him as participants in His nature.
6. The body of Jesus Christ is present in the Lord's Supper through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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[11] John Milbank, "Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy," *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, et al (London / New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 32.

[12] John Calvin, "We call it either 'the Lord's Supper' or 'the Eucharist' because in it we both are spiritually fed by the liberality of the Lord and also give him thanks for his kindness." Cited by B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 19.

7. The bread of the supper is really bread, not just the appearance of bread, and functions as a symbol, exhibiting Christ's true presence, not just as a sign or memorial.
8. The celebration of the supper must always involve the entire community.

We'll look at each of these in turn.

First, *through the incarnation, the human body of Jesus Christ becomes a source of life for us.* Our understanding of the Lord's Supper must begin with an understanding of the incarnation of God in Christ. In the "Heads of Agreement" concerning the Lord's Supper published by the churches of Zurich and Geneva under Calvin's leadership, we read: "As the sacraments are appendages of the gospel, he only can discourse aptly and usefully of their nature, virtue, office, and benefit, who begins with Christ: and that not by adverting cursorily to the name of Christ, but by truly holding for what end He was given us by the Father, and what blessings He has conferred upon us."[13] As is typical of Calvin, he begins his investigation, not with our experience, but with God's nature and work, which can be summed up in terms of grace, gift, and goodness.[14] An understanding of the gift of God's presence in the incarnation is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the sacrament.

Calvin claims, "[W]e are taught from the Scriptures that Christ was from the beginning that life-giving Word of the Father [John 1:1], the spring and source of life, from which all things have always received their capacity to live."[15] Just as Christ has always been the source of life in His divine nature, so too His human body is life-giving. In commenting on John 6, where Jesus claims to be the bread of life come down from heaven, given for the world, Calvin notes, "By these words He teaches not only that He is life since He is the eternal Word of God, who came down from heaven to us, but also that by coming down He poured that power upon the flesh which He took in order that from it participation in life might flow unto us."[16] Calvin further notes, "[T]he flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours into us the life springing forth from the Godhead into itself . . ."[17] He quotes Cyril of Jerusalem approvingly as saying "Just as a man by pouring other wax upon melted wax completely mixes both together, so it is necessary, if one receives the flesh and blood of the Lord, for him to be joined with Christ, so that Christ may be found in him and he in Christ."[18] By this he means that it is the human nature of Jesus Christ in which we participate; it is because we share human nature with him that we can be joined to him completely, so that our human body "communicates in some

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[13] "Mutual Consent as to the Sacraments," *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1983), pp. 212-213.

[14] This is the thesis of Gerrish's *Grace and Gratitude*.

[15] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xvii.8

[16] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.8.

[17] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.9

[18] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.34

way with his immortality."[19] Calvin promises, "[A]lthough Christ, being elevated to heaven, has left His abode on earth in which we are still pilgrims, yet no distance can dissolve His power of nourishing His own with Himself."[20] In the gospel of John, it is the human body of Jesus that is His Father's house, and Jesus promises His disciples a place in that house, a place to which we already have access now through our relationship of abiding in Him.[21]

Calvin is here standing in the long tradition of Augustinianism regarding the illuminating and vivifying power of the incarnation. By entering into our human flesh, Jesus Christ "charges," as it were, His human body with life, knowledge, and power. When we come into contact with Him, as we do through the work of the Holy Spirit, that charge is passed on to us. The ontological gap between Creator and creature – a gap that since the fall has become also a gap between holiness and sin, between boundless life and inevitable death – could only be bridged from above, and this is what the Son has done, by pouring divine life into a human body. Calvin says, **"**For it is not possible for the human mind, leaping the infinite spaces, to reach beyond heaven itself to Christ.**"**[22] It *is* possible for Christ to leap the infinite spaces, coming down to us and creating a way for us back to heaven, for He Himself is the way, the truth, and the life.

Christ as the incarnate Word is therefore the solution to two ongoing epistemological problems. First, there is the problem of how finite humans are able to know an infinite God. Jesus bridges the gap between the supernatural, eternal, and incorporeal God and our temporal and corporeal nature, because in Him "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" joined to human nature and incarnate within time. Second, there is the problem of how human mental faculties are able to interact with the physical, sensory world. This knowledge is also channeled to us through Christ, even for those of us who are unaware of His presence or His work. The Christian philosopher Stephen Clark affirms this same idea when he says: "If we wish to see things clearly and to see them whole, we must believe that there is a divine *Logos* that is also human. Without that belief we may as well despair."[23] It is only through the illuminating presence of the Word, or *Logos*, within us that any knowing is possible, and it is the incarnation that initiates the process leading to such union with Christ the Word. Our knowledge of God, of the world, and of ourselves is all mediated through the incarnate Christ, in whom all things hold together. Paradoxically, full humanity requires something beyond humanity; we receive that in Jesus Christ.

Second, b*oth the incarnation and the sacraments are examples of God's accommodation of his self-revelation to our human finiteness.* Although Calvin affirms that all our knowledge of

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[19] John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith (1537)*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1977/1992, p. 68.

[20] *Instruction*, p. 68.

[21] John 14:2, ff.

[22] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.15

[23]Stephen R. L. Clark, *God's World and the Great Awakening*, vol. 3 of *Limits and Renewals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 221.

God is mediated, he believes that it is mediated, not by our cultural context, but *to* our context by God himself: first, by the Father's accommodation to us in Scripture and other revelation, second by Christ, who is both fully God and fully human, our high priest and mediator, and finally by the Holy Spirit, who Himself is God and who unites us with Christ so that through Christ's human nature we may come to know God truly. Through union with Christ in the sacrament, we really do have immediate knowledge of God, although in this life it is still fleeting and clouded by our sin. Still, when we partake of the bread and the cup, we are lifted into God's presence, transformed into Christ's likeness, and equipped to represent him to the world.

Calvin understands the institution of the Lord's Supper, and the use of bread and wine – elements that are commonly recognized by people around the world – as one more instance of God's gracious accommodation to us.

> Since, however, this mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible, He shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity…. For this very familiar comparison penetrates into even the dullest minds: just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so are souls fed by Christ…. [W]hen we see ourselves made partakers in [His body], we may assuredly conclude that the power of His life-giving death will be efficacious in us.[24]

Accommodation is a big theme in Calvin: God translates Himself into terms that we can understand. Calvin asserts that just as a nurse bends over an infant and speaks baby talk, so God speaks to us at our level, using signs and images that we can grasp in order to lead us to truths beyond our grasp.[25] All of God's self-revelation is therefore analogical and symbolic, pointing to a reality that we are not capable of grasping fully. It is God Himself who mediates and translates the knowledge of God to us.

Third, *since Jesus Christ is fully human and truly embodied, His risen and ascended body is locally and spatially present in heaven, at the right hand of the Father*, though "locally" and "spatially" may have different meanings for resurrected bodies than for us. At the heart of a Calvinist understanding of the Lord's Supper are two events: the incarnation, in which God comes down to us, and the ascension, in which our human nature is lifted up to God in Christ. Calvin is absolutely opposed to the Lutheran and Catholic idea that the body of Christ could be ubiquitously present, precisely because he contends that this undermines the corporeality and full humanity of Christ. Whereas Lutherans argue that the omnipresence of Christ's divine nature is shared by His human nature, as a result of the *communicatio idiomatum* between the two natures, Calvinists believe that the two natures remain distinguishable, even though Jesus Christ is one person. Calvin says, "[H]e who was the Son of God became the Son of man – not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For we affirm His divinity so joined and united with His humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet these two natures

[24] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.1

[25] *Institutes*, I.xiii.1

constitute one Christ."[26] So for Calvin, the humanity of Christ is in no way mitigated by His divinity.

This means, among other things, that we must experience Christ as genuinely absent in some way, while yet being comforted by our present communion with Him and living in hope of His return. It is our awareness of His absence that lies behind the passionate prayer, "Maranatha."[27]

Many of the differences among Christians in understanding the Lord's Supper center on the meaning of Christ's words, "Take, eat, this is my body." Some take those words literally; others seem to dismiss them as purely metaphorical. Calvin carves out a third option: a symbolic or analogical understanding. He spends an entire section of the *Institutes* discussing the significance of the word "is" in Jesus' words of institution and concludes, based on I Corinthians 10:16, that the "is" of this sentence actually signifies participation, which "is something different from the body itself."[28] For Calvin, the mystery is not in the "is" of the sacrament, but first in the fully embodied humanity of Jesus received into heaven at the ascension and second in our real union with him. Calvin says that this **"**intimate fellowship in which we are joined with His flesh" is a "thing greater than all words.**"**[29] Calvin is in line with Gregory of Nyssa, who says that in Christ's statement, "This is my body,"

> I recognize another kind of food also, having a certain analogy to that of the body, the enjoyment of which extends to the soul alone: 'Eat of my bread', is the bidding of Wisdom to the hungry; and the Lord declares those blessed who hunger for such food as this, and say, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.'[30]

Gregory and Calvin both think symbolically about the supper; that is, they think that the elements point to something more real than themselves.

Whereas some contemporary Christians think of Jesus' ascension as the end of His humanity, a moment when He leaves the particularity of the incarnation behind in order to return to the Father, Calvin insists on the local presence of Jesus Christ's risen and ascended human body joined with a fully human soul, now seated at the right hand of God. If His body is thought of as abandoned or transfigured into some new substance, then the fully human nature of Jesus is not being respected, and our human nature is not in God's presence. If His human body is thought of as now fully co-extensive with the Church, the metaphor of the Church as

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[26] *Institutes*, II.xiv.1. He gives examples of times when the Bible attributes things of Jesus that can only be true of either his divine or his human nature (such as being present at the Creation – which was clearly not true of his human nature), concluding that the *communicatio* is often rhetorical rather than ontological.

[27] I Corinthians 16:22

[28] *Institutes,* IV.xvii.22; I Cor. 10:16 reads, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (RSV).

[29] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.9

[30] Gregory of Nyssa, "The Making of Man," trans. W. Moore and H. A. Wilson, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises,* vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), XIX.1, p. 408.

the body of Christ ceases to make sense, for there is no longer any fully human head of the body in whom the members of the Church participate and find their new humanity. Furthermore, if the incarnation does not continue with the ascension, in what sense can we speak about Jesus' return? There can be no robust doctrine of the second coming unless we believe that Jesus remains a particular, fully-human person now.

Calvin insists that our doctrine of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper must never be "in conflict with a nature truly human" and suggests two theological rules to make sure that it is not: "(1) Let nothing be withdrawn from Christ's heavenly glory – as happens when He is brought under the corruptible elements of this world, or bound to any earthly creatures. (2) Let nothing inappropriate to human nature be ascribed to His body, as happens when it is said either to be infinite or to be put in a number of places at once."[31] Calvin insists that it is precisely the particular body of the man Jesus that is now with God, that the same body that was on the cross and in the tomb is now in heaven. When we see Jesus Christ face to face in the next life, that is the body we will see.

At the same time, Calvin would agree that the idea of "local presence" must not be understood in a naïve way or in a way univocal to our present experience. Calvin does not care to speculate on the exact nature of the heaven in which Jesus now lives. We need to know that, wherever it is, Christ already now reigns over heaven and earth and so is already now protecting and caring for his church. Keith Mathison summarizes Calvin's perspective, saying, "Despite the fact that our finite minds cannot perfectly grasp or define the exact nature of heaven, we are compelled to teach that Christ's body is presently there and that it is a dimension that is distinct from the one in which we live."[32] We need to know that Jesus Christ, in the fullness of His human nature, is constantly interceding with the Father on our behalf, so that nothing can now separate us from the love of God. We do not need more detailed information about where heaven is or what it is like, especially since we almost certainly could not understand such information if it were offered. Being a man of the 16th century, Calvin realizes that heaven is not simply above our heads somewhere in the clouds. He asserts that it "is neither bounded by location in space nor circumscribed by any limits,"[33] so that it is perfectly possible for Christ to exert influence on the earth. Beyond that, Calvin doesn't try to solve the problem of where heaven is, or where Jesus now is, insisting simply on two things: first, heaven is not here, in the world of our everyday experience, which means that we must in some way experience Christ as absent from us, but second, heaven *is* our final destination and being with Christ is our ultimate purpose.[34] Perhaps

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[31] *Institutes,*IV.xvii.19

[32] Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), p. 279.

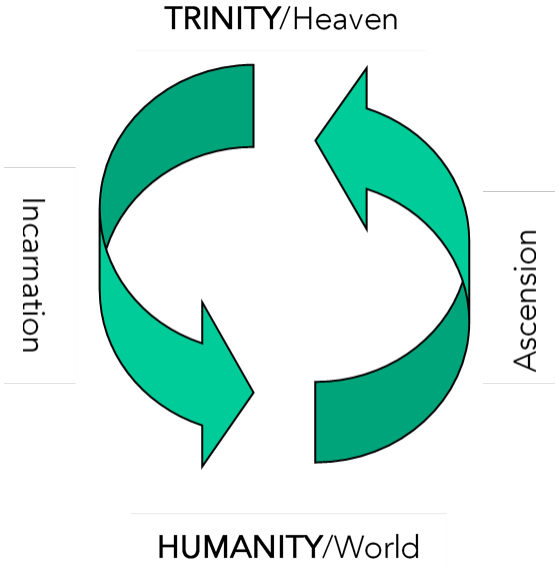
[33] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.18

[34] Despite Calvin's clarity on this subject, some contemporary Christian theologians remain uncomfortable with the language of ascent to heaven. In a discussion I had last January about an earlier draft of this paper, I discovered that many of my colleagues were resistant to such language and seemed to assume that I meant it literally, or perhaps just that Calvin meant it literally. He didn't, and I don't. However, almost every culture uses the metaphor of ascent to refer to approaching

our resurrected bodies exist in more dimensions than our present bodies, so that time and space will not be limiting in the same way that it is for us now (though however more dimensional we may become, we will always be finite creatures *vis à vis* God's infinite eternality). Perhaps heaven is some sort of alternate dimension, intersecting this world in some ways. We don't know. The important thing to remember is that Jesus Christ rose in a human body, albeit a resurrected body that seemed less constrained than our present bodies by things like locked doors, but still a human, material body, capable of enjoying food, taking a walk, and being touched. That human body is in heaven, wherever that is, and, in that body, He intercedes for us before the Father. To suggest that His body is ubiquitously present is to make Him something other than fully human.

So the heart of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is here in these first three points: God's accommodation to us through the incarnation and the ascension of Christ, forming a circular movement of descent from God to humanity and return to Him.

The turn between these two movements lies between the cross and the resurrection. The cross is the culmination of the downward movement; the resurrection is the beginning of the upward movement. In between those two events, Jesus Christ encountered the negation of



death, hell, and human sin, none of which have positive reality, all of which exist as nearly nothing, parasites on God's goodness. The supreme reality of Jesus Christ, the Logos in whom all reality holds together, flooded the unreality of evil. His nature in all its goodness, glory, beauty, and truth could not be contained by the shadows of death, sin, and hell.

God, and almost every culture uses the metaphor of up and down to refer to hierarchies of value (indeed, the very word hierarchy includes that metaphor), probably because we humans grow vertically throughout our lives and very early on learn to associate moving upward with progress. Excising such language from our theological conversation strikes me as profoundly unnatural. Furthermore, this is the metaphor the Bible uses, and for that reason I believe it is privileged and should continue to be part of our language, even though none of us believes that heaven is literally "up there."

Fourth, *the celebration of the sacrament must always be initiated by the proclamation of the Word.* The sacrament of the Lord's Supper seals the promises of God contained in Scripture, and unless those promises are proclaimed the seal is meaningless. This proclamation of the Word is not just an inner reality, not just the Holy Spirit speaking to individual hearts, but is the authoritative preaching of the Scriptural Word to the gathered community. Calvin requires the Word to be proclaimed in conjunction with the supper, a speaking in conjunction with an acting. This speaking has been understood throughout the Reformed tradition to involve not only the words of institution but also the sermon, which must precede the sacrament. It is through the proclamation of the Word that Christ comes to us, so that our union with Him becomes possible. Commenting on John 5:39, Calvin says, "if we wish to obtain the knowledge of Christ, we must seek it from *the Scriptures;* for they who imagine whatever they choose concerning Christ will ultimately have nothing instead of Him but a shadowy phantom. First, then, we ought to believe that Christ cannot be properly known in any other way than from *the Scriptures* . . .."[35]

The doctrine of transubstantiation posits that the sacrament is a "downward" movement from God to us, in which the body of Christ is distributed to the world. As the Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx explains,

> The basis of the entire eucharistic event is Christ's personal gift of himself to his fellow-men and, within this, to the Father. This is quite simply his *essence* – 'The man Christ Jesus is the one *giving himself* (*ho dous heauton*, I Tim. 2.6) . . .. The Eucharist is the sacramental form of this event, Christ's giving of himself to the Father and to men. It takes the form of a commemorative meal in which the usual secular significance of the bread and wine is withdrawn and these become bearers of Christ's gift of himself . . .. Christ's gift of himself, however, is not ultimately directed towards bread and wine, but towards the faithful.[36]

On this view, the sacrament is the event of Christ's self-giving, a movement in which he is dispersed to the Church. When the sacrament is understood as a downward motion, it makes sense to speak about the sacramental quality of all of life: since the dispersed body of Christ touches all of life, all of life becomes potentially a point of contact with the presence of Christ. When taken to extremes, this view may result in arguing that the material world is not only validated but also absolute.[37] Any suggestion that Christ is in some sense absent from the world, or that there is another kingdom for which we wait, is dismissed as escapist dualism.

In contrast, Calvin thinks that the dialogue between God and humanity is initiated by the revelation of God's Word, both the incarnate Word (which is where we started) but also by the inspired word of Scripture and its proclamation. The first downward movement from God to us, the movement in which God gives himself to us, is the movement of revelation, not of eucharist

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[35] John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, Vol. 1, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), p. 133. Accessed online 04/29/2004 http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/calcom34/cache/calcom34.pdf. Italics his.

[36] E. Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 137.

[37] To be clear, this extreme view is not the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

(which is why some argue that preaching is the primary sacrament in Calvin, rather than the supper). We are first brought into communion with Christ by the proclamation of the gospel.

Which leads us to our fifth point, *the movement of the supper is not a downward movement, of Christ being drawn to us, but an upward movement, as we are lifted to Him as participants in His nature.* One section of Calvin's *Institutes* has this heading: *Christ not brought down to us; we are lifted up to Him.* In that section, Calvin berates those who think that Christ is present in communion bread or wine, claiming:

> To them Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if He should lift us to Himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence! The question is therefore only of the manner, for they place Christ in the bread, while we do not think it lawful for us to drag Him from heaven.[38]

George Hunsinger has called this idea of Calvin's an "upward vector."[39] Whereas other traditions assert a movement of dispersal, Calvin teaches that Christ is ascended in the body and, through the sacrament, draws all believers into union with Him and thus into communion with the inner life of the Trinity, suggesting the movement of convergence. It is only because we have stood in God's presence through having been lifted into union with Christ that we are equipped to represent Christ to others. It is only when we are so equipped to represent Christ to others that the Church in turn becomes the body of Christ, a symbol exhibiting the ascended body of our sovereign Lord. Through our participation in the Lord's Supper, we as the Church become the body that is "lifted up" in order to draw all people to Christ.

So Calvin's perspective suggests an expansion of the body of Christ, but not an expansion in which the particularity of Jesus' humanity is lost. In Christ's ascension, humanity is ushered into the presence of the Godhead. Through our union with Him, the body of Christ that is the Church expands, not because the physical body of Christ is distributed throughout the world, but rather because we are lifted into heaven with Him. We add nothing to Jesus Christ, who is already fully God, and already fills heaven and earth in his divine nature. Instead, *we* are expanded, adding a heavenly dimension to our lives already now, because we are united with Christ. Calvin calls this "the wonderful exchange" God has made with us:

> that, becoming Son of man with us, He has made us sons of God with Him; that, by His descent to earth, He has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, He has conferred His immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, He has strengthened us by His power; that, receiving our poverty unto Himself, He has transferred His wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon Himself (which oppressed us), He has clothed us with righteousness.[40]

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[38] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.31.

[39] George Hunsinger, "The Bread that we Break: Toward a Chalcedonian Resolution of the Eucharistic Controversies," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, vol. XXIV, no. 2 (2003), p. 251.

[40] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.2

This exchange happens particularly in the supper, because union with Christ is its fruit. Calvin understands himself in harmony with Augustine here, for in his *Confessions*, Augustine hears Christ saying to him, "I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: you will be changed into me."[41]

There is nothing equivocal about this exchange, which is both a real communion with Christ in glory and a spiritual communion. The communion is initiated by the symbol of the elements, making this exchange genuinely analogical. The "spiritual" nature of this communion, however, refers to the work of the Holy Spirit and to our mode of participation in Christ; the communion is nonetheless with Christ's human *body.* Keith Mathison explains:

> The idea of "spiritual eating" is opposed to the idea of "carnal eating" and has to do with the manner in which we eat. It does not have anything to do with what we eat. The Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches argued that we partake of Christ's body and blood with the mouth. Calvin argued that we partake of Christ's body and blood by faith – the mouth of the soul. They agreed that we partake of the body and blood of Christ. They disagreed over the manner in which we partake.42

Calvin explicitly distanced himself from those who thought that the sacrament was only a communication with Christ's divine nature or with his spirit.

On Calvin's understanding of the sacrament, Christian people have a shared reality that is more important than all the things that divide us. Calvin's vision privileges the unity of the Church as Christ's body over the diversity of the Church as members of Christ's body. I realize that may sound unlikely to those who think of Calvin primarily as the instigator of a great schism. Still, in Calvin's understanding of the supper, the throne-room of God is the place where Christians of every time and every place encounter one another and are joined to each other through Christ. The Church is constituted as Christ's body through this heavenly communion.

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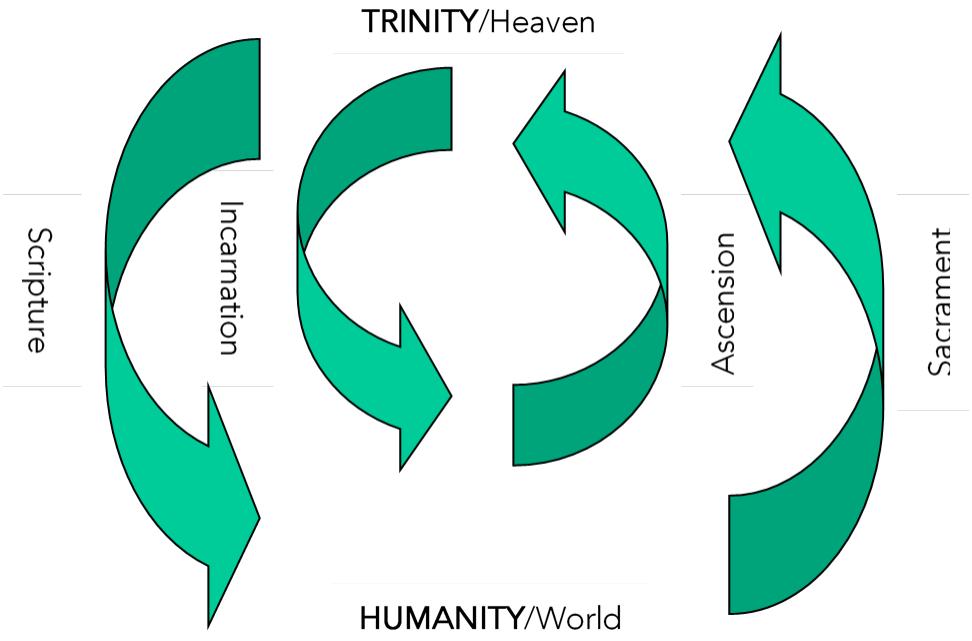
[41] Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, vol. I/1, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle *et al* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), p. 173. VII.10/16

[42] Mathison, p. 282.

We now have a second circle to draw around the first, a circle that gains its logic and significance from being analogous to the first.



The second downward arrow is the revelation of Scripture, and the second upward arrow is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Notice that the revelation of Scripture is analogous to the revelation of the incarnation, and, in the same way, the ascent we experience in communion is analogous to the event of Christ's ascension. Through the sacrament, we participate in the ascension of Christ. We are united to his ascended body and pulled upward to where he is. In his Commentary on I Timothy, Calvin comments on our participation in the Son's return to the Father.

> [T]he Son of God holds out to us the hand of a brother, and . . . we are united to him by the fellowship of our nature, in order that, out of our low condition, he may raise us to heaven. . .. Accordingly, whenever we ought to pray to God, if we call to remembrance that exalted and unapproachable majesty, that we may not be driven back by the dread of it, let us, at the same time, remember "the man Christ," who gently invites us, and takes us, as it were, by the hand, in order that the Father, who had been the object of terror and alarm, may be reconciled by him and rendered friendly to us. This is the only key to open for us the gate of the heavenly kingdom, that we may appear in the presence of God with confidence.[43]

[43] John Calvin, "Commentary on I Timothy," 2:5, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), p.31. Accessed online 04/29/2004 http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/calcom43/cache/calcom43.pdf.

It is because Calvin understands God's nature as truly Other – terrifyingly so, even though God is the fountain of all good – that Christ's mediatorial office is so important. Both in the revelation of Scripture and in the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ himself is the connecting link, the ladder between heaven and earth, for he is the Word who is spoken, the content of revelation; he is also the Body with which we are united, by whom we are nourished. As the Belgic Confession puts it, the sacraments "are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing."[44] The content of both the Lord's Supper and Baptism is Jesus Christ, and the goal of both sacraments is our participation in him.

The remaining three points look more closely at the nature of the sacrament. The sixth point is that *the body of Jesus Christ is present in the Lord's Supper through the power of the Holy Spirit*, and here we find the "turn" between the downward movement of revelation or proclamation and the upward movement of the sacrament. I would argue that this "turn" lies between the words of institution and the distribution of the elements, when the celebrant prays the prayer known as the *epiclesis*, asking the Holy Spirit to transform the gathered people and the elements, so that this event will be a true *communion* with our ascended Lord. In my tradition, this prayer most typically goes like this:

> Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, that we may be one with all who share this feast, united in ministry in every place. As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.[45]

The Holy Spirit is the agent uniting us to Christ. In Reformed worship, the reading of Scripture is always preceded by a prayer of illumination, in recognition that the Holy Spirit is the agent opening the Scriptures to us. Each of the movements in this circle depends not on our work, but on the work of the Holy Spirit. Both sides of this dialogue are God-initiated, involving all three persons of the Trinity. It is God the Father who speaks, it is the Son who is spoken, and it is the Spirit who moves in our hearts so that we can hear and understand. It is the Spirit who transforms the elements, it is the Son with whom we are united, and it is the Father whose presence we enter through our union with Christ.

The body of Jesus Christ is really spiritually present in the Lord's Supper through the power of the Holy Spirit. In order to avoid confusion for those who believe that "real" must mean "physical," this view is sometimes described as a "mystical presence" view. So Calvin says:

> I conclude, that Christ's body is *really*, (as the common expression is,) -- that is, *truly* given

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[44] Article 33 (The Belgic Confession is a Reformed confessional statement.) Accessed online 05/01/2004 http://12.106.150.196/whoweare/beliefs/confess_belgic_33-37.asp.

[45] Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know, 1993), p.72

> to us in the Supper, to be wholesome food for our souls . . .. [M]y meaning is, that our souls are nourished by the substance of the body, that we may truly be made one with him, or, what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving virtue from Christ's flesh is poured into us by the Spirit, though it is at a great distance from us, and is not mixed with us.[46]

Calvin reconciles the seemingly incompatible beliefs that Christ's body is locally present in heaven and that we must feed on his body for eternal life by speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit.

> Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.[47]

Elsewhere he says that "the Spirit of Christ . . . is like a channel through which all that Christ Himself is and has is conveyed to us." Calvin explains the role of the Spirit, using the image of the sun, which sends nurture to the earth through its beams, asking, "why should the radiance of Christ's Spirit be less in order to impart to us the communion of His flesh and blood?" [48] Calvin is classically Augustinian in understanding the Holy Spirit as the bond of love, both within the Trinity and within the relationship each believer has with Jesus Christ.

In his first Catechism, Calvin says, **"**[F]aith is the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit by which our minds are illumined and our hearts confirmed in a sure persuasion within,**"** and the act of partaking in the supper is both an *act* of faith and a *source* of faith. It is the Spirit who makes Christ truly present to us, and it is the Spirit who truly brings us into God's presence through uniting us with Christ. In his commentary on I Corinthians, Calvin connects these two works of the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ, so that we *participate* in His body, and the Holy Spirit does this by the faith that He gives to us, since it is by faith that we "rise

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[46] Calvin, "Commentary on I Corinthians," 11:24, *Commentary on Corinthians, Vol. 1*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), p. 241. Accessed online 04/29/2004 http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/calcom39/cache/calcom39.pdf.

[47] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.10

[48] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.12. John Nevin, a later interpreter of Calvin, teaches the same thing, saying of the Lord's Supper: "It is not simply an occasion, by which the soul of the believer may be excited to pious feelings and desires; but it embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; and this grace is not simply the promise of God on which we are encouraged to rely, but the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We communicate – in the Lord's Supper – not with the divine promise merely, not with the thought of Christ only, not with the recollection simply of what he has done and suffered for us, not with the lively present sense alone of his all-sufficient, all-glorious salvation; but with the living Savior himself, in the fullness of his glorified person, made present to us for the purpose by the power of the Holy Spirit." ("The Mystical Presence," *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, eds. Bard Thompson and George Bricker, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology, vol. 4 (Philadelphia / Boston: United Church Press, 1966), pp. 33, 34.)

heavenward."[49] Elsewhere, Calvin observes that faith is not just knowing what Christ has done for us, but also "accepting the offers which He makes of Himself" so as to "possess and enjoy Him as our Savior . . .. [F]aith is not a distant view, but a warm embrace, of Christ, by which He dwells in us, and we are filled with the Divine Spirit."[50] Participation, or union, with Christ is a major theme for Calvin's theology. For this reason, those who participate in the supper without faith receive only a sign and do not in fact participate in Christ, because the Holy Spirit is not present to them.[51] But faith itself is a gift, a result of God's electing grace. God is the initiator in our union with Christ.[52]

Seventh, the bread of the supper is really bread, not just the appearance of bread, and functions as a symbol, exhibiting Christ's true presence, not just as a sign or memorial. Calvin believes that the reality of the sign points to the reality of that which is signified. If the bread is an illusion, then so is the promise.

> But the signification would have no fitness if the truth there represented had no living image in the outward sign. Christ's purpose was to witness by the outward symbol that His flesh is food; if He had put forward only the empty appearance of bread and not true bread, where would be the analogy or comparison needed to lead us from the visible thing to the invisible? . .. For instance, if in baptism the figure of water were to deceive our eyes, we would have no sure pledge of our washing; indeed, that false show would give us occasion to hesitate. The nature of the Sacrament is therefore canceled, unless, in the mode of signifying, the earthly sign corresponds to the heavenly thing.[53]

Calvin embraces Augustine's understanding of signs and symbols, placing himself in a long tradition of Christian symbolic theology, an approach to theology that sees correspondences between this world and what he calls "heavenly things." As Richard Muller has shown, Calvin is generally standing in continuity with medieval thought, rather than participating in the new ideas of modernity;[54] this symbolic theology is a fine instance of that continuity. In his "Commentary on I Corinthians," he gives the example of a statue of Hercules

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[49] "Commentary on I Corinthians," 11:24,

[50] John Calvin, "Commentary on Ephesians," 3:17, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), p.162. Accessed online 04/29/2004 http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/calcom41/cache/calcom41.pdf.

[51] "Commentary on I Corinthians," 11:27, pp. 238,239.

[52] As John Nevin says, "The virtue that [the sacrament] possesses is not put into it by the faith of the worshiper in the first place, to be taken out of it again by the same faith, in the same form . . .. [F]aith does not properly clothe the sacrament with its power. It is the condition of its efficacy for the communicant, but not the principle of the power itself." *Mystical Presence*, pp. 39-40.

[53] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.14; He makes the same observation in his *Commentary on I Corinthians*: "Hence, if there must be a correspondence between the sign and its reality, it is necessary that the bread be real — not imaginary — to represent Christ's real body. Besides, Christ's body is here given us not simply, but *as food*. Now it is not by any means the color of the bread that nourishes us, but the substance. In fine, if we would have reality in the thing itself, there must be no deception in the sign." [11:24]

[54] Richard Muller, *The Unaccomodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See especially chapter 3, "Scholasticism in Calvin: A Question of Relation and Disjunction."

as a simple sign or representation of Hercules, something that certainly has no power to summon Hercules and is in no way connected to Hercules' presence. In contrast, the dove that appeared at the baptism of Jesus was a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and as such a signal and a pledge that the Spirit was truly present. A symbol is something "by which the reality is presented to us," and so the symbol genuinely mediates the presence of the thing symbolized.[55] Calvin considers the burning bush and the Ark of the Covenant to be Old Testament examples of symbols.[56] In the case of such symbols, there is "a sacramental form of expression, in which the Lord gives to the sign the name of the thing signified."[57] So in thinking about the sentence, "This is my body," Calvin observes, "[T]his expression is a metonymy, a figure of speech commonly used in Scripture when mysteries are under discussion."[58] A metonymy is a symbol that "truly exhibits" the thing it represents, and when the symbol is God-ordained we may trust that He has joined reality and symbol to each other in such a way that the symbol leads easily to the truth it exhibits.

In his book *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis explains the tradition of symbolic theology in contrast to allegory. He suggests that although allegory is connected to symbolism, in that both establish what he calls an "equivalence between the material and the immaterial," the impulses are in other ways completely opposed. Allegory starts with the sensible world and invents something fictional, which is less real than the sensible. Symbolism, in contrast, tries to look past the sensible world to something more real beyond it to which it points. Lewis says, "The attempt to read something else through its sensible imitations, to see the archetype in the copy, is what I mean by symbolism or sacramentalism . . .. The allegorist leaves the given - his own passions - to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is a fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real. To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory."[59] So to say that Calvin stands in the tradition of "symbolic theology" means more than that he had a way with words or liked to use metaphors. Rather, it means that he interpreted the world as a set of symbols that pointed to God. Calvin certainly stands in this tradition in his understanding of the Lord's Supper. This is both a supremely analogical and a supremely eschatological understanding of the sacrament. The bread is genuinely exhibiting the body of Christ, without being univocal with the body; and the whole of the sacrament points forward to the wedding feast we will someday enjoy, giving us already now an actual foretaste both of the feast and (more importantly) of our union with Christ.

Those who reduce the present "body" of Jesus to the body of the Church express an understanding of the sacrament that is allegorical rather than symbolic or analogical, since they suggest that the physical bodies of Christians who make up the church are more real than the

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[55] *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

[56] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.21

[57] *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

[58] *Institutes*, IV.xvii.21

[59] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 45.

particular ascended body of Jesus. Here the movement is downward rather than upward, in a way that absolutizes present materiality, rather than allowing our current experience of materiality to be a symbol of our future resurrected and transformed materiality. Rather than finding icons in the present world, we are left with idols that "stop the gaze," as Marion would say, rather than directing the gaze beyond themselves.[60]

Finally, *the celebration of the supper must always involve the entire community*. Calvin was adamant that all believers must be invited to the table, arguing that for one person to take communion alone was to misunderstand the nature of the sacrament. In his *Commentary on Ephesians*, Calvin hears in Paul's teaching regarding marriage and the analogy there drawn between the relationship of husband and wife and the relationship of Christ and His church a reference to the Lord's Supper, for it is in the sacrament that we participate in Christ and are united with Him. Gerrish suggests that this is where Calvin gets the expression "mystical union," from Paul's discussion of the mysterious union of husband and wife.[61] But as the ones to be united are *the church*, not individual believers as individuals,[62] so our union with Christ also results in union with one another. The community of the Church is the bride of Christ. This is why the prayer for the Holy Spirit, quoted earlier, asks not only for the transformation of the elements but also for the transformation of the community. John Nevin argues, "Christ's flesh and blood are at hand, not in the bread and wine as such, but in the transaction; not materially or by mechanical contact in space, but *dynamically* . . ."[63] This is why churches in the Reformed tradition typically insist on having both elders and a pastor present whenever the sacrament is celebrated, even if it is in a hospital room or at the home of a shut-in. The sacrament is found not in the elements, nor in some special clerical power, but in the faithful gathering of the community under the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Do we find in this understanding of the sacrament the same grounding for world affirmation as in Roman Catholic theology? Not obviously. In fact, it is not surprising that this Calvinist understanding of the dialogue between God and humanity has usually given rise to iconoclasm, since there is no place in this dialogic circle of word and sacrament for a human creative response. We are swept up in God's action, rather than being actors ourselves. We are acted upon. And yet I believe that there is a coherent way for me, as a Calvinist, to be as affirming of beauty as theologians in other traditions.

The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says that an aesthetic theology must have what he calls "a doctrine of *seeing*," such that there is some way to perceive or apprehend God's work in the world, and also what he calls "a doctrine of *rapture*, of *being brought out*,"

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[60] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 10-11.

[61] Gerrish, p. 73. Though the mystery may also be derived from Colossians 1:26,27 – "the mystery [is] Christ in you, the hope of glory."

[62] *Commentary on Ephesians,* 5:28-33

[63] John W. Nevin, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper: Nevin's Reply to Charles Hodge," *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, p. 316.

for without rapture it is impossible to get out of our own "metaphysical systems into the free system of God."[64] In order to make space for such an aesthetic sacramental theology, a Calvinist needs a third circle, analogous to the movement of word and sacrament, but not identical to it, which provides both the doctrine of seeing and the doctrine of rapture. The downward side of that circle is not hard to find. Calvin taught that there was an additional line of revelation, the book of nature, the Creation. The work of creation is a gift of grace, since the Triune God has no need of anyone or anything outside himself. Calvin typically refers to God, especially but not exclusively to the Father, as the "fountain of all good;" indeed, Brian Gerrish suggests that this is Calvin's "fundamental image of God"[65] and that "the meaning of creation for Calvin is that the Father and fountain of good has spread a table of good things before his children."[66] The proper response to this fountain of goodness is gratitude and enjoyment of God's glory. Gerrish argues that for Calvin "authentic humanity is constituted by the act of thanksgiving to the Maker of heaven and earth, whose goodness has prepared a table before us; that is the truth of our being, grounded in the creation." It is therefore appropriate to think of all human existence as "eucharistic."[67]

This revelatory act is parallel to the revelations of incarnation and Scripture. Just as Christ can be said to be the content of both the incarnation and the Scripture, so too in identifying Christ as Logos the gospel of John suggests that he is also in some way the content of the creation. As Colossians 1 puts it, "in him all things hold together."[68] The Father speaks the Word in the animating power of the Spirit, and everything comes into being and is held in being, centered on the person of the Son.

Even though creation is (from our perspective) chronologically prior to incarnation, it is epistemologically tertiary. We must experience the justifying results of Christ's incarnation and ascension, and we must then be instructed and sanctified through word and sacrament before we can read the book of nature aright. The Holy Spirit's illuminating presence is necessary here too, just as it has been both in hearing the word and in receiving the sacrament. The primary revelation, to which all other revelation is analogous, is the revelation of the incarnation.

We have therefore almost arrived at an understanding of the dialogue between God and humanity as three concentric circles.

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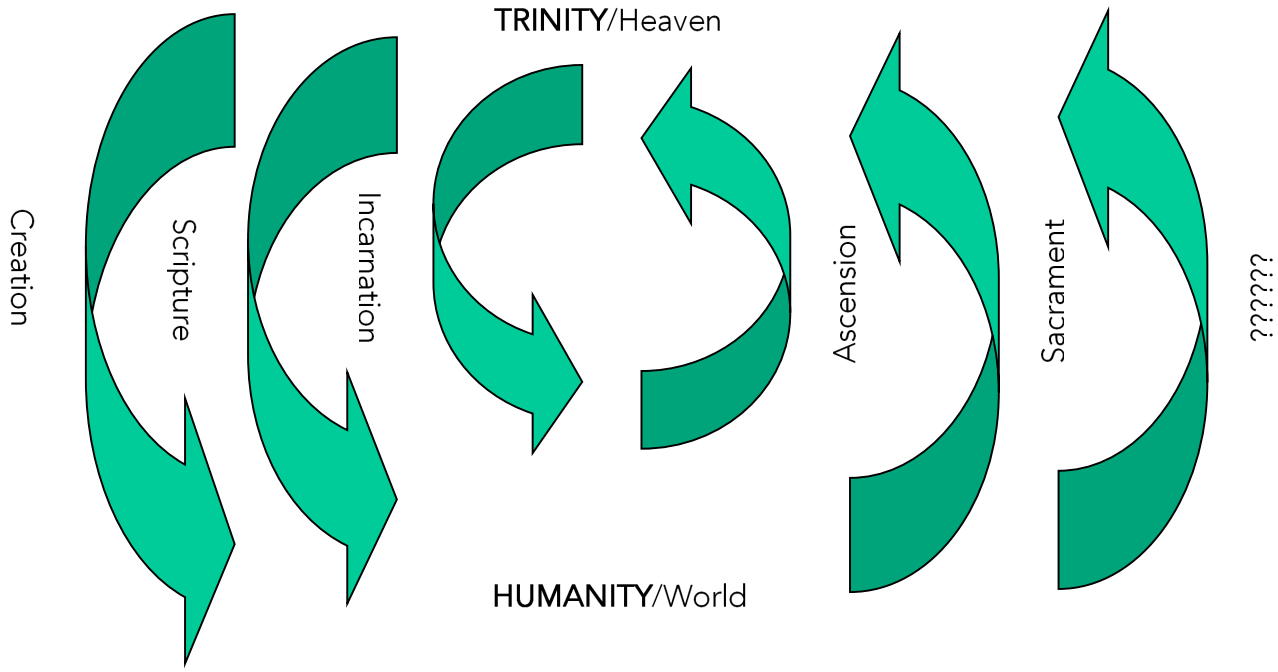
[64]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. IV., *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans., Brian McNeil *et al*, eds. Joseph Fessio& John Riches. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989) p. 24.

[65] Gerrish, p. 26.

[66] Gerrish, p. 48.

[67] Gerrish, p. 50.

[68] Colossians 1:17



The inner circle is of Christ's descent via incarnation and His ascent via His triumphant ascension and session at the right hand of the Father. The second circle is of the Word of Scripture, proclaimed prior to the sacrament, and the act of the sacrament in response, in which the people of God participate in the ascension of Christ. This circle is controlled by the inner circle of incarnation and ascension, such that the Word and sacrament are pointers or symbols directing our attention to the central event of the coming of God to be with us as a human being. The third circle is of the creation and … what? What would be the upward movement parallel to the ascension and the sacrament? For the parallels to hold true, Christ must be the content of this upward arrow in some way, and the Holy Spirit must be the initiating power.

One way to understand this upwards arrow would be in terms of the Logos tradition, which sees Christ as holding in Himself the content of the created world, which is then offered back to the Father through the love of the Spirit. Human beings participate in Christ the Logos's return to the Father by seeing the created world as related to the Creator. The human mind is designed to perceive the world. God's design for human beings is that we will understand, will *grasp* the things around us. In doing this, we reflect the image of Christ, who, as the Logos, contains, or *grasps* the essential forms of all that exists. When we grasp the world, we are being like Christ. We are also recognizing the essentially symbolic nature of our world, since everything we see reflects the deeper reality of God Himself, the reality of his glory and His beauty. As Wordsworth says, "[W]ith an eye made quiet by the power/Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/ We see into the life of things.[69] When we not only grasp the world, but also

[69]William Wordsworth, "Lines above Tintern Abbey".

love it, or – as Jonathan Edwards would say – consent to it, we make the turn from reception of the creation to an imaginative offering of that creation back to God in gratitude.

This turn is analogous to the turn of the inner circle, in that through our loving attention to the independent reality of the beautiful creation we exchange the shadows of our own ideas about reality for the truths of God's glory and beauty reflected around us. This turn is analogous to the *epiclesis*, the turn of the middle circle, in that it requires the help of the Holy Spirit, so that we come to see "no longer from a human point of view,"[70] but rather with eyes of faith. The turn involves the reordering of desire (*eros*) toward its proper object, God, so that our longing and desire pulls us into his presence. I believe that this is where we may expand a Calvinist understanding of the sacrament. Just as the bread is really bread, but is also a symbol uniting us to heaven, so the created world is really physical, material, and good, but is also a symbol uniting us to the lasting kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth, and ultimately to Christ himself. Calvin's understanding of the sacrament allows us to think analogically about the created world and our knowledge of it. Just as the bread is not univocal with the body of Christ, but is genuinely connected to that body and genuinely makes that body available to us, so too our everyday experiences of the world around us are genuinely connected to the kingdom of light of which we are now citizens and genuinely make that kingdom available to us, without being univocal with that kingdom. Calvin's understanding of the sacrament allows us to understand all of reality as united in the person of Christ, who is the Logos in whom all things hold together. We as the church are constantly being expanded by the addition of a heavenly dimension to our lives. This expansion transcends the limits of time and space, uniting the church in a real, not simply theoretical, way before the face God.

I suggest that this entire diagram is a partial portrait of the priestly, mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ and the Church. Here we are thinking about the way in which Jesus Christ stands between God and humanity as our mediator, and the ways in which we participate in that mediatorial work. One way that we do this is by recognizing and lifting up the goodness and beauty of creation in a way that gives glory to God, a way that references God as the source of that goodness and beauty. So perhaps the right label for the arrow on the far right of the diagram is "the priesthood of all believers," our call to share in that mediatorial office as a community, with that priesthood being understood as a response of delight to creation in a way that is analogous to Christ's ascension and to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In our fallen world, such priesthood also involves a recognition that things are not the way they ought to be, coupled with a ministry of intercession for the restoration of the creation.

As we read in Colossians 1:12-13, we have *already* been given an inheritance in the kingdom of light; our citizenship has *already* been transferred to the kingdom of the Son. The world of our everyday experience, including things like bread and wine, books and churches, bushes that burn without being consumed and birds that are symbols of the Holy Spirit, all that

[70] II Corinthians 5:16

world directs our attention toward the more lasting kingdom, for this world is dependent on the next. We are called to be people who are seeking a city with firm foundations, and that city is not here and now. However, we already have access to that city through the sacrament, and the sacrament is a promise that someday we will be residents as well as citizens of that city. In the light of the sacrament, we can see our present experience as symbolic of the world to come, pointing beyond itself to something more lasting and more real.

Communion and Discipline

Dr. Amy J. Erickson

If there are any relational strains in a household, they are bound to reveal themselves at the dinner table: stony silences, curt exchanges, full-blown arguments. By the same token, shared meals can become the needed remedy for these strained relations. Breaking bread bonds humans together. This age-old truth is embedded in the word "companion": someone with whom (*co-*) one shares bread (Latin: *panis*).

In the household of God's family, the Lord's Supper operates in much the same way. Communion gives us the opportunity to check ourselves and our relationships with our family in the faith. Are our relationships in order? Do we need to ask for forgiveness?[71] Are we harboring a grudge or animosity with a sister or brother and need to seek reconciliation?[72] Is there a sibling who is actively living in in unrepentant sin who is threatening both the health of the church family and themselves, and needs to be confronted – or even turned away?[73] Communion operates as a kind of diagnostic of the health of the church body, its individual members, and their relations; it also offers a means for their repair. In more extreme circumstances, this repair might look like refusing to share communion with a sibling. Such a refusal is the culmination of a neglected church practice: discipline.

Three marks of the church

In the spirit of the Reformed tradition, ECO's *Essential Tenets* recognizes three marks (or defining features) of the church:

1) the preaching of God's Word
2) the administration of the sacraments
3) the exercise of discipline

Although discipline was first identified as a third mark of the church by the *Scots Confession* (a Reformed document written in Scotland in the 16th century), discipline is not an ecclesial afterthought. Discipline was considered a defining aspect of the church's life from its inception. The 2nd century theologian Tertullian, for example, insists that—along with worship, prayer, and scripture reading—during church gatherings "exhortations are made, rebukes and

[71] Matthew 5:23–24.
[72] 1 Corinthians 11:28–29.
[73] 1 Corinthians 5:11–12.

sacred censures are administered."[74] Basil of Caesarea, a 4th century theologian from what is now Turkey, in a book that became the seedbed of the monastic tradition, gave this reason for why community is so important: how can you see your own faults without someone else to point them out to you?[75] A little later in the monastic tradition, Benedict's Rule suggests that one of the main duties of the abbot (something like the head pastor) is to actively pursue those who were excommunicated from the community's fellowship.[76] After all, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.[77]

Far from existing as an isolated and lesser aspect of the church's life, discipline organically stems from the first two marks. Discipline is a form of speech that speaks the convicting and healing power of God's Word into the concrete condition and life of an individual believer in the form of confrontation and exhortation. Discipline is also—as noted above—a function of participating in the Lord's Supper. And, in some rare instances, a refusal of the Lord's Supper is itself a final and severe form of discipline.[78]

ECO's *Polity* retains the highest degree of censure as the removal from membership,[79] which implies the forbearing of communion. This measure should be rare, only done as a last resort, and with great pain. After all, excommunication is like amputating one's own limb.[80] At the same time, excommunication retains hope for the restoration and return of the excommunicated. Paul, in a puzzling passage in which he instructs the Corinthians to remove a man guilty of unrepentant incest from their midst by "handing him over to Satan", makes clear that this measure is—in some mysterious way—*for his own salvation*.[81] Jesus' own instructions regarding discipline are sandwiched between the parable of the lost sheep[82] and of the unforgiving servant.[83] No matter how egregious the offense, we should always be poised to welcome a wandering sheep home, and to forgive a repentant heart over and over and over again: or risk forfeiting our own forgiven-ness.[84]

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[74] Tertullian, *Apology*, ed. Philip Schaff, Kindle, The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection (Catholic Way Publishing, 2014), chap. 39.

[75] Basil, *The Rule of St Basil in Latin and English: A Revised Critical Edition*, trans. Anna Silvas, Kindle (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), Loc 3469.

[76] Terrence Kardong, Benedict, and Benedict, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996), chap. 27.

[77] Matthew 9:12.

[78] See Heidelberg Q85; Westminster Confession chapter 32.

[79] *Polity of ECO*, 6.4.

[80] 1 Corinthians 12.

[81] 1 Corinthians 5:5.

[82] Matthew 18:10–14.

[83] Matthew 18:21–35.

[84] Matthew 18: 35.

But discipline is much more than just excommunication. ECO understands practices of discipline as serving "to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another's burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ" (ECO Essential Tenets, p. 7). Discipline expresses our duty and responsibility for our mutual growth and edification as we follow Jesus together along the Way. Communal discipline extends from the personal discipline of self-examination and confession. Communal discipline is also the natural outcome of our commitment to hold one another to obedience to God's commands (p. 8). Discipline does not consist only of ecclesial courts and judicial processes like those spelled out in our *Rules of Discipline*.[85] *Discipline* is a culture of *discipleship* and the outworking of communal love.

Discipline has, however, often been considered a dirty word, and not unjustly so. It has often been wielded as a tool of punishment and power rather than as a means of discipleship and love. These abuses of discipline painfully scar the church's history. They should sober us, but neither should they deter us from pursuing a healthy culture of church discipline in fidelity to Christ.

Thus, it is crucial to consider what discipline is, and what it is not.

Discipline is *not*:

- A form of punishment.
- A personal or individual issue (i.e. "self-discipline" or "spiritual discipline").
- Only for church pastors, office-holders, and leaders to receive and deliver.
- An opportunity to exercise retribution or moral superiority.
- To purify the church (which is already full of sinners!).
- A marginal aspect of church life.
- Final and permanent (even if it involves excommunication).
- Only a matter of official judicial process.

Discipline *is*:

- A form of healing (it is always remedial, even when excommunication is involved).
- The responsibility of the entire church body.
- For every covenant partner to participate in.

[85] *Constitution of ECO*, 32–41.

- To be done in a spirit of utmost gentleness, humility, wisdom, and *prayer.*[86]
- To pursue health and integrity of witness for both the corporate church body and the individual involved.
- A central aspect of the process of discipleship, and a central duty of the church.[87]
- Always open to renewal, repentance, and return in the life of the person being disciplined, and reconciliation between individuals within the church.
- Constituted by practices and activities that include reproof, exhortation, confrontation, forgiveness, confession, encouragement, preaching, communion, and prayer – all of which are conditioned by our breaking bread together in the Lord's Supper.

In fact, Jesus startingly suggests that *he is most present when gathered believers are praying over a matter of church discipline to regain a lost sibling.*[88] Ultimately, *discipline is good news*: we are not alone on our journey toward Christ-likeness. It is the direct result of the Word of God convicting sin and extending healing and hope within the individual lives and interpersonal engagements of God's people, and in the reconciling work of the Lord's Supper. Discipline is how faithful disciples are forged in Christ's image, and how the body of Christ is made holy and one and prepared for her wedding day for her bridegroom.

Discipline is one of the central tasks of the church because it fulfills a central command that is the beating heart of the Old and New Testaments and of the Christian life: *to love*. The golden rule command to love our neighbor as ourself[89] derives from Leviticus. The preceding verses of Leviticus make clear what love looks like: "Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."[90] In other words: love disciplines. It pursues open, if difficult, conversations with a fierce love that refuses to either harbor grudges and resentment that may fester, or sit idly by as a community member continues down a path of self-destructive sin. True love exercises discipline out of hope for renewed table fellowship, both in this life, and in the life to come.[91]

[86] Matthew 18:15–20; Galatians 6:1–2; Proverbs 9:8.
[87] Matthew 7:1–6; 18:18; 1 Corinthians 6:1–6.
[88] Matt 18:15–20.
[89] Mark 12:31.
[90] Leviticus 19:17–18.
[91] Isaiah 25; Matthew 26:29.

How to recover discipline for our church:

Unfortunately, discipline is a neglected aspect of church life in the contemporary West. ECO's *Polity* makes it clear that session's responsibility includes the exercise and oversight of discipline (p. 16-17). This includes, but is not confined to, the disciplinary polity spelled out in our constitution. Church sessions should consider how to cultivate an ecclesial culture of discipline – or in other words, discipleship.

To do this, sessions may want to consider:

- training covenant partners in their responsibilities at baptism or confirmation to both give and receive discipline in a spirit of humility, gentleness, and grace on matters of agreed accountability (see ECO Essential Tenets III. E)
- training covenant partners in ECO's disciplinary polity, and the theology which undergirds it, stressing especially that all discipline is to be bathed in love and prayer
- teaching what it means to partake communion as a means of personal and corporate examination
- developing, adopting, and disseminating practices of exhortation, confrontation, and conflict resolution, and related training material and tools

What if we are falsely accused, disciplined, or excommunicated by our own church family? Or worse, what if we falsely accuse, discipline, or excommunicate one of the members of our very own? Wrongful exclusion from the church does not mean loss of salvation or separation from God for the one falsely accused. Even so, the sobering situation of false accusation and exclusion is not impossible. In fact, we see it throughout church history. In some ways: this *is* the church's history. The church was birthed because of an unjust trial that falsely accused and executed an innocent man: our Savior, bridegroom, and God. Jesus reminds us that to be near God's people is to draw near sinners who will inevitably wound us. But by his wounds we are healed, and by his broken body we are fed and nourished for new life together.

Symbolizing the Sacrament: Practical Considerations of Symbols

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

While there is no officially approved or disapproved method of administering the sacrament, this chapter is intended to help a church's leadership consider what the various methods might signify, as well as to address some common questions.

The guiding principle when choosing how to administer the sacrament in a church is how to best integrate the people into a *community of signification* in which the signs or symbols used represent what Jesus intended them to represent (see the chapter on what the symbols mean). Priorities matter here: convenience and efficiency are not symbolized by the Lord's Supper, and so trying to make its administration as efficient as possible betrays other priorities that will be evident and formative for the congregation.

In reading this you might be tempted to ask, "Why does any of this matter?" Indeed, diving into the minutiae of choreography in liturgy may seem absurd or nit-picky. Consider an American football game. Every detail of each play is meticulously analyzed by the commentators, fans, coaches, and players. Teams often record a performance and analyze it later to learn how to improve. This is a game, a sport. Why would not our acts of symbolizing the body and blood of the King of creation and our redemption not be worthy at least somewhat similar attention, if not more? Details and symbol matter, and the care and attention we give to a symbol itself teaches a congregation about it.[92] If the sacrament is administered with boredom, with a bare sense of duty from the leadership, this will be felt and replicated by the congregation.

Convenience

The difficulty of administering the sacrament is often the primary consideration a church makes. This is itself symbolic of where the church today is and what we value. For our symbols always reveal what we value. But nothing about the gospel of Jesus Christ is convenient or efficient. Discipleship is not a stepped process, a one-size-fits-all formula for success that can be coached through. The work of God in our lives is ongoing and lifelong. Sometimes it is painfully slow. Sometimes it feels boring when we yearn for the temporary excitement of a life of sin. The incarnation itself was not done for convenience sake, nor was The Last Supper. Why can't God just wipe away all sin all at once? Why did God have to become flesh in Jesus when he could have just fixed all the problems with a word of his mouth? We worship a God who does not fit our image, thankfully. The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God does not

[92] Paul is adamant about doing the Lord's Supper correctly and having participants understand what they are doing in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29.

solve problems with a single stroke, but reawakens personal relationships with himself and brings individuals on a journey toward being conformed to the image of Jesus. It is vital that we do not symbolize a false gospel of convenience and efficiency by making these the primary driving values of our worship services.

Seeker-Sensitivity and Missional Church

Although the fad of "seeker sensitive" church has come and long gone, it revealed something important about what we're trying to do with church, and thus by extension, with the sacraments. The primary lesson to be learned is that churches have tried and failed to fit the entirety of the Christian life into an hour event. Discipleship doesn't only happen in a worship service. Evangelism must be taken out of the worship service much or most of the time. Christian education cannot be confined to sermons alone. Nor can fellowship or community formation happen only in the gaps between worship services. These are all valued aspects of the Christian life that need intentional time and effort.

The church of the first and second centuries often had a segregated service in which the first part was open to the public and included the ministry of the word. This could be more evangelistic and focused on bringing people to Jesus. The second part of the service was only for baptized Christians who had also gone through catechesis.[93] It was in this second part that the Lord's Supper was practiced, out of the public. In this way, these churches were able to do both evangelism in a seeker-sensitive way, and rightly administer the sacraments.

The missional church movement contains similar dangers of seeker-sensitivity if a church tries to make a worship service primarily missional. Of course the worship service is missional at its core, but it was never designed as a tool for outreach or mission, especially the sacraments. The sacraments prepare and equip the people of God for mission, but they are not for unbelievers.[94] The sacraments are mysteries, and they cannot be made obvious to people who are not part of a "community of signification" in which signs have shared meaning.

The Bread

Historical context: Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover celebration, which requires unleavened bread to help the Jews remember the exodus when there was not time to let the bread rise.

Grain type: While modern matzah (Passover bread/crackers) is wheat-based, ancient Jews in Egypt would have eaten emmer, a kind of primitive wheat. Emmer, like einkorn, are semi-wild varieties of wheat that contain significantly less gluten and more protein than modern

[93] Catechesis is the process of learning the basics of the faith and life of obedience through a catechism.

[94] The Westminster Confession states, "Sacraments are… instituted… to put a visible difference between those that belong to the church, and the rest of the world" (XXIX.1).

wheats. These grains are harder to obtain today as they are less commercially viable, though more healthful. Jesus distributed barley loaves when he fed the thousands.[95]

Modern wheats, rice, and other gluten-free options are appropriate. Paul's encouragement to the strong to accommodate to the weak should be kept in mind when offering gluten-based breads. The Lord's Supper must be as inclusive as possible for the people of God. Again, what does the bread symbolize in practice vs. what it ought to symbolize as part of the people of God?

Form: Individual portions or breaking bread? Again, the choice should be governed by the question, "What does this symbolize?" and "How can we holistically communicate the message of the Lord's Supper?" There ought to be intentionally symbolic reasons why your church uses a certain type of bread, and this should be communicated to the congregation.

The Wine

Historical Context: Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover celebration, which utilized wine.

Wine vs. Grape Juice: Wine was always alcoholic in the ancient world, since it is self-fermenting. Grape juice would have to be drunk fresh if intended for that purpose. Alcohol is a type of natural preservative that allowed grapes to be consumed year-round rather than only at harvest. Storable grape juice is only possible with the more modern process of pasteurization. However, wine was often diluted with water in the ancient world, and this is still the practice among many churches who use wine.

Grape juice is a modern invention and came of its own with Prohibition in the US. Thus, it is a modern practice to replace wine with juice. Although it is not authentic, there may be good reasons for using grape juice instead of wine. Juice allows those in recovery from alcohol addictions to participate fully in the sacrament without it becoming a temptation to relapse.

Like with the bread, it is worth questioning whether choices are offered and what the providing of choice symbolizes.

The color of the wine or juice is worth noting as well. Although white wine or juice tends to not stain as badly when spilled, the chief concern is symbolizing blood, not keeping carpets unstained. Again, the choice of wine/juice type and color should be dictated by symbolic intent, and this should be communicated to the congregation.

Form: Common Cup, Individual Portions? Jesus himself seems to have used a common cup for the sacrament. While this often raises questions of sanitation, particularly post COVID-19, again the question needs to revolve first around what we are trying to symbolize.

[95] John 6:9.

Intinction and Hygiene

Intinction is the practice of dipping the bread in the wine and then eating them together. This practice has a very long history, first noted by Julius I in 340 AD as a practice already existing. It seems to have arisen to help give communion either to the sick or children, or both. It is an accepted practice in Eastern Orthodoxy, and has been for millennia. But in the West it has come and gone, and come back around with opposition abounding. Most opposition simply has revolved around the fact that Jesus didn't do it that way and it violates the exact words of his command "eat" and "drink" since the wine is *eaten* with the bread. Those who oppose intinction generally insist on performing the sacrament as closely as possible to the actions Jesus did and commanded. Those who support intinction argue that the Bible does not oppose it even if there is no real support for it. Historically, theologians in the Reformed tradition have rejected it alongside Lutherans.[96]

Theologically, some point out that keeping the body and blood separate is vital because the sacrament itself symbolizes death, which is the separation of the body from its blood. In the Old Testament flesh with blood still in it was forbidden, because blood was seen to have the *nephesh* (soul or life-essence shared by all animals) within it[97]. This prohibition is one of the few restated by the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. The reunion of body and blood within the believer (and not before) can symbolize participation in the resurrection as the life-essence (blood) returns to the flesh.

The modern reality is that intinction is most prevalent for reasons of hygiene; symbolic or theological reasons are probably lower on the list. The hygiene argument offers something of a false-security however. Intinction does not share saliva, but it does not prevent the dipping of bread touched by dirty hands, let alone dirty hands or fingernails themselves into the wine/juice.

The use of alcohol and a silver chalice[98] both can eliminate some sources of infection, but as we now know from COVID-19, the alcohol content to kill viruses must be around 70%, or 140 proof, which is unattainable for any naturally fermented alcohol and would be dangerously intoxicating. Some churches have the practice of using fortified wine (sherry, brandy) in part to address this.

Thus, if hygiene is a chief concern, churches will have to consider single-serving, a practice that has numerous symbolic challenges to the essence of the sacrament. Alternatively, it might be worth considering group size—whether practicing the sacrament may be more

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[96] Keister, Lane B. "Intinction: An Historical, Exegetical, and Systematic-Theological Examination." *The Aquila Report*, 2012. Accessed <https://theaquilareport.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/IntinctionPaper.pdf>

[97] Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11, 14; Deuteronomy 12:23.

[98] Silver is a natural antibacterial, and antifungal agent, though only in certain forms and its effectiveness is debated.

appropriate and hygienic among small groups rather than full congregations. There are many other potential benefits to such a practice as well, including a more natural and high-level of accountability or discipline/discipleship.

But we must acknowledge that the Lord's Supper was never designed around modern problems of sanitation. Part of the incarnation is God entering into dangerous territory, into the land of sickness and death, and experiencing these things himself. It is also designed to show how we suffer together. Rather than operating out of a security-mindset, it is worth considering how a church might equip its individual disciples to take precautions to not infect others if ill. One lost practice of the Protestant church that exists in other traditions and even other religions is the importance of ritual purification before participating in a worship or sacrificial service. Reintroducing ritual purification in the form of handwashing prior to celebrating communion is worth considering.

Disposables

If we ask the question, "what does this symbolize?" the use of disposable cups, plates, or other containers symbolizes convenience and disposability. Historically the church has spared no expense in presenting the body and blood of Jesus the King of kings in the most noble of vessels. We must question whether the diminution of the place of the sacraments among modern Evangelicalism is not itself symbolized by the transition to disposable and therefore contemptable vessels. It is also worth considering whether we can symbolize the reconciliation of all creation if we use vessels that are themselves unsustainable and toxic to the natural world.

Coming Forward or Remaining Seated

The act of walking forward to the front of the church symbolizes approaching an altar of sacrifice to participate in the sacrifice and receive the benefits of it. Some might be concerned that this is a misunderstanding of the sacrament, as though it were a re-sacrifice or re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ, which it is not. However, that the sacrifice is an offering of the self as a "living sacrifice"[99] it is fitting that we bring ourselves to the altar to offer our lives in service to the King. Indeed, the highest altar, the Ark of the Covenant housed within the holy of holies in the old temple was representative of God's throne (or footstool because God is too big for such a small throne).[100] So it is appropriate that we symbolize our own movement toward God even as he comes to meet us.[101]

[99] Romans 12:1.

[100] Psalms 99:5, 110:1, 132:7. Here "footstool" is clearly being used as a reference to a throne.

[101] See Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7.

Remaining seated can symbolize the aspect of service, that Christ came as a servant who served his disciples rather than being served himself. This is especially evident in the serving of those who are unable to walk forward.

Passing the Plate, Elder/Deacon Servers, or Self-Service?

Passing the plate could be linked to Jesus' miracle of feeding the five thousand. In Luke 9 Jesus gives the loaves to his disciples to distribute to the five thousand. How they did this is not known. In John 6, the feeding of thousands is linked to the Passover, but not because it is a Passover meal. Rather, because it was during the Passover season which requires the use of unleavened bread and the destruction of all leavened bread, the disciples seemed to be worried that there wouldn't be any to feed the crowds. This sets up Jesus' teachings on his being the bread of life.

So, although passing the plate makes distribution easy, it may be better to have those who are able make an effort to get to Jesus in line with his teaching of John 6:35, "Whoever comes to me…" Just as an "altar call" of revivalist services and evangelical crusades is effective in showing commitment, so could this approach to receiving communion.

Passing the plate also almost always comes with individual cups, often disposable plastic ones at that. Again, what does this symbolize?

In some traditions, only ordained ministers or priests can distribute the elements. What does this symbolize? For these traditions, often Roman Catholic or High-Church Anglican, the intent is to show that it is through the "apostolic succession" that the priest himself is the representative of Christ. The Reformed tradition does not hold to this doctrine. Apostolic succession for us refers to the authenticity of the faith, teaching, and accountability handed down from the apostles through the church's history. So, for the Reformed, there was an intentional movement of raising up elders who would not preside over the sacrament or say the words of institution, but would aid in its distribution, much like Jesus' disciples aided in the division of the loaves of bread.

A modern trend, and one that will likely be heightened after COVID, is towards self-service. Here there are stations placed with the elements and individuals come up and take the bread and juice at the station alone before returning to their seats. Although convenient and somewhat more sanitary, this symbolizes an isolation entirely out of line with the meaning of the Lord's Supper as Communion. Discipleship is not a me-and-Jesus affair, but one that involves entry into a covenant people.

Group Size

The sacrament has generally been held for the largest gatherings only, with rules about how smaller groups may administer the sacrament. But group size will increasingly become an

aspect of symbol worth considering, again because of hygiene considerations. First considerations go toward Jesus's Last Supper itself, which was limited to his small group of closest disciples. There one person indeed ate and drank death upon himself because he participated in an unworthy manner. It is worth noticing that Judas' forthcoming betrayal was identified at this very meal. The link between sacrament and discipline is thus revealed. Small groups of close-knit disciples know one another and are better able to sharpen one another's discipleship, even if it also reveals the hard aspects of discipleship as we get to know one another's sins. This again is vital to understand in our communion with one another—we are not united by a shared righteousness of our own, but by that given by Jesus which is represented in the sacrament as well. Smaller groups also symbolize that the sacrament is communal and not individual. In large groups there is a natural tendency to be alone in the crowd.

But larger groups symbolize the larger union of the people of God, just as churches celebrate World Communion Sunday. The incredible growth of the church of God across the world can be well symbolized by multicultural gatherings across a city as well. Jesus' feeding of the thousands can also be recalled by large group sizes, but it is important to remember that the feeding of thousands was set up as a contrast to Jesus' statement about being the bread of life, so it is not the primary event of the Bible that the sacrament recalls. Also, when Jesus fed 5,000 in Luke 9, he divided them up into smaller units of 50.

It doesn't have to be either/or. Large churches may want to explore equipping and commissioning elders to preside at smaller group sacramental services with large-group communion services administered less frequently. Smaller groups allow for greater reflection on the meaning of the sacrament in all of its aspects, while larger groups can encourage the wider church. Smaller churches may want to also explore smaller group services as well as intentional efforts to meet with other churches to symbolize unity in Christ.

Sentiment: Joy or Solemnity?

Different traditions have often taken very different approaches toward the sentiment expressed in the sacrament. The more liturgical churches tend to have a more solemn feel to the sacrament. This is designed to emphasize the gravity of what one is doing. In standing before the throne of God and recalling the great mystery of our faith, that the King of Creation would become a servant and submit to death on the cross, it seems appropriate to be reverent. What we revere we take seriously. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."[102]

However, others have noted that the grace that God is communicating through the sacrament is salvation—resurrection from the dead, liberation from sin, and abundant life in his kingdom. These are very good reasons to rejoice.

[102] Hebrews 10:31.

The different approaches often come down to the focus: the work of Jesus or the results of that work as they benefit us. As in all of life, joy is often mixed with sorrow.[103] We live through the death of the one who loves us most. It is also worth mourning that the world needed to kill Jesus and how by its continued sinfulness it "crucifies again the Son of God."[104]

Part of the answer to this question is a rediscovery of the church's calendar and a robust liturgy of the sacrament during which a range of emotions are evoked. As in the theatre, book, movie, or other story, the audience can be drawn in to a gamut of feelings as the story unfolds. We indeed have a *comedy*, in the sense that is has a happy ending. But we also feel the hopeful sorrow as that ending, the eschaton, has not yet come.

Because the sacrament is intended to integrate people into the body of Christ, not just through the sacrament itself, but also through our working together to understand it in discipleship, it is fitting that the sacrament integrates us into the story of the people of God which is full of pain, sorrow, suffering, death, reverence, holiness, hope, joy, and peace, each in their respective seasons.

[103] This is noted as part of the Passover Seder meal in the mixing of bitter herbs *maror* with *charoset*, a sweet mixture of nuts and fruit.

[104] Hebrews 6:6.

Part II: Modern Questions and Debates

In this part we desired to document some of the conversations ECO's Standing Theology Committee had surrounding the issue of online-communion as prompted by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and restriction of church meetings. The following opinions belong to the authors cited and are not representative of ECO, which has as time of publication no official position or guidance on this issue.

For Online Communion: Rev. David L. Reichelderfer

Holy Week of 2020 presented churches with some unique challenges—as has all of the season of pandemic that we have found ourselves in this year. As society was largely shutdown by stay-at-home orders, churches were faced with the prospect of shutting down all aspects of their ministries and moving what was possible to on-line or virtual platforms. Worship services were viewed either through live-streaming or recordings.

Pastors and church staffs found themselves in fairly unfamiliar territory, a digital wilderness of sorts, which required ingenuity and flexibility, while attempting to meet the spiritual needs of their congregations. Many adjustments were made and rolled out without much opportunity for "trial and error." It was, and remains, for a lot of us a stressful and uncertain time.

We just wanted to continue to be "the Church," and not everyone agrees with how that can be pulled off in a digital environment. This became very apparent when some churches made the decision to keep Holy Week as "normal" as possible and offer the Lord's Supper as it often is as part of the observance either on Maundy Thursday, or Easter Sunday.

A theological debate ensued as to whether Holy Communion should be observed as part of a virtual worship service. And as is common is many theological debates—some heated arguments were presented! It seemed as though people were caught navigating between deeply held theological positions, and a desire to meet the needs of their congregations pastorally.

I found myself in this situation as a first-time pastor in the third year of a transitional ministry with a small congregation in a rural setting. We were working hard, as everyone in ministry was, to keep our people connected and to provide comfort to them during a very unsettling time. The only visual presence we had was through recorded sermons that were delivered in my basement and posted on the Internet. For the most part, our efforts were received well by our people. My intention was to keep everything rolling along as the week before Easter quickly approached.

"What about Maundy Thursday?" Following the pattern of making decisions "on the fly," my first thought was— "Ok, let's see if we can administer communion using the Internet." I put a few thoughts down, sent it out to our elders to see where they were on the idea, and received their response— "it seems doable." The "green light" that I was looking for!

Then, the "theological storm clouds" gathered, "lightning" began to flash, and I found myself saying, "wait a minute," maybe this isn't such a good idea, I got back to the elders and informed them that "Covid" Communion was on hold. There would be no Maundy Thursday service this year.

I'm not sure that I made the right decision. The decision I made was based upon the reaction of others to the idea of administering the Lord's Supper in a way that just didn't seem

"right." After all, we are talking about a sacrament, correct? Should we not take great care in the way that it is administered?

I would describe myself as a "traditional" Presbyterian, as I hold the "traditions" of Presbyterianism and Reformed theology in high regard. I struggle with how closely I hold those traditions at times. For me, the sacraments of baptism and Lord Supper are to be "rightly administered." What exactly does that mean?

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the sacraments are to be dispensed by an ordained pastor (WCF 27.4). Our ECO practice is to extend the administration of the sacraments to properly trained elders and deacons, as well as others, who might be serving as leaders in "micro-expressions" of the church.

In order for online Communion services to meet these standards, an ordained minister would be required for the administration of the sacrament. The words of institution, distribution of elements, and the partaking of the sacramental meal all can occur, within reason, in a virtual setting.

I observed this through participation in the Lord's Supper online, affirming that the sacrament can "rightly" be administered in this way, and so I offer my own story.

While pastoring a church from a distance, I was blessed to have my wife and I pastored through a church and its online worship services. The church offered a robust "virtual" experience. Instead of just a message preached, there were also elements of liturgy, prayer and music. And yes, on one Sunday, the Lord's Supper was administered "virtually."

Our virtual Communion experience actually began the day before, on Saturday morning, as one of the members of the church delivered the elements that would be used during the worship service. Given that this was at the direction of an ordained minister, I counted this distribution as being done in a "right" way, although most certainly out of the order that is customary. We were thankful to receive them and appreciated the amount of effort it took to distribute the elements among the hundred or so households within the congregation. It was also a great comfort to see and speak briefly, at a distance, with the delivery person. It was good to know that the church remained active, and inviting to us, in a personal way during a time of isolation and stress.

The next day, as Communion was served, the familiarity of the pastor's words of institution, and the partaking of the bread and grape juice, served to strengthen us as God's people, and we communed together as one body. We noted the names of many congregants who had "checked in" to the service, and acknowledged that we were one in the Spirit, although separated by location.

We did have to attend to one thing of which we would not under normal circumstances. What shall we do with the leftovers? This task of clean-up is often left to the pastor, spouse, or a member of a committee in the church. Here, it was left to me. Instead of disposing of the elements, I decided to lay them on the island in our kitchen.

I then found myself visiting the "table" on several occasions after the service. It was there that I experienced the spiritual presence of Christ. Somehow enjoying an extended time at His table—gaining strength, receiving comfort and knowing that He is always with me in the power of the Holy Spirit. On that day, I had experienced a means of grace in a new and powerful way.

I had a unique experience which fell outside of the bounds of my traditional, and theological, constructs.

So, what will I do if the time came again for me to administer the Lord's Supper in a season of pandemic and isolation in the church? I'm not sure, but I will give it prayerful consideration.

After all, you see, I am traditional, Reformed and Presbyterian.

Against Online Communion: Dr. Amy J. Erickson

In what follows, I will share why I have deep theological concerns with practicing communion through online platforms. I understand that some congregations opted to do so during the social-distancing measures of the COVID-19 pandemic. These decisions were made in genuine efforts to pastor and shepherd God's people in a season of great and sudden uncertainty. Even if you and your congregation opted to engage in virtual communion—and even if you disagree with my concerns by the end of this piece—I trust that we can all agree on this: we are in the wake of a unique opportunity to reflect on the meaning of our practices. Once the initial shock and extreme measures of social isolation and distancing have passed, our experience of them still carries an opportunity to reflect on the trajectories on which our practices have been set, both before and after the pandemic. I also trust we can agree that this period of reflection should continue, and that theological conversations like this are essential as we pursue increased faithfulness to our Lord. After all, that is exactly why this booklet is before you.

I will begin by considering some common arguments I have encountered which support the practice of online communion. This engagement is not meant to be exhaustive. Oddly, I do not doubt that a convincing theological case can be made to legitimize virtual communion. But I wonder if even if such a practice might be *permissible*, whether this means it is *constructive*.[105] My concern is that even when fueled by sound instincts to express unity and feed God's sheep in a time of distress, online communion damages our understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ.

One line of reasoning for engaging in virtual communion stands on God's omnipotence: if God can do (or use) anything, then it must be acceptable. Or in other words, because God's power is limitless, he can meet us through technological means even when we are physically apart. The problem with this line of argument is that it appeals to God's power in a manner that side-steps human responsibility and discernment. If God can use us—and all our actions and decisions—no matter what, then it quickly becomes difficult to explain why we should wrestle with any judgment or decision at all. In his mysterious sovereignty, God *really does* challenge us to make decisions with consequences about how to take care of and, indeed, feed people ("*you* give them something to eat."[106] Just because God may override human constraints or oversights does not mean we should make light of testing these boundaries. To be sure, the

[105] 1 Corinthians 6:12.

[106] Mark 6:37.

gospels show Jesus performing instantaneous healings from a distance.[107] We could conclude that this gives us permission to perform simultaneous communion services from across town. But what is remarkable about this mode of divine work is its rarity. Throughout much of the gospel narratives Jesus goes to a great deal of trouble to heal people through his direct touch.[108] There is a foundational element of our faith beneath this inconvenience: the Incarnation. The scandalous and radical truth of the gospel is bound up in the actual touch of Christ's body, which is the church.[109] The Heidelberg catechism lingers on this miraculous fact, using Adam's words to Eve to reflect on Christ's very bodily relation to the church: "we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone."[110] The sacrament of communion beautifully displays the gospel truth that God primarily opts to mediate his presence to humans through their bodies.

A second line of reasoning justifies virtual communion on mechanistic grounds: as long as it is performed in a suitable manner, then it is permissible. That is, if all the right elements are in place (bread and juice or wine at home) and the right words are spoken (over a device by an ordained minister), then virtual communion should be considered genuine. This approach naturally neglects an in-person gathering of the community of faith as a key ingredient in this formula, but the real problem is that it treats communion as just this: a formula. According to this perspective, as long as the ritual is practiced correctly, what is actually happening between or among the participants is irrelevant. The problem with this understanding of communion is that it does not conceive communion as "discerning the body."[111] Admittedly, this phrase needs some explaining (more below). For now though, my concern is that by focusing on whether or not communion may "work" in an online context, we are failing to embrace communion as God's means of opening our eyes to his presence in our gathered midst. As odd as it may seem, I think the decision to refuse online communion better opens our eyes and attunes our hearts to this presence as we mourn its loss.

A third line of reasoning focuses on the experience of taking online communion. Because it *feels* meaningful, then it must be acceptable. In some ways, this is the opposite line of reasoning from the mechanistic one above. This viewpoint endorses virtual communion because participants have felt it to be profoundly significant. I do not doubt this. My concern is that this assumes that the meaning of communion is grounded in our subjective feelings about our experience of it. As with the omnipotence argument, it can be taken in a dangerous direction. Any number of actions can feel meaningful, but this does not make them permissible or constructive. Moreover, communion's remarkable gift lies in the opposite direction: we may

[107] Matthew 8:5–13.
[108] Matthew 8:3; 9:20–22, 25, 29; John 9:6.
[109] 1 Corinthians 12:12.
[110] *Heidelberg Catechism* Q & A 76.
[111] 1 Corinthians 11:29.

not feel anything at all, and yet Christ still nourishes us. We may find ourselves in a moment of profound pain, confusion, or doubt about our faith when we receive the elements, yet we can nevertheless truly taste and see God's provision and goodness to us. The Heidelberg catechism revels in this direct and concrete perception at the very moment that the elements are prepared and given to us by a fellow member of the church body:

> *as surely as I see with my eyes* the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross…*as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves*, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.[112]

Communion is not a feeling, but a tangible reception of Christ's body. A spotty internet connection reveals how online platforms weaken this perception, and how much they fail to relay a reciprocal tangibility among those partaking.

A fourth position adopts an emergency legislation mode: these are unusual times that permit unusual measures. These certainly have been odd times, but neither are such times new. Both our tradition and Scripture provide us with a ready-made and well-worn practice for desperate times: fasting. It may not be theologically correct to speak of fasting from the Lord's Supper itself, but neither is it theologically invalid to suggest that God may be inviting us to reclaim this widely forgotten practice. Fasting also directly resists the instant-gratification which characterizes our culture and directly threatens our discipleship to the one who calls us to deny ourselves and follow him. I have found it both curious and troubling that, for the most part, congregations have been much quicker to adopt measures of online communion than invite their members to express their solidarity through fasting.

A fifth and final view that supports online communion is pragmatic: we have the tools for online communion and people want it, so what is stopping us? Perhaps unexpectedly, this position is not too far from the first. However, instead of focusing on God's power, the focus here is on human ability and needs. Because of this, it fails to take into account what God wants from us: faithfulness. Faithfulness is not constructed at the intersection of our desires and our ability to meet them. Nor are faithful measures always the most popular ones. In fact, faithfulness may lie in the opposite direction of consumer demand. We see Jesus refusing Satan's offer of a pragmatic response in Matthew 4:3-4. Like Jesus, the church too, is in a season of wilderness. Like our Lord, we should guard against the temptation to manufacture our own bread.

[112] Heidelberg Catechism Q28, emphasis added

My concerns with our haste to reach for and justify virtualized communion in the manners just considered are threefold: 1) that we are fueled by the false gods and mistaken values of our age, 2) that we are obscuring God's invitation to suffer for and with one another as we wait to re-commune, and 3) that we are blinding ourselves to the physical and spiritual health of our own brothers and sisters in our haste to meet consumer demand. Overall, I worry that we are failing to practice communion in a manner that encourages us to reflect on our actual relationships as a manifestation of Christ's body.

First, I am curious why we are so drawn to virtual communion. My suspicion is that we are driven by our age's chief values: convenience, control, and individualized consumption. Our justifications may themselves be obscuring God's invitation to reflect and to repent of these false idols. Virtual, self-serviced styled communion dangerously mimics the convenience of our age: it circumvents the work it takes for us to gather, prepare, and feast on God's gifts to us. That our habits of gathering and worshipping are so readily translated into online forms that are individually consumed in the comfort of our own home suggests that we may have bent the knee to them long ago.

Second, I think we are not only drawn to virtual communion for its convenience, but I suspect we are also avoiding something: God's invitation to suffer, long for, and even hunger for one another and our shared meal. Calvin insists that we *should* hunger for communion:

> in fact, what mockery would it be to go in search for food when we have no appetite?...Hence it follows that our souls must be pressed with famine and have a desire and ardent longing to be fed, in order to find their proper nourishment in the Lord's Supper.[113]

Perhaps God wants us to regain an appetite for a meal which we have too long regarded with satiation.

Last, and perhaps most of all, by practicing virtual communion we are failing to discern the body of Christ and to show sensitivity to each other's physical and spiritual health. In this assessment, I am heavily informed by Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, where in his engagement with the Corinthian church we see Paul modeling exactly what our Essential Tenets commissions each session to do: "exercise due care and provide sufficient education to the congregation and to new believers that the Sacraments may be rightly received as means of grace."

As Paul explains to the Corinthians, even in-person communion can be mistakenly eaten as a privatized meal. When partaken in this way, it aggravates pre-existing social inequalities

[113] *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, 23.

that the Lord's Supper itself intends to overcome.[114] It is likely that the Corinthians had modeled their communion services after a typical Greco-Roman meal, with all of its accompanying social class distinctions.[115] The laborer who was toiling in the fields all day would likely arrive late, after work hours, with little to contribute. Because of their delayed arrival, they would have gone hungry, while the wealthy others who had shown up earlier had plenty of time to get drunk (verse 22). In verses 27-29, Paul suggests that if the Corinthians had practiced an authentic communion (compare verse 20)—a service which broke down their social hierarchies instead of perpetuating them—they would have perceived their unity with other members of the one body of Christ. In verse 30, Paul makes an alarming suggestion: because the Corinthian church has failed to discern their unity in their communion meal, some have become ill and even died. One commentary offers a compelling explanation for this otherwise puzzling passage: Paul indicates that the same members who were neglected and went hungry at the Corinthian's communion service (v. 21) are the same ones who are becoming ill (v. 30). That is, the same members who were neglected at communion were also being neglected by the Corinthian community's pastoral care.[116] Their physical unhealth was a direct result of their church community's failure to notice and attend to them during the sacrament.

What does the Corinthians' non socially-distanced communion have to do with the American church of the COVID-19-era? Virtualized communion presumes that participants have internet access. Yet the very same people who are the most likely to contract, suffer from, and even die from the virus—the elderly and the socio-economically disadvantaged—are the same people who are least likely to have the technological means to participate in virtual communion. According to one Pew study, more than 30% of adults over age 65 and over 40% of adults with an annual income under $30,000 did not have home internet in 2019.[117] Our online services are leaving behind the very people COVID-19 is most likely to infect—and even kill.

I should be clear here: I am *not* suggesting that having online communion is directly linked to these statistics. In other words, I am not saying that people are dying because they are unable to participate in communion. COVID-19 does not discriminate based on internet access. Instead, what I am suggesting is that like the Corinthians, who modeled their services after the socially stratified meals of their day, we too have opted to style our meals off of the common meals of our day: fast food, home-deliveries, the self-serve buffet, the microwaved TV dinner eaten in isolation in front of a screen. As Americans, all of these meals tend to reflect our

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[114] 1 Corinthians 11:20–22.

[115] For a stimulating analysis of how the Lord's Supper emulated the Greco-Roman patron feast while also undermining its design to cater to political and pagan powers, see R. Alan Streett, *Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord's Supper under Roman Domination during the First Century* (Eugene, Oregon: PICKWICK Publications, 2013).

[116] Brian Brock, Bernd Wannenwetsch, and Douglas A. Campbell, *The Therapy of the Christian Body: A Theological Exposition of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Volume 2* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018).

[117] https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/

penchant for individualism and instant gratification. They also tend to reflect and perpetuate radical social inequalities that fall along socially stratified lines of food quality, access, and affordability. Those who are poor tend to consume unhealthy—but cheaper and more readily available—fast food meals which heighten their susceptibility to develop health conditions; the wealthy are able to afford higher-end delivered meals that ward off their exposure to diseases which they are already less likely to be vulnerable to to begin with.[118] In other words, technological accessibility tends to cut across the same lines of health care vulnerability. Refusing virtual communion does not erase these embedded inequalities, but offering virtual communion *does* both imply and perpetuate our blindness to their existence. *How* we practice our communion directly relates to how we permit Christ's reconciling work to actively transform our material and social reality. Because of this, the order of our communion services requires continual discernment.

Virtual communion does not only neglect the physical health of our siblings in Christ's body. It neglects their spiritual health as well. Communion is one of the main avenues through which the church exercises communal discipline, a task which cultivates the spiritual health of both individuals and the wider community. Both the Heidelberg Catechism[119] and the Westminster Confession[120] outline how the church is obligated to refuse communion to members who themselves refuse to cooperate with the disciplinary measures set out by Christ in Matthew 18:17-19. Paul, too, while intervening in a case of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, uses communion language to explain how important the exercise of discipline is for the health of the church body.[121] Certainly, the measure of refusing communion to a sibling should be rare. However, these disciplinary measures are difficult to carry out if communion is partaken virtually. Communion cannot be withdrawn from online participants who are ultimately serving themselves. Of course, this raises a significant question: how *should* discipline function in a period of social distancing? The answer—like the question of whether or not to practice online communion at all—is ultimately for an individual session to address. But the danger of practicing virtual communion is that it further severs the sacrament of communion from the exercise of discipline. It again suggests that we have treated communion as a privatized meal divorced from the spiritual health of our collective members long before we featured it online.

By now, you may have rightly wondered why I have yet to suggest how non-virtual communion fails to relay Christ's presence in communion. Many who are familiar with the

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[118] For an informing and sobering podcast episode which explains how unequal food access has made the black community more susceptible to the virus – and how the church responded in the midst of COVID-19 in Chicago – listen to Episode 27 with Charlie Dates, titled "The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on African American Communities" with host Ed Stetzer: https://stetzerleadershippodcast.com/

[119] Q82 & 83.

[120] Chapter 32, section 4.

[121] 1 Corinthians 5:1–13.

church's history will know that wells of theological ink have been spilled—and many church splits have been triggered and solidified—by differing notions of how Christ's presence is relayed in or through the elements. Catholics are well known for upholding transubstantiation (that the bread and wine actually become Christ's body), the Lutheran's consubstantiation (that the bread and wine are Christ's body, but mysteriously, and not literally so), and the Anabaptists and others that communion is only a symbolic, memorial meal that remembers Christ's act. Our own Reformed tradition holds a unique understanding that in the Lord's Supper, we feed on the body of the ascended Christ. I will have to leave my siblings to express the merits and depth of our tradition's particular articulation with due justice. These depths should certainly be drawn from.

At the same time, the more I have reflected on what communion is in this time of social distancing and self-isolation, the more these attempts to locate and articulate Christ's presence through the elements have felt inadequate. In this reflection I am heavily informed by two things: my engagement with the Bible, and my own experience during COVID-19. I am a single woman who, when not accompanied by the extended family in whose home I currently reside, lives alone. My extended family does not claim Jesus Christ as Lord. During the initial months of self-isolation in Spring 2020, I was hungry: hungry to be with my siblings in Christ, hungry to see them and to be touched. In the invitations to virtual communion issued by my church family to gather my own elements of communion to consume in front of a screen, that hunger was accompanied by a deep sadness. This sadness was heightened when the same invitation to online communion celebrated how the intact family unit, abiding under the same roof, would have the opportunity to partake communion together in their own homes. I felt ignored and unseen by my church family while I continued to hunger alone. For me, virtual communion has been a mocking simulation of the Lord's Supper, not a genuine comfort.

Turning to Scripture in this state, I have been struck that the term 'presence' is not found in the biblical accounts where Christ institutes communion. However, Christ does express his commitment to be present in Matthew 18:20, where two or more are gathered. This verse is often stripped from its context and used to romanticize the small group bible study or prayer session. But if we look one verse back (18:19), it states that this gathered small group is discussing some "matter" (Greek *pragma)* together. Look a few verses back (18:17-18), and it is evident that the matter they are discussing is how to handle a grievance caused by a sibling. Turn to Paul's letter to the Corinthians—the same passage we examined above—and he is also writing about a "matter" (same Greek word) over a case of incest that has gone unconfronted by the Corinthian community.[122] Interestingly, Paul directs them to gather to judge the matter and promises that Jesus himself will be present with them.[123] The logic of communion is directly

[122] 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:4.

[123] 1 Corinthians 5:4.

at play here.[124] In other words, Scripture only promises Christ's presence to us when we are actively gathered to reconcile our relationships with one another. This reconciling work is expressed by our shared meal. That is: Christ is present when we are working out our differences, and then coming together to feast on his flesh. He is present among *us*. According to the Heidelberg catechism, "although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone."[125] By casting the words of Adam as he received the gift of Eve as Christ's own perspective about us, the Heidelberg catechism recognizes that *we*—our bodies—which receive one loaf and one cup, are Christ's presence in the world that he is redeeming and renewing in his name. Participating in the sacrament and being physically present to one another are intimately linked.

Of course, we will gather and eat together again, and hopefully by the time this is read. But sessions are still tasked with discerning how to "exercise due care and provide sufficient education to the congregation and to new believers that the Sacraments may be rightly received as means of grace," all the more so in light of the discipline we have recently endured.[126] Whether or not individual sessions opted to encourage virtual communion during the COVID-19 crisis, I hope that sessions will now take time to reflect and discuss the lessons raised from this unique season in the church's life. Is it possible that our habits and conceptions of communion mimicked privatized meals before the pandemic erupted? How might we be trained to pay attention to Christ's body as we receive it in the Lord's Supper? How might communion be ordered in a way that resists the social inequalities of our time to reflect the reality that all things have been reconciled in Christ? I hope, too, that sessions will prayerfully consider how to reintroduce discipline as one of the central tasks of the church, a task which is closely linked with the administration of communion.

Whether or not they sense we have been practicing virtual communion long before the COVID-19 crisis, there remains a great need for our sessions to take up the sober and sorely needed task to equip their congregations to discern Christ's body in the Lord's Supper. Meanwhile, whatever our position on this important topic, I pray that together we will once again revel in the power, wisdom, and grace of God in his scandalous choice to deliver his own body into our all too human hands.

[124] 1 Corinthians 5:6-11.
[125] Q&A 76.
[126] 1 Corinthians 11:31.

A Modern Communion Debate

Rev. Dr. Laura Smit and Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

The following re-presents a long-running debate among two theologians about the legitimacy of online Communion. It is significantly abridged. There is no resolution and not all lines of argument are traced to their conclusions, as is often the case in real life debates, especially those that happen online over a period of weeks or months. But our hope is that by this dialogue the church is edified and encouraged to sharpen one another for the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2).

Virtual Church?

Wagenfuhr: Online Communion is a *simulation* of church. What I mean is that the online or digital format is a re-presentation and translation of the church designed to make us feel like it is real. Virtual means that something possesses many of the virtues of the real thing, but is not the real thing. Simulation is "the imitative representation of the functioning of one system or process by means of the functioning of another."[127]

Smit: First, we're not talking about starting a new online-only church. If we were deliberately trying to avoid the commitment of in-person community, that would be a problem. We're talking about congregations that are already real communities and that are maintaining that community across distance in response to a horrible situation. When Paul wrote letters to the churches that he had planted, he wasn't simulating concern, care, or communication. More than that, he believed that his union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit truly, really, actually connected him to the Christians to whom he was writing. Christians throughout history have always found ways to stay in community across distance.

Second, and more importantly, the communion with each other through the sacrament is not about the kind of community we build by hugging each other and singing together, any more than it is about the community we build by writing letters or participating in Zoom meetings. What the Lord's Supper is about, what it *does,* is bridge separation, specifically the spatial separation between us and Jesus, who is ascended, which at the very least means that He's not present to us the way someone sitting next to us in the pew is present to us. We experience Him as absent in His human nature, but our theology says that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper brings us into His presence. That's what we mean when we speak of the "real presence" in the sacrament: it's the real presence of Jesus, not the real presence of each other. We are in communion with each other only insofar as each of us is in communion with Jesus

[127] Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simulation.

through the Spirit. We meet one another in His presence. The ecclesial communion that is created through the sacrament is not limited to our local congregation. Communion strengthens our connection to the new humanity that Jesus is creating, bringing divided Christians into one body (per Ephesians). The gatherings of churches throughout the world and throughout Christian history are doorways into the great communion of the Church invisible but real. When you take the Lord's Supper you are united with *all Christians* participating in the sacrament, not just the handful who are in the room with you. If you're sitting next to someone in church who is not communing with Jesus, then the sacrament is not uniting you to that person. Your physical proximity to each other doesn't matter here. Jesus is building a new humanity out of those who are divided, primarily by uniting each of us to Him as our head.

Wagenfuhr: I don't disagree on much of what you're saying. My point is not to deny the possibility of exceptional measures. I just want to clarify the technological aspect of this so that we assume full responsibility for what we're doing. Here's the basic mechanics: A video camera and microphone receive light and sound waves that come via the people and scene being recorded. The computer translates these waves into binary 0's and 1's, called "digitization." The programming behind Zoom or other media takes this binary code and compresses it, stripping away details that the programmers deem suitable to strip for efficiency's sake. Slow internet connections lead to stronger compression and more stripping of details. Zoom programming then transmits this compressed code through the vast network of the internet to its servers and then again to the receiver, potentially recording it at the same time. The receiver's computer then takes this code, decompresses it, and reconstructs an approximation of the sound and light waves through the computer speakers and monitor. My point is that "presence" is simulated and the reality behind it is binary code. This is the essence of computer simulation and it doesn't matter how good that re-presentation is, it is still translating human beings into binary code manipulated by engineers. This presence is mediated, translated, and simulated.

I'm not saying this is evil, necessarily, only that we mustn't be taken in by simulations and treat them as though they were real. We must consider the implications before we take a step in this direction.

On Longing and the Power of God:

Smit: Not only have Christians always found ways to connect across distance, they've also always acknowledged, as Paul does in his letters, that they miss being closer to one another. We should acknowledge that too. Of course we want to hug each and shake hands and sing together and breathe the same air. Of course we want to be in the same place. That's the design of the Church, both for our comfort and to challenge us. When we're not together physically, it's much easier to ignore the inconvenient things about each other, including each

other's physical needs. It's also easier to indulge our impatience with each other, to fast-forward through the parts of a message or service that bore us. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when we're separated from the church, we should long for the presence of other Christians, and I believe that. At this point we all know that Zoom community is a far cry from in-person community. This is all true. But the Lord's Supper is not a community-building exercise for the local church. It's about each of us being nourished by the new, glorified humanity of Jesus so that we can be more fully incorporated into the new humanity He is creating, and only then united with all other Christians who are being incorporated into that new humanity. This is a really important part of the Christian life, and to deny people the nourishment of the sacrament for months because we can't be in the same building seems to me to be wildly underestimating the supernatural power of the sacrament.

Wagenfuhr: I agree about longing. But I don't see this as an issue of questioning the supernatural power of the sacrament, nor of God. To me, this entirely an issue of semiology/how symbols work. No one is questioning God's power. I'm questioning the legitimacy and responsibility of *our* choices.

Smit: So because something is sub-optimal, God can't work? We have to have a perfect, in-person community experience in order for the sacrament to function? Even by your understanding of sacrament, that would seem to prohibit bringing communion to shut-ins or people in the hospital. It would seem to prohibit bringing communion to people who are sitting in an over-flow room in the church, watching the service on a monitor. It might even prohibit having communion with a group that's too large for me to see everyone while I'm communing. How close do we have to be for it to be real? If we're sitting six feet apart, does that weaken the power of communion?

Wagenfuhr: God can work through sub-optimal things, obviously. But that doesn't make sub-optimal normative or even permissible. My worry isn't with God's inability to do something, but with our ability to create unintended consequences by good intentions. So, if it were normal that a church had an overflow room with the sacrament distributed to people somewhat excluded because of room size, such a church ought to think about making the service smaller. What I'm arguing is that the method by which we perform the symbol of the sacrament matters. It's our responsibility to do our best to communicate the symbolic intent of the sacrament all of these seemingly minor details matter.

Smit: I agree that it's about the meaning of the symbols, but I disagree with you about what that meaning is. Your understanding of this symbol seems to me to be very horizontal, which is why online communion doesn't work for you. It also seems very focused on the physical sharing of the elements, as if the presence of Jesus is in the bread and the wine. If the point of

the Supper is to bring the community together, then you're right, it doesn't work well when we're apart. But that's the point of a potluck, not the sacrament. In our tradition, the symbol is not the bread and wine *per se*, but rather the *event* of our sharing in the bread and the wine, which is a symbol of sharing in the body and blood – i.e. the humanity – of Jesus. Our communion is only secondarily our union with each other in Christ. And the "each other" is a much bigger group than the local church.

Wagenfuhr: I'm not sure you're understanding what I'm saying. Where you accuse my vision of the sacrament as too horizontal, I'd criticize your view as too vertical. I would emphasize the cruciform shape of the horizontal meeting the vertical. My very point is that we can't make it an either/or between horizontal or vertical, between physical and spiritual. We are celebrating and participating in the incarnate life of the incarnate God, not a disembodied spiritual life of a spiritual God.

Required Elements of the Sacrament:

What elements are required for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be valid?

Smit: Given the Reformed focus on the event rather than the elements, it seems important to me that a shared event must be shared in time. Even if we are communing across space, we should be doing this at the same time. We want to avoid recording a service and then encouraging people to take a self-serve approach to the sacrament at whatever time is convenient. I do believe that we are being joined to Christians throughout time, but in order for the doorway-event to be an event, it needs a temporal place and duration. It seems from Scripture that our experience of time will change significantly in the eschaton and that it may already be significantly changed for those in the great cloud of witnesses who are now in the presence of Jesus, but for those still in this life time is inescapable.

Wagenfuhr: Hold on a minute. I do think Einstein has been proven quite correct in linking space and time. There is no shared time without sharing space. Simulation of presence is simulated time and space, so there's no simultaneity where space is simulated. In any case, Zoom calls are on a slight delay. The efficacy of Zoom in tricking us into thinking we're "live" should distract us from the fact that we're anything but "live" transmitted through digitization. It's a simulation of life.

So I don't understand how we can focus on an event without focusing on elements that make up an event. Events are not somehow separate from the bodies that participate in them, the spaces they occur in, etc. The created objects/elements, the characters, the setting, the actions are all necessary parts of an event or story. We can't just take the action of one character and dislocate it and have a real story. I don't think an event can be reified.

So what about the elements? If you think people can be symbolically present, why not have symbols of symbols? Why not have pizza and coke with the youth pastor leading? Why not a VR Lord's Supper?

Smit: Scriptural teaching on the establishment of the Lord's Supper speaks clearly about the symbolism of the bread, in which many grains make one loaf, and the wine, in which many grapes make one drink. Although most of my Presbyterian life has been spent in congregations that serve grape juice instead of wine, this substitution is not rooted in Scripture. The sacrament is a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb, and it is right to use wine, which is the Bible's symbol of celebration and a gladdened heart. The new tendency is to substitute for bread some sort of faux-bread that dissolves into a gooey paste in the mouth, with no discernible grains of any sort. I am far more concerned by these departures from the Biblical elements than I am by having communion spread out over the city to which we minister. And it is possible to share the elements even across distance, though it takes a little work. Some congregations distribute the elements to their members during the week before communion, so that each member is given a piece from the same loaf and a portion of the same wine. That is certainly preferable to having each family look about their kitchen for something that can stand in for bread and wine.

Our tradition also emphasizes that there must be a union of word and sacrament, so the sacrament should never be separated from the proclamation of the word. Since the sermon and the sacrament are united, our tradition really supports the idea that a full worship service is a circle of proclamation (in which the Word comes to us) and sacrament (in which we go to Him). Like Calvin, I think the sacrament should be celebrated weekly, though the only time I ever convinced a congregation to do this it was for a mid-week service attended by, at most, ten people. Even though it was small, the session only authorized communion to be celebrated at that service on the condition that there be Bible readings and a significant (though not long) time of proclamation. Similarly, when bringing communion to a shut-in, the person celebrating reads Scripture and comments on it, offering the promises of grace before responding to those promises with the sacrament. As we encourage celebrating communion in varied settings within our ECO congregations, we need to maintain this union of word and sacrament.

We should also think about how we represent the fullness of the church when we celebrate communion in those varied settings. In our tradition, we do not believe that the authority to celebrate the sacrament is something that a pastor carries around by virtue of ordination. This is a way in which we differ from Roman Catholics. Instead, we believe that the authority for the sacrament is vested in the community and requires elders and pastors working together. This is why the celebration of the Lord's Supper is always authorized by the session and why elders must be present to serve. When an elder is authorized to celebrate the sacrament, there should also be another elder present (whether in person or virtually) to act in the role of an elder, maintaining this awareness of shared authority.

Wagenfuhr: Well said. I want to bring it back to what I see as a false dichotomy between the elements and the people, as though the people were not one of the elements of the sacrament. The people are the ones who perform the sacrament, after all, even if the Spirit empowers it. The real presence of the people to me is essential, not arbitrary because I think that the church must be embodied, physically, at least two or three. Jesus talks about two or three gathered in his name in the context of bearing witness according to *torah*. So, if we are bearing witness or giving something of a legal testimony in the sacrament, as Paul indicates ("as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again"), then it would follow that a legal quorum is required to bear this testimony. Of course there is the universal church, but the whole point of our faith is the incarnation. How do we symbolize incarnation by excarnate simulations? To me the sacrament isn't just God and the elements, it must include the people. Those who are physically present but not participating are indeed a drag, but no one is holding them up as a model for valid celebration of the sacrament. Online communion is not an exception in the same way that this non-participant is. That individual is responsible for his or her own presence, when the church legitimizes non-presence that's my concern.

Smit: The incarnation is a unique event referring to Jesus. I'm not God incarnate. You're not God incarnate. A group of Christians gathered are not God incarnate. Jesus is incarnate right now in the ascension, and He is not sitting in the pew next to me. Yes, we are the body of Christ, but that body is all the Christians in the whole invisible Church, including those who have already died, those not yet born, and those in every part of the world today. That great communion is not visible to me either, and even that group is not Christ *incarnate*. We are His body only by being joined to Him as our head, which is what is happening for each of us in the sacrament. Talking about "incarnational ministry" or about "incarnating" various attributes of God undermines our understanding of the reality of the continuing incarnation of Jesus ascended. In fact, it can be a way of suggesting that Jesus didn't really ascend in His humanity, but rather "went back to being God" – a horrible expression that I have heard far too often. Too many of our members believe that Jesus shed His humanity once He was received into the cloud and that we are the only body He now has.

Wagenfuhr: Certainly the incarnation is Jesus, not us. You're right about "incarnational ministry" being a misunderstanding if it assumes that we are the incarnate God. All I'm arguing is that our symbolic acts properly depict God as the incarnate one in Jesus Christ, not as a non-embodied spirit.

Ascent, Descent, and the Presence of Jesus

Smit: The Spirit descends to draw us up to the heavenly feast of the Lamb, as Calvin teaches and the Reformed tradition holds. Because the power of the sacrament comes from

the Spirit who draws us up to heaven, the real communion is in heaven, not online in our homes, not in the sanctuary when we gather there.

Wagenfuhr: I see what you're saying. But I have trouble with this Reformation-era debate because of more recent biblical scholarship and studies of Jewish apocalyptic literature of the 2nd Temple Period. Although the Bible uses terms like "up" and "down" to refer to heaven and earth, the people of that time viewed heaven more as "behind the scenes" of earth. This overlapping reality means that heaven is not a distant location, but a very present one. So, to me, I think we can improve on Calvin's understanding of ascension in the sacrament by talking about revelation rather than re-location. It's not as though we have to go somewhere else to perceive heaven and the throne of God where the risen Jesus sits, we just need the veil of earth that blinds us to be lifted, to experience the reign of God as king of a reconciled creation. Because the people of God are the temple, and the temple is the meeting place of heaven and earth (as the Jews believed in Jesus' day), so it is in the real presence of the people assembled that God reveals heaven—the reign of God as king. Jesus neither descends neither do we ascend, as it were, but the veil is lifted and we see the eternity of God's Sabbath rule of his kingdom and participate in the future feast of Christ's victory as heaven conquers earth and the veil is forever removed.

Smit: Well, of course it's behind the scenes as a present reality. Calvin believed that too; he was just careful about "speculation," so refused to try to explain that idea. I think our contemporary situation requires us to try to explain a little, because otherwise people think that we're just falling back into irrationality. That's why I, like many contemporary Christians, use the metaphor of dimensions, saying that Jesus's glorified body is *more* real than mine, and one way to think about that is to imagine that His humanity is more dimensional that mine. He is not only really present, but He is far more present than I can be to anyone, since in His humanity He now has a different relationship to space and time. We can see this in the resurrection appearances. He doesn't walk through walls because He's a ghost; He makes very clear to the disciples that He's not a ghost. No, He walks through walls because He's far more solid, more real than the walls. He is still Immanuel, God with us. When He promised His disciples to be with them, He wasn't lying. He hears us when we speak to Him, not just in His divinity, but in His humanity as well. He's more human than I am, since He's the Second Adam, glorified and perfected in His humanity, whereas I am a very imperfect example of a human with a lot of sin mixed into God's design for human nature. It is as the Second Adam that He is ruling the cosmos. But, since I am so much less dimensional, I cannot see Him, just as a two-dimensional being wouldn't be able to see a three-dimensional being just next to its two-dimensional life. I experience Him as absent and must long for His returning, while at the same time knowing that He is working, that the new kingdom of light is already being established and that I'm already a citizen there.

Wagenfuhr: I must admit I find modern attempts to talk about something being "more real" or "more fully human" strike me as odd, because it's a way of saying that we're less than fully human now, which also seems to imply that what God created as human creatures is not good. I have serious ecological concerns with this line of thinking as I see it leading to a deeply and wrongly anthropocentric Christianity that bears some responsibility for the present state of earth's maladies. The gospel is of reconciliation of all creation, not of human transcendence of creation by ascent to godlikeness. So, I find Eastern Orthodoxy's notion of *theosis*, depending on how it is defined, incredibly dangerous. The NT doesn't hold up the ontology of Jesus' humanity as the most vital point, but his authority, his rightful rulership, his for-us-ness (*pro* nobis), his character. Our becoming like Christ is a statement of human maturation, not becoming ontologically more than we are, but arriving at the destination for which we were created. Yes, Paul has 1 Corinthians 15, but he far more often focuses on the character of Christ and the mind of Christ toward which we are striving and moving. But I certainly agree that Jesus was not a ghost and that neither the New Testament nor we ourselves have proper language to describe Jesus's ascended body, somehow scarred and yet able to move through walls.

Smit: But none of that is compatible with saying that this is not a change in location, only revelation, which does not sounds like an improvement on Calvin to me. That sounds to me as if you are trying to demythologize the transformation of His resurrection body, His ascension into heaven (which, yes, is a place, even though it's an over-lapping place), His continuing incarnation, and by extension His second coming. The only way that what you're saying makes sense to me is if you believe that Jesus's humanity dissipated in the ascension. Are you on board with Graham Ward, who thinks that the particular body of Jesus (what he calls "the body of the gendered Jew") is gone, and the only remaining body is the Church? That's not what the book of Hebrews teaches. I sincerely hope that I am misunderstanding you. I find Calvin on the local presence of Jesus to be especially helpful in thinking about the continuing incarnation of Christ and about the distinction of His divine and human natures.

Wagenfuhr: I really don't see how you would get that idea from me. The notion that heaven is revealed to us as being right next to us is somehow a denial of the continuing incarnation of Jesus? That's a non-sequitur. No, I don't follow Graham Ward on that. Again, that's a massive leap. It's not demythologizing, it's an attempt to decenter Medieval European beliefs about heaven and re-describe it in terms that a Jew of Jesus's time might have understood. If anything, I'd say much of the philosophical reifications of scholastic theology were a profound demythologization of Jesus's world.

Smit: It is certainly true that there are Christians in our time who don't believe in the continuing incarnation of Jesus and don't believe that heaven is an over-lapping reality. But the reason that many people in today's church don't think this way isn't because of Calvin on the

local presence; it's because of the disenchantment of the world and the triumph of naturalism, so that even Christians talk as if the natural world that we know is all that God made, as if the only reality beyond the natural world available to our senses is God Himself. But God created the heavens and the earth. He created angels as well as humans. Created reality is much bigger than what science can study, and it includes a place that, for want of a better word, we call heaven. Even naturalists who don't believe in it sometimes still sense a thin place where that reality seems almost within reach. We believe that by God's grace we do see into and even take one step toward that reality when we come to the table of the Lord.

Wagenfuhr: But that dichotomy of a world that seems to be real and a more real beyond-world is a well-attested development globally among cultures that did not have significant interaction. Because study of the history of religions and thought shows that this is a development independent of the revelation of God in Scripture, an account of even this development between OT and NT has to be had. I don't find systematic theology helpful in that regard, as it forces the OT into a later philosophical framework not shared by the authors. Where I see the NT continuing the OT line of thinking is less in the shape of the cosmos and more in the belief that the world is in rebellion against God. The division of heaven and earth is one of rulership. Earth is in rebellion and cannot perceive the very-present God behind the scenes.

So, it's not an earthly sanctuary or building that is the location of heaven, but the people who submit to the reign of God as king gathered in a congregation, that constitutes the meeting place of heaven and earth, just as Jesus did in his earthly incarnate ministry.

Smit: You do know that ascension is part of our Essential Tenets, right? If Jesus is ascended in the body, that means His body *is* somewhere. If there's no *where,* then He's no longer fully human. I know you see a lot of gnosticism in our culture, and I agree that it's there in places. But where I'm standing naturalism is a much bigger threat.

Wagenfuhr: Yes. I'm not disagreeing with what Calvin is working hard to protect in his understanding of our hearts and minds and eyes ascending to heaven to the real presence of Christ there. To me the question isn't about the "real presence" of Christ. Calvin is right that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father and does not enter into the elements or the people. I think this Reformation debate misses out on the church (as people) becoming, through this sacrament, the revelatory gateway of heaven on earth.

I am indeed worried about both materialism and gnosticism. But, I think they mutually imply one another. For the materialist to not become a nihilist, she must invent a hidden and secret world of spirit and meaning. For the gnostic, the material world has to be the locus of experience and an experience that must be transcended. Transhumanism, towards which our technological interventions are striving, is at once eminently gnostic and materialist. The

fulfilment of the desire for immortality is, in our time, the gnostic-materialist transformation of the human "soul" or "mind" or "person" into something that can be digitized and transformed into a simulated eternal life stored in computer memory.

Smit: You've told me that you think I have an overly-realized eschatology, but I think you're the one with the overly realized eschatology here. I have a much stronger sense of discontinuity between the world we currently experience and the new creation. And I don't get that from Plato. I get it from the book of Hebrews. Jesus is right now in the permanent place; we're in the transitory place, what Lewis called the shadow lands, which will be shaken.

Wagenfuhr: Hmm. I don't get that. I see great discontinuity as well, but why does it need to be some kind of *ontological* discontinuity? *This* world will experience new creation. Why not this dove, that dog, this mountain? What I think you get from Plato (as a figurehead of Axial Age thinking) and not the Jewish line of thinking is a radical ontological separation between this world of shadows and the world to come that is more real, as Lewis so wonderfully described in *The Great Divorce*. Again, my issue with this line of thinking that also can be seen in St. Augustine, is that it makes this world a disposable resource, useful only insofar as it enables us to transcend this creation for the "more-real" creation. That ontological differentiation between heaven and earth is what I have problems with. I see the differentiation in Scripture as primarily one of loyalty. Plato's vision of this world being a shadowland is, in essence, his calling it Hades. The diminution of this creation to shadowland transforms it into hell… an exact diagnosis of why human civilization has transformed the rich diversity of God's creation into a simplified, dead, concrete hell, choking in heat, pollution, and disease. My not-yet eschatology is radically rooted in sinful disobedience to which humanity has subjected creation which needs to be rescued from us, and we from ourselves, by God and his Sabbath rest. That's where I think the book of Hebrews lands, not in ontological shadowlands.

Smit: Also, as an historical theologian, I just get really uneasy when someone tells me he has bright idea that's more accurate about the spiritual life or about heaven or about the two natures of Christ than anything in Calvin or Aquinas. That seems unlikely to me. Calvin and Aquinas are both on the other side of the Enlightenment, which means among other things that they have a huge advantage over us in understanding the thought-world of the Bible. Our way of seeing the world is very messed up by the rise of scientism and the subsequent disenchantment of the world. So especially in thinking about the nature of heaven, I'm going with the pre-Enlightenment theologians every time.

Wagenfuhr: That line of argument seems very simplified to me, essentializing the "Enlightenment" event as though it were the axis of the history of thought. Pre-Enlightenment vs. Post-Enlightenment is a false dichotomy of history produced by the Enlightenment itself.

Calvin himself was a major forerunner of the Enlightenment. Many sociologists and philosophers from Max Weber to Charles Taylor have traced Calvin's influence in secularization and the rise of materialism. Why not point to the Renaissance as a major factor here, after all that's what divides Aquinas from Calvin? But I'm baffled by so many theologians who reduce the history of ideas to a dichotomy that erases the vast differences in perspective between the people of Abraham's world and the people of Jesus's world. I have argued in my books (with sources), that the Hellenized world the Jews of Jesus's day were living in and resisting (more or less), was more different than Abraham's world, than ours compared with the Greek world of the first century.

What we have now that Calvin and Aquinas did not is access to vastly more Second Temple Jewish literature, archaeology, and other sources that help us understand the surroundings of Jesus and the Ancient Near Eastern situation of the Old Testament. Aquinas and Calvin inherited a Christianity largely purged of its Jewish heritage and deeply informed by Greek philosophy itself transmitted through Islamic nations.

What I'm trying to do is access ancient near eastern beliefs, Judaism throughout the OT, Jesus's world, Paul's world, and the rise of Gentile Christianity, and the remainder of church history. I strongly believe modern secularism is the most evil religion ever to arise. But there is no either/or here. The picture is complex. Trying to arrive at a systematic conclusion of the nature of reality based on a more rigorous historical survey is difficult. People have had a diversity of views of reality and how it's accessed, and the Bible with Christian history attests to this vast diversity. To make the essence of Christianity linked with a particular cosmology or ontology is doomed to make Christianity obsolete in different cultures.

Church as the Body of Christ

Wagenfuhr: Karl Barth argues that the "body of Christ" is not a metaphor, but that the church really is the body of Christ through the marital union of Christ and his body. The two become one flesh. So, how can we symbolize union with the incarnate Christ by a spiritual ascent? How can we symbolize incarnation by the excarnation of the internet?

Smit: I'm sure you will not be surprised that I disagree with Barth here. Calvin does like to use the word "mystical" to talk about our union with Christ, but he certainly doesn't mean any kind of fusing of identity, as if we can no longer distinguish the gathered body of the Church from the continuing incarnation of Christ in the ascension. It sounds as though you're dissolving the human body of Christ into the Church. Just as talking about a married couple as "one flesh" is indeed a metaphor, so is this. Jesus's literal body is seated at the right hand of the Father. Jesus's metaphorical body is the Church – not just my church, but the whole Church. Which is spread through the whole world, so I still don't see how communion is invalidated if we're not all in the same room.

Wagenfuhr: It's not a dissolution of a real body, it's an older understanding of kingship at play here. To the ancient mind a part was often inseparably linked to the whole. This was how magic worked. You could manipulate a part and impact the whole. This is exactly how Paul describes the body of Christ. Union of one member with the body of a prostitute meant uniting the body of Christ to that prostitute.[128] When one member suffers, all suffer.[129] In many ancient cultures, as it was in medieval times, the king has two bodies, the body-politic and his physical body. The two were linked. The failing health of a king would lead to a decline of his kingdom. That's how I understand "body of Christ" language in historical context.

Smit: Sure, but medieval people do know the difference between the body-politic and the king's physical body. They also know all about the connection between those two things, but that knowledge depends on the *analogia entis.* Since Barth throws that away, he has no appropriate language to talk about this connection other than to dismiss a "merely" metaphorical meaning and suggest that it's literal. The Bible presents us with a symbolic, analogical understanding of reality, which underlies Paul's use of that language of all these connections between my body and the Church as Christ's body and the body of Jesus. All of that is metaphorical, but not "merely" metaphorical; the metaphors are rooted in the analogical nature of reality, especially seen in our identity as images of God, capable of being glorified. Barth is taking this complex understanding of ascending levels of reality and flattening it down by trying to make it literal. Silly man.

Wagenfuhr: I strongly disagree that the Bible teaches the *analogia entis* (analogy of being). Few Jews beyond Philo of Alexandria would at that time have been so boldly Hellenistic as that. The notion of the king's two bodies is attested in pre-philosophical cultures that have no concept of *analogy*. Throughout this, it seems to me that you're falsely dichotomizing thought into ancient and modern, choosing the ancient. But that "ancient" is actually classical or "axial" thinking and a radical innovation during the centuries surrounding the authorship of the NT.

Technology

Smit: Various online media are different. Zoom is different than a Facebook Live event, which is different than posting a video on YouTube of a pre-corded service. Not all technology is doing the same thing. Some of these options let all the members of the congregation see one another more constantly than they do in person. I'm not sure that's such a good idea, since I think the worship service is not about seeing each other; that's coffee hour, and prayer group,

[128] 1 Corinthians 6:15.

[129] 1 Corinthians 12:26.

and lots of other things, but not the worship service, so I'd prefer not to see everyone, but if your understanding of the worship service is that it's about building community, there are ways in which that happens on Zoom or Facebook Live that it doesn't happen in person. For instance, in a Facebook Live service, people often keep a running commentary on the service. Again, this is not my favorite thing, but if you're all about community, there are differences here in how community functions.

Wagenfuhr: I see what you're saying. I agree that some media are more participatory than others. But there is no ontological difference between them. My concern is the fact of digital translation, not how it is re-presented. Computer video is not "real" but a simulation of movement by a relatively rapid succession of still frames that fool the mind into believing a simulation is reality. Even the "live" element of this is a simulation of movement and change. There is no ontological difference between a Zoom call and a VR computer game simulating communion in which avatars partake of virtual elements. The difference is only in how programmers re-present the data. The re-presentation (VR, AR, video, animation) is merely a surface-level skin.

To me, this betrays a fundamental Gnosticism of our age. We believe there is a soulish essence that can be separated from the flesh and doesn't really need the flesh. I see this as a journey toward transhumanism, a deeply anti-incarnational belief at the heart of much sci-fi and Silicon Valley figures.

As Marshall McLuhan said 40 years ago, "The Medium is the Message."[130] There are no neutral methods of transmitting information. Rather, the media we use form us and transform us according to their own image. My main point is this: the medium of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the embodied people partaking in participatory bread and wine empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring us to the real presence of Christ. This medium of the good news of Jesus Christ, if translated to any digital medium, translates the gospel into a fundamentally different one, a Gnostic one, in which God saves individual souls from the burden of human fleshly existence. The intentions of the participants are largely inconsequential here, the medium reforms the message in the transmission. Or, in other words, worship is formative, and it's not just the words we use, but the symbols and the media by which the symbols are communicated that are vital.

Smit: I'm happy to agree with you that this is sub-optimal. Everyone I know is so tired of Zoom – tired of teaching online, tired of having meetings online, tired of going to church online. We know the difference between being together in person and being together online. No one is confused about this. But think of a couple who are in a long-distance relationship. They get so tired of the phone, so tired of sending pictures to each other instead of seeing each other

[130] McLuhan, Marshall, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects.*

face-to-face, so tired of FaceTime. Does it follow that they should stop using the phone, stop sending pictures, and stop using FaceTime? I don't think so. When Anselm writes to other theologians around Europe, he expresses some of the same frustration with the limitations of writing; should he then not have written? I don't think so. No one is arguing that Zoom church is great, or that YouTube church is wonderful. But given the circumstances, should we stop doing it? And if we're going to do it, then can we find some things about the medium that we're using that are actually advantages? That's how we talk in teaching: are there ways to find something about this online classroom that we couldn't do as well in person, some gift that we can locate in this format that we're mostly finding frustrating? I think that's an appropriate Christian question.

But the bigger question is not whether we should worship together virtually; it's whether, given that we're worshipping together virtually, should we celebrate communion. And I think the answer must be yes. No one is arguing that Jesus is appearing on Zoom, or being captured on the video. Jesus is not being reduced to simulated movement. And perhaps the gift we can find in this sub-optimal situation is a heightened awareness of our union with the Church universal, not just with the little collection of like-minded people gathered in our sanctuary.

Also, not all anthropological dualism is gnostic. Yes, I believe that the soul can survive without the body; otherwise there can be no hope of the resurrection. I also believe that in the soul/body union, the soul ought to be charge, just like parents should be in charge in a family. Children are good; the body is good. Neither children nor the body should be the decision-making center of the family or the self. And I believe that when the body fails us, through sickness or weakness or aging, we do not need to despair, because that is not the end of our self. In fact, in such weakness, we can grow stronger. That's not gnositicism; that's the gospel.

Feeling

Wagenfuhr: The category of feeling or "meaningfulness" of the individual's experience of the sacrament has no bearing on the validity of the sacrament. This seems to me theological liberalism *a la* Schleiermacher. God's actions are independent of our feeling of meaningfulness.

Smit: I agree. Validity is not guaranteed by feeling, but a feeling of disorientation would get in the way of rightly participating. Calvin does say that part of sanctification is the gift of a new "sense of sweetness," that allows us to be aware of God's presence. This is how we taste and see that the Lord is good. Spiritual senses aren't any more subjective than the physical senses. They're sensing something that's really there, just as the physical senses are, and they can be fooled, just as the physical senses can.

Wagenfuhr: I wish there was more feeling of disorientation with online media. We're so normalized to online media that it feels natural to us, almost because it has become our new nature or environment.[131]

Ownership

Wagenfuhr: I also wonder about the problem of ownership. Online media platforms are for-profit businesses who make money often by the sale of information. As is often noted, if an online product is free it's because you are the product being sold to advertisers. Regardless, there is the problem of terms of use. A church meeting online may be the property of the company that hosted it and they may be allowed to use and monitor those recordings. This new visibility or legibility of church services means we are constantly surveilled and may be liable to legal prosecution if laws are made against certain beliefs. This may seem preposterous for us, but not in China. Likewise, if we preach that homosexual acts are sinful, we may be liable for hate-speech prosecution.

Not only that, we are effectively renting space for the church to meet from major media corporations who may, at a moment, impair our ability to meet. Never before has this been a risk, for even if a church rented physical space that was then denied to them, they could always borrow space elsewhere.

Never before has the act of the Lord's Supper been *owned* as property whose very existence contributes to the profits of corporations.

Smit. I'm not disagreeing that technology is a problem. I also like Ellul and assign him in class. And I don't know ANYONE who thinks Zoom is normal or the equivalent of being together in the same room. We're all sick to death of it. BUT since Zoom does not capture the presence of Jesus, we don't need to worry about Zoom owning the presence of Jesus. In the Old Testament, we meet God at the mercy seat, and what is the mercy seat but a place of emptiness between the cherubim. If it would have been possible to place a camera in the Holy of Holies, God would still have evaded capture. This is one of the reasons why I am such a strong defender of Reformed iconoclasm. We are not mini-gods. We are made in God's image because of the God-shaped empty space within us, or—different metaphor—because we're God-receivers, able to pick up His transmissions to us.

Wagenfuhr: Amen. Jesus can't be owned. But our worship can be—by nation-states, by corporations, by slave-masters. Those masters try to make Jesus into their image so we end up worshipping them under the name of Jesus. The Hebrew slaves had to leave Egypt *so that they*

[131] That we live in a technological environment is shown by Jacques Ellul in *The Technological System*. Jean Baudrillard showed that we have become so well integrated into a world of simulacra (copies without originals) that most all of life is now a simulation of reality in *Simulation and Simulacra*.

could worship God.[132] In that context *worship* was a form of servitude and submission. It was either Pharaoh or Yahweh, Caesar or Christ.

[132] Exodus 5:1, 7:16, 8–10.

Communion and Plasticity

Dr. Amy J. Erickson

It crinkles and crackles at the corners and crevices of commodities. It bottles our beauty brands, it wraps our wares, it tinkers toys, packs products, dishes dinner made in a microwave and ties up the trash while taking it out, all while carting the cash that acquires more. **Plastic** pervades our postmodern epoch. It mediates our materiality, all while littering our lives—literally. Try going without touching or disposing plastic for a single day, and the task will almost feel impossible.

Rhetoric aside, plastic is symptomatic of how we treat and view our world and our bodies, and it's quite literally toxic. Plastic betrays an alarming condition that we're in today, especially in the west. Yet we often remain blind to the way that plastic threatens to distort our relationship with the world, with each other, and even with our own faith in Christ.

The word plastic comes from a Greek word that means 'to mold'. Plastics—or plasticity—is ultimately about deformation. As a material, its flagship trait is that its malleable, but doesn't break. This is why when we use the word plastic in a non-literal sense it picks up harsher connotations of being fake, artificial, or unnatural. The reason plastics have grown so wildly popular and prevalent is they're pretty low cost, pretty easy to make, waterproof, and—this is key—we can do what we want with them, and they don't break down. The drawback is that they're pretty slow to decompose, and they tend to be a vehicle for toxins. Both these qualities are paradoxical given our relationship with plastic. Even though they are so durable, we throw away 50% of plastics after they have been used just once. And even though they are so toxic, we handle 30 million tons in America each year.[133]

Our bodies, Genesis tells us, come from dust. How we use and manipulate materials around us betrays how we view and use our own bodies. Our addiction to plastic is just one symptom of a much deeper and sinister condition to which we are enslaved. This condition is a plastic imagination.

There are two aspects to a plastic imagination. This first is that a plastic imagination manipulates material reality in order to gratify one's own desire. The second is that a plastic imagination resists decay and death and having to take care of things that are ultimately fragile. (This second aspect is most evident in our cultural obsession with youthfulness; just think plastic surgery.) Altogether, a plastic imagination creates a spirit of disposability. This disposability

[133] https://www.ukonserve.com/Articles.asp?ID=253

falsely pursues a self-made immortality that bypasses death and therefore resurrection and redemption.

So how does this play out in our contemporary lives? A host of ways. Take a plastic fork. The US uses over 40 billion utensils in a year.[134] Plastic utensils spare us the inconvenience of having to think about and take care of them after eating. Instead, we can dispose of them soon as soon as our meal is finished so that it will no longer require any of our labor, time, or attention.

Porn is one way our culture applies a plastic imagination to other bodies. It manipulates others' bodies to suit our own pleasure in one of the most disposable ways imaginable. It bypasses the need to tend to the emotional and even logistical aspects and inconveniences of a real relationship. Nor is there the risk of committing oneself to a physical, fragile, and inevitably dying body of another human. Porn persists in an immortal, synthetic realm which may perpetually cater to the sexual whims of the viewer. It turns the bodies of others into a disposable form of plastic.

But we also apply a plastic imagination to our own bodies. Terms like heterosexuality and homosexuality (and any type of sexuality for that matter) both mistakenly define one's own body by the bodies judged to hold maximum potential for sexually gratifying oneself. Both these terms describe one's own, isolated body as the gravitational center of self-gratification.

The plastic imagination in which we are all implicated renders us homeless, estranged from the home of our bodies, the home of our churches, and the home of our planet. It also estranges us from the heavenly home to which we should look forward. It seduces us into shirking our task to take care of the material reality that God has given us. Our plastic lives attempt to avoid the inevitable sacrifice and death which he invites us to sojourn—through our baptisms, through our marriages or celibacy, and through our lives. All of us our guilty of perpetuating the plastic pursuit of engineered immortality, laying our gifts at the altar of indulgence and convenience. Our plastic imagination is a black hole that collapses inward on the burden of its own gravitational weight and in so doing, fails to emit any light.

Fortunately, the church is given a ready-made practice to resist our bent towards plasticity: communion. In communion, we receive a body given over to us. This reception must transform our perception of the material world and our engagement with it. We see other bodies as joined to ours by way of a shared labor which unites to meet each other's hunger and thirst, not simply indulge our own.

[134] https://blog.ukonserve.com/2018/04/08/say-goodbye-to-plastic-utensils/

Unfortunately, sometimes even communion itself has become subjected to our plastic habits. Think of the ways that the practice is shaped by our desire for instant gratification (online communion?), and for efficiency and disposability (think pre-packaged communion elements: no need for clean up!). Many Presbyterian congregations do not practice communion every week. Why? Perhaps it is simply too inconvenient. It takes too much time, too much effort, too much coordination, too many volunteers to summon, too many bodies to serve. But what better way to resist our culture's plastic habits of convenience than by inconveniencing ourselves with communion once a week out of our joined adoration and anticipation of the resurrected body of Christ?

Signs and Symbols: A Contemporary Understanding

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

To understand the sacraments, we have to understand something of how symbols work. A symbol requires at least three elements: the sign, the thing signified (or referent), and the community of signification. Modern studies of symbol aid us in understanding the sacraments, even if this is not how Augustine or the Reformers described symbols.

The Sign

We are all familiar with signs. They are all around us. Street signs, advertisements, brand logos, sports team mascots, and national flags, are all obviously signs. They are graphical depictions of something that we are all familiar with, and they communicate some shared meaning simply by their presence. But perhaps less obviously, all human language is symbolic. Each of the 26 letters of our alphabet are symbols that, when arranged in a certain way, signify something beyond themselves. Calligraphy makes us focus on how words themselves are symbols. The writing of the symbol can be an artwork in and of itself—just like singing, poetry, and different accents can help us focus on the beauty of the spoken words themselves.

Thing Signified

But words are not performing their intended function if we just focus on the beauty of writing or vocalization. They must point to something beyond themselves. They must *signify* something.

Words can signify concrete objects, like "this loaf of bread" refers to a particular loaf of bread and nothing else. But they can also signify abstract concepts like the word "food." Food is a category of thing, but what it signifies (or conjures in the mind) may be vastly different in different cultures and historical contexts. To a Roman, food could be shellfish, while to a Jew shellfish was forbidden as food. To a Scot, haggis is food. To the American government, a key ingredient of haggis is not fit for human consumption and is not legally distributed.

Humans seemingly interact with the world almost entirely by use of signs and symbols. Money is a symbol of value. Time is a symbol of change. Even truth is a symbol as it is (often) an attempt at linking a shared symbol with the non-symbolic nature of reality.[135]

[135] At least in the correspondence theory of truth.

We live in a world of signs, such that some scholars talk about our whole human experience as symbolic. This was not lost on Saint Augustine, who gives us an early definition of the sacraments as visible signs of an invisible grace appointed by God. Calvin agrees and talks much about how God must "condescend" to communicate with us. The human mind cannot escape its symbolic world and so God must enter into time, space, history, language, culture. God makes covenants with his people in the Bible, and in so doing deals with ancient people in language that fit the kings and empires of the ancient Near East. These covenants were confirmed with signs, visible actions that communicated a shared meaning. So, in Genesis 15, Abraham divides animals in two and receives a vision that, to him, confirmed the covenant, when a smoking pot and flaming torch passed between the animal halves.

Community of Signification (Context)

This very strange and ancient part of the Bible keys us into the third aspect of a symbol: *the community of signification.* Symbols have their meaning as they are shared within certain groups of people. No symbol contains its own referent within it, or it would not be a symbol at all. The symbol and the thing signified require people, or God, to link them and give them the intended meaning. This is why it is so important to read the Bible in context. Because, if we are ignorant or ignore the original context and simply quote proof-texts, we transform the meaning of the symbol by yanking it out of one community of signification, and dragging it into our own, sometimes kicking and screaming. In order for us to understand ancient symbols, we need to understand something of their community of signification. If we ignore context, we impose our own context on the text, forcing it to do our own will. And this is how the Bible is manipulated for evil purposes and false teaching.

Two Kinds of Symbols: Pointing and Participation

To understand a key distinction in symbols let us consider two kinds of military memorial. On the one hand we could look at a victory arch in Paris or Rome. Unless we read the interpretive tourist signs or are students of history, we won't know exactly what we are looking at or what it's supposed to mean. These are memorials, designed to commemorate a historical event and publicly celebrate it for years to come. We could say the same for a young civilian visiting the Vietnam War Memorial. These are all names of people who died long before she was born, fighting in a war in a different period of history that may be hard to understand now (the Cold War). The young civilian is not *participating* in this symbol, but *looking at it*. Now, for the veteran who lost friends, maybe even stood by them as they fell, the same symbol means something entirely different. This veteran was a participant in what this memorial symbolizes.

This is even more true when we think of military service ribbons, which are given only to those who participate in a certain operation. These ribbons commemorate the *participation* in an event. To a civilian they just look like stripes of clashing colors.

What we can see with this distinction is that the difference between a pointer and a symbol of participation lies *in the observer*, not in the symbol itself. To the outsider who did not participate in Constantine's conquests or in the Vietnam War, these war memorials are pointers to historical facts. To the one who participated in the event, these symbols awaken memories, stir pride, evoke deep sorrow. The symbol perpetuates and transforms the experience of the participants. The same goes for a funeral. Funerals are important, even for unbelievers and materialists. They help those who participated in the life lost transform this relationship into memory as they cement these memories when friends and loved ones grieve together. But sometimes, to a pastor or a funeral director who may not have known the deceased or their family, these funerals are pointing signs. The pastor is not participating in the grief of every funeral simply because it is a funeral! That would overwhelm anyone, and it would be inauthentic. The family would feel a certain violation of intimacy if the pastor felt the same pain they did.

So again, the meaning of the symbol lies very much within the community of signification, and in the observer or participant.

Symbol and the Lord's Supper

If we take these points and apply them to the Lord's Supper we can make some observations about how different people have understood it. First of all, we must say that to treat the Lord's Supper as *merely a sign* is like saying to the Vietnam veteran standing at the memorial or the family at a funeral, "it's just a sign." We must not mistake the Lord's Supper as merely a pointer, a reference to a historical fact that Jesus did indeed do things we say he did on the night he was betrayed. The *facts* of the Last Supper are important, but faith does not lie in acknowledging their facticity, but in *participating in that supper*.

Thus, the error of memorialists who deny the reality of any sacraments lies here. They miss a crucial call of the gospel to participate in the community of signification in which we are called to join Jesus in his sufferings and death so that we might thereby also attain life and glory.[136] It is not surprising that those who would describe the gospel as something personal, what God has done for you and what benefits you get out of it, would tend to become memorialists. For, if we do not share in the community of signification, we do not share in the

[136] Romans 6:5; 2 Corinthians 1:5–7; Philippians 3:10–11; Colossians 1:24; Hebrews 2:10; 1 Peter 4:13.

meaning of the symbol. Instead, we each interpret the symbol in our own way. Like proof-texting, we take the Lord's Supper out of context and force it to mean whatever we want it to mean. In short, memorialists transform sacraments and the faith as a whole into a personal, private, individual expression of one's own spirituality.

The opposite error would be to transform the symbol into the reality itself. Rather than seeing the sacrament as the way we join the community of signification with Jesus, being present at Jesus' feet across time and space, transubstantiationists hold that the symbols themselves *become Jesus*. The mistake here is to transform an event and a relationship into an eternal essence. It makes the bread and wine objects of power themselves, and ends up worshipping the elements themselves. The Lord's Supper does not symbolize ontological union with God by eating the flesh of Christ. It symbolizes the foundation of the covenant people of God, the only community in which this practice makes sense.

So, it is by participation in the life of the people of God that we rightly participate in the Lord's Supper and are able to rightly understand it. In that way the Holy Spirit is at work uniting us to a community that shares this meal from the Passover all the way until the resurrection of the dead and the final rule of Jesus as king over all creation. It is by participating in this event that the symbol unites us to a time-transcending reality of the great Sabbath rest of the people of God. And, at no point does the object of bread or wine need to become anything other than it is! No, *we are the ones who change* by participating in the Lord's Supper, *because we have shared in the communion of Jesus Christ himself by the Holy Spirit.*

And now perhaps it is clear why it is vital that we rightly understand the sacraments and why it is vital that our churches teach them. The Lord's Supper depends on the community of interpretation for its meaning. The Holy Spirit brings the word of God where our words fail, of course, but if we are not faithful to the life of the people of God and loyal to his kingdom, we have little hope of tasting and seeing the coming reality of the rule of Christ with his people gathered around his throne.

Rightly understanding the sacrament is not simply mental, nor does it stop at joining the community of God's people. It must go on to participate in the sufferings of Jesus. His suffering was not pointless, and there's no value to suffering for its own sake. We are to join the sufferings of his body and so fill up what was lacking by Jesus' own sufferings.[137] For it is here that the Lord's Supper unites to Christ, and is the means by which we are brought to the maturity to which we have been predestined—the image of Christ.[138]

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[137] A strange concept, I know, but Paul says it! Colossians 1:24.

[138] Romans 8:29, Ephesians 4:13, Colossians 1:28.

And in that way, the Lord's Supper is symbolic of the whole life of the people of God. As we eat our daily bread together with Christ, we grow mature by rebuke, correction, suffering, and perseverance in the face of a hostile world. We do this together. The Lord's Supper is a symbol, but how else would God condescend to communicate with his people?

The Ascended Christ: A Modern Take

Reformed theology has generally followed Calvin in his explication of the Lord's Supper. Calvin taught that Jesus is really present in the sacrament, not by his coming down to the feast, but by the people of God ascending spiritually to heaven. Recent biblical scholarship, especially from figures like NT Wright, [139] have sought to reframe the church's understanding of heaven and earth. Rather than an up-down, far away view of the cosmos, the Bible assumes what was commonly understood among Second Temple Jews, that heaven was behind-the-scenes of earth. Heaven and earth were created to be joined, were separated by sin, the earth is in rebellion under the power of evil, and Christ is reconciling all things. Thus, heaven was not far away, but nearby and ready to break in wherever the rule of God is manifest.[140] The temple was the place where heaven and earth met. Jesus, as the temple, is this intersection, and his replacement of the temple and the rending of the veil shows that the kingdom of God/heaven was breaking out of the temple and invading the earth. Because the people of God are the temple,[141] they are the continued meeting point of heaven and earth. Their community gatherings are the "thin space"[142] where God's rule overturns the present evil age. As the temple and the body of Christ, the people of God, as they gather together, are indeed brought by the Holy Spirit to the unveiled heavenly feast of the victorious Christ. The net result is the same as Calvin had stated, but there is no ascent or displacement of the people, nor is there a descent of Christ to the church. Rather, it is in the celebration of the sacrament that Christ is revealed to his disciples.[143] Indeed, as heaven is the place of "gathered time" as Augustine has it,[144] the sacrament is the place at which we join Jesus both in the Upper Room and in his victory feast, all without leaving the now-time and here-space. This notion of heaven as overlaying and the church as thin space solves many Reformation-era debates about the location of Christ in the sacrament. Christ is not present in or around the elements. The elements are just bread and wine. Christ does not move from his place seated at the right hand of the Father. Nor do we move across space or time. Rather, heaven is opened to us and through us by the Holy Spirit. The church is the context of this revelation, just as the temple was in the Old Testament. We get a foretaste of the reconciliation of the whole cosmos by seeing and sharing the resurrection

[139] See, for example, *Surprised by Hope*.

[140] So, "The kingdom is in your midst" in Luke 17:20.

[141] 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21.

[142] As opposed to places of power in paganism and later Celtic-influenced Christianity.

[143] As in Luke 24:30–31.

[144] This is Charles Taylor's phrase describing Augustine's view in *Confessions* XI. See *A Secular Age*, 56–58.

life of Jesus, just as we also taste and fill up what was lacking in Jesus' sufferings in one another in the now-time.[145]

[145] Colossians 1:24.

Advanced Sacramentology: a History of Symbolic Thinking and the Sacraments

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This longer chapter is a reflection on how symbols have changed over time and what that has meant for the sacraments. I hold a basic thesis that theologies of the sacraments reflect contemporary philosophical trends. This is the reason why many perspectives on the sacraments today sound preposterous to us, and why the sacraments occupy relatively little place in the life of the church today when previously they were central practices. I will argue that symbolic thinking has moved in a complex and non-linear way through the following perspectives:

- Magical[146] realism
- Axial Age: Symbol-as-gateway and allegory
- Secular Materialism or Modernity: symbols are merely words or signs, not connected to reality.
- Postmodernity: Symbol as power-play and the world as socially constructed symbol.

When John the Baptist called for Jews to go down to the Jordan River to be baptized, they went out in droves. What did those first century Jews understand him to be doing that they would obey without having to read a book on what baptism is and what it is supposed to symbolize? Baptism made immediate sense to them. In the same way, when Jesus gathered his disciples in the upper room for the Passover feast they were, of course, very familiar with the meaning of the Jewish holy day they were celebrating together. And so, they had the ability to understand what Jesus meant as he reinterpreted the elements of that celebration so that they referred to him as the fulfilment of the mighty act of God in delivering his people from slavery.

Ancient "Magical Realism"

In order to understand the ancient world, it is often necessary to understand ourselves to a degree. Western civilization entered a new phase of its history over the course of the last five hundred years, so-called "modernity." The total domination of secular materialism has entirely transformed the way people see the world. We want bare facts, and believe we can understand bare facts without needing symbols. Traditional symbols of Christianity, or even more ancient paganisms now contain only nostalgic and commercial value. Consider holidays, which used to be *holy days*, or days set apart for the most important functions of a society. Pagan holidays were most often related to the seasons and the activities that fit the seasons. The faint echoes of our ancient pagan ancestries can still be seen in the fecund and verdant springtime symbols of Easter (fertility and hope for new birth and new life), harvest festivals like

[146] Throughout this chapter the word "magic" is not used pejoratively.

Thanksgiving, days honoring departed ancestors like Halloween, and midwinter festivals of light and hope in the midst of darkness and death at Yule/Christmas (seen in evergreens, holly and ivy, mistletoe, yule logs, candles, and Christmas lights). Although Christianity used these preexisting holidays and redirected them to the worship of the true God, it could never divorce these days from their true roots. These holy days were natural expressions of people who lived organically within a world, so called "embeddedness." But these symbols serve, in the public square of today, as carriers of nostalgic value to serve our god of Profit. They have been "disembedded" or taken out of the world in which they made immediate sense. We still put up Christmas lights and have Christmas trees, but few think of the hope of increasingly long days in the bleak midwinter. Christmas is importantly near the winter solstice and its pre-Christian roots in various cultures celebrated the end of shortening days. Few believe that the spirits of our ancestors watch over us and are deeply interested in the way things work, and so we do not honor them with elaborate funeral rites, nor seek to ensure they remain on our side during times when the barrier between the living and the dead becomes thin, like at Halloween. Instead of sacrificing to the dead, we now offer candy to children who are supposed to dress up like the dead, though who now just play dress-up. The whole meaning of Halloween is now inverted, but that hardly matters when it generates revenue for decorations and candy.

What we see in this consideration of holidays is that we live within what we might think of as a third phase of human religious history. In the early phase of paganism, human religion was deeply tied to the environments in which people lived. They believed in spirits and powers related to specific locations. And they sought to manipulate the powers of the world by *imitative or homeopathic magic*, and a belief in symbolic reality. Imitative or homeopathic (feeling or suffering similarly) magic was a practice in which humans would try to manipulate the larger reality by imitating the change they wanted on a small, representational scale. They believed that they could control the shape of reality by controlling a symbolic representation of it. The basic premise is that a part can be substituted for the whole, or that a representation of the whole can influence the whole. So, for many ancient peoples, hair, nail clippings, or bodily fluids retained a connection to the individual even after they were shed, and so they had to be disposed of carefully, lest a sorcerer get hold of them and use them against you (think of a voodoo doll here).

The point is, the ancient mind was fundamentally symbolic, to the point that they didn't really have discrete symbols *as symbols.* They believed that the link between a part and the whole, or a representation of a thing was fully connected. They did not think that there was such a thing as a "symbol" that only existed in human minds. The microcosm and macrocosm were intimately and inseparably related. And we see evidence of this kind of thinking at various points in the Old Testament. Saul's use of the Ark of the Covenant in battle to attempt to

guarantee victory is a type of this magical thinking.[147] He thought that manipulating the relic would manipulate the God it represented. The part/representation/symbol could be substituted for the whole. God, of course, didn't obey this logic! The cloak of Elijah also functioned as an object of power that Elisha had to don in order to be filled with Elijah's power.[148] When Moses struck the rock with his staff in order that water would gush forth, God became angry with him. Indeed, this is the incident that prevented his entry into the promised land.[149] Why? I would surmise that rather than simply raising his staff and letting God do the work, Moses used the staff in a magical way, trying to open the rock by his power. The bones of Elisha functioned as relics that brought a dead man back to life, as the remnant representational part of Elisha retained power even after his death.[150] The bronze serpent erected for the purpose of healing became something of a magical object of power that was abused.[151] The logic behind casting lots or the Urim and Thummim, which appear to be objects of divination (discerning the will of God or the gods by signs), is likewise magical in that it sees portents within the shape of the real world. Many other examples of this type of thinking can be found throughout the Old Testament.

It is in this world and with this kind of thinking that idolatry makes sense. There is little evidence that any ancient person mistook a miniature wood carving for a god. Rather, they knew that it was representational, *and for that very reason it had power*. It was connected, so that what happened in a small way to the idol would be mirrored in a large way on the real god. This helps us make sense of the prohibition of graven images in the Ten Commandments. It is a prohibition of imitative or homeopathic magic. And this is why magicians are condemned in the Old Testament as well. The story of Saul and the necromancer reveals that it is when he loses faith in God that he returns to the old ways of thinking, of consulting a phantom representation of Samuel for advice, even though he'd outlawed such practices.[152]

Although God prohibits the use of representational or imitative magic, this does not mean he forced his people to think in entirely different ways about the world. God met the people where they were using the forms of reasoning they understood. In making a covenant with Abraham, God engaged in a symbolic ritual by passing through the animals cut in two as a flaming pot.[153] What is unique about the Old Testament in this regard is that, in speaking their language, God engaged his people on human social or relational terms, not through

[147] See 1 Samuel 4.

[148] 2 Kings 2. Note how the cloak here is seemingly a vital part in separating the water. The cloak did not merely symbolize the spirit of Elijah resting on Elisha, it participated fully in the whole.

[149] Numbers 20:11–12.

[150] 2 Kings 13:20–21.

[151] Numbers 21:9 and 2 Kings 18:4.

[152] 1 Samuel 28:5–19.

[153] Genesis 15.

manipulation and power-moves. He made a covenant with them, as a king would have done. He did not offer them power over their enemies by magical formulas or specific rituals. He did not offer them power over the natural world by imitative practices. Even when the Old Testament does show manipulation of the natural world, it is God doing the work and a human interpreting it for the people. Elijah did not make a three year drought, he announces that God has done this and that God is the one who can lift the drought.[154] Thus, Elijah is not a rainmaker, or a magician, he is a prophet who derives his power from a covenant or commission from God, even if he uses some techniques that seem magical to us, like requiring seven repetitions before a desired result is achieved.[155]

The Second Phase: Philosophical Skepticism and Second Generation Religions (Axial Age)[156]

The way (elite) humans thought about their world began to shift dramatically in Greece, India, and China around 600 BC. The rise of philosophy came alongside a major transformation in religions that moved away from the type of symbolic thinking evident in ancient paganisms. Philosophers began believing that symbols were actually gateways to a higher plane of existence, a world where everything was unified and one. Rather than believing in many gods and spirits who could be manipulated by magic, philosophers and religious thinkers across these geographic areas began to believe that perhaps there were no gods at all, but a single unified and universal force that controlled all things. Most of the Presocratic philosophers of Greece held this kind of perspective, as did Plato. They began to reinterpret their traditional myths by allegory to try and find how these seemingly absurd stories of the exploits of the gods revealed deeper, hidden, secret keys to the structure of the universe. Anaximander (ca. 610–546 BC) taught that all things were part of *apeiron*, an impersonal force that united all things. In China, Taoist thinkers like Laozi (6th or 4th century BC) taught very similar things, that the Tao was an impersonal force or energy that flows through all things.[157] In India, philosophical Hinduism and Buddhism also moved away from belief in the pantheon of gods and posited that all these gods are merely the manifestations of the one universal power, as are we. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (ca. 563/480–483/400 BC), similarly taught that everything that makes life particular is suffering and so it is by understanding and becoming part of the oneness of all things that one achieves enlightenment or Nirvana—escape through dissolution into oneness,

[154] 1 Kings 18.

[155] E.g. Joshua 6; 1 Kings 18:43; 2 Kings 4:35, 5:10, 14.

[156] The "Axial Age" was a term coined by the 20th century German philosopher Karl Jaspers. That there was a particular age is debated, but the similarities across a wide geographical swath at a similar historical time have interested historians of ideas ever since.

[157] It is sometimes noted the importance the Tao played on George Lucas in creating Star Wars and the idea of "The Force." Taoism teaches that it is by going with the flow of the energy of the universe, the Tao, that one can achieve long life, health, prosperity, and perhaps immortality.

a dreamless sleep, a drop in an ocean. All of these thinkers tried to find some kind of reality beyond the symbol, some unifying source of power that might be achieved without needing the extraneous rituals of older religion. They tried to escape the world that *seemed* to be real, the world of shadows, of karma, of suffering, to get to the real world beyond. They did this through new moral practices based on reason and rational contemplation.

But all of these new philosophies were also at the same time revolutions in religion. For, although we now tend to see philosophy and religion as different, all of the ancient philosophers were religious practitioners as well. Schools of Greek philosophy were closer to what we might think of as secret societies led by charismatic intellectuals than they were universities with leading professors. Nearly all of them had initiation rites, secret knowledge, and particular ways of dressing and behaving. In that sense, they have some in common with Asian monastic groups. Another area of influence during this time was Persia/Iran in which Zoroastrianism was developed and would have been known by the Jews living in exile there. Zoroastrianism is one of the earliest monotheistic religions, though it also focused on dichotomies of heaven and hell (*paradise* is a Persian word!), and the resurrection of the dead.[158]

From areas like Persia came new religious ideas into the Mediterranean world, including among the Jews. There were new cults and "mystery religions" spreading rapidly around Jesus' time. Among Jews arose different sects—we know from the Bible about the Sadducees and Pharisees, but other groups existed too, like those who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls. Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC – 50 AD) was a Hellenized (Greek-ified) Jewish philosopher. Philo worked with an allegorical method of interpretation, something that Greek philosophers and mystery religions were doing with Greek mythology as well. Allegory sees a text as a symbolic key to a more profound or deep reality. Sometimes this has been understood as a "spiritual" interpretation rather than a "literal" one. But this way of trying to use a text to see beyond it to some deeper reality mirrors what was happening in the philosophy of that time. Of course, the early church fathers made great use of this method as well, as did Jewish rabbis and the kabbalah.

During the Second Temple Period, much of Jewish theology turned toward "apocalypticism." This is a way of seeing reality as divided into that which seems to be real, and what is actually going on behind the scenes. Most clearly evident in the book of Revelation, many other Jewish works have been found that contain this two-world perspective. Apocalyptic here does not refer to the end of the world, but to the idea that there is a veil that must be lifted to reveal reality. This apocalyptic type of thinking is similar to the allegorical thinking of the philosophers. But for the book of Revelation it's far more about dominion—who runs the

[158] See Tomasinio, Anthony, *Judaism before Jesus* for more on the Persian influence on Judaism.

world—than a division into shadows and real reality. The division of the world into what seems to be real and what is really real often came to be divided into the physical and spiritual worlds. The physical world was the world of seeming, of shadows, of symbols, and it pointed to the real reality of the spiritual world or the world of the Forms (Plato). St Augustine argues in this very way in his *On Christian Doctrine*:

> …this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,—that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.[159]

So, rather than trying to use symbols to manipulate reality, as ancient paganism did, this second generation philosophically religious way of thinking still thought that the small world of everyday life was full of symbols, but instead of trying to obtain their best life now by imitative magic, they sought to escape the small world of suffering and enter the spiritual plane of existence. Symbols offered a gateway to a world beyond this world, a perfect or ideal world in which only concepts or spirits exist in an undifferentiated unity.

The New Testament was written in a world in transition between ancient paganism with its imitative magic and spiritual manipulation, and this new philosophy. And at no point in human history did ancient paganism and philosophical religion ever cancel one or the other out, to this day. Even at the heights of Christendom there were practitioners of ancient imitative magical ways of thinking, though this came to be called "superstition." Indeed, it is only under Christendom that this type of thinking came to be called “paganism” as related to hill-people as opposed to the enlightened city-dwelling philosophers.

The New Testament bears witness to both of these perspectives and to Jewish resistances to both of them. Some of Jesus' healings happen in ways that would make sense to magical thinking—the use of spittle to make mud for the healing of blindness,[160] the touching of the hem of Jesus' robe healing the woman with the issue of blood and Jesus feeling the power go out of him into her,[161] and the multiplication of loaves and fishes. This is not to say Jesus was using magic.[162] It is to say that Jesus performed his miracles in ways that made sense to the people for whom they were performed. Other miracles he did without any symbolic manipulations, like the stilling of the storm. Some miracles specifically sidestepped the magical way of thinking at play, such as when Jesus rejects the hot springs for healing a lame man and just tells him to get up and walk.[163] Jesus was not a magic practitioner, but he made use of the

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[159] Chapter 4.

[160] John 9:6–7.

[161] Luke 8:43–48.

[162] Jesus’s power came from God, not from secret knowledge of how to manipulate the world through symbolic actions.

[163] John 5.

logic of the ancient mind to speak to the people he ministered to. And we see that the apostles reject Simon the Magician in his desire to buy the power of the Holy Spirit.[164] This is a clear statement that they saw that power came from God alone, not from special practices or manipulations. They were empowered because they were entrusted, not because they had secrets or techniques. And this may be the clear teaching of the Bible on magic. The Bible rarely says that magic is fake, but that it is an attempt to gain godlike power through skill, craft, or technique. Godlike power only belongs to God himself, who fills people with the Holy Spirit according to his will alone, and so enables them to perform miracles. This cuts through the ancient way of thinking that a part can influence the whole. Again, this is partly why there is a prohibition against idols.

This Axial Age world enabled sacraments and sacramental thinking to be invented. Magical realism has no need or ability to understand sacraments, for it did not believe in a reality behind the scenes, nor in allegory.

The Medieval Mind

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire and political fracturing of Europe, philosophy largely fell by the wayside in that region and the majority of people continued in an ancient way of thinking. The philosophers were always elites and this whole class of people largely disappeared. Those who remained were theologians, attempting to merge philosophical schools with Christian doctrine. The influence of their work was likely rather more isolated than our study of history through great figures would suggest.

Thus, the common Medieval mind was very similar to the ancient mind.[165] They believed that symbols were real and reality was symbolic. So, when it comes to the Lord's Supper, we easily understand why it was understood as a form of magic. When the priest held the bread aloft and proclaimed in Latin, "Hoc est corpus meum" or "This is my body,"[166] they believed that this bread was an object of power. The bread *is* the body of Christ, because the microcosm or representative symbol is inextricably linked to the macrocosm. Thus, we also understand the prescriptions against desecrating the sacramental bread or wine. Letting it touch the floor is dropping Jesus himself. Letting sacramental bread rot is the rotting of the body of Christ. The part and the whole are joined together. And, as with ancient priesthoods, the common people may not have understood the secret language of ritual incantation (hence the invention of "hocus pocus" from "hoc est corpus"), but they believed that it was effective. In this way, the

[164] Acts 8:18–24.

[165] This can be seen very easily in histories like the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* which is full of what moderns would call "superstition" and hagiography. Also relics.

[166] Matthew 26:26, Luke 22:19.

sacrament was literally idolatry because it linked a created thing with the Creator in such a way that to manipulate one was to manipulate the other.

Sacraments were not invented in the ancient magical world. Ancient priests performed rites and magical rituals that were effective because of how they understood the world to work. Priesthoods kept their trade secrets. But in the Medieval world in which the church had already developed with some philosophical influence, the church (officially) became limited in its rituals of power to seven sacraments.[167] These means of grace were how the power of God was communicated or channeled through his body, the church, to the people. Christian paganized practices continued, however, to the dismay of the Reformers, and many within the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformation and Modernity

The world of Martin Luther was undergoing significant changes from the high Middle Ages, particularly in beliefs about ideas and symbols. Long before Luther, thinkers across Europe were rediscovering philosophical concepts from ancient Greece and incorporating these questions into their theologies. At the same time, secular power was steadily rising and coming to battle against the dominance of the church. This led to a revival of Classical thinking that labelled the ancient ways as "superstition" and "pagan" (i.e. belonging to hill-people/hillbillies, *pagan* comes from Greek for "hill").

The Renaissance saw something of the Axial Age part two. It continued a project that had been left off for nearly 1200 years in western Europe. These philosophical ways of thinking had been earlier at play in the Islamic Middle East and to a degree in the Byzantine Empire. The Crusades and the fall of Byzantium and the old Eastern Roman Empire led to an exodus of scholars to the west. These scholars maintained a more "enlightened" way of thinking that revolved around seeing the world of symbols as gateways to the real reality that lay behind the symbols. They returned with long-lost classical texts of Greek philosophy, like those of Aristotle. This revolutionized theology beginning in the 1200's with figures like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. So, alchemy as a practice emerged, linking manipulation of matter (lead into gold) as a method of achieving immortality. The symbols of lead and gold could communicate their virtue (i.e. incorruptible value of gold) to the user. This was a form of magic, but a magic rooted in scientific enquiry.[168] The roots of a materialism were growing in the fertile soil of this period.

[167] To be clear, the number of seven only became official with the Council of Trent during the time of the Reformation.

[168] These new sciences of alchemy, algebra, the invention of alcohol through distillation, and Arabic numbers (ten digits including zero), all still bear witness to their Islamic/Arab origin through the "al" prefix.

Alongside the popular magical view of the sacraments came the theologians who greatly benefited from the recovery of lost philosophy. They sought to explain how the bread could be Jesus' body and the wine his blood. They took Scripture seriously when they read, "This is my body", "my body is true food," and "unless you eat the flesh of the son of man you have no life within you."[169] These theologians, newly equipped with the philosophy of Aristotle, now had a framework of *hylomorphism*[170] out of which they could make sense of this. The *essence* of the bread was transmuted, much like in alchemy, into the body of Christ, even though it retained the same appearance or *form*. So arose the doctrine of *transubstantiation* which holds that the miracle of the sacrament is the transformation of bread into the flesh of Jesus and wine into his blood. This enabled theologians to agree, to a point, with the magical realism view of the sacrament. But they did so without holding that bread was itself God, or that the priest was a magician capable of this transmutation. God alone had power to transform the essence of the bread and wine while keeping the appearance the same.

It was in this world in transition that the Reformation happened. The Reformation continued in the line of elite scholars (Renaissance Humanists) who were critical of lower-class superstitions based on magical realism. Truth would come by an objective observation of the natural world, which meant requiring the person to cease immediate (unmediated/uncritical) participation in the natural world. Hence the need for and growth of universities in which scholars could be sequestered to an environment in which it was plausible that reality was not itself symbolic, and that symbols were actually veils to be lifted or gateways to enter through to discover the truth that lay behind appearances.

These schoolmen or "scholastics" rediscovered and invented new ways of thinking about how human thinking relates to reality. Chief among these came figures like Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Occam. And it was through the influence of ideas like those Occam espoused that the Reformation could take place and modernity begin in thinking. To continue using the terms of this essay rather than his own, let's say that Occam taught that signs are not connected to reality, nor gateways to reality, they are just words or images. The link belongs in the human mind.

From this basis modernity can begin with its denial of symbols as either real or as gateways to the real. Modernity eventually worked to eliminate signs as a whole. And so we come to the idea of something being "merely symbolic." Some of the reformers, like Ulrich Zwingli, taught that the sacrament was merely symbolic, a memorial event. Nothing happened

[169] See particularly John 6:53–59.

[170] Aristotle's term for the composition of things. He taught that the form was expressed in its material particularities, so that you could not have a form without matter, in disagreement with Plato. This meant that the soul was expressed by the body and had no real existence apart from it.

in the sacrament, and so it was not a sacrament at all. It was merely an institution, a tradition that Jesus established. Jesus was not present at the event any more than he was present at any other time.

But Luther and Calvin did not go so far. Both of them sought to preserve the real presence of Jesus in the sacrament. For Luther, the symbol was a gateway to reality. Jesus was present around the bread, even if the bread itself didn't change. Calvin didn't agree with this either. For him it didn't make sense that the risen, incarnate Jesus could be present in multiple places at once. Jesus wasn't present in or around the bread and wine. Instead, the symbol was a gateway in another way. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the symbol brought the participant up into heaven where Jesus is.

Luther and Calvin both could not accept the old magical realism, nor a Medieval philosophical defense of the bread and wine changing into Jesus. But neither were they prepared to deny that Jesus was present at all, and that it was "merely" a symbol, as though a symbol were empty. This was a special symbol, one that was chosen and empowered by God because Jesus instituted it. So, although other symbols may not be necessarily linked to reality, nor gateways into a divine reality behind the veil of seeming, the sacrament was made special or holy by the Spirit. In this way, Calvin and Luther are reclaiming what we quoted from Augustine above, a notion that the material reality is to be used and gone beyond to access and enjoy God.

During and after the Reformation a long process of secularization began. Luther himself appealed to the secular authorities for protection against the church. By his and Calvin's mustering of secular authority to reform the church we see the beginnings of an inevitable move towards a modern world in which the material world is no longer a gateway to the divine, but is all that there is. This move was inevitable because, once empowered as protector and reformer of the divine realm, the state would eventually gain full control of the divine realm, leading to a nationalist conception of God. If the nation-state has preeminence, then the divine realm will conform to the needs and demands of the people who make up the state.

Various influential scholars have noted this unfortunate and ironic relationship with the Reformation and secularization. Sociologist Max Weber saw in Calvinism the roots of capitalism and the "protestant work ethic." He argued that doctrines like predestination, God's sovereignty, and justification by faith alone had an inverse effect of making Calvinist cultures the most heavily focused on material gain, profit, and hard work. This eventually inverted the divine as a gateway to the material, i.e. that "God helps those who help themselves" as Benjamin Franklin famously said.

More recently, philosopher Charles Taylor likewise saw in Calvin the roots of secularism. By Calvin's expectation of a high level of discipleship from all believers, not just the ordained

(the priesthood of all believers), Calvin created conditions of deep spiritual resentment among a laity looking to escape the burdens of a hyper-spirituality. Because it was understood that the successful must be blessed by God, it fell upon everyone to work hard and become successful to prove their salvation. In other words, Taylor argues that predestination ironically demanded that individuals prove their salvation by an assurance of hard work and worldly success. In this way freedom from God meant a culture of success without a spiritual guilt, i.e. modern capitalist consumerism.[171]

The Axial Age way of thinking has always proven to be the realm of an intellectual elite. The first Axial Age faltered and largely remained only among educated elite throughout the Medieval period. Even in other cultures this process seems historically temporary in China, India, Iran, and the Mediterranean. The type of symbolic thinking inherent in this Axial Age was unstable, fluctuating back to magical realism on the one side, and secularism on the other. Allegorical ways of thinking, of viewing the visible world as a gateway to a hidden spiritual world, requires a consistent intellectual effort. It is a more complex mental operation than either seeing the divine at work in the material world or the material world as self-enclosed and self-sufficient as secular materialism does.

Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and Nostalgia

It is worth briefly mentioning here that modernity has had numerous nostalgic revivals of ancient ideas, both in magical realism and Axial Age symbol-as-gateway. Modernity, with its brutal focus on materiality was hard to accept for many who still experienced the world as though it were mysterious and contained meaning. Movements like Romanticism endowed the natural world with power and meaning, in a way still perceptible to neo-pagans. Transcendentalism,[172] heavily influenced by Hinduism, was itself an Axial Age symbolic gateway type of thinking. It was through engaging the natural world that one was able to transcend it and attain a higher plane of existence. This type of thinking remains with us in Buddhism and the many pseudo-Buddhist spiritual practices popular today like mindfulness meditation.

Each of these movements retains some form of conscious nostalgia. People who daily live in a secular materialist world find an escape by temporarily participating in more ancient ways of thinking through alternative spiritualities, fantasy, and video games.

Video games are themselves highly worth considering in discussion of the sacraments. Video games are not simply escapism. The worlds that are simulated are revealing, for they often present a hybrid world of secular materialism and magical realism. In other words, the values of secular humanism are given superpowers by simulated magical realism. A hero

[171] Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, 80–84.

[172] Noteworthy figures include Ralph Waldo Emmerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

progresses in her quest and gains quantified levels though money, experience, and getting better equipment (materialism). With experience new superpowers are unlocked (magic).

And yet, video games are not simply nostalgia. They are themselves a type of symbol-as-gateway, like all computer-based simulations are. At the heart of any video game is code. The graphics, sounds, and storyline of a game are the world of seeming. The real world beyond is made of code, of forms, of pure ideas. And, if you were to reverse-engineer a video game, you could do so by analyzing the structure and behavior of the game while playing it.

What does this show? The intellectual elite of computer programmers are thinking at a systems and categorical level, just as Plato did, but they are presenting or re-presenting a world of seeming. In that sense, they do the opposite of Plato or Buddha in trying to liberate people from the shadow world. Video games only serve to confirm the material world of suffering, offering a fake reality to escape to. To the average gamer who does not understand coding or computer science, the simulation is effective. This representation of reality, often a magically-real reality is realistic enough that modern gamers do not need to seek the forms behind the simulation. To use Plato's Cave analogy, many gamers are happily chained watching a shadow-play. This concept was famously explored by the film *The Matrix*. And with videogames we can now discuss the "postmodern."

Into Postmodernity?

The term "postmodern" has, fittingly, meant different things to different people and groups. For Christians, it has often been oversimplified into a combat between *objective* and *subjective* truth. That's not really what postmodernity is about at its heart. That's more a fixation on the effects rather than the cause. For, at its heart, postmodernity is a way of thinking and viewing the world. If modernity was about a strict materialism that persecuted magical-realism and lost interest in symbol-as-gateway thinking, postmodernity is a rediscovery that power controls symbol and thus constructs a reality for which those symbols are a gateway. Postmodernism is the discovery that real power comes not so much by control of the material realm, as the control of the spiritual or symbolic realm by the creation of complex systems of simulation. Postmodernism is the creation of transcendent realities by material symbols. It isn't the same as the Axial Age belief that truth was attained by going through symbols to the real reality behind. It is the belief that truth is created for people by symbols.

This is how "truth" has become "subjective." It is because we understand that the world of meaning beyond reality is something humans create rather than receive that there is a call to arms in a great power-play in the world of symbols. Postmodernity is not the rejection of truth, it is the realization that truth-claims come from power wrapped in symbol. Postmodernity is about *questioning authority*, as authorities mask themselves in claims to objectivity.

Postmodernism says that symbols control people, and so there is now a conscious battle over symbols and the meaning of words. So, postmodernity is also about the self and "authenticity." The self is now both a construction project (materialist) and a spiritual or symbolic quest to find the true self hidden behind the fake world we see. Of course, this type of self-construction of authenticity is contradictory. But it gives the impression that the self is sovereign and master of his or her own destiny.

In order for the individual to be sovereign, the individual has to be provided with the means of constructing her own life and identity. No one can be self-sufficient, for that would require a wilderness lifestyle, which then means the individual is entirely dependent on the whims of the environment. Self-sufficiency or godlikeness, is the lie given to us by products, social media, and interest groups. The self is not sovereign, but dependent on countless others. In fact, in order to maintain this illusion of self-sufficiency, all of our suppliers and resources have to be as anonymous as possible. This is where branding comes in. Rather than revealing individual identities, branding hides individuals behind a manufactured identity. We do not know who makes our clothes, how many hands have touched it, what their working conditions are, where they live, their life stories. And that is what permits us to use fashion as a means to construct ourselves. It detaches our material objects from any rootedness in connection to a wider material reality, enabling them to be used as symbols.

Because we have to use these anonymous products, some philosophers have noted that we now live in an entirely artificial world. It is a world of simulation. Everyone is trying to conceal themselves behind a Wizard of Oz type of projection, or a mask, ever more so with the internet. Postmodern symbols are therefore stripped of meaning so that we have the authority of making them mean what we want them to. They are symbols detached from reality that create reality. And so we live in a world of symbols that don't refer to anything but ourselves. We do not participate in a shared reality, we are supposed to construct our own. Thus, symbols are manufactured for us and branded. Religious symbols fit into this as well. We are given branded religious meanings to help our own spiritual self-development. So we have people who can mix and match ideas that are historically incompatible. We have centering prayer, which is a mixture of Chinese Taoism and Christian mysticism. Yoga is branded in hundreds of different ways to aid physical and spiritual health. Psuedo-Buddhist mindfulness[173] is adopted and used even by government agencies that are legally bound to not impose a particular religion on others.

So, what does the Postmodern sacrament look like? We use manufactured breads. We do not know the bakers, the farmers, the millers behind the bread. We might even use pre-packaged, individual portions. In this way we are as isolated as possible from others so that the

[173] See Purser, Ronald, *McMindfullness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*.

elements of the sacrament can produce what they are supposed to—whatever it is that the individual wants them to. Even the idea of passing a plate with morsels and tiny cups anonymizes the practice, isolating the sheep from the shepherd, removing the element of discipleship or discipline, so that we can focus entirely on our own private spirituality. The postmodern Lord's Supper is given for us to aid us in our journey of spiritual development.

How Ought We To Think of Symbols?

So what is the right and true way of understanding symbols and thus the sacraments? Human ways of interacting and understanding their world has changed dramatically. What does that mean for the meaning of the sacraments? Are they simply bound to their time? Are they human practices?

Postmodernism is useful in that it helps us see how people seek to control one another with symbols rather than just with material means. It also shows us that symbols are tied to power relations. This is exactly what the sacraments have always been for the church. They are given their meaning, not because of their attachment to water, bread, or wine, but by being given meaning by God. The ultimate authority has invested these symbols with meaning that they do not contain in themselves. This does not make them magically real. The symbol-as-gateway view has always been correct, it's just that there are now millions of gods and lords vying for control of symbols. The church's claim is that God himself is the authority behind them. But this isn't a god who uses the sacraments to get his way and control people through propaganda. This is the God of Jesus Christ who revealed his character on the cross. This is the God who empowers these symbols, not to achieve authenticity, but to lead to self-death, not to have power over this or that group, but to serve our enemies. It is truly a "love feast" as it was often called in the early church. It symbolizes the character of a God the world could not invent. The meaning of this symbol and its effectiveness are controlled by God through the Holy Spirit.

Thus, it falls to church leaders to use the Word of God to rightly explain these symbols so that the people of God rightly participate in the giving up of themselves as true offerings to God. It falls to the community of the people of God, the church, to be united to Christ.

But postmodernity has also made the church too cautious in its claims to represent a real reality and in the power of the sacrament to unite us to Jesus Christ. The symbol is given power by its authority and that authority is God himself. So the symbol isn't just about meaning, it is also able to cause an effect. This isn't a magical realism, but it is a realism that is hard to comprehend for modern or postmodern people.

God's "reality" is called "heaven" in the Bible. There is indeed a gateway to this reality through our reality, and that is the people of God who are his temple. But that does not mean

our world is a simulation, something to pass out of to get to God's world. God's reality and the material reality were created to be united, and the Bible teaches that this is what the eschaton holds—the reunification of heaven and earth. Sacraments are ways by which the veil between these realities is lifted, so that we can participate in the future reality now. We join Jesus at his victory feast. We rest in God's eternal Sabbath. We enjoy God and his presence. And we do this as a community of signification who faithfully serve as representatives of God's reality in the present evil age as it is ruled by the evil one.

Part III: Resources and Reference

ECO's Polity on The Lord's Supper

ECO's Constitution establishes how ECO is governed. It has a number of things to say about the Lord's Supper both in how it is to be practiced and what is to be believed about it. These documents are given to explain a common center of belief and practice and are intended to be marks of unity in mission and identity rather than limitations or boundary markers. Here is a list of relevant points from ECO's Polity and Essential Tenets.

Polity

Three Marks of A Church

"In the Reformed tradition the marks of the church are the proclamation of the Word, the Sacraments rightly celebrated, and the exercise of discipline." (1.0603)

Open Table

"All who put their trust in Jesus Christ are welcomed to receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper." (1.0302)

The Session is responsible to

"Authorize and provide for the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper; authorize the administration of Baptism; exercise due care and provide sufficient education to the congregation and to new believers that the Sacraments may be rightly received as means of grace. (1.0603b)

Presbyteries are responsible to

"Authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper beyond particular congregations." (3.0103f)

Non-Pastor Officers may administer sacraments accordingly:

"There are two general ways in which officers may be commissioned to provide pastoral leadership and administer the sacraments. First, they may serve in various ways within a congregation under the supervision of the session and a pastor/head of staff or transitional pastor. Second, an elder or deacon may be commissioned to serve in the role of pastor/head of staff for a congregation or a church plant. It is appropriate to refer to individuals serving in

either capacity as "lay pastor." The session shall pre-authorize the administration of the sacraments, and also determine the process by which preauthorization occurs." (2.0501)

Small Groups of various kinds may celebrate the Lord's Supper accordingly:

"The Church exists wherever two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus. Therefore, it is appropriate to celebrate sacraments in these smaller units. These smaller units include, but are not limited to: small groups, missional communities, retreats, leaders of satellite congregations, and house church gatherings. If an officer has been commissioned by the session to lead these groups in mission or ministry and has been appropriately trained, he or she shall be authorized to administer the sacraments in these communities. The pastor and the session shall oversee those who are commissioned to such service within a congregation. This commission shall be for a period of twelve months and may be renewed indefinitely." (2.0502)

Officers Commissioned to Serve as Pastors

2.0503 Gives the provisions for an officer (elder or deacon) to be commissioned to serve as the pastor of a congregation. Under these provisions such a person may administer the sacraments.

Essential Tenets

Means of Grace, Three Marks of the Church

"Within the covenant community of the church, God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline." (III.C)

Signs Linked to the Thing Signified, Seals of God's Promises

"the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus." (III.C)

Union With the Ascended Christ

"In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ, so that His resurrection life may nourish, strengthen, and transform us." (III.C)

Commitment to Practice Sacraments

"We hold one another accountable to… worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own

innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments" (III.E.2).

Summary

As part of the Reformed tradition, ECO holds to the three marks of the church: word, sacrament, discipleship/discipline. These three marks work together to rightly compose a church of Jesus Christ. As Presbyterian, ECO holds that it is the session's responsibility to oversee the right administration and reception of the sacraments. This means uniting discipleship, word, and sacrament, by ensuring that the sacraments are understood and thus able to be received rightly.

ECO holds that it is normally only the place of an ordained pastor to administer the sacraments. This is not because they are made special, but because pastors are under the highest level of accountability and discipline. If similar expectations and structures of accountability and education are established in a church then the sacraments may be celebrated in smaller groups and by officers duly commissioned instead of by a pastor.

ECO does not hold that anyone can administer the sacraments at any time. Small group leaders, for example, are not allowed to administer sacraments unless by leave of the session according to the Polity of ECO.

Lord's Supper FAQ's

1. Does ECO teach that Christ is really present in the celebration of the Lord's Supper?
   Yes, but not in or around the elements (bread, wine) themselves. We hold, with our wider Reformed tradition, that God is truly present in the sacraments by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit unites the believer to Christ. We believe that Jesus Christ is still and always fully God and fully human, and so retains his physical, incarnate presence. This means his body cannot be dispersed or divided, but is seated at the right hand of God the Father. So, if we are to meet with him, he does not come down to the table, we are drawn by the Spirit to the throne of heaven to meet with him there.

2. How often does a church have to celebrate?
   As often as possible! This sacrament has been one of the most central practices of the church throughout its history, and, if we understand its purpose rightly, we should desire it regularly. The ministry of word, sacrament, and discipline go hand in hand, so that to have word without sacrament, or sacrament without discipline, is to neglect the full life of the church.

3. The Elements: wine or grape juice? What kind of bread? Gluten Free? Can we use other food and drink?
   The elements do not become objects that possess power in themselves. They remain what they are. But they are symbols. Thus, this question is somewhat misguided in that it asks what is permissible when *the right question is, "What will best communicate what Jesus himself is communicating?"* Within this question should include everything we know about what the "body of Christ" means in the biblical narrative and in the theology of the New Testament. For example, the unleavened bread of Passover, manna in the desert, the church as the body of Christ, the body broken for the healing of all peoples, daily bread, etc.

4. When should children be allowed at the table?
   ECO Polity states that the Session must "exercise due care and provide sufficient education to the congregation and to new believers that the Sacraments may be rightly received as means of grace" (1.0603b).
   This is the decision of the Session. Unbaptized children, like all who are unbaptized, are not allowed to participate in the sacrament. It is expected, however, that baptized children should be taken through a process of confirmation or catechesis. Because the elements of the sacrament are not effective in and of themselves in producing any kind of spiritual transformation they are of no benefit to the ignorant, for the sacraments are integrated with the revelation of God in his word. Symbols do not bear their meaning in themselves,

their meaning comes from Christ. Bread does not inherently symbolize the body of Christ. Only by the shared understanding of the community as it meditates on the word of God does the bread rightly symbolize the body of Christ. Children must come to know what they are doing, to a degree, to rightly participate.

5. So, what about people with learning disabilities if they are not able to fully understand the symbolism at work?
   The sacraments are empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit, not our intellects. We cannot consider the case of children and those of limited mental abilities as the same thing. With children we generally expect that they will work towards a level of sufficient understanding through catechesis or confirmation. Those who will not progress in their understanding, including those who have succumbed to diseases like Altzheimer's or dementia, should not be excluded on this basis.

6. One of my elders says, 'this represents the body of Christ' when distributing the bread. What theology is being expressed and is this an acceptable position to hold in ECO?
   That an elder would intentionally misquote Jesus's own words (Mt 26:26, Mk 14:22, Lk 22:19) suggests that there is an agenda here, likely a memorialist view that is concerned with making sure people do not think that the bread is itself the body of Christ.
   Memorialist views of the sacraments are not acceptable for officers (pastors, elders, deacons) in ECO, since a memorialist cannot agree to the Essential Tenets in good conscience when they state, "the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus.... In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ..." (III.C).
   It is often the case that the Reformed view of the sacraments is unknown to many Evangelicals who generally believe there are only two views: memorialist or Roman Catholic. In such cases, education may provide the only discipline necessary to ensure such an elder that ECO does not hold that the bread and cup are transformed themselves into objects of power, but that God is still at work in the sacrament.

7. Can an elder serve communion to the congregation without a pastor present?
   It depends. ECO allows for this in Polity 2.05. See that section for specifics.

8. Can a CLP serve communion to the congregation without an ordained pastor present?
   It depends. ECO allows for this in Polity 2.05. See that section for specifics.

9. Can small groups celebrate communion in their homes?
   It depends. ECO allows for this in Polity 2.05. See that section for specifics.

10. Live-stream communion? Can the elements be unique to each household? Can we do pre-recorded communion?
    2020 opened a host of new questions about whether and how to celebrate the sacraments online. We have differences of opinion on this, and we have a whole section of this book devoted to exploring those opinions. We encourage you to think this through with your session with resources offered here.

11. How should we dispose of unused elements?
    Because the Reformed perspective on the Lord's Supper does not hold that the elements are transformed into something they are not, they may be treated like bread and wine/juice. However, this often overlooked aspect of the Lord's Supper provides great opportunity to explore other aspects of the gospel, particularly in regards to the poor and hungry, the suffering of creation from human agricultural practices, the hardship of migrant workers, and the vast amounts of food waste produced in modern countries. The session may want to consider how these aspects of the gospel, noted in our Essential Tenets, "Since the fall our natural tendency is to abuse and exploit the creation, preferring evil to goodness.... Since the fall, our natural tendency is to engage in relationships of tyranny and injustice to one another..." (III.A). We might explore how the Lord's Supper is for the healing of creation and reconciliation of human relationships, not simply our personal relationship with Jesus.

12. Why are only ordained pastors generally allowed to administer the sacraments?
    Although some traditions view ordination as a process that transforms a person providing them with an "ontological change," ECO as a Reformed body does not hold this position. Ordained pastors are different because they have received training, examination, and are subject to structures of accountability and discipline greater than others. ECO expects that those who administer the sacraments have sufficient knowledge of what it is they are doing so that the sacraments are rightly treated as holy and as means of grace.

Best Practices, Tips and Tricks

- If you're using leavened bread, have someone slice it only *halfway* through in the middle so the breaking is seamless, but doesn't just fall apart.
- It's okay to be nervous. Be sure to have the words of institution printed out large enough to read from a distance on the table if you need to use them.
    - But aim to memorize the words of institution!
    - Look at the people when saying the words of institution.
- Don't be afraid to give very clear instructions, don't assume people in the congregation know how to do things the particular way your church does.
- Remember that the sacraments are communicating grace.
    - Therefore try to be well prepared (so that you are not treating them lightly), but also don't be too anxious about making 'mistakes'. God will keep His promises even if we serve the cup before the bread.
    - Also, try to relax and encourage your servers to relax and look relaxed. For many of us our 'concentrating on not making a mistake face' looks a lot like an angry face. Try to remember that you are delivering good news in these elements.
- Don't rush. Take time to notice faces and make some eye contact where you can. This meant to be an embodied gracious experience, not a fast food drive by.
- If your tradition involves people coming forward to receive the elements, be sure to ask if anyone needs the elements brought to them before concluding the service.
- Let people know ahead of time your traditions regarding eating and drinking together or individually. Nothing makes a visitor more uncomfortable than hearing 'let us drink together' when they have already drained their cup.

For Churches who Have Celebrants Come Forward

- If you are going to serve the Lord's Supper intinction style, do a test to see how your bread works with the juice (pro tip—avoid wonder bread).
- In a church small enough, aim to know the names of the people you are serving and serve them by name.
    - But don't say people's names unless you're confident of your ability to remember everyone's name, because people will notice if you said the name of the person ahead of them in line but don't say theirs. Trust me on this. They

notice. It's all right only to say the names of children, but then you'd better know the names of each child.

- Make eye contact with people as you offer them the cup or the bread. And smile. You should be looking at them when you say, "...for you." It's a wonderful thing to look the members of your congregation in the face as you offer them the presence of Jesus. Do it with intention.

Children

- Think through your expectations for how children can (or should not) participate in the Lord's Supper and make sure that parents know and understand this before the moment comes.

- If you know that there's a child of the church who's taking communion for the first time (whether you know will depend on how you work with families about this), then it's lovely to announce that to the congregation before you begin the prayer of thanksgiving.

Liturgy

The following liturgy is rather full and will not fit into a timeslot allotted by many churches who have not practiced a lengthier liturgy of the sacrament. This liturgy is not intended to tell your church what to do, but hopefully to inspire you and your churches to consider the elements of the sacrament you do have. Also, if your church is considering changing how it administers the sacrament, this document may be of use. The following has deep roots in the Reformed tradition, going back to Calvin, but with modern language.

Introduction

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a major portion of a normal worship service and may be included in nearly any worship service apart from Good Friday.

Appropriate Texts for Sermon on The Lord's Supper

Matthew 26:17–29

Mark 14:12–25

Luke 22:7–23

John 6:25–59 (or portions thereof)

1 Corinthians 11:23–34

Offering

Pastor

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1)

Congregation

We are living stones being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

Invitation to the Lord's Table

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Pastor

Come to the table laid by Jesus. He established this practice for his people using these words.

The pastor takes the bread and holds it up and breaks it at the appropriate moment

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

The pastor sets the bread down and takes a large vessel with the wine/juice and an empty cup, pouring a sufficient quantity at the appropriate moment

In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The pastor sets down the pitcher and takes up the broken bread, saying:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Exhortation to Discipline

Pastor

We are called to a life of faithful obedience. Using the words of Paul let us examine ourselves.
Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine him or herself. Only then eat the bread and drink from the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on him or herself. But if we judge ourselves truly, we will not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:27–32)

The congregation is given a moment of silence for self-examination.

The following or something similar is said to welcome all repentant and baptized people who have covenanted to follow Jesus to the table.

This table is not for those who believe themselves to be righteous because of their own works. It is for those who know their need of their savior Jesus. Those who have, by their baptism committed to a life of following Jesus and who believe with their hearts, trust with their minds, and are striving to faithfully work out their salvation with fear and trembling are welcome here.

Great Thanksgiving

The people stand. The pastor leads in the following responsive prayer. This prayer should be altered according to the season of the church calendar.

Pastor — The Lord be with you.

Congregation — **And also with you.**

Offer up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Pastor, addressing God — It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you our thanks and praise, God our King. You are the eternal Creator of all things. You created all things by your wisdom. You sustain all things by your grace. You made a thriving creation without our help. But you made us in your image to love you and find our joy in you. You made us to represent your gracious and loving rule to the creation. But we rebelled against you, seeking to rule for ourselves. We refused to submit to your word and your judgment, deciding for ourselves what is good and evil.

You did not reject all people, but chose for yourself a people to come out of the world to learn again how to represent your gracious and loving rule. By your discipline you formed a people to be a blessing to all creation. When your people continued in rebellion, you sent prophets with your word to call us back.

In the fullness of time you sent your one and only Son to become one of us. He was made flesh, took on the form of a servant, and gave his life for us, for our salvation, and the rescue of all the creation from the power of sin, death, and the evil one. Therefore we praise you with the whole church, the whole people of God from all time and to eternity, and with the angels who forever sing:

The people may say or sing with music the following. It is not appropriate for the choir or band to sing alone here.

Congregation

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

(Isaiah 6:3, Matt. 21:9 / Mark 11:9 / John 12:13)

You are indeed holy, God. Blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our King. By being born of Mary, the Word became flesh and made his house among us. He lived a fully human life, tasting food and joy, suffering sorrow and feeling pain. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, opened the eyes of the blind, ate with sinners and outcasts, and proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God: Liberty to the captives, rest for the weary, judgment upon the wicked, and defeat of the powers that enslave us. Dying on the cross he rescued us and his creation from the power of sin. And he offered himself to God on our behalf to save us from the judgment to come on his enemies. Death is defeated in victory. We thank you that Jesus ascended to heaven and sits at your right hand, the first fruit of our resurrection and glorification. And we thank you for the promise of his return to bring the fullness of your kingdom reign to renew the world crying out for salvation.

With thanksgiving we offer our very selves to you to be a living and holy sacrifice, dedicated to be ambassadors of good news of your kingdom.

Pastor

Great is the mystery of faith:

Congregation

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Pastor, addressing God

Father, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Jesus. By your Spirit make us one with Christ and so one with all who share in this feast. In this oneness grow us up to be the full stature of the measure of Christ, so that we are prepared to bear your name to a world enslaved to sin. Guard us until Jesus returns with final victory that with all your saints we may share in the joy of new creation. By your presence give us a foretaste of your fulfilled kingdom, your eternal Sabbath rest. Through Christ's own name we pray. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Pastor

Let us pray as Jesus taught us for his kingdom rule to come:
Do you believe in God, the Father almighty?

Traditional Form

Our Father, who art in heaven,hallowed be thy name,Thy kingdom come,Thy will be done,on earth as it is in heaven.Give us this day our daily bread;and forgive us our debts,as we forgive our debtors;and lead us not into temptation,but deliver us from the evil one.For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Or

Modern Form

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

The people are now seated

Breaking of the Bread

The pastor takes the bread and holds it up and breaks it at the appropriate moment

Pastor

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

The pastor sets the bread down and takes a large vessel with the wine/juice and an empty cup, pouring a sufficient quantity at the appropriate moment

In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The pastor sets down the pitcher and takes up the broken bread, saying:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23–26)

Because there is one bread,

We who are many are all one because we share in one bread.

(1 Corinthians 10:17)

Communion

Holding out the bread and the cup, the pastor says

Jesus said, "The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall not thirst." (John 6:33, 35)

Come, for all is prepared.

Here communion takes place according to the decisions of a church's session. It is appropriate for Psalms to be read, music to be played, or hymns to be sung during the service.

Server

The body of Christ, broken for you.

Congregant

Amen

Server The blood of Christ, shed for you.

Congregant **Amen**

Prayer after Communion

We thank you, God, for uniting us as your body. With this holy sign you have given us a taste of the feast that awaits all your people with the coming of your kingdom. Send us out in the power of your Holy Spirit to give the world a vision and taste of your kingdom by the good works you have prepared for us in advance. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Amen

Commentary on The Lord's Supper Liturgy

Introduction

The following document is intended to help you and your church's leadership understand elements of a traditional Reformed worship service. Your church may or may not practice or be familiar with all of these elements. Our intention is to provide you with resources for understanding how the elements of such a worship service fit together, not to provide a necessary order of worship. It is for your session to rightly discern what is best in your context.

The Lord's Supper is one of two sacraments established by Jesus and handed down throughout the history of the church. As a symbol, it is vital that those who are participating in the symbolic act understand what it symbolizes. The right performance of the sacrament cannot occur if those who participate are unaware of what they are doing and why. ECO's Polity states that the Session is responsible to "exercise due care and provide sufficient education to the congregation and to new believers that the Sacraments may be rightly received as means of grace" (1.0603b). Different church traditions have celebrated this sacrament in different ways, but the core elements, established by Jesus, elaborated upon by Paul, remain fairly standard.

The elements listed in this chapter are often integrated at various points of a whole worship service, not simply confined to the celebration of the sacrament.

The Week Before?

Because a crucial element of the sacrament is self-examination for the purpose of repentance as enjoined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27–32, churches were historically required to inform the congregation the week prior to the celebration of the sacrament to spend time in self-examination before the next Sunday.

"Fencing" the Table

Another historical element of the sacrament that has fallen out of common use relates to varying degrees of restricting who may participate in the sacrament. While ECO Polity enjoins an "open table" it does not thereby free people from self-examination. Thus, it is appropriate to remind the congregation before the sacrament that it is not a light thing or an empty symbol. The right administration of the sacrament requires the exercise of discipleship/discipline, which is one of the three marks of the church. For we worship and participate in the life of the God who disciplines those he loves (Ps. 94:12, Heb. 12:6, Rev. 3:19).

At the same time, the table is not for the morally perfect. Those who are contrite of heart are to be encouraged to come to the table to receive the grace and forgiveness that their efforts could never attain. The fellowship of union with Christ is offered through forgiveness.

Where the Lord's Supper fits in a service

The Lord's Supper has historically been placed after the ministry of the Word (reading of Scripture and sermon). The preaching of the Word invites the congregation to renewed union with Christ in his forgiveness and his mission. The ministry of the Sacrament confirms the word with action.

In special services, the Lord's Supper will still come after the ministry of the Word. For example, in an ordination, it will often occur near the end of the service after a new pastor has been ordained. At a wedding, the Lord's Supper may be celebrated after the union of the couple has been symbolized with the giving of vows, rings, and a kiss.

Offering

The offering should clearly distinguish between the requirements of God to his people and the need of paying the institutional bills. God never asks for the giving of money in Scripture. Money, according to the head of the church, Jesus, belongs to Caesar. Offering has changed significantly from what was established in the Old Testament, which was the direct fruit of agrarian labor (foodstuffs) which was then redistributed to the needy including the priests.

It is vital to remind the congregation that God has called them to full-life service as part of his people, and that their financial contributions only represent one aspect of this service. Just as God gave himself for us, so too we present ourselves as living sacrifices, our true spiritual offering (see Romans 12:1, Hebrews 12:28–13:16). Hebrews makes clear here that worship requires actions for one another. We are ourselves the living stones of the house of God who are to offer spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:5).

Prayer of Confession

The Prayer of Confession is essential. God desires a broken and contrite heart, not sacrifices and religiosity (Ps. 51). God desires justice, not worship that covers for injustice (Isa. 1). We must also invite the congregants to repent from their sins before participating in the body of Christ. Paul speaks of the danger of those who do not do this in 1 Corinthians 11. In ECO, as in all historically Reformed churches, the sacraments are not rightly instituted or celebrated without the practice of discipline. The congregation, at least regular covenant partners, should understand that they have covenanted to be discipled and to be conformed

to the image of Christ and his measure of maturity (see Eph 4). Participation in the sacrament symbolizes their commitment to growth toward Christlike maturity, which requires leaving behind the life of sin. Remember, the mature mind of Christ is seen in his taking on the form and role of a servant and suffering death on behalf of others (Phil 2). The Lord's Supper remembers his maturity, not only his atonement, and thus leads us to be grow up in every way into Christ Jesus (Eph 4:15).

Many church traditions make use of the *Kyrie eleison* (Greek for "Lord have mercy") as a response to specific confessions.

Declaration of Forgiveness

Suitable words from Scripture are used to explain God's forgiveness for those who repent.

The Peace or Ministry of Reconciliation

Jesus teaches that we receive forgiveness to the degree we pass it on. If we do not forgive one another, God will not forgive us. He also teaches that we should not offer sacrifices (even simply of thanksgiving) to God is we are not at peace with one another (see Matthew 5:23–24, 6:14–15). So, the passing of the peace is not intended to be a time of greeting, small talk, or a moment of peacekeeping conflict-avoidance, but a time to offer signs of reconciliation. This is a moment to express the joyful fruit of repentance and forgiveness with one another, just as God has done for us.

Invitation/Exhortation

The invitation to the sacrament is an appropriate place to remind the congregation of the solemnity of the sacrament, and invite those who are weary and heavy laden to come to Christ for rest.

The Creed

Because the sacrament is about union with the body of Christ and thus its unity, we affirm that unity by historical creeds. This is both an act of corporate confession of faith, as well as training the young in the faith what it is they ought to believe. Those who do not believe in the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed should not be invited to participate in the sacrament, as these are generally used in baptism or confirmation to confirm that a person does indeed believe in the same gospel the church has proclaimed for millennia.

Great Thanksgiving or Eucharist

The Greek word *eucharisteo* means "I give thanks." The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is also rightly called the Eucharist, because it is a thanksgiving meal of the family of God, and a thanks-offering from the people to God. This is normally a long prayer that brings the visible and present people of God into communion with the whole invisible people of God by reciting the story of God's people according to the season. There are a large number of options for this prayer depending on the occasion. But its main purpose is to remember the mighty acts of God culminating in Jesus Christ and giving him thanks for our inclusion in that story and that people. We then offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1) for the service of God's mission.

After this prayer, the people respond with one of a few traditional responses that declare one of the key meanings of the sacrament.

The Words of Institution

These words are what establish the actions as a sacrament. Their placement varies. Some place these words before the Great Thanksgiving, some in the middle, and some afterwards. Although Presbyterians do not believe that the bread and wine become the body and blood in themselves, we do believe that the sacrament is more than just a mere sign or remembrance of a historical act. These are the words Jesus and Paul enjoin the church to say. Historically the words of 1 Corinthians 11:23–32 were read in full, including the exhortation to self-examination and consequences of wrongly partaking. The decline of the practice of discipline in churches has meant verses 27–32 are rarely read. But, if they are shocking to the congregation it is likely that they have not understood the meaning of the sacrament rightly. Again, those who love God should not despise his discipline nor reminders thereof.

Breaking the Bread

The breaking of bread and pouring out of wine are the visible element of the symbol. Part of the meaning of the sacrament is to remind the church that Christ's body is and remains flesh and blood, and that we are to be part of his body, his flesh and blood on earth as he is in heaven. So, the physical action of breaking bread and distributing it symbolizes the movement from the one body of Jesus of Nazareth spreading to the bodies of each person involved.

The pouring out of wine is to communicate a similar message. The pouring out of wine symbolizes the blood flowing out of Jesus' body in his death. Some thus argue that intinction is incorrect symbolism because it reunites the body and blood of Jesus that have just been separated by the act of death.

The Lord's Prayer

The Great Thanksgiving moves into the Lord's Prayer which appropriately sums up the request of God's people: for his name to be honored, for his kingdom to come, for his will to be done, for him to meet our basic needs, to forgive us as we forgive others, to save us from temptation, and deliver us from all evil.

Communion of the People

The actual act of the people is in receiving the bread and wine. The methods churches use for this vary according to context. The governing principle in deciding how this ought to be done in your context should not be convenience but the right understanding and demonstration of what the symbol is supposed to symbolize. The more layers of approximation there are from the actual Last Supper, the less likely the sacrament is to communicate its intended meaning. At some point, when symbols have been transformed enough, they begin to symbolize something else. Candles at Christmas provide a good example of this. If a church uses battery-operated imitation candles, a key element of the symbol of spreading the light of the world to one another is lost, because we each turn on our own lights. Instead of receiving light from above, we contrive to make our own light shine (Pelagianism or self-help gospels). At its root, then, such simulated candles end up subverting the meaning of candlelighting services, and they usually symbolize nostalgia and personal feelings, as much of Christmas symbolism now does. So, effort must be made to foreground the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the meaning of the symbols.

Prayer after Communion

A suitable prayer thanking God for the unity of his body is appropriate to conclude the sacrament.

Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis)

For millennia, including in Calvin's own day, the church has used the words of Scripture to sing its response to the work of God. Using the words of Simeon the elderly priest who saw the infant Jesus and was satisfied that he lived to see the kingdom come, we can likewise sing our response of tasing and seeing the salvation of God for his people. See Luke 2:29–32.

Benediction and Commission

As with all worship services, a service that includes the Lord's Supper should conclude with a benediction (Latin for "good word' meaning the pronunciation of a blessing), and a commission. God's blessing is to be upon his people, not to justify their regular lives, but to

send them out as ambassadors of Christ's reconciling all things to himself. The unity expressed in the sacrament is intended to be carried to the world, that by repentance and forgiveness, all of creation may be reunited to God in Christ Jesus. The sacrament has given us grace to perform this high calling to which all the body is called to do *together*.

Worship Service with Lord's Supper Outline in Full

1. Gathering
    a. Call to Worship
    b. Opening Prayer
    c. Song/Hymn
    d. Confession
    e. Assurance of forgiveness
    f. Peace—Spreading Reconciliation
    g. Song/Hymn
2. Ministry of the Word
    a. Prayer of Illumination
    b. Old Testament Reading
    c. Psalm
    d. New Testament Reading
    e. Song
    f. Gospel Reading
    g. Sermon
    h. Song/Hymn
    i. Apostles' or Nicene Creed
    j. Offering
3. Ministry of Sacrament
    a. Invitation
    b. Great Thanksgiving/Eucharistic Prayer
    c. Lord's Prayer
    d. Words of institution/Breaking of bread
    e. Communion
    f. Prayer after Communion thanking God
4. Benediction/Commission
    a. Song— Song of Simeon (*Nunc Dimittis*)
    b. Benediction

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