

Call to Worship



Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Invitation to Christ
Volume 54.2

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*



Volume 54.2
Invitation to Christ



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Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music* (1971–2000) and *Reformed Liturgics* (1963–69), *Call to Worship* seeks to further the church's commitment to theological integrity, corporate worship, and excellence in music, preaching, and other liturgical art forms.

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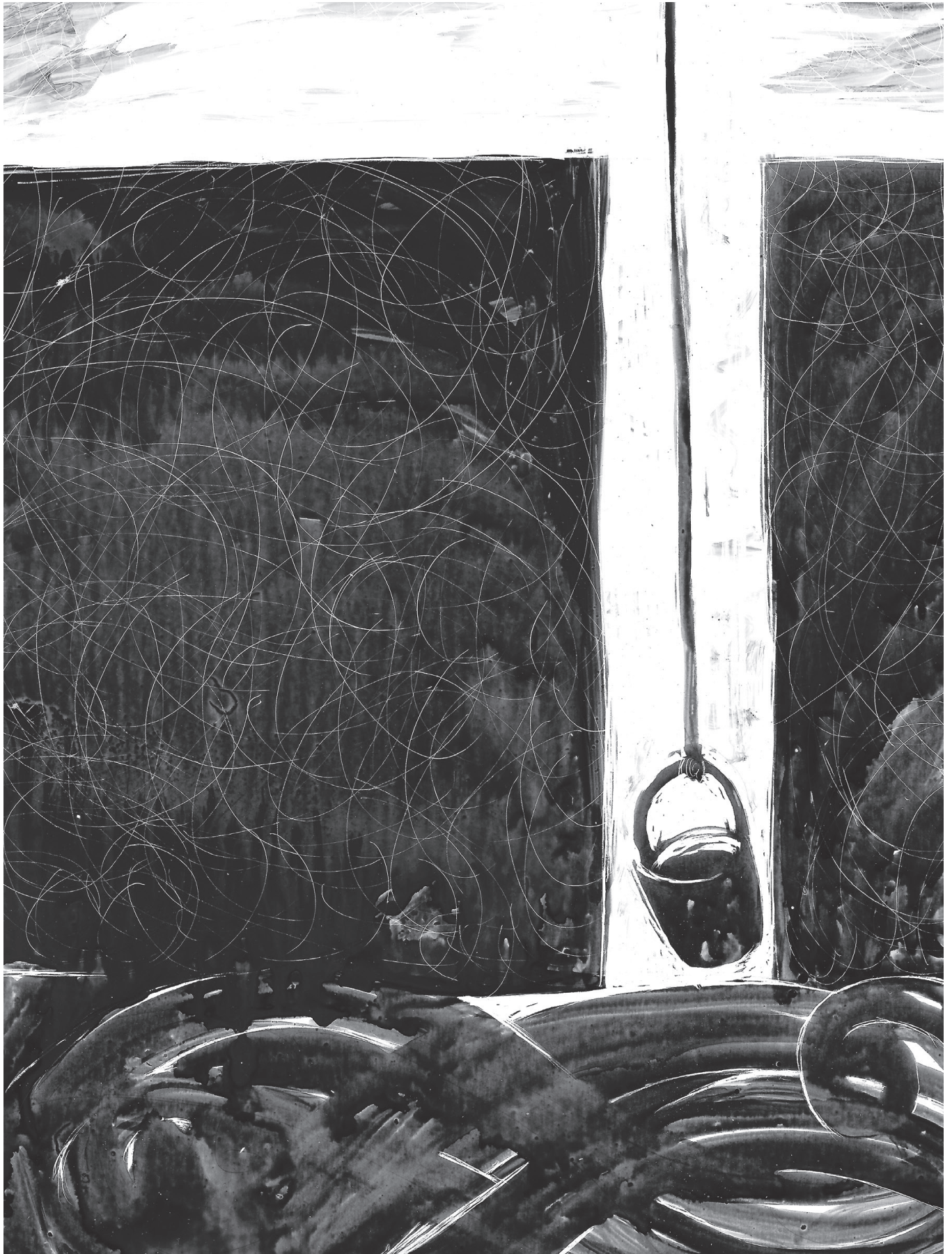
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Introduction

Kimberly Bracken Long

It is hard to believe that it has been close to twenty years since work began on what we now know as *Invitation to Christ*. In those two decades, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), along with other denominations, has experienced a deepening of sacramental life and understanding. Responding to overtures to the General Assembly regarding the relationship between baptism and communion, the Office of Theology and Worship convened a task force to study the biblical, theological, and historical roots of baptism and the Lord's Supper and to advise the church on how to order our life together.

After three years of intensive study, discussion, and worship, the fifteen members of the Sacraments Study Group produced *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table, A Guide to Sacramental Practices* (2006). In a pastoral letter to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), they invited us “on a spiritual journey to explore the deep and joyful waters of baptism.” They recommended five simple practices:

1. Set the font in full view of the congregation.
2. Open the font and fill it with water on every Lord's Day.
3. Set cup and plate on the Lord's Table on every Lord's Day.
4. Lead appropriate parts of weekly worship from the font and from the table.
5. Increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

Over the next two years, congregations across the denomination made a commitment to study the document and undertake the five disciplines.

After this period of study was concluded, the General Assembly once again took up the question of how baptism is related to Eucharist, and who is invited to the Lord's table. As a result, our Directory for Worship now reads as follows:

“The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding. If some of those who come have not yet been baptized, an invitation to baptismal preparation and Baptism should be graciously extended” (W-3.0409).

In short, if someone comes to the table for communion and is not baptized, that person is not turned away but welcomed. Then it becomes the responsibility of the church to lead that person to baptism so that they might be fully welcomed into life with Christ.

Over the last decade I have noticed a marked increase in the number of churches whose fonts are visible and filled with water, whose communion table holds a plate and cup even on Sundays when the sacrament is not being celebrated. I see presiders leading parts of the worship service from the font and from the table. And churches are celebrating communion more often than ever before.

I have also often asked people whose churches observe these practices whether they have heard of *Invitation to Christ*. Many have not, even though

they have become familiar with those “five simple disciplines.” As a result, *Call to Worship* is publishing the document in these pages so that it may be introduced to a new generation of readers.

The version of *Invitation to Christ* that appears in this issue is a second iteration, this one prepared for an ecumenical audience by Marney Ault Wasserman, who chaired the Sacraments Study Group. (Read more about this in her introduction to this issue.) Since our subscribers and contributors come from a variety of traditions, it seemed most appropriate to offer this version.

If you are already familiar with *Invitation to Christ*, you will surely appreciate revisiting this landmark study. If it is new to you, there is no better time than this to read it. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised many questions about the church’s sacramental life, and this work—which is designed to be studied and discussed by groups—can provide valuable guidance.

Three companion articles accompany *Invitation to Christ—Extended*. The first, by Paul Galbreath, depicts how his involvement in the Sacraments

Study Group has continued to bear fruit in his spiritual and vocational life through the practice of water walks. The second is by Tom Trinidad, also a member of the Sacraments Study Group, who explores how *Invitation to Christ—Extended* can help congregations consider their sacramental practices during the pandemic. Finally, Ronald Byars offers an apology for the *Book of Common Worship*, drawing connections between the service book and *Invitation to Christ—Extended*. Our four excellent columnists offer their reflections on the document as it pertains to liturgy, music, preaching, and the arts. Because of the length of the document, some of our regular features—the Work of Our Hands, book reviews, and ideas—will not appear in this issue.

I pray that this deep dive into the sacraments will renew your minds, enliven your hearts, and lead to a richer sacramental life for you, your congregations, and the whole church. Thanks be to God.

Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor

A Word from the Editor of *Invitation to Christ—Extended*

Marney Ault Wasserman

In 2003, when I received a phone call from Martha Moore-Keish, then serving in the Office of Theology and Worship, about a newly forming Sacraments Study Group, I had no idea about the amazing ride I was about to begin. That group became one of the richest experiences of my ministry.

There were 15 of us, 14 Presbyterians and 1 Lutheran—including 4 active pastors, 1 Christian educator, 6 seminary professors, 2 PhD candidates, 3 church musicians, 4 staff members from the Presbyterian Association of Musicians and Theology and Worship, and 1 community organizer—and I have never had the opportunity to work with a finer group of pastoral theologians. Over three years, at full three-day meetings, we studied together, we wrote papers for each other, we argued all the finer points of sacramental theology, we listened to the voices of the church, we ate together, and we worshiped together—morning, midday, and evening, preaching

and Eucharist, baptismal remembrance, psalmody, hymns and daily prayer. In the end, we wrote *Invitation to Christ*, and encouraged the church to expand its sacramental practice. Every last one of us made a significant contribution to that common effort; we each found our place in the whole, and we all gave our best for the church.

You will read much more about *Invitation to Christ* in the upcoming pages, not only the text itself but how it came about, the impact it has had on the sacramental life of the church, and more. What I want you to know is that this was a remarkable group of people who blended their common work and worship in seamless and empowering ways, and who gave a substantial gift to the church. And it was my deep privilege to serve among and with them.

*Marney Ault Wasserman,
former convener of the Sacraments Study Group
and editor of Invitation to Christ—Extended*



Amy E. Gray

Invitation to Christ—Extended

Invitation to Christ—Extended

A Guide to Sacramental Practices at Font and Table

Association for Reformed



⚔ Liturgical Worship

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Invitation to Christ—Extended

Invitation

“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. You with no money, come, buy and eat!” —Isaiah 55:1

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“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” —Isaiah 12:3

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Invitation

“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! You with no money, come buy and eat!”
—Isaiah 55:1

Letter to the Churches

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship invites you to explore the deep and joyful waters of Baptism, and to be nourished by the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper alongside the read and preached Word of God.

In 2006 the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) published *Invitation to Christ: A Guide to Sacramental Practices*. The purpose was to invite congregations to engage in specific sacramental practices and to reflect theologically on them in the hope of enriching congregational life around font and table. Since the initial publication and public invitation, *Invitation to Christ* has awakened many Presbyterian congregations to renewed discipleship and sacramental life.

The Steering Committee of AR&LW has been impressed with the value of this resource and requested permission to edit the document for a broader audience. With the blessing of the Office of Theology & Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), representatives from several church bodies gladly entered into a process of preparing this new edition and inviting wider ecumenical participation in *Invitation to Christ—Extended*.

Specifically we invite every church to practice five simple disciplines:

1. Set the font in full view of the congregation.
2. Open the font and fill it with water every Lord’s Day.
3. Set cup and plate on the Lord’s table every Lord’s Day.
4. Lead appropriate parts of weekly worship from the font and from the table.
5. Increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.

Concrete suggestions for engaging these sacramental practices are included in this resource together with some helps to prompt your theological reflection on the sacraments of the church and how they are practiced in your congregation. The intention is to do the *thinking about* the sacraments in the context of a shared sacramental *practice*.

All around us is a changing world where hungry and broken people are looking for a trustworthy word, a place to belong, a chance to start over, a way of life that can satisfy the longing within. The Word of the gospel and the water, bread, and wine of the sacraments are God’s gifts to the church for the sake of this very world! As we find ourselves surrounded by growing numbers of people who have not been raised in the church and have little understanding of its life, it becomes urgent that our ministry focus clearly on these simple and central gifts we have been given—Word, water, wine, and bread. We need to explore anew how best to offer them, along with the new life they bring, to a hungering and wanting world.

So we invite you to renewed discipleship and to joyful, passionate, baptismal living. We encourage you to engage your church in these five practices and in reflective dialogue with others, both in your congregation and in the wider ecumenical community.

While any branch of the church catholic may benefit from engaging these practices, it is churches of the Reformed tradition that will find their history, theology and experience most clearly reflected in these pages—those churches that have emerged from common roots in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship aims to serve these churches, through its commitment to “cultivate, practice, and promote worship that offers a foretaste of the fullness of God’s Reign. This worship is Trinitarian, ecumenical, incarnational, and sacramental; it is both universal and local, and sends the church to live its liturgy, bringing God’s justice and grace to all of God’s creation” (AR&LW Mission Statement).

At the font and the table we meet the same risen Lord to whom the Scriptures bear witness. The central invitation that both Baptism and the Lord’s Supper extend, together with the Word proclaimed, is the invitation to know the Lord Jesus Christ and to live in the world as his disciples.

We pray that each of you will be refreshed in your own faith and life in Christ. We join our prayers with yours for the vitality and strength of your congregation, and we pray for renewal in the life and work of Christ’s whole church.

Faithfully,

The 2011–2012 Steering Committee of the Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship:

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Marney A. Wasserman

November 2012

Sacramental Practices

With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
—Isaiah 12:3

Introduction

In Luke 24, the evangelist narrates the post-resurrection appearance of the risen Christ to two disciples who have departed Jerusalem for Emmaus. In this well-known encounter, Jesus appears as their companion along the way. Conversation around the meaning of the Scriptures concerning the Messiah leads to a meal where the stranger acts as host. The revelatory meal is one in which the identity of the host is made known to the two disciples, who are left to ponder the meaning of their experience. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” The text says the disciples returned to share the experience with their fellow disciples: “They told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

The Emmaus story holds together different and indispensable ways of human knowing: hearing and sensing, word and symbol, Scripture and sacrament. Only after the experience of breaking bread together did the two disciples recognize Jesus. The shared meal made it possible to return to their hearing of the Word and discover a new depth of understanding. The relationship of experience to understanding is of great importance to our sacramental practice. Indeed, when the disciples report their encounter with the risen Jesus to those in Jerusalem, they name the meal as the place where recognition took place even though, in retrospect, their hearts were burning while he spoke the Word to them.

Believing that lived experience deepens our understanding, sacramental practices are commended for renewal in every worshiping community. A richer, stronger baptismal practice can help us see more clearly how to be a Word and Sacrament church in a needy world. A fuller, more celebratory eucharistic practice can help us recognize and serve the risen Christ in our midst. Five simple disciplines are offered to the church. For some congregations, the practices will be familiar; for others, they may be new. In either case, the practices are suggestions for how to make use of ordinary things that are deep with significance. They set before us the meaning of our common life as a baptized community, nurtured in Word and Sacrament, and sent to serve the world.

Five Practices for the Church at Font and Table

1. Set the font in full view of the worshiping community.

Place your church’s font in a location where it is visible and accessible to the worshiping community in its place of worship each week. This could mean at the front of the center aisle or at the back near the entrance into the church. Think in terms of baptismal *space*, including space for people to gather around the font and, if the church celebrates the Easter Vigil, a paschal candle (recalling Christ’s “passover” from death to life).

In preparation for Sunday, spend some time during the week experimenting with different placements of the font, and imagining how each one changes the significance of Baptism for the congregation. Every time members enter the worship space, what do the location of your font and table communicate to the congregation?

2. Open the font and fill it with water every Lord's Day.

Remember that the font is the receptacle for the primary symbol for Baptism, which is water. Let the water be present all the time—whether there is a Baptism to celebrate or not. If the font has a cover, consider removing it, so the water may be visible and accessible to all.

Consider starting with some water in the font and a pitcher with which to pour additional water during worship. The pitcher might be placed on a small table, on the floor beside the font, or carried in procession. The minister, a lay leader, or even a child may pour the water. It is important to help the one pouring understand the baptismal meanings evoked in this grace-filled act.

When during the liturgy might it be timely to pour the water? There are many different opportunities during worship where pouring water or engaging the font helps deepen our understanding of baptismal life. Water that can be seen and heard—as worship begins, at confession and pardon, at offering or sending—brings attention to our baptismal identity as God's own, to our ongoing need for grace, and to our calling into lives of discipleship.

3. Set cup and plate on the Lord's table every Lord's Day.

The Lord's table should be in a prominent place before the congregation. Set the table with a cup and plate each Sunday. Together these vessels point the congregation to the core meaning of our eucharistic life, a life of thanksgiving for who we are in Christ. Even empty, they may speak to us of our hunger for Christ who feeds us at this table. Just as the font must be filled with water to express its meaning, so the Lord's table must be set in order to function as a symbol. Be sensitive to the possibility that the presence of other things on the Lord's table may distract from the meaning of the meal or prevent the table from being an effective sign of that meal.

4. Lead appropriate portions of weekly worship from the font and from the table.

What we do and how we do it convey meaning every bit as much as what we say. Intentionally leading worship from the font helps people make theological connections that might not be as clear to them otherwise. The presence of the leader at the font invites the congregation to see and hear anew portions of the liturgy that have baptismal

implications. For example, leading the Prayer of Confession and Declaration of Pardon from the font grounds our confidence in God's forgiveness in our baptismal identity. Lifting water with a hand or both hands as the words of forgiveness are spoken makes the abundance and freedom of divine grace visible.

Imagine the increased meaning of all acts of promise-making if done at the font where God's covenant pledge to us is enacted. Reception of new members, profession of faith or confirmation, ordination and installation, dedication, commissioning, and marriage might all take place around the font.

The congregation can also engage the font while receiving the Lord's Supper. When worshipers pass by the font as they come forward to receive the bread and wine, some will look and see, while others will reach in to touch the water and remember the gift and calling of their Baptism actively.

Baptism gives the church its mission, as well as its identity. Speaking the Call to Discipleship, Charge and Blessing from the font (again, lifting water with hands) can be a reminder that we are a sent people, baptized for service in the world. Ministry, mission, stewardship, ethics, and evangelism are all rooted in our being washed in grace for self-giving in the world.

Leading the intercessory prayers or extending the offering invitation from behind the Lord's table can help make similar connections. At this table where the hungry are fed, our prayers and our gifts for others come into focus as ways we respond to the Word and reach out to serve the world Christ loves.

5. Increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

At Eucharist¹ we are fed and nourished to live the baptismal life. The Christ with whom we are joined in Baptism, and whose body we are, continues to give himself to us in the meal that bears his name. The Lord's Supper draws us more deeply into the mystery of our dying and rising with Christ. We are baptized only once, but we are called by Christ to gather regularly at his table.

While practice varies in different Reformed churches, the Reformed tradition affirms the celebration of Word and Sacrament as normative for each Lord's Day and encourages its congregations towards the recovery of the church's ancient pattern of Word and table on each Lord's Day. Churches might consider adding celebrations of Holy Communion on particular Sundays in the liturgical year or through an

entire season, like the season of Easter. Whether the annual number of communion Sundays is increased by several or by many, more frequent and regular use of these means of grace strengthens the church in its identity and call.

Questions for Reflection

As you adopt, or adapt, these sacramental practices and engage in reflection on your congregation's patterns for celebrating Baptism and the Lord's Supper, you may find the general questions below a helpful starting place for conversation. More specific reflection questions related to Scripture, church history, theology, and contemporary culture are included in the Theological Reflections section to follow.

1. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are made up of spoken words, actions, texts, and symbols.
 - Describe the words, actions, texts, and symbols that are present in your congregation's celebration of the sacraments.
 - Make a list of the various meanings each of the sacraments has for your congregation.
 - How are these meanings expressed in your celebration of the sacraments?
2. Describe how font, table, and pulpit are related to each other in a typical service of worship.
 - What does their physical location in the church communicate about their relationships?
 - What words, actions, texts, and symbols demonstrate a connection between the two sacraments? Between Word and Sacrament?
 - What parts of worship, in addition to the sacraments themselves, involve the font or the table?
3. Describe the preparation your congregation offers prior to participation in the sacraments.
 - What kinds of preparation for Baptism does your congregation offer? For whom? When?
 - What kinds of preparation for participation in the Lord's Supper does your congregation offer? For whom? When?
 - Are acts of baptismal remembrance or reaffirmation celebrated in your congregation? If so, describe them.

This final question may be useful at several points in your exploration of sacramental practice.

4. Review the sacramental practices commended in this resource.
 - Which practices has your congregation already been doing?
 - Which new practices has your congregation participated in?
 - Compare the congregation's previous patterns with its use of these five practices.
 - What insights about the sacraments arise from your experience with these practices?
 - What do you sense the Spirit of God is leading you to explore further?

Liturgical Resources

For liturgical resources that may help you adapt these practices to your congregation, you may want to consider what is available through your denomination, or explore some of the following sources:

Book of Common Worship. Prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

Book of Worship. United Church of Christ. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1986.

Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching and the Arts. Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), <http://www.pcusa.org/calltoworship>.

Long, Kimberly Bracken, editor. *Feasting on the Word Worship Companion* (six volumes). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012–2015.

Psalter Hymnal. Christian Reformed Church. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987. For additional resources visit the website for the new CRC hymnal, *Lift Up Your Hearts*, 2013. <http://www.liftupyourheartshymnal.org>.

Reformed Worship: Resources for Planning and Leading Worship. Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources. A journal of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, <http://www.reformedworship.org>.

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Wasserman, Marney Ault. "Who Does *What* from *Where* and *Why*?" *Call to Worship*. Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 53.2 (2019): 37–46.

Witvliet, John D. and Emily R. Brink, editors. *The Worship Sourcebook*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, and Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2004.

Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America. Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2005, <http://www.faithaliveresources.org>.

Worship Ways. Resources from the United Church of Christ, <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways>.

Note

1. *Eucharist* means "thanksgiving." The term is used in Scripture, not as a name for the Lord's Supper, but as a verb describing the action of giving thanks with bread and wine. Thus the term is drawn from the Christian tradition and is now being more widely used among Protestant as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. In this document, the names Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, and Eucharist are used interchangeably.



Amy E. Gray

Theological Reflections

Where do you get that living water?
—John 4:11

Introduction

Roger is 52. He's a member of Central Christian Church where he attends regularly. He was raised Methodist, and having moved around a lot, he's been a member of a number of churches, including Lutheran, Presbyterian, and briefly, Mennonite. He's taken communion all of his adult life. But he's never been baptized. Somehow his parents just never got around to it. When it was time for confirmation, the family had moved and the new pastor just assumed all the kids were baptized. Each time he joined a new church, the subject never came up, and it felt embarrassing to call attention to himself. In his present congregation, he's been touched by the believers' Baptism services he's witnessed and has begun to wonder about his own spiritual journey. His friend has told him not to worry about getting baptized: "You've been a practicing Christian all your life. What difference is a ritual going to make now?" But he's thinking there must be something more to it. He's decided to visit with his pastor about it.

Charlotte serves as pastor of a Presbyterian church in the Midwest that recently celebrated its centennial. At the celebration Charlotte met Ted, a child of the church who had gone away to college but had moved back to town with his young family. Ted was married to Alice, who had been raised in the Southern Baptist tradition. Together they had agreed to "dedicate" their two children and postpone Baptism until each child had matured enough to make a personal decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Charlotte knew none of this at the time Ted's family came forward to receive communion at the service. As the family became active in the church,

Charlotte assumed the five- and eight-year-old boys had already been baptized. Only after a chance conversation six months later did Charlotte realize she had been serving communion to these children along with all the other adults and baptized children in her church. Mindful of the church's long-held understanding of the Lord's Supper as the meal of the baptized, Charlotte was uncertain about what, if anything, she should do.

Sylvia, raised a Roman Catholic and married in that church, says that she has come to hold strong convictions against having grace regulated by religious bureaucrats. Perhaps her divorce, which now prevents her from receiving communion at Mass, has something to do with these feelings. She says that doesn't matter anymore because she is remarried and worships with her new husband in an urban United Church of Christ congregation where she helps serve daily meals and weekly Eucharist to homeless men and women. At this church, each time Holy Communion is served, the minister says, "All who know and love Jesus Christ are welcome to this table." Sylvia believes that such hospitality is more Jesus-like because it places the burden of decision making on each individual in light of his or her own relationship with the Lord. During a Sunday coffee hour a friend made a critical remark after seeing the Buddhist husband of a mutual friend come forward for communion. Sylvia was quick to retort, "How do you know what God is doing in his life?"

Calvin Reformed Church is a block and a half from the community college and enjoys a surge of visitors each time a new semester begins. With the Lord's Supper once a month, the Worship Committee knows it is preparing more communion elements than it

did a few years ago. Jim, the pastor, knows it, too. He also knows from his Sunday evening Cappuccino & Christ discussion groups that many of the students receiving communion at his services have never been baptized: they have said so freely. After much thought, Jim has decided not to push the question of Baptism. A keen observer of cultural changes, he believes we are in a new paradigm that requires the church to offer its life for those hungering to know Jesus. "Right now," the pastor says, "knowing Christ a little should be enough to be welcome. Baptism will come when people are ready. This open table nurtures readiness."

While the case studies above are fictional, they point to actual scenarios that are happening with increasing regularity all across the church. Today, as congregations welcome visitors and receive new members, as we preach and teach sacraments, as we gather around the font to baptize and around the table to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are being asked new questions and encountering needs that were not present in congregational life as recently as twenty-five years ago.

In the past decade, some groups of Presbyterians have requested that the invitation to the Lord's Supper not be limited to the baptized but be extended to "all persons of faith" or "all who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior."²

Similarly, the website of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) makes no mention of Baptism in its statement on who is invited to the Lord's table: "The Lord's Supper or Communion is celebrated in weekly worship. It is open to all who are followers of Jesus Christ."³ Many congregations in the United Church of Christ adopt a similar openness.⁴

To some, such changes may sound reasonable or even crucial to meet an urgent pastoral need; to others they may sound unthinkable, if not heretical. However we ultimately answer them, these are significant questions because they invite all of us in the church to think deeply about why and how we do sacraments. Furthermore, they invite us to think again, in a rapidly changing world, about what the church's relationship is, or should be, with all those who are not (or not yet) a part of our fellowship.

It is not incidental that these questions of sacramental practice are being raised now. God is doing something new in the church in North America in the twenty-first century. In numerous places, it is no longer the norm for people to be born and

raised in a Christian church. Many go about their lives unaware of, or even hostile to, the institutional church in all its forms. Growing numbers of people remain outside the church through disinterest, suspicion, or experiences of rejection. Still, people are spiritually hungry, and some come to our churches on Sunday mornings looking for answers. We have an enormous opportunity to embrace these beloved strangers whom God is sending us and to welcome them into a fellowship where Christ, working through us, may shape all our lives more fully in the ways of discipleship.

The new realities in which we live place important questions before the church, not only about who is invited to the Lord's table, but also about how people are led to Baptism. Even more profoundly, these new realities raise questions about the relationship of Baptism to the Lord's Supper, the relationship of both sacraments to the ministry of the Word, and the relationship of the church's ministry of Word and Sacrament to the life of Christian discipleship in the world.

To get more specific, it is worth wondering:

- What ways of receiving new Christians into the church will help them learn *how* to follow Jesus Christ in their daily lives?
- What kind of formation prior to Baptism will give adult believers the spiritual resources they need to know God more deeply?
- What kind of preparation for reaffirmation of faith will help new members reclaim their Baptism and discover within it the Spirit's call to grow in faith and service in community?
- When strangers to the church—who may be slowly starving in a superficial, market-driven, workaholic, high-tech/low-touch, fast-food, instant-gratification, quick-fix culture—come to the Lord's table asking for bread and wine, how will we welcome them, not just to Christ's table, but to Jesus Christ?

Perhaps in the church today, we need to begin by confessing our long inattention to baptismal practice. Have we sometimes lived as if Baptism and the life of discipleship are unrelated? In various parts of the church, we have practiced infant Baptism as if it were merely a celebration of Christian families. In other parts of the church, we have practiced believers' Baptism as if it were all about our choosing, our individual faith. Perhaps we have trivialized both the

incredible gift, and the radical call, of our Baptism into the life and death of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we forget that the church does not define Baptism so much as Baptism defines the church.

It may help keep us on the right path if we will remember that the invitation the sacraments extend is an invitation not just to water, not just to bread and wine, but to Christ himself who becomes present through these elements. In Baptism and in the Lord's Supper, as in the Word of God written and proclaimed, it is nothing short of encounter with the living Christ that is promised and offered. That we may meet Christ, in water and Word, wine and bread, in washing and eating in community—this is an extraordinary promise we have from God! And that extraordinary promise bears with it an extraordinary responsibility: that the church, to whom God has entrusted the gifts of Word and Sacrament, use those gifts rightly, fully, and well.

In an age of spiritual hunger, the sacraments help the church extend the gospel's invitation to know and follow Jesus Christ in a way that is direct, concrete, and compelling. In a church that desires to grow, renewed engagement with the sacraments, as both a gift and a call to discipleship, can reenergize needed ministries of evangelism and hospitality. In our theologically diverse traditions and in a fractious world, strong, visible, and frequent sacramental practice can help build up the church's peace around the One who is our peace.

Much is at stake in how the church responds to the opportunities and challenges before us. Therefore, this resource is a twofold invitation to the church. First, you are invited to seek the renewal of our life together in Christ by engaging in the following simple practices:

- Set the font in full view of the congregation.
- Open the font and fill it with water every Lord's Day.
- Set cup and plate on the Lord's table every Lord's Day.
- Lead appropriate parts of weekly worship from the font and from the table.
- Increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

And, second, you are invited to join in lively and sustained theological reflection in congregations around sacramental practice—*theology*. Too often we think of theology as something professional

theologians do in academic settings remote from the daily life of most Christian communities and most Christians. But the truth is that the church's primary theology is lived out Sunday by Sunday in worship, in Word and Sacrament, prayer and praise, as God's people gather together in the Spirit of the risen Christ and are sent by him to serve the world. The way we practice Word and Sacrament in Sunday worship both expresses what we believe about Christ and shapes how we live for Christ in our homes and our communities.

To engage in theological reflection on Word and Sacrament is to do theology in its proper context in the life of the church, and in the common language of the church's worship as it gathers week by week around pulpit, font, and table.

The four essays that follow invite congregations to reflect on their sacramental practice in dialogue with Scripture, church history, Reformed theology, and contemporary culture. The essays provide background material to *inform* the church's dialogue about Word and Sacrament, and they offer multiple entry points to *encourage* important conversations about the role of the sacraments in the life and witness of the church. Each essay concludes with reflection questions designed to prompt continuing conversation among the members of every congregation and a list of additional resources for those interested in further reading.

Scripture and Sacraments

Listening to Scripture

As Reformed Christians, we look to the Bible to guide our worship practices, and we share the conviction that the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper find their basis in Scripture.⁵ While we rely on the instructions contained in Scripture concerning the sacraments, a full understanding of the sacraments cannot be gained solely from the commands of Christ, nor do we find a full sacramental theology spelled out explicitly in Scripture. We must also look for principles and themes gained from Scripture and examine the witness and practices of Israel and the early church; together they provide us with a broad framework for understanding the sacraments.

This essay addresses the Old Testament and the worship practices of Israel as the essential background to our two sacraments and the statements, commands, and stories about Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament.

In addition, the essay summarizes the scriptural arguments made by those supporting and opposing changes that would extend the invitation to the Lord's table to the unbaptized.

The Old Testament and the People of Israel

In the Old Testament, we find two different kinds of material that contribute to our understanding of the sacraments. First, there is a set of interconnected practices related to the covenant between God and the people of Israel. These practices include temple sacrifices, ritual washings, circumcision, and feasts. Second, we find rich narratives around the basic elements of water, bread and wine, narratives that have for centuries contributed to the Christian interpretation of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Jewish sacrifices and feasts, washings and circumcision are all vehicles of the covenant relationship between God and the called-out people of Israel. They are effective signs that point to and mediate God's presence and purpose. In and through them, God touches and guides the people. God's will is made known, the presence of God is encountered, sin is acknowledged and dealt with, and humans offer themselves to God. All of these signs and practices are central to the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

The **temple** played a particularly important role in the covenant life of Israel. Like the tabernacle before it, the temple signified the dwelling of God among God's people. The temple practices of the Israelites suggest that the temple was a sacred place where heaven and earth came together. It was associated with life and creation and understood to be the place where paradise or Eden was located. Called "the house of God," the temple was a "sacramental" place in that it mediated the presence of God. Pilgrimages to the temple and the pilgrim feasts point to a persistent longing among the people for the presence, rule, and paradise of God.

What was true for the temple as a whole was also true for the **sacrifices** offered there and Israel's system of atoning for sin. The overarching goal of the sacrifices seems to have been to reclaim what was lost in Eden. In the sacrifices, the will of God for God's people and the will of the persons offering sacrifices coincide, and fellowship between God and God's people is reestablished. Heaven and earth meet in the flames and smoke. Both the corporate and the individual offerings are means to the end of true communion between God and

God's people. Repentance is a crucial part of these practices. For sin and guilt offerings, a confession of sin by the individual or the community was required before the sacrifice was offered (Leviticus 5:5f; Numbers 5:7). Many scriptural passages explicitly state that there is no automatic forgiveness of sins as a result of merely enacting the sacrifice (Proverbs 15:8; 21:27) but that the will and intentions of the one making the offering must be sincere.

Circumcision was another practice central to the covenant God forged with God's people. It developed from the belief that circumcision made males more fertile, and was the sign of initiation into the covenant first established with Abraham, a covenant that brought blessing and life to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:1–14). The themes of fruitfulness and initiation into the covenant community are reflected in typical Jewish prayers during the ceremony, which invite the child to enter a life of obedience to the Law, marriage, and good works.

In classical Judaism, the people of the covenant also practiced **ritual washings**, or purification rites. While they were done for many different reasons, the purity regulations surround activities that are in fact central to life—eating, sexual activity, and worship of God—and conversely, things related to death, mainly corpses and certain diseases. Among the different rites was immersion in a ritual bath (*mikveh*). Proselytes to Judaism were ritually immersed upon their conversion to Judaism; ritually unclean people and objects were admitted back to their normal place in the community after their immersion (Leviticus 11:32, 36); and ritual washing was performed by priests and others before attending services in the Temple (Exodus 30:18–21).

Certain ascetic Jewish groups around the time of Christ, such as the Essenes and the Qumran community, emphasized ritual washings as a crucial part of the practice of their faith. As these practices inform our understanding of Baptism, it is important to see how physical, moral, and spiritual cleanliness were understood to be interdependent and how ritual washings were part of a journey back to God and the ways of life.

In addition to evidence of Israel's worship practices, the Old Testament provides a wealth of **narratives** that stand behind Christian sacramental practice. These narratives center on the basic elements of water, bread, and wine.

From the beginning, in Genesis 1, **water** is central to the biblical narrative. Out of primeval, chaotic water, the Creator God brings forth order and life. Later, in Genesis 7, the waters of the flood wash away sin from the face of the earth, giving righteousness a new beginning. Exodus 14 records Israel's escape from Egypt through the parting waters of the Red Sea and its birth as a nation. In Joshua 3, when God's people leave the wilderness behind to enter the Promised Land, they cross one more river: here, the Jordan serves as a boundary marker between wilderness and home. In 2 Kings 5, Naaman, a commander of the King of Syria, is cleansed of his leprosy as he follows the prophet Elisha's directions to wash in the Jordan River. In all these stories, water holds the power of both life and death, even as Baptism is both a death and a new life in the body of Christ.

The Old Testament also provides narratives about **meals** that deeply inform our understanding of the Lord's Supper. The story of the Passover in Exodus 14 is a central one. The blood of the Lamb that protects God's chosen people from death, the unleavened bread eaten in haste before escaping from slavery in Egypt—these symbols are rich with meaning for us as we gather at the Lord's table. In Exodus 16, God sustains the people of Israel with manna in the wilderness, "bread from heaven" that satisfies their hunger day by day through forty years of wandering. In 1 Kings 17, the prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath encounter God through a miraculous jar of meal that never runs out. Here, God as provider is linked with the charge to love our neighbors, even as the eucharistic meal sends us out to feed the poor.

In all kinds of ways, the covenant practices of the people of Israel and the Old Testament narratives of water, bread, and wine serve as crucial background for our understanding of the sacraments of the new covenant. The practice of circumcision, as a way of initiation into a fruitful covenant relation with God, and stories of water with their themes of creation, re-creation, and cleansing, inform our understanding of Baptism. All of these stories reverberate in our minds as we gather around the font.

Similarly, Israel's meal stories and the central meanings connected with the temple feasts, festivals, and sacrifices inform our understanding of the Lord's Supper. In this feast with the risen Christ, not only are sins forgiven, but also the harmony of heaven and earth is reestablished and the people of

God are sustained and strengthened with food and the very presence of God.

The New Testament and the Early Church

The early church, following Jesus, took three primary material elements of life—water, bread, and wine—and used them in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Through these elements, God bestows abundant grace and new life; and through them, we gratefully offer life back to God, as Jesus offered his life. In the New Testament, our understandings of the sacraments are rooted in specific instructions, exemplary stories related to water, bread, and wine, and various kinds of implicit and explicit theological reflections about Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism in the New Testament

Turning first to **specific instructions** about Baptism, we find there are few. The command to baptize at the conclusion of the Gospel according to Matthew is well known: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:19–20; cf. Mark 16:15–16).

There are, however, numerous **exemplary stories** about Baptism. John poured water from the Jordan over Jesus and he was proclaimed the beloved of God as his ministry began (Mark 1:9–11; Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:29–34). Jesus sent his disciples to baptize and they did (Matthew 28:19–20; cf. John 4:2). In Acts, many stories of baptisms surround the growth of the church, such as Philip's baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). These stories do not tell us much about how to baptize; rather they witness to the way that many who heard the good news responded to the invitation to follow Jesus and were subsequently baptized.

There are also many stories that center on water. Jesus offered living water to a Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42) and calmed the chaotic waters of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25). He commanded a blind man to wash the mud from his eyes, and the man's sight was restored (John 9:1–12). The New Testament ends with the vision of "the river of the water of life" that flows from the throne of God, and the invitation for all who are thirsty to come to the waters as a gift (Revelation 22:1–2, 17). We invoke these

stories when we baptize children and adults as new members of the body, allowing the symbol of water to call to mind God's promises of cleansing, healing, and life.

In addition to instructions and stories, the New Testament writers offer **theological reflections** on the meanings of the church's central actions. These reflections often reveal how familiar Jewish rites were reinterpreted in light of the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles suggests that the early church came to associate the practice of baptizing in water with the presence of the Spirit, while at the same time avoiding any claims that the Spirit's presence is the result of our ritual practices. In the writings of Paul, the meanings associated with Baptism are grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Romans 6, the apostle says boldly that Baptism is a dying and rising with Christ, thus linking Baptism explicitly to the cross and articulating what participation in Christ and life in his Spirit mean. In 1 Peter 3, the saving of Noah and those with him on the ark prefigures Baptism, and Baptism is tied to the resurrection of Christ. The meanings of Baptism, which grow out of the stories and covenant practices of Israel, gain new specificity in the early church in light of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. In Baptism, we are not just washed, in Christ's name and by his Spirit, but fundamentally joined to Christ, buried with him, and raised to walk in newness of life.

In the Gospels, Jesus echoes these themes as he speaks to his disciples about a baptism unto death in the Synoptic Gospels, and when he tells Nicodemus about a baptism that is linked with new birth in John. Unlike the other Gospel writers, John records neither a specific command by Jesus to baptize nor an account of the institution of the Lord's Supper. Instead, the sacraments are integrated into the call of Christ to follow him in his life, death, and resurrection.

In the New Testament, then, we find that Baptism develops from the actions that initiate and sustain covenant life in Israel and comes to be seen as a way that Christians are incorporated into the saving life and work of Christ through the Spirit. In Baptism, we are thrust into the middle of God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ.

Lord's Supper in the New Testament

In regards to the Lord's Supper, a quick survey of New Testament texts yields strands of materials similar to those discussed above concerning Baptism.

In terms of **specific instructions**, the narratives found in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul are central (Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–23; 1 Corinthians 11:22–26; Matthew 26:26–29). In addition, there are other instructions about meals and eucharistic practice in the early communities of faith. Notably, in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, Paul chastises the Corinthian church for the way that it was celebrating the Lord's Supper, and in his instruction gives us insight into the meaning of the sacrament.

There are also many **exemplary stories** about meals. Jesus turned water to wine to assure that a wedding feast could continue (John 2:1–12). Jesus turns scant resources into abundance to feed multitudes and is known for eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners (Matthew 9:10–13, 11:19; Mark 2:15–17; Luke 5:30–32, 15:1–2, 19:7). Jesus calls himself the bread of life (John 6:25–36) and presides at the Passover meal with his disciples on the night before his death. After the resurrection, he makes himself known to two disciples from Emmaus in the breaking of bread (Luke 24) and reveals himself as he serves breakfast on the beach (John 21:14). The early church after Pentecost gathered regularly for the breaking of bread and prayers (Acts 2:42).

Finally, there are also various kinds of **theological reflections** on the meanings of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. Similar to the way the meanings of Baptism grew out of the practices of the people of Israel, within the New Testament we see the sacrifices and meals of ancient Israel reinterpreted in relationship to Jesus. The narratives of the early church in Acts suggest that they shared several different kinds of meals and that there were initially fluid boundaries between what we would differentiate as sacramental and non-sacramental meals. During the period in which the New Testament letters were written, there appears to have been gradual movement towards a clearer distinction between the fellowship meals and the eucharistic meal of bread and wine. The Apostle Paul explicitly grounds the words and actions surrounding the breaking of bread in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and points to the ethical implications of sacramental practice (1 Corinthians 5:8, 10:14–22, 11:17–34). Throughout

the New Testament, the sacramental actions associated with Eucharist find a foundation in the narrative of Christ's life, passion, and resurrection. The breaking of the bread is an encounter with Jesus that empowers the early church in its life and mission.

In conclusion, once these practices are placed in the context of a distinctive Christian narrative, basic patterns for Baptism and the Lord's Supper develop in the early church. Christian Baptism is no longer a general purification rite nor merely an initiation into the people of God; more specifically, it is an immersion into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and incorporation into the body of Christ, the church. Likewise, in the Lord's Supper, a shared meal becomes connected to this same central gospel narrative. The commandment to remember Jesus grounds the lives of believers in the pattern of his life, death, and resurrection.⁶ Additionally, it is through the power of the Spirit that we are baptized into the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:1–13) and united as one people at his table. In these communal, Christian sacramental actions, we are immersed into the redemptive action of God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Regarding whether or not the unbaptized might commune at the Lord's Supper, the biblical texts do not give a specific command, but we do know that people were both baptized and ate together at table as a part of the full expression of their faith and life in Christ and the Spirit.

Biblical-Theological Rationales Concerning "Open Table" Practice

Shall people who are not baptized Christians be invited to the Lord's table if they are "persons of faith" or "acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior?" This practice is often described today as "open table," a phrase that has changed meaning over time. Originally used in reference to communing with those from different Christian traditions or denominations, and later in reference to opening the table to baptized children, the phrase "open table" is now being used to mean open to all who respond to Christ's invitation to the table, whether or not they have been baptized.

The "open table" question has emerged in many Protestant traditions, and a body of literature has developed around the issue (see Appendix I). In the published articles and books that advocate for or against an "open table" practice, those who enter the discussion tend to focus on (a)

the biblical-theological rationales for "open table" practice, (b) the reasons in our culture that this question is emerging, or (c) the likely results of "opening the table" instead of keeping the "baptismal requirement." The following reflections focus primarily on the biblical-theological rationales contained in this literature.

In considering these biblical arguments, it should be restated that there is no explicit New Testament mandate requiring Baptism before participation in the Lord's Supper. The Bible is not clear regarding a specific requirement for Christian Baptism before receiving communion in the New Testament churches; nor is it clear that there *was not* such a requirement.

Because of this lack of explicit scriptural guidance, most authors begin with their understanding of the central meanings of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, and then argue for the kind of table practice that best embodies these meanings. Not surprisingly, proponents and critics of "open table" practice tend to emphasize different root meanings of the sacraments. Furthermore, these different emphases tend to be related to different ways of telling "the gospel" of Christ, that is, different ways of understanding who Christ is, what Christ has done, and what it means to be immersed in the narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Those who **advocate for "open table" practice** tend to emphasize that in and through Jesus Christ, the sins of all are freely forgiven and walls are broken down between God and humanity. At the same time, in this new way of life, the walls between human beings associated with race, gender, or class are torn down, the marginalized are included, and forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with others through the power of God's Spirit are made possible.⁷

Among those who advocate **against "open table" practice**, there tends to be a greater emphasis on God's call of and ongoing relationship with a covenant community.⁸ God's plan to defeat evil, sin, and all that holds us captive is mediated through the covenant first established with Abraham and the people of Israel, and then through the renewal of that covenant in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which gave birth to his church. This telling of the good news certainly includes an understanding of the wide and welcoming mercy of Christ, but it also preserves a strong role for Israel and the church in God's economy of redemption. Like Israel (which Calvin called the "ancient church"), the new

community in Christ is to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, for the sake of the world. While not fully embodying the coming Kingdom of God, it is to be a “city on a hill” and the “salt of the earth.” The community of disciples serves as a witness and sign of Christ and the Kingdom’s presence in the world, and its communal life is centered around Word and Sacrament.

These two ways of telling “the gospel” affect how the Lord’s Supper and Baptism are understood. The first vision of the gospel resonates with an understanding of the Lord’s Supper that emphasizes forgiveness, justification, and acceptance by God and finds these meanings in Jesus’ ministry, the cross, and resurrection life. The meanings of Baptism that point to the same unconditional acceptance of sinners by a gracious God are often highlighted. Based on these meanings, the potential equivalence or exchangeable order of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper is understandable.

In contrast, the second vision of the gospel emphasizes the meanings of the meal that involve the covenant community. Through “feeding on Christ” in the meal, this community is strengthened and preserved in its task to be the body of Christ in and for the world. With these meanings accented, the meal becomes a central symbol for this new community. Paired with this, Baptism as a sign, symbol, and seal of entering into this community makes perfect sense.

In conclusion, the biblical-theological rationales used by those in favor of and opposed to “open table” practice seem to suggest that the fullest range of meanings of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—both God’s expansive love and forgiveness and the call to be a community of disciples, the body of Christ in the world—is preserved and embodied through the normative practice of Baptism before Eucharist. However, there is a strong biblical crosscurrent, notably in Jesus’ inclusive meal practice and his breaking of certain purity laws that would seem to allow or even call for the disruption of those regular practices if and when they wrongly serve exclusionary purposes.

Questions for Reflection

1. Make a list of the biblical texts and stories your congregation regularly recalls at Baptism.
 - How do these inform the meaning of Baptism for your congregation?
 - What others are omitted that might communicate additional meanings?

2. Make a list of the biblical texts and stories your congregation regularly recalls at the Lord’s Supper.
 - How do these inform the meaning of the Lord’s Supper for your congregation?
 - What others are omitted that might communicate additional meanings?
3. Invitation to the Lord’s table can be expressed verbally, nonverbally, and/or in writing.
 - Describe the ways the invitation to the Lord’s table is given in your congregation.
 - What is communicated about exactly who is invited (and who is not invited)?
 - What biblical images or theological ideas lie behind this invitation to the table?
 - What does the invitation communicate about what it means to be a follower of Christ?
4. The Lord’s Supper has been understood as both the church’s covenant meal and a table where Christ welcomes all who would come to him.
 - Is there tension between these two meanings? How do you understand it?
 - Is this tension evident in your congregation’s sacramental practice? Where?
 - Are there any circumstances in which you think those who are not baptized should be included in the Lord’s Supper? What are they? Or why not? Can you imagine doing this in ways that prepare for and lead to Baptism? How?
5. The “Open Table” section of the essay summarizes two different ways to tell the gospel.
 - How does your congregation tell the gospel?
 - Compare your congregation’s way of telling the gospel with the two ways described in the essay.
 - How does your congregation’s understanding of the gospel shape its practice of the sacraments?

Suggestions for Further Reading

James Brownson, *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007.

This accessible yet deep book is organized around 30 typical questions people ask about Baptism. The questions are plumbed by drawing primarily from an analysis of the New

Testament and the Reformed tradition. For example, Section II of the book is “The Core Meanings of Baptism” and two of the chapters are “7. What Does Romans 6:3 Mean When It Speaks of Being Baptized into Christ’s Death?” and “9. What is the Relationship of Baptism to Receiving the Holy Spirit?” Also discussed are questions concerning infant baptism (Questions 17–24) and pastoral decisions surrounding baptism (Questions 25–30).

Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

Chapter 23 of this important book by Brueggemann entitled “The Cult as Mediator” (pp. 650–679) provides a good overview of Israelite understandings of worship at the Temple/Tabernacle. That worship is arguably one of the most important backgrounds to our Christian sacraments. Brueggemann also names many of the stereotypes and reasons why Protestants in general and Protestant Old Testament scholarship in particular have been dismissive of Israelite worship and relatedly, contemporary liturgical and sacramental practices.

Byars, Ron. *Sacraments in Biblical Perspective. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

This very helpful book, intended primarily for preachers, provides commentary on the many scriptural passages in both the Old and New Testaments that serve as a backdrop to the church’s sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Most scriptural commentaries focus on a single book, but this broader approach allows Byars to draw from and discuss the relationships between important passages throughout Scripture.

Stubbs, David L. “The Open Table: What Gospel Do We Practice?” *Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 22*. Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2011.

Stubbs, a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Sacraments Study Group that originally wrote *Invitation to Christ*, has since published this analysis of the current literature on “open table” practice, i.e., opening the table to the unbaptized.

Vander Zee, Leonard J. *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

A book written with the evangelical church in mind, Vander Zee draws deeply from Scripture, the Reformed tradition and the larger church and creates a biblically-based, Christ-centered vision of the meaning and place of the sacraments within the worship life of the church. Three chapters in particular, “3. Sacraments in the Bible,” “6. Baptism: Introduction and Biblical Background,” and “9. The Lord’s Supper: Introduction and Biblical Background,” give a good overview of the biblical grounding of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Notes

2. General Assembly Overtures in 1998, 2004, and 2010 (#98–33, #04–50, #16–06) raised questions about language utilized in the invitation to the Lord’s table in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In July 2010 the Assembly issued “pastoral advice” and “guidance” recommending that invitation to the Lord’s table continue to be extended to “all the baptized faithful,” “that the approach . . . be gracious and inviting, . . . extending Christ’s welcome to the people of God,” that “congregations renew the practice of the invitation to discipleship . . .,” and that the “unbaptized persons who present themselves at the Lord’s Table be warmly received and promptly instructed on the significance of the sacraments . . .” (Overture 16-06, July 2010).
3. Disciples’ congregations celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, and all present are invited to respond to Christ’s invitation. For Disciples, the “open table” is a powerful symbol of their commitment to diversity and Christian unity. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States & Canada, “Discover the Disciples” (Indianapolis: Communication Ministries), <http://www.disciples.org>.
4. Significant differences exist amongst UCC churches regarding Holy Communion. The summary of a survey on congregational practice of the sacraments may be found on the denomination’s website. J. Bennett Guess, “Shall we break bread together? ‘Really?’” (United Church News) July–August 2004, <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/jul04/shall-we-break-bread-together.html>.
5. The word “sacrament” does not actually appear in the Bible. It comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, denoting an oath or pledge, which was used to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, or mystery. The early church referred to the new life in Christ

as the great mystery, which was entered through baptism and celebrated in the breaking of bread. Later, beginning in the fourth century, the term was used to describe the church's rites themselves. Peter E. Fink, ed., "Sacraments," *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990).

6. The Greek word for "remember," *anamnesis*, means more than simply calling a memory to mind, but has a more active sense of making present through enactment. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds., "Anamnesis," *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1985).
7. See Appendix I, pp. 47–48.
8. See Appendix I, pp. 48–49.



Amy E. Gray

Sacraments in History

In what ways has the church celebrated the sacraments throughout its history? How are the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper related in the history of the church? The following historical overview suggests some of the key ways that the sacraments have been practiced and connected throughout the history of the church.

Ancient Practice: First through Fifth Centuries

From the earliest days of the church's life there was a clear relationship between the Word read and preached, Baptism, and Eucharist. The Word was the creative voice of God proclaimed in the midst of the worshiping community. The Word called for repentance and change, which led to Baptism. The Word called the faithful to become one in Christ in the sharing of bread and wine as Christ commanded his disciples.

From the beginning of the church we see that there was an order, a pattern, to the way the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper were celebrated. We know from ancient sermons and writings that only the baptized were invited to eat the bread and drink from the cup. During the weekly Sunday Eucharist, those preparing for Baptism were dismissed after the sermon, with the blessing of the congregation, and given instruction in a Christian lifestyle. Whether Baptism was understood as forgiveness of sin, healing, being joined to Christ's death and resurrection, rebirth, or some combination of these, it served as an initiation rite, admitting believers into the community of Christ. Their full incorporation into Christ's body was then celebrated by the whole congregation at the Lord's table, where the newly baptized were invited to receive the bread and

wine along with the rest of the church. By the third century, a relatively uniform practice of bringing persons from the hearing of the Word to Baptism, and from the font to the table for the Lord's Supper, was firmly established.

Even in the mid-second century, we can see the outlines of this pattern of the sacraments in the ancient church. In his *First Apology*, which is a description of Christian practice to the emperor (155 C.E.), Justin Martyr reports that new Christians are examined concerning their creedal and ethical commitment; then they are brought by the faithful to water where they are washed in the name of the Trinity. The newly baptized are then led to the assembled community where prayer is offered for them, they are greeted with a holy kiss, and their initiation concludes with the Eucharist.

At stake in this early pattern was an understanding of the process of conversion: what did it take for a nonbeliever to become a part of the Christian community? British scholar Alan Kreider answers, "In Christianity's early centuries, conversion involved changes in belief, belonging, and behavior—in the context of an experience of God." Being converted to a community's convictions involved "becoming the kind of person who belonged to that kind of community." And this meant that conversion in the ancient church was at least as much about changing one's loyalties and one's lifestyle as it was about changing one's creed.⁹

By the third century, the process of making adult disciples followed a relatively uniform pattern with clearly marked stages. Stage 1 was an informal period of inquiry in which the unbaptized began attending worship. Those who found Christianity attractive approached the church's leaders to request instruction and, if approved, entered Stage 2. Formally

enrolled as catechumens, or learners, they were regarded as members of the church and committed to a journey of conversion. This stage often focused on a reshaping of the converts' lifestyle. Stage 3 was the final intensive preparation period, the washing in water or the Baptism itself, and the first reception of the Eucharist. Preparation in this stage often included imparting the creed and the Lord's Prayer as a way of reflecting on Christian belief. While persons engaged in this process were always considered to be members of the church, once they were baptized, the catechumens experienced belonging as full members of the Christian community; now they could take part in the community's prayers, the kiss of peace, and the Lord's Supper. Stage 4 was the post-baptismal teaching about the meaning of the sacramental initiation they had just completed, or what the tradition calls "mystagogy."¹⁰

In ancient Christianity, there was a unity of pulpit, font, and table. While there were some differences in the shape and duration of the initiatory process from one region to another, Baptism and the Lord's Supper were linked as two parts of a single act of Christian initiation. The two sacraments of the church that we practice today were so closely related in the ancient church that Eucharist was understood as the one repeatable part of Baptism.

After the Peace of Constantine (312/313 C.E.) the process of Christian initiation underwent significant change. As Christianity became the established religion, belonging to the church became a desirable step for all in society. Since the way of life expected of baptized Christians was demanding, many people in the fourth century became lifelong catechumens, spending their lives preparing for Baptism as a way of becoming official members of the church while remaining free from the burdens borne by baptized Christians. During this period, both the preparation process and the rites themselves expanded and became more elaborate. Baptism was offered to those who demonstrated a life intent on following Christ. In order to attract people to Baptism and an authentic Christian faith, the process of Christian conversion developed into a rich, extended, and dramatic liturgical journey.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, rituals within this pattern were expanded and commonly included such features as exorcism; the renunciation of sin, evil, and the world, along with profession of allegiance to Christ; and a post-baptismal anointing.

The process of becoming Christian was tied to Easter, or alternately to Pentecost, the end of the great fifty days of Easter, and the rites of initiation were celebrated at those times by the bishop.

In the fifth century, we find a dramatic increase in the practice of presenting infants for Baptism. This was due to a high infant mortality rate and, in the West, Augustine's doctrine of original sin. The practice of infant Baptism, in turn, raised questions about the church's pattern of pre-baptismal instruction. Many of our own questions, concerns, and practices of infant Baptism can be traced to this time. The post-baptismal anointing came to be identified as "confirmation"; and Baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist emerged as the three principal parts of the initiation rites. By the end of the fifth century, Christian initiation was still one process with three parts, but the seeds had been sown for its eventual separation by the Western church into three distinct rites.

As Christianity spread out from urban areas, bishops became less and less able to minister to country regions and local pastors undertook leadership of rural parishes. In response to this new reality, the churches of Egypt and the East were determined to retain the unity of Baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist as three parts of one action. They have done so to the present day by allowing a presbyter (local pastor) to anoint immediately after Baptism with oil blessed by the bishop. Thus candidates in the Eastern Orthodox churches, usually babies, are baptized, anointed, and communed all on one occasion.

The Middle Ages in the West: Sixth through Fifteenth Centuries

While the unified process of Baptism, anointing, and Eucharist on a single occasion was held together at all costs in the East, the pattern in the West was a slow but irreversible division of the process of initiation.

The church in the West was less concerned about the unity of the rites of initiation than were their neighbors in the East and sought instead to preserve the central role of bishops in the initiation of new Christians. So in the West, only the bishop could perform the post-baptismal anointing. This meant that as Christianity spread, especially into the vast, tribal dioceses of northern Europe where bishops visited infrequently, candidates for Baptism were often unable to receive anointing (confirmation). Without

anointing, they could not receive communion. And thus, more by accident than by design, the single process of becoming a Christian necessarily broke apart into three separate acts in the Western church: Baptism, confirmation, and first communion. During the centuries of the medieval period, the three events were separated by an increasing number of years and celebrated with a diminishing sense of their theological interrelationship.

In the twelfth century, when the laity were denied the cup for fear they might spill the blood of Jesus, it became difficult to commune newly baptized infants who were too young to eat the bread. Baptized infants had to be confirmed before turning eight years old, but often children took their first communion at a younger age. A thirteenth-century church council made confession mandatory before communion—proof that communing infants on the occasion of their Baptism was no longer practiced. Beginning in the fourteenth century, councils and synods decreed that Baptism should occur within eight days of birth, thus formalizing what had become established practice. The decree officially changed the theological and ritual connection between Baptism and Christ's resurrection by detaching Baptism from the festivals of Easter and Pentecost. It also firmly established Baptism as an infant rite that was celebrated privately outside of Sunday worship. The public role of the congregation as witness and mentoring community, a role that was significant in the ancient church, was forgotten in the Middle Ages.

Practically speaking, the late medieval church was no longer engaging in baptismal preparation either. With the virtually universal practice of infant Baptism firmly established, there could be no genuine instruction of infants. While many of the ritual steps of the ancient church's practice were retained, the extended catechumenal period of apprenticeship in Christian living could not be sustained. By the end of the medieval period, serious baptismal preparation had been abandoned, even as the ancient unified pattern for Christian initiation broke apart into the three distinct rites of Baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. These three were now both temporally distant and theologically separated from one another.

The Reformation and John Calvin

In the sixteenth century, preeminent Reformed theologian John Calvin significantly reinterpreted the sacramental theology of his day, through careful study of the traditions of the early church fathers. Calvin affirmed that the sacraments are signs of our incorporation, our engrafting, into the body of Christ. With Augustine, he believed that the sacraments are “visible words” and “means of grace.” Accordingly, he believed that the sacraments should be celebrated in such a way as to clearly proclaim God's grace, and even to set forth Christ himself in whom this grace is granted. It may be, as historian Brian Gerrish argues, that “Calvinism actually begins its existence in the Reformation era . . . as a distinct interpretation of the central mystery of the Eucharist.”¹¹

Calvin inherited from the medieval church a temporal separation between Baptism and Eucharist of typically eight years or more. Yet—like Bucer, Zwingli, and Bullinger around him and other reformers after him—he maintained theologically the sense of union between Baptism (almost always infant) and communion (almost always, for the first time, in adolescence).

Calvin believed that the purpose of both sacraments is to unite Christians with Jesus Christ. Baptism initiates us into this union, and the Lord's Supper provides a means for our continuance in it. In Baptism, God adopts us in Christ as God's own children. And then, like any good parent, God sees to it that we are fed and nourished so we may mature in faith.

As God, regenerating us in baptism, ingrafts us into the fellowship of his Church, and makes us his by adoption, so we have said that he performs the office of a provident parent, in continually supplying the food by which he may sustain and preserve us in the life to which he has begotten us by his word. (*Institutes*, 4.17.1, trans. Beveridge)

Calvin was particularly concerned with the central nature of the sacraments: they are, together, the gift of God and the sign, or mark, of the church. The sacraments exhibit Christ's presence in the church, forming us to embody Christ and nourishing us to continue Christian discipleship in the world.

In other words, even though Baptism, confirmation, and the Lord's Supper were celebrated as separate occasions during the Reformation, the unity of Baptism and Eucharist was theologically maintained in the teaching of John Calvin. In the practice of the Reformed churches, instruction in the faith, or catechesis, still held the two sacraments together. The act of confirmation, however, underwent radical transformation.

What had been understood in the medieval Western church as the bishop's act of confirming an individual's prior Baptism became, in the reforms of Calvin, Luther, and others, the candidate's act of professing baptismal faith. Parents made promises at Baptism to raise a child in the church, but the baptismal vows were delayed until confirmation, when they could be spoken by the one being confirmed, or professing faith. First communion followed, usually immediately after confirmation.

Although he was insistent on maintaining infant Baptism, Calvin emphasized baptismal formation; and it is here that we see the distinctive Reformed theological pattern. In Calvin's practice, infant Baptism was followed by post-baptismal formation through childhood, in preparation for profession of faith, or confirmation, and first communion. The ancient catechumenal pattern of pre-baptismal instruction, which had been abandoned by the medieval church in response to the normative Baptism of infants, was restored in the Reformed churches as post-baptismal catechesis, forming young Christians for their profession of faith and admission to the Lord's table. Although there was still a temporal separation of Baptism from confirmation and Eucharist, Calvin restored the historic order of the three acts, and at the same time strengthened their formative and theological connection.

For Calvin and the Reformed churches, the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are integrally related. Catechesis, the church's teaching of baptized children, leads directly from Baptism to Holy Communion. Baptism at the font leads to faith professed before the church, which leads to receiving bread and wine at the table. For Calvin there is unity of Baptism and grace, Baptism and faith, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Sacraments and the Confessions of the Church

Reformed confessions, which are testaments to the faith, place priority on the Word of God, revealed

in Jesus Christ, written in Scripture, and proclaimed in preaching. In relation to the sacraments, we find the written Word of God instructive not only in passages that deal specifically with Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but more broadly in the teachings of Jesus and the narratives of God's people throughout the Old and New Testaments. Additionally, we affirm that the Word of God is proclaimed in the witness of the church and by the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

In Reformed theology, the sacraments are understood as distinguishing marks of those who belong to the community of faith. Both Baptism and the Lord's Supper recall God's faithfulness to the church. Their use assures and increases the faith of believers. The sacraments call us to live in accordance with God's Word. Sacraments make the Word of God more clearly known by adding sight, taste, touch, and action to the mere hearing of God's Word. In all of these ways, the sacraments are means of grace.

Clearly Reformed Christians uphold the significance of the sacraments. It is therefore important for churches to proclaim God's Word not only in Scripture and sermon, but also in sacrament. Congregations encounter the Word of God in unique ways through the gift and promise of the sacraments. It is important to teach congregations the many ways the sacraments serve the Word of God. The sacraments are not only objects that point us to God's Word; they are communal actions as well, in which we may respond to God's Word and find guidance for living that response. Put another way, the sacraments are occasions for both proclamation and discipleship, grace and obedience. In Baptism and the Lord's Supper, we receive gifts from God and we give ourselves back to God; they extend to us both a gift and a call.

By celebrating the sacraments, the church cultivates in believers an awareness of God's grace that allows us, in turn, to witness to that grace with others around us. In regularly returning to font and table, the faithful learn to hope for God's presence, not just at the time of sacramental celebration, but throughout their lives.

The confessions of the church throughout history remind us that sacraments depend not only on the Word of God, but equally on the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who speaks God's Word to us, making it more clearly known, and compelling us to respond in faith and action. It is

this dependence on the Spirit of the risen Christ that prevents the sacraments from being reduced to mere remembrance or empty ritual action by the church.

For those interested in further study, the following is a partial list of Reformed confessions of Christian faith, with sections noted that pertain to the sacraments:

- The Scots Confession*
(1560, Scotland) Chapter XXI
- The Belgic Confession*
(1561, Netherlands) Articles 33–35
- The Heidelberg Catechism*
(1563, Germany) Questions 65–82
- The Second Helvetic Confession*
(1566, Switzerland) Chapters XIX, XX, and XXI
- The Westminster Confession of Faith*
(1646, England) Chapters 27–29 (29–31)
 - The Westminster Shorter Catechism*
Questions 88 and 91–97
 - The Westminster Larger Catechism*
Questions 35, 154 and 161–177
- The Creed of 1883*
(United Church of Christ, USA) Article XI
- The Evangelical Catechism*
(1867, United Church of Christ, USA)
Parts IV and V
- The Confession of 1967*
(Presbyterian Church U.S.A.) Part II, Section B
- The Study Catechism: Full Version*
(Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 2003)
Questions 68–79

Recent History and Ecumenical Considerations

Recent decades have seen significant progress in mutual understanding of the sacraments ecumenically. Two of those are represented by the *Lutheran-Reformed Formula of Agreement* (1999) and round VII of the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogues (2003–2010).

Of particular interest here are efforts to adapt the ancient catechumenate to the present age of the church. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council mandated a recovery of the catechumenate in the Roman Catholic Church. Since that Council, the church has prepared and is widely using *The Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). Today, Roman Catholic adults seeking union with Christ and his

church are led, in a four-step process, to Baptism followed by Eucharist. This modern adaptation of the ancient pattern envisions that Baptism occurs at Easter, that the congregation be involved in the entire baptismal process, and that Baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist be unified within the same liturgy. During their preparation period, the candidates for Baptism, or catechumens, are publicly dismissed from the church's Eucharist to engage in catechesis, and the congregation marks their progress through each step with rites of worship. The candidates are in this way considered members of the congregation who are distinguished from other members in that they are preparing for Baptism and Eucharist.

Recently, several Christian traditions have been engaged in conversation about and experimentation with the catechumenate. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, the Reformed Church of Canada, the United Methodist Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and other traditions have held conferences, produced materials, and even experimented with unifying the rites of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. While nothing resembling a mandate has occurred in any denomination, there is a great deal of interest regarding both the character of adult formation and initiation, and the prospect of enhanced and unified sacramental practice.

As Christians consider the meaning and practice of sacraments, and in particular the question of extending the invitation to the Lord's Supper to all persons of faith, irrespective of Baptism, we need to consider our place in the whole church of Jesus Christ. While some are exploring the practice of communing the unbaptized, most churches follow the ancient norm of Baptism before Eucharist. Many church bodies are encouraging congregational renewal through a recovery of deeper sacramental practices, especially a revitalized practice of Baptism and baptismal renewal. In our rapidly changing world, where many now come to the church unformed in the faith and unprepared for the life of discipleship, a wide spectrum of Protestants and Roman Catholics are urgently exploring ways to reclaim the pivotal role of teaching (formation, catechesis), so that those who come to us seeking God's gifts are invited not just to join the church, but to meet the living Christ in and through his body, to profess faith in him, and to learn how to become his followers.

Questions for Reflection

1. During some periods of history, the sacraments were more central to the church's life and mission than during others.
 - How central are the sacraments to your congregation's life and mission today? Why?
 - In what ways does your practice of the sacraments demonstrate this?
2. Consider the history of your own congregation.
 - What sacramental practices have changed over time? When? Why?
 - What sacramental practices have stayed the same?
 - What would you like the next generation to remember about what you did to enrich the sacramental life of the congregation?
3. History suggests that the way we celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper reflects the church's beliefs about the sacraments.
 - What does your practice suggest about what your congregation believes?
4. This essay divides church history into four periods: Early Church, Middle Ages, Reformation, and contemporary church.
 - Did certain parts of this history capture your imagination? Which ones? How?
 - Which period of church history holds the greatest authority for you? The least? Why?
 - What new things did you learn about your sacramental heritage from the essay?
 - Are there implications for your congregation's sacramental practice that you want to explore?
5. The first section of the essay describes conversion to the Christian life as an ongoing process that involves "changes in belief, belonging, and behavior."
 - Does this ring true to your own experience? How? Or how not?
 - In your congregation, do Baptism and the Lord's Supper involve all three of these dimensions of the Christian life? Is one emphasized over the others? Which one?
 - What parts of your congregation's sacramental practice emphasize changed beliefs?
 - What parts of that practice emphasize new loyalties to Christ and to his church?

- What parts emphasize living transformed lives as disciples of Jesus?
6. Throughout its history the church has invited people to faith through Baptism.
 - How would you describe the role of Baptism in your invitation to new believers?
 7. How might the Spirit in our time be using the sacraments to bring together people of faith (that is, the church) with those outside the church who are seeking faith?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Benedict, Daniel T. Jr. *Come to the Waters: Baptism and Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997.

Methodist Dan Benedict reviews the steps in the ancient practice of baptismal formation and reinterprets them for the present day. For those interested in modern adaptation of the catechumenate, he offers historical grounding and practical suggestions.

Bradshaw, Paul. *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice*. 2nd edition. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.

A brief introduction to the first four centuries of Christian worship, from the most respected contemporary liturgical historian of this period. Impeccable scholarship accessible to a general reader.

Galbreath, Paul. *Leading through the Water*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2011.

Presbyterian Paul Galbreath reminds us that Baptism is bigger than a single occasion. Rather it is a distinctive way of life, lived within a faith community. Exploring what he calls "sacramental ethics," Galbreath helps congregations connect baptismal practices with daily living and Christian witness in the world. See also his companion book on the Lord's Supper, *Leading from the Table* (2008).

Hoffman, Paul. *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012.

Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, where Hoffman is pastor, discovered that by

forming the faith of new Christians and leading them to Baptism, they were renewed as a parish and revitalized for mission in the world. His book describes the year-long process of faith mentoring that has become the center of this congregation's ministry.

Johnson, Maxwell. *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*. Revised and expanded edition. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2007.

Notre Dame professor Max Johnson gives a thorough treatment of the rites of Christian initiation. Tracing their history from the New Testament to current Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran practice, he argues for an ecumenical baptismal spirituality.

Kreider, Alan. *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999.

Mennonite Alan Kreider says conversion and initiation into the early church involved changes in belief, belonging, and behavior. Insisting on the importance of Christian community and the life of discipleship, this book challenges today's church to rethink how new converts to the Christian life are prepared for Baptism and equipped for baptismal living in the world.

Riggs, John. *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Riggs provides a careful analysis of the development of Reformed baptismal theology and practice in the sixteenth century, with a final chapter raising challenging questions for contemporary Reformed baptismal practice, including recent emphases on baptismal preparation.

Rozeboom, Sue A. "John Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper." *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception*. Edited by J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

A Reformed Church in America scholar, Rozeboom offers a thematic discussion of Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, and explores how that doctrine was appropriated in churches of the emerging Reformed tradition. In a later chapter, Timothy Hessel-Robinson traces the reception of Calvin's eucharistic thought from the seventeenth century to the present day.

White, James F. *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.

White takes an historical look at the theology and practice of sacraments in Protestantism over the past 500 years.

Notes

9. Kreider's book makes the argument that conversion and initiation into the early church involved changes in belief, belonging, *and* behavior, standards that were lowered in later periods. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom, Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999) xv, 21.
10. The four-stage process is described by numerous liturgical scholars. See for example Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 3.
11. Gerrish, Brian, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 2. See annotated bibliography on p. 36 of this resource.

Theology and Sacraments

The invitation into deeper sacramental practice and reflection is borne out of a strong theological conviction that in Word and Sacrament the living, triune God encounters us in the life of the community. Our practice and our reflection are enriched by careful attention to what our tradition affirms about God, ourselves, and our relationships.

In the preparation for this essay, the theology of Reformer John Calvin served as a starting point. In addition, the works of contemporary Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox theologians were consulted, along with ecumenical statements like *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*.¹² Many of the theological statements that follow are grounded in a quote from one of several historic confessions of the Reformed faith. The quotes themselves are broadly representative of Reformed theology, and they come from creeds and confessions spanning the church's history.

What is offered here is not a comprehensive systematic theology, but a foundation for further theological reflection. It is put forward in the hope that it will encourage congregations to examine, reflect on, and deepen sacramental practice.

Who Is God?

The triune God is not bound by creation. Central to Reformed theology and crucial for an adequate sacramental theology are two affirmations: the first is that God is sovereign, and the second is that God is self-communicating. In regard to the first, we recognize that God is not subject to the limits of our understanding or our experience. God is ever beyond our grasp. This means that God is not limited to any particular means to communicate

transforming grace. God can save, liberate, judge, forgive, and heal by whatever means God chooses to employ.

The triune God chooses to be in relationship with creation. In regard to the second affirmation we accept the testimony of God's Word in Scripture, Christians throughout history, as well as our own eyes and ears, that God is a God of love who seeks to communicate that love as saving grace to all people and to all the world. Such witnesses proclaim that God does, in fact, reach out to save, liberate, judge, grasp, forgive, and heal. God chooses not to be alone, but to be in relationship with humanity and the whole world.

Who Are We?

Created: "In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community" (A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991). The first thing we must affirm about humanity is that we are created good, in the image of the triune God, created out of love and for love. As those formed from the earth, we celebrate that our very bodies are pronounced good by God. Therefore we need not hide or deny that our bodies are a fundamental part of being human. Our whole selves are part of God's good creation, and the sacraments engage our whole selves in the worship of God.

Sinful: "In sin, people claim mastery of their own lives, turn against God and each other, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. They lose their humanity in futile striving and are left in rebellion, despair, and isolation" (The Confession of 1967, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), inclusive

language version, Part I, A, 2). The second thing we know about ourselves is that although we are created in God's image, we rebel against this image and do not live as God's beloved ones. We turn toward ourselves, either in pride or in self-contempt, and away from God. As a result, we deserve God's judgment. We can "escape punishment, come again to grace, and be reconciled to God" only through the mediation of our faithful redeemer, Jesus Christ. (The Heidelberg Catechism, Germany, 1563, Question 12). We sinful people come to Word and Sacrament in need of redemption, and in the sacraments we encounter and receive reconciliation with God and one another.

Redeemed: Even when we turned from God, God did not turn from us. Through the ages God called to the people through the voices of prophets, priests, and kings, and through the actions of despised women, nameless slaves, and forgotten children. In the fullness of time, God came to live in the world as Jesus Christ, redeeming our sinfulness and enabling us to return to God. Jesus Christ shows us what it means to live the true humanity that God intends for all of us. "By his passion and death and everything which he did and endured for our sake by his coming in the flesh, our Lord reconciled all the faithful to the heavenly Father, made expiation for sins, disarmed death, overcame damnation and hell, and by his resurrection from the dead brought again and restored life and immortality" (The Second Helvetic Confession, Switzerland, 1566, Chapter XI). By joining us to Christ, the sacraments engage us in ways of being truly human and empower us to live in these ways.

Living in hope for God's future: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come" (The Nicene Creed, 325/381 C.E.). As those who have been redeemed, we live in gratitude to God. Yet we also see the continuing effects of sin in the world around us, so even as we try to live faithfully, we also live in hope of the time when God will make all things new, when "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 21:4). In the sacraments, we anticipate, participate in, and glimpse a vision of that future.

How Does God Encounter Us?

Covenant: From the beginning, indeed from creation itself, God enters into relationship with human beings. This relationship of love and faithfulness is what we

call "covenant." Of our own accord, we do not have the means to establish a relationship with God, but because of God's "voluntary condescension," we receive divine promises and are enabled to respond (The Westminster Confession of Faith, England, 1647, Chapter VII). Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel receive and practice signs of the covenant including circumcision, Passover, and sacrifice. They also receive the law that provides patterns for covenant living. Sometimes they observe these things faithfully; at other times, the prophets testify that the people have abandoned the covenant. Yet even when the people do not live in faithfulness, God remains faithful. In Baptism, we enter into covenant life as disciples of Jesus Christ. At the table, God feeds us and calls us into community where we renew our covenant promises.

Incarnation: In the covenant, humanity and God are bound by promises of love and faithfulness. In Jesus Christ, humanity and God are joined in flesh and blood (see The Scots Confession, Scotland, 1560, Chapter VI). Because of this, we marvel that the Holy One, the Creator of heaven and earth, has known the heights of human joy and the depths of human sorrow. The incarnation means that Jesus Christ has taken even suffering and death themselves into the eternal life of the triune God. The incarnation confirms the witness of Scripture that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God made known to us in Christ—in the preaching of the Word, the pouring of the water, and the breaking of the bread.

Holy Spirit: We are related to God in covenant promises and in the life of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the One who joins us to the covenant and unites us with Christ. Christians are invited to affirm the witness of our tradition: "that God's Spirit is also given to me, preparing me through a true faith to share in Christ and all his benefits, that he comforts me and will abide with me forever" (The Heidelberg Catechism, Germany, 1563, Question 53). Scripture also testifies that the Spirit of God comes as a disturbing power, not always a reassuring comfort. Yet whether comforting or disturbing, the Holy Spirit inexorably draws us, individually and as the church, into the life of the triune God. By the work of the Spirit, the sacraments draw us into union with Jesus Christ.

What Can We Say about the Sacraments?

God works through Baptism and the Lord's Supper in multiple ways to form us into God's own people.

These sacraments are not things but events: a gathered people in the presence of God take material objects and with Word proclaimed and preached and the Spirit invoked, sing, move, wash, eat, and drink so that love abounds, truth is spoken, and grace flows.

To say only one thing about either Baptism or the Lord's Supper would be misleading and unfaithful to the biblical witness. To understand the richness of the sacraments requires a multiplicity of images and the magnification of our sacramental practice.

Baptism: To begin with, Baptism evokes all the rich biblical images of water. Water was the first element of creation, over which the Spirit hovered and from which came all life. Water overwhelmed a world gone wrong with destructive force. Water parted and slaves walked to freedom on dry land. Water flowed from a rock to quench the thirst of a parched and grumbling band of wanderers. Water from a young woman's womb surrounded a baby boy as God took on flesh to dwell among us. Water spilled over this baby now grown into the man Jesus and his identity as Beloved of God was proclaimed. Water will flow through the city of God where all people gather in peace and the nations are healed.

From the deep well of these biblical narratives springs our baptismal theology. Baptism is the gift of a faithful God who is not bound to creation, but who chooses to enter into covenant relationship with creation out of divine love. Baptism, like the Lord's Supper, is God's gracious accommodation to our embodied humanity, God's approach to us in ways that we can not only hear, but also can see, feel, and taste. Baptism cleanses us of sin, sets us free from bondage to the ways of death, signifies God's redeeming love, and orients us toward the future. In Baptism, we are welcomed into the covenant, engrafted into the body of Christ, and given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The landmark ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* described Baptism in terms of five major images: (1) participation in Christ's life, death and resurrection; (2) conversion, pardoning, and cleansing; (3) the gift of the Spirit; (4) incorporation into the body of Christ; and (5) the sign of the

Kingdom. Reformed churches have taken cues from *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* in their discussions about the meaning of the sacraments.

Cleansed of sin, we begin anew a life of faithfulness and service. Dying and rising with Christ, we need not fear death any longer. Gifted with the one Spirit, we look into one another's eyes recognizing our equality and embracing our unity. Anointed for service, we live in the world as signs of the coming reign of God. So, today "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Here, we are all adopted daughters and sons of the Most High, no more and no less. We are all priests, all royalty, not according to the values of the world, but simply as forgiven sinners (see 1 Peter 2:9).

Lord's Supper: So, too, the meal has many meanings. When holding or smelling or ingesting bread and wine, myriad stories come to mind. Bread: unleavened, for angels who sojourn with Sarah and Abraham at Mamre; from heaven, for hungry, escaping slaves; miraculously abundant, from a small bowl of flour for Elijah, a widow, and her son; with milk and honey, in the promised land; leavened by a woman, in a saying describing the coming new age; multiplied, with fish, to feed five thousand; broken on a fateful night, as a command to love and to remember. Wine: for the wedding banquet, made from water; for the Passover feast; for the feast of the new covenant and its weekly commemoration; for the final banquet where none shall want for anything.

These scriptural narratives shape our understanding of the Lord's Supper. As with Baptism, we affirm that this meal is a gracious gift of our God who is free, yet freely chooses to approach us here in love. At the table we celebrate our embodied selves as creatures of the earth, dependent upon the goodness of the earth for our existence. With the broken bread we acknowledge the brokenness of the world. In the words we recite we come to know our own redemption from the ways of sin, and we anticipate the future banquet at which all will be fed. At the table of the Lord we renew the covenant, we encounter the Incarnate One, and we receive again the gift of the Spirit.

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry sounds many of these themes in its discussion of the primary meanings of the Lord's Supper: (1) thanksgiving to the Father; (2) memorial of Christ; (3) invocation of

the Spirit; (4) communion of the faithful; and (5) meal of the Kingdom. These five images also serve as a summary of the classic themes in the church's great prayer of thanksgiving at the Lord's table, and an outline of the Trinitarian structure of that prayer.

Thanksgiving at the table shapes us as grateful people who everywhere and always give thanks to God. Joining together for the meal, we are reminded of the call to make sure that food and drink, both ordinary and holy, are shared adequately among all. By the power of the Spirit, both past and future coalesce, as around the Lord's table we eat with Christ as disciples ourselves and as guests at the great feast of the Lamb that is promised and will surely come to pass.

*Baptism and the Lord's Supper are
"marks of the church."*

For John Calvin, the church is "wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and believed, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution" (*Institutes*, 4.1.9). Like other branches of the church, Reformed theology understands the "marks" of the church not as rules or prerequisites, but rather as fountains from which spring the witness to and foretaste of the Kingdom of God. This means that the sacraments are not simply actions that the church practices; they are, together with the Word proclaimed, *the* defining features of who the church is. Where Word and Sacrament are not, the church is not.

Through the sacraments, God provides an inexhaustible well from which we can draw the very substance of our faith. Rich, complex acts of Christian public worship, the sacraments with the narratives of the gospel, and its proclamation are the very source of the church's life. Gathering behind locked doors at the most profound moment of crisis, the first disciples experienced the one who had been crucified now alive and transformed. Shaken out of despair, they recommitted themselves to Jesus and his mission; the church came to be. Whenever a person outside the community responded to the gospel, they were washed in water as the Spirit descended. The Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip, "Here is water . . . what is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). And from the font, converts proceeded immediately to the regular practice of Word and table. This is how the church began and how it has sustained itself in spirit and in truth. From the beginning, proclamation, Baptism, and

the Lord's Supper have been the central, identity-forming practices of the Christian community.

*Both Baptism and the Lord's Supper are
simultaneously gift and call.*

For disciples throughout the history of salvation, hearing the gospel is a gift that is also a call. We are offered Christ and all his benefits. In turn, we offer ourselves in service to God and humanity. As Calvin puts it, this gift of Christ through the Spirit is a "double grace," involving both justification and sanctification. This offer of Christ is a forgiveness of sin, a free offer of relationship, but this offer of relationship is at the same time an invitation to be part of God's saving work. We are offered the opportunity to be children of God, the body of Christ in the world, the *ecclesia*. The Reformed tradition has often understood this offer through the term "the covenant of grace" (see The Westminster Confession of Faith, England, 1647, Chapter VII). It is grace, it is freely offered, and what is offered is a covenant, a new and renewed place within the people of God. This double grace of gift and call is what we receive in the sacraments. Reformed sacramental theology seeks to resist anything that would reduce the meaning of this encounter with God in the sacraments to either *merely* forgiveness of sins on the one hand, or *merely* a call to good works on the other. The former has been called "cheap grace" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the latter "works righteousness," a problem against which the Reformers worked vigorously. Both dimensions of the sacraments need to be held together.

*The sacraments are the gifts of a gracious God who
seeks relationship with us.*

Many of the meanings mentioned earlier make it clear that the sacraments are fundamentally about gift, about God's abundant grace. Baptism symbolizes the gift of life, of forgiveness, and of the Spirit. The Lord's Supper symbolizes the gift of life and the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. Both symbolize the gift of covenant community, the gift of new relationship we receive in Christ.

In Christ, we receive the offer of the forgiveness of sins and the beginning of a release from the power of sin. This free gift of forgiveness, of renewed relationship with God, is what the tradition has called "justification." Both Baptism and the Lord's Supper witness and communicate this justification to those who receive them in faith.

God is indeed free to convert, save, and liberate in whatever way suits the divine purpose, but that does not lessen the power and centrality of the Word rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered to nourish, guide, and empower Christians. It would not be prudent to disdain this gift of the sacraments, backed by God's promise and Christ's command. Rather, we approach both font and table as a privilege and an opportunity to learn again who we are and whose we are. And the only suitable response to such gifts is to offer God our thanks and praise.

The sacraments call us into transformed relationship with one another and with the world.

God's gift of salvation involves not merely a legal pronouncement of forgiveness, but a release from the power of sin. It involves an entrance into a new way of life as the body of Christ. It is an offer to enter into the way of Jesus and a taking on of his yoke, a way that is both individual and corporate. This is what the tradition has called "sanctification." "Our good God, mindful of our crudeness and weakness, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith" (The Belgic Confession, Netherlands, 1561, Article 33). This understanding was behind Karl Barth's sharp critique of infant Baptism in the mid-twentieth century. Barth was concerned that Reformed Protestants had lost sight of the way in which Baptism conveys God's costly claim on our lives, as well as God's unmerited grace. The sacraments not only signify our justification or the repair of our relationship with God: they also nourish our sanctification or our growth in faithful living.

The sacraments are not for the church alone. They are gifts held by the church on behalf of all humanity. The movement of the sacraments is always twofold—into the center of the gathering and out again into the world. The sacraments invite us to a way of living that connects deeply to earth and to neighbor.

Earth: God, as we say in the Apostles' Creed (second to sixth centuries), is "maker of heaven and earth." As Job found out, God loves humanity but loves just as passionately all other creatures—whether ostrich, leviathan, bee, or antelope—and loves the earth itself, with all of its forces both to sustain and to destroy particular living beings. As clean, fresh water will soon be (if it is not already)

the most precious natural commodity on earth—a source both of life and of conflict—gathering at the font to wash a new convert focuses our attention on a central ecological, political, economic, and social reality. We wash in ordinary water, water over which we pray, into which we invite the Spirit, through which we pass on the way to salvation. Bread, too, comes as a gift of God's abundant earth, yet must be crafted through the human art of baking to be made ready to eat. The grain we receive as gift reminds us of the cycles of the seasons, of rain and wind and sun and drought. Through partaking of the bread in community, we are connected in our very bodies with the earth from which we are made. As ordinary things made holy, water, bread, and wine turn us toward and not away from our fragile planet home.

Neighbor: Attending to these things, we cannot leave font or table without being changed. We must leave this place and go and work to ensure that all have enough to eat, enough water to drink and to keep clean, and a place to rest their heads. The sacraments issue in works of justice. The font and the table shape communities that are open to strangers, relate to one another as equally made in God's image, and joyfully rehearse God's promised future. A community whose existence is based on font and table cannot help but be a community that offers hospitality to the stranger and sanctuary to the refugee. The prophet invites us, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55:1). So too we invite those who thirst for community, for forgiveness, for healing touch, for food and clothing and shelter.

Those who have been washed in the waters of Baptism and fed at the table of the Lord know that the world continues to bear the marks of sin and brokenness. Washed and fed, we give witness to the redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ. Evangelism is the church's mission to share with a broken world the good news of God's saving grace. The sacraments do not turn us away from the needs of others in complacent satisfaction; they lead us back into the world with a greater hunger for righteousness. When Christians join the struggle for justice, for a world where all have enough to eat and all are honored and live in peace, they cry, "How long, O Lord?" More often than not, such communities testify that although God may not come when we want, God still gets there on time.

The sacraments rehearse the way things ought to be, the way God has promised they will be—and in

fact the way things already are, if only we have eyes to see. Practicing them, we become unable to be satisfied with less, with living in a world of violence and pain, discrimination and meaninglessness. And so we welcome the outcast and provide shelter to the homeless because we know that in God's future reign, all will sit together at the great welcome table.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper work together with the Word proclaimed to present us with the living Christ.

Both sacraments complement the precision of the preached Word with the openness and multifaceted nature of symbols in action. They rehearse for us the history of salvation. They tell us who God is and who we are. Around the font, we sense the Spirit above the waters, God's grace seeking out even those who cannot respond, cleansing, renewing, marking us as God's own; we are forgiven, newly alive, members of the one body. At the table, we remember Jesus, the last night, the betrayal, the suffering, the wondrous love; we break bread again and recognize him, our hearts burning, for Christ is present.

The encounter with God around font and at table is an encounter with the same God who is proclaimed in the Word. Calvin affirms, "Let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us . . ." (*Institutes*, 4.14.17). But as Calvin also says, the sacraments offer a "visible Word." That the sacraments employ material objects at their core both accommodates and honors our embodied humanity. While some Reformed Christians have tended until recently to use a minimal amount of water, Baptism not only points to a spiritual renewal, but actually washes human skin. If we indulge again in larger basins or pools and a quantity of water that gleefully splashes and actually gets us wet, we may better understand the connection of exterior action and interior disposition. It may be true that many who present themselves for washing have already heard and believed and so have experienced conversion and regeneration by the Spirit. But it may also be true that a more thorough washing can reveal new dimensions of what God has in store for new Christians. So, too, at table, talk about the depth of Christ's love or the power of the Spirit to make prophets and priests of us cannot carry us as far alone as with the taste of bread and wine, their delight on our tongues, their warmth in our bellies, their physical as well as spiritual nourishment. At table, we practice the equal sharing of food, the

honoring of all in equal dignity, a new way of being community, a new relationship to neighbor.

What is the relationship between the sacraments, between Baptism and the Lord's Supper?

If both sacraments consist of both gift and call, if both lead us to encounter the living Christ, then what is the relationship between the two sacraments? Does Baptism necessarily come first? Does the order matter?

The grace is the same, and the call to a new pattern of life is the same. Yet there are aspects of these two sacraments that lend themselves more naturally to the order in which Baptism leads to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Baptism is connected with death and new life; the supper is connected with ongoing nourishment of that life.

Baptism is connected with incorporation into the body of Christ; the supper is connected with the repeated gathering of that body over time. Baptism is connected with initiation into the covenant community; the supper is the meal of that covenant community. In addition, the long, historical tradition of the church has practiced this rhythm of washing before eating, out of which has emerged a rich tradition of theological interpretation and liturgical practice. This does not mean that the long, historical tradition of the church may not be changed; it does mean, however, that some rich sacramental images (for instance, the font as a womb and the table as the place where the body of Christ is re-membered) lose symbolic power when the practice is revised.

As the essay on "Scripture and Sacraments" also expresses in its conclusion: in general, the broad range of sacramental meanings seems best preserved when Baptism leads to the table. Being washed comes before eating. Those who have come through the waters of birth then come to the table and learn to eat with the family. Nevertheless, when this order serves to exclude rather than welcome people to God's grace, then perhaps it needs to be temporarily disrupted. The larger theological concern is the power of both sacraments to convey both God's transforming grace and God's call to a transformed life. If someone receives God's grace first at the table, we need rebuke neither that person nor the local church that has welcomed her. Instead, we should joyfully invite that person to the life-giving waters of Baptism.

Conclusion

Having gathered, prayed, sung, shared sacred stories, heard the Word preached, offered symbols of our bounty, poured water, broken bread, and drunk deeply from the cup, we are bound more tightly to Christ and to each other. We become a people set apart to do God's work in the world. We are also touched and changed as individuals. One gift of the sacraments is that they help us to hold together tensions of the faith rather than to choose one pole or the other: individual and community, material and spiritual, gift and call. Both font and table effect both the formation of the individual as a disciple, one who walks in the path Jesus blazed, and the formation of a community as body of Christ. Both font and table shape our bodies and in so doing shape our inmost selves in covenant relationship with God and one another. Both font and table are both gift and call.

In terms of discipleship, the sacraments communicate again and again the good news that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we have nothing to fear. Such assurances are not easy to grasp. We forget. We refuse to believe. We despair. And so regularly we gather around the font to hear again the astounding truth that God claims each and every human child without requiring our prior acknowledgment. On the occasion of infant Baptism, parents give over a child to representatives of the church, relinquishing any sense of possessiveness, accepting that this child is not theirs but belongs to a larger body and will find her or his own path of faith to walk. When an older child or adult comes to the font, we are astonished by the story of her or his journey to the point of public proclamation of faith. To take on as one's own the ancient creed and enter the waters is a monumental step that we honor, and as we stand as witnesses we can also recall, whether we actually remember the day or not, our own passage through the womb and tomb of the church. We, too, are given the opportunity to renew our pledge, to splash in the water, to know again that we belong and will not be abandoned. Near the font we can again learn not to be afraid. As we receive this life-altering truth, we are enabled to turn and live as God's new creation, as Christ's disciples in a sin-haunted world. Likewise the table offers every one of us each week, in sensible form, the promises of God. We not only hear but taste and digest these truths: that no sin is beyond grace and no betrayal is so deep that it cannot be healed, that a day is coming

(and in fact is already here) when all shall eat and be filled, and that death is not the end of the story but joy will come in the morning. As we receive this gift, we respond with joyful lives patterned after the One who is crucified and risen, who poured out his life in order that all the world might have life eternal.

Questions for Reflection

1. This essay presents Baptism as both a gift of God's grace and a call to discipleship.
 - How does your congregation's practice of Baptism show it to be a gift of God's grace?
 - How does your congregation's practice of Baptism show it to be a call to discipleship?
 - Are both meanings present? Does one receive more emphasis than the other? If so, why?
2. This essay presents the Lord's Supper as both a gift of God's grace and a call to discipleship.
 - How does your congregation's practice of the Lord's Supper show it to be a gift of God's grace?
 - How does your congregation's practice of the Lord's Supper show it to be a call to discipleship?
 - Are both meanings present? Does one receive more emphasis than the other? If so, why?
3. Sacramental meaning is conveyed through symbolic objects, especially water, bread and wine.
 - In your congregation, how much water is used to baptize, and how is it used?
 - How do water and the use of water communicate baptismal meaning?
 - How might Baptism be understood differently if more (or less) water were used?
 - Do the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper taste good? Look appetizing?
 - How does the taste, smell, or appearance of the elements convey sacramental meaning?
 - What meanings of the Lord's Supper might be understood differently if the bread and wine were different?
4. Baptism and the Lord's Supper call individuals and the whole church into living transformed lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - In what ways does your congregation's practice of Baptism lead people into living a transformed life?
 - What aspects of this sacrament call you?

- In what ways does your congregation's practice of the Lord's Supper lead people into living a transformed life?
 - What aspects of this sacrament call you?
5. This essay describes the sacraments as events that draw upon the biblical past, unite the community in present celebration, and propel us into God's future with hope.
- How is each of these aspects of time present in your congregation's practice of Baptism? of the Lord's Supper?
 - Is one (or more) dimension of time missing from the celebration?
 - How might that dimension be reclaimed?
 - Why might it be important to do so?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982. PDF file available, <http://www.oikoumene.org>.

Barth, Karl. *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*. Trans. Ernest A. Payner. London: SCM Press, 1948, reprinted 2006.

Barth offers a sharp critique of the practice of infant Baptism, as nothing more than a cultural rite of passage which neglects the need for our response to God's grace. Still an important challenge to today's baptismal theology and practice, from one of the giants of twentieth-century Reformed theology.

Byars, Ronald P. *Christian Worship: Glorifying and Enjoying God*. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000.

Byars, retired Presbyterian scholar and pastor, writes for all who want to think more deeply about the heart of Christian worship. He argues that Word and sacrament can't be separated. Preaching the Word and celebrating the Lord's Supper go together as the usual pattern of Christian worship.

Brownson, James V. *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007.

This thorough and accessible presentation is theologically rich and pastorally insightful. Brownson also has excellent material on confirmation/profession of faith.

Gerrish, Brian A. *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Gerrish's scholarly exploration of John Calvin suggests that the entire shape of the great Reformer's theology is eucharistic: God as father feeds his children, and we respond in gratitude. This theme of grace and gratitude runs throughout Calvin's work, especially his eucharistic theology.

Hunsinger, George. *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Princeton theologian George Hunsinger proposes a new Reformed understanding of eucharistic presence and sacrifice, in hopes of finding common ecumenical ground with Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Episcopalian Christians. Demanding reading, but worthwhile for those interested in ecumenical progress with the Eucharist.

Lathrop, Gordon W. *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Lutheran scholar Gordon Lathrop suggests that from the earliest centuries there is a basic pattern in Christian worship and that we need to recover the strong central symbols of bath, book, and meal as the core of our Christian identity.

_____. *What Are the Essentials of Christian Worship?* Vol. 1, *Open Questions in Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.

A more accessible summary of the argument in *Holy Things* that the essentials of worship are the acts around font, pulpit, and table.

These Living Waters: Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism. Link at <http://www.arlw.org>.

This 2010 agreement on Baptism represents more than forty years of dialogue between the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Reformed churches in the United States (including PCUSA, UCC, RCA and CRC). A companion report on the Lord's Supper is also available at the link above: *This Bread of Life*.

Torrance, James. *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*. Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Church of Scotland theologian James Torrance understands worship and Christian living as participation in the life of the triune God and in God's mission in the world. Chapter 3, on Baptism and the Lord's Supper, offers a fully Trinitarian theology of our participation in these sacraments.

White, James F. *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.

Methodist liturgical historian James White offers an accessible reflection on the renewal of sacramental practice in mainline Protestant churches.

Note

12. Also known as the "Lima Text," *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* was published in 1982 by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which met that year in Lima, Peru. The result of more than 20 years of ecumenical dialogue, *BEM* explores the growing convergences, as well as the remaining differences, between the Christian churches on the theology and practice of the sacraments and offices of ministry. It has been widely distributed and studied, and has served as the basis for numerous "mutual recognition" agreements between churches.



Amy E. Gray

Sacraments and Culture

Listening to the Church

The study and reflection process that led to the original publication of *Invitation to Christ* in 2006 was grounded in a commitment to listen closely to the church and to give sustained attention to the way the sacraments are actually celebrated and understood in congregations today. The fictional scenarios described earlier reflect the real experience of congregations across North America, and the challenges addressed there raise important questions for the church's practice of Word and Sacrament.

The study group of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that conducted the initial research reflected here sought broad participation and received input from numerous sources. There were progressive voices and evangelical ones, practitioners of both "liturgical" and "free church" worship patterns. New church development pastors and multicultural congregations were consulted, as well as congregations known for their careful attention to worship. Those who proposed changes in the relationship of Baptism to Eucharist were sought out, as were those committed to maintaining the earliest understandings. Conversations happened through public hearings, surveys, interviews, web postings, and articles in denominational publications. Pastors, elders, seminarians, members, and regional church leaders all contributed to the picture of sacramental practice that emerged, and to the identification of cultural trends, challenges, and the resources needed to meet them.

While this research on sacramental practices was conducted within one denomination, it soon became apparent that its findings were applicable to a much wider ecumenical circle, especially those congregations that are part of the Reformed tradition.

The Culture Addressing the Sacraments

In North America in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, we live in a world that is substantially different from the one in which all but our youngest generations grew up.

The differences have been described in a variety of ways, but perhaps the simplest way to say it is that we no longer live in a Christendom world. The unified Christian cultures of western Europe and North America that came into being with the conversion of Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century and lasted into the second half of the twentieth century are no longer the reality we inhabit. Whether we lament or welcome this change, or more likely engage in a little of both, it is worth noting the ways in which this new cultural reality has had, and continues to have, an impact on the practice of Word and Sacrament in the church.

One of the most obvious implications of the demise of Christendom is that more of the people coming to our churches on Sunday mornings are **not baptized**. They may be not recently churched or never churched or altogether unevangelized, but they are seeking something they believe the church has to offer—which presents us with an enormous opportunity! At the same time, their very presence with us raises questions about the church's practice. More than any other single factor, the presence in our worshipping communities of people who have never been baptized is challenging the church to think deeply about who is invited to eat and drink at the Lord's table and why.

Contemporary culture places a premium on individual freedom and autonomy and joins them with a mistrust of traditional authority. This combination has resulted in a positive increase in

personal and political freedom, and in many parts of the world that is cause for the church's thanksgiving. But at the same time, it has had corrosive effects on community and coherent communal identity. In North American culture we value our uniqueness as individuals, sometimes even at the expense of those parts of our identity that link us with others. This fierce **individualism** makes the inherently communal nature of sacramental life together in the church hard to comprehend and even harder to practice. We may be more drawn, for example, to the quietness that facilitates personal meditation and individual communion with Christ than to the joyful communal act of gathering together as one body at the Lord's table.

An emphasis on individual autonomy is closely linked with the consumer orientation of the culture in which we live. As a **consumer society** we are inclined to understand the bread, wine, and water of the church's sacraments as spiritual goods available for distribution to individuals who desire them, rather than as practices to sustain the church community for God's mission in the world. At the same time pervasive consumer advertising that uses visual and material symbols to sell products—sometimes in manipulative ways—has made many in our culture suspicious of symbols in general, including the symbolic elements of the church's sacraments.

To cite a more positive impact of culture on sacramental practice, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tendency to value verbal communication over artistic or symbolic expression and the dualism that favored the mind over the body has been challenged in recent decades by a more holistic view of human nature. People more readily see the world as an organic entity than as a tightly put-together machine. Just a generation ago, the symbolism of the sacraments often seemed to communicate truths that were better explained from the pulpit. Today a more **visual and sensory culture** is attracted to the richness of sacramental practice and the many-layered levels of meaning embodied in symbols like water and bread. The auditory and verbal learning that happens through words is amplified when we can use our other senses of sight, touch, smell, and taste in the church's sacraments.

Another reality is the increasingly **multicultural** makeup of our North American society. There has been explosive growth in Christian movements around the globe, particularly in South America, Africa, and Asia. Immigrant churches are

mushrooming in this country and introducing new sacramental practices and understandings. Surely Christians from across the oceans have things to teach us about baptismal faith and celebrating "the joyful feast of the people of God!"

Finally, the increasingly **unchurched and multi-faith** culture in which the church does ministry has large implications for how we prepare people for membership and sacramental participation in the church. In the centuries of Christendom, the church could count on many of the structures in the wider society to teach Christian values and a Christian lifestyle. Today, as in the first four centuries, the church is a minority voice in a largely secular culture, and many who come hungry for a faith that can sustain them come also with little or no prior knowledge of the church's message or its ways. In this new context, preparation for Baptism, for participation in the Lord's Supper, and for church membership may need rethinking so that we meet the real and substantive spiritual needs of those who are seeking.

The Sacraments Addressing the Culture

Just as there are aspects of our contemporary culture that are influencing the church's practices of Word and Sacrament, so do the church's sacraments speak to the particular needs of the culture. The church members interviewed for this essay gave voice to a number of things for which they, and the people they see around them, are hungry and thirsty and sometimes even desperate. Listed below are some of those "hungers" which the church's ministry of Word and Sacrament has a unique and powerful opportunity to address:

The hunger . . .

- for community—for relationships of depth, intimacy, endurance, resilience, for a place to belong, and for people to belong to;
- for conversion—for experience of God that encompasses the whole person—heart, soul, mind, and body—for a growing intimacy with God, for a deepening sense of the mystery of life, for a new path, a fresh start, a second chance;
- for discipleship—for lifelong commitment, for a coherent, integrated way of living, for conformity to something larger than ourselves;

- for ministry and mission—for the chance to make a difference, to give ourselves away in serving others;
- for a world made right—for ethical integrity, for deep caring for creation, for social justice, righteousness, and shalom;
- for hospitality—to include people, to welcome others into the life of the church, to return the generosity we have been shown;
- for evangelism—to share with others our experience of God, our joy in knowing Christ, the ways Jesus' love has changed us;
- for peace—for ways of living together that build bridges, for common bonds strong enough to hold us together.

Community

In a culture that is fast-paced and individualistic in the extreme, many people search for a place to belong and for intimate relationships. These longings are accompanied by a growing and general distrust of institutions. As one pastor explains, "There is an anti-institutionalism in our culture. People resist becoming members [of the church]. . . . I find I have to help people understand that it's not about joining an institution; it's joining the body of Christ. They're attracted to something much more organic than institutional."

In this context, some view the traditional order of Baptism before the Lord's Supper as an unwelcome institutional requirement. Others find refraining from eating and drinking at the Lord's table until after the washing of Baptism to be a profoundly meaningful sign of the movement away from individualism into deep and liberating community. The sacraments establish community and embody the gift of shared communal life for which people hunger. Some congregations have moved from practices of Baptism that aim for timesaving efficiency to practices that "take as long as they take." Some include the Lord's Supper at every service where Baptism is celebrated. Pastors say this allows the sacraments themselves to make explicit the invitation into the body of Christ and to embody incorporation into a community and its shared life.

Conversion

Liturgical actions and words, as regular practices over a lifetime, both shape and express our most deeply held beliefs about God, ourselves, and our world. As such, the sacraments are less like objects

to be preserved and more like maps to be followed, practices in which we engage again and again in order that we might hear the Word, renew our covenant promises, and live as if the very reign of God is at hand. By doing these things again and again, we become the body of Christ, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, bearers of the Word of life to all the inhabitants of the earth—a conversion that extends over a lifetime. "We understand Baptism the same way we understand marriage," says a new church development pastor. "The wedding and the day of Baptism are starting places in a covenant relationship [to which we give] the rest of our lives."

Some congregations practice the sacraments with all the senses engaged. In Baptism, lots of water is used so that conversion, washing from sin, and dying and rising with Christ are ever-present images. Every celebration of Baptism is understood as a reaffirmation of Baptism for all the baptized. "In the baptism liturgy we always stress the congregational responsibility as well as the theology of Baptism. When we receive new members, we emphasize that this is a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant . . . for all present." According to this pastor, "Sacraments illustrate profound theological truths, and thus we practice them with all the vigor we can muster. Sacraments offer a sense of mystery, which is something our members are longing and hungering for." For these congregations the mystery of God's conversion of humankind into Christ's own likeness is a profound invitation to ever-deeper exploration.

Some congregations take instruction in the sacraments seriously. New member classes, adult education, officer training, classes for children and their parents, and choir training for worship leadership all can contribute to greater understanding of the sacraments and deepen participation in the practice of worship. In congregations that frequently reflect upon worship practices, there is additional opportunity for practice to inform understanding and for understanding to reshape practice. The sacraments can serve as a means to establish the life of the community of faith on the firm foundation of God's promises, regularly expressed in embodied practices. Congregations experience the presence of God and learn attitudes of keen discernment of that presence. In these ways, regular practices of Word and Sacrament lead the church and its members into continuing conversion.

Discipleship, Ministry, Mission, and Ethics

Many people long for communal and personal lives marked by a lifelong commitment to something larger than themselves. In a culture saturated with individualism, fragile relationships, and overly busy schedules, opportunities for all this activity to add up to something meaningful seem almost impossible. Rather than a fragmented life, many long for a life that is coherent and organized around communal and personal identity, so that all one's activities embody and give expression to one's deeper commitments. God beckons Christians to just such a communal and personal identity. Christian discipleship encompasses one's whole life and integrates the physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, relational, economic, political, and recreational dimensions.

Christian discipleship offers practices of Christian faith that help to orient all aspects of life toward God. Such practices include participation in worship, study of Scripture, prayer, acts of justice and mercy, and critical reflection on experience.¹³ A new church development pastor puts it this way, "I continue to maintain that we need disciples who struggle with what it actually means to be a Christian. Our sacramental life, at the very least, continually draws us into the holy mystery of God-among-us and shapes us by the ongoing rehearsal of who we are in Christ."

A life of discipleship grounded in the sacraments has ethical implications. Ministry within the church and mission outside the church's walls are opportunities for Christians to give themselves away for the sake of the world God loves, the same self-giving that is exemplified by Christ and enacted in the sacraments. In one congregation where the frequency of Holy Communion has increased, for example, members report that they cannot celebrate with bread and wine at the Lord's table and then ignore the hungry of the world. "It is like the church has saloon doors," says their pastor. "They swing both ways." Another pastor adds, "We are always looking for ways of linking our sacramental life with intentional acts of mission and service."

Enriching our sacramental practice and talking together about the meanings of these acts can lead to deeper understanding and enactment of faith in life. Such conversations come naturally when the connections between the sacraments and ministry are made explicit in the communal life of the congregation. The sacraments are crucial to a life of

discipleship as regular occasions to recall the central stories and themes of the faith, practice our central commitments, and rehearse the promised future. Gathered repeatedly around font, pulpit, and table we may yet become a holy people, going out into the world to serve the needy, to speak words that sustain the weary, and to testify that God is alive and at work doing a new thing and renewing the face of the earth.

Hospitality and Evangelism

Christians who have experienced the transforming presence of God in their lives are naturally eager to extend the hospitality of the church to others. An increasingly secular culture in which many are raised outside of any faith context challenges the church to grow in its practice of evangelism. Credible, verbal witness to the gospel, hand in hand with lives that demonstrate its claims with generosity and genuine care, is sorely needed in our time. As people are isolated, they are sensitive to intimations of exclusivity. We hunger for intimacy and belonging and yet are easily dissuaded. And as membership rolls shrink, we want to be as inviting as possible. Finally, we know of the harm perpetuated by discriminatory ecclesiologies in which those who do not fit a particular mold are rejected, abandoned, or forced out of community.

For all these reasons, congregations may keep expressions of hospitality in the forefront of their thinking as they celebrate the Lord's Supper. Words of invitation to the table are gracious and may be quite simple: "All who trust in Jesus Christ are welcome at this table." When persons "self-select" in response to such a general invitation, church leaders may never know who is baptized and who is not.

In addition, preparation of ministers in the theological, liturgical, and pastoral dimensions of sacramental practice is inadequate. One pastor shared that it was not until his second call that he became aware of the normative relationship between Baptism and the Lord's Supper. "I will confess that I didn't know about the 'baptism requirement' until a few years ago! I was never taught it. But when I came to this church, I had an elder who told me . . . that you have to be baptized. I looked it up and saw that it was indeed there."

Often leaders in the church seem both eager to extend evangelistic hospitality and anxious about giving offense. They find it difficult to imagine a generous middle ground between a completely

“open table” and narrow restriction. “Jesus was not a legalist. I’m not going to slap [the bread] out of someone’s hand. I would not exclude anyone. It is a celebration of the family [of God].” Other pastors say they “come down on both sides of the question.” They understand the traditional pattern of Baptism before Eucharist, but do not know how to honor it without giving offense. They ask, “How can I say ‘No’?” Jesus’ hospitable table practices strongly influence this ambivalence. “It is not OUR table! If [the unbaptized] come, why would I deny them? Jesus welcomed everyone.”

In congregations where hospitality and evangelism intentionally lead to Baptism, there are often increasing numbers of adult baptisms. “We had six adult baptisms in our little church last year,” one enthusiastic elder noted. Bringing people to confession of faith in Christ strengthens the baptismal identity of the whole congregation. Yet in some congregations, the welcome to Christ inherent in Baptism seems to be overlooked. When pastors are asked how people are invited to Baptism, many respond, “They’re not. I can’t remember when I’ve asked someone whether or not they have been baptized.” Pastors and other church leaders seem to focus on the Lord’s Supper as the primary event around which sacramental hospitality can be extended and fail to notice the explicit invitation to faith and Christian life offered in Baptism.

Peace

In a culture that is increasingly diverse, people search for ways of engaging with those different from themselves that will lead to peace instead of discord. In some denominations, recent theological conflicts have left the church exhausted and with a deep longing for relationships that express our unity in Christ. The practice of the sacraments is an especially welcome gift to the church as we attempt to heal our divisions. In Baptism each one is grafted into the body of Christ and adopted as a child of God; thus we all become brothers and sisters to one another. In Baptism we die to all that divides, and are united in Christ’s resurrection. During the Lord’s Supper we eat from one loaf and share one cup in the presence of the risen Christ, whose body we become. In this way, the reality of our unity is enacted every time we come together around pulpit, font, and table. This is good news indeed! Rather than a competitive struggle for particular understandings of peace, unity, purity,

and justice, the sacraments enact and make real the peace, unity, purity, and justice that are already ours in our risen Lord, Jesus Christ; and they call the church to enlarge the demonstration of this peace in every aspect of our unified life in Christ. Congregational leaders affirm that as they “live into [their] Baptism together and gather around the Lord’s table, people seem more patient with each other and are able to deal with differences in a more tolerant way.”

In a similar way Christian unity among all branches of the church of Jesus Christ is a gift consistently enacted in the sacraments. The act of breaking bread and drinking wine practiced by all branches of the Christian church unifies us, despite denominational divisions. This unity is increasingly important given the church’s current position in society. In one multi-denominational congregation, celebrations of Holy Communion help the congregation to embody its emerging unity. “There is the recognition that Christ seeks us to be one in unity (John 17:21),” says their pastor. As we consider decisions concerning our sacramental practice and the relationship between font and table, these ecumenical relations are of profound significance. We know that many North American Christians set aside denominational loyalties to “church shop.” Most of our churches include members and visitors who used to belong to other denominations. While they may be eager to understand denominational distinctiveness, church leaders have a vital role to affirm the unity of the whole church of Christ, enacted in the sacraments.

Conclusion

We have said that the worship of the church both shapes and expresses Christians’ deepest beliefs about God, ourselves, and the world. As such, the life of the church is best seen and understood in its enacted demonstrations of itself as the body of Christ. Especially in worship, where our full attention is given over to discerning God’s transforming and sustaining presence with us, the church is most thoroughly “itself.” The cultural context described in this report serves as a call to the church. In order to respond faithfully, it is actions—strong, expressive, participatory, lavish, loving, and grace-filled sacramental practices—that are called for. The hungers of the world await the spiritual food entrusted to the church, given to us by Christ for just this purpose.

Questions for Reflection

1. Describe the culture of your community.
 - What sort of people live here?
 - What are the central values in their world?
 - How do they relate to the church?
2. Cultural dynamics can support faithful, formative sacramental practice. They can also undermine it.
 - How do your congregation's sacramental practices mirror the culture around you? How do they conflict with that culture and its values?
 - In your community, what cultural dynamics work against faithful sacramental practice?
 - What cultural dynamics support faithful sacramental practice?
3. A number of "spiritual hungers" have been identified in North American culture.
 - For what are the people around you most deeply hungry?
 - In what ways do your church's sacramental practices speak to these hungers?
 - What changes in your practice of Baptism or the Lord's Supper might better address these hungers?
4. This essay articulates several positive values in maintaining the traditional order for Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
 - When unbaptized people are eager to come to the Lord's table, are there good reasons to ask them to wait until after Baptism? If so, what are they?
 - Can you imagine doing this in ways that are hospitable, warm, welcoming, confident, and spiritually encouraging? How?
5. For a variety of reasons, people who have not been baptized do sometimes come to the Lord's table for bread and wine.
 - When unbaptized persons come for communion in your congregation, are they served?
 - How do pastors, officers, and members respond to them? During the service? After the service?
 - Is an invitation to seek and prepare for Baptism ever extended?

- What sacramental practices might help those seeking faith to encounter Jesus Christ most fully?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Baumann, Gerd. *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.

An anthropological and philosophical investigation of the intersection of national, ethnic, and religious aspects of cultural identity. The author describes the building of national cultures, the influence of ethnic cultures, and the view of religion as culture, to investigate the ongoing negotiations among these elements of culture.

Driver, Tom F. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. Boulder: Westview, 1998.

Driver advocates for the necessity of ritual in human life and examines the place of ritual in and outside of religion. His aim is to foster ritual revitalization, especially with community and social justice in mind.

Miller, Vincent J. *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.

Our present-day consumer culture undermines many Christian teachings and values, but perhaps more disturbing is the way religion itself has become a "consumer product." Miller proposes possible acts of resistance against this trend, not through asceticism but by involving church communities in the creation of liturgy and worship space—thereby countering the passive consumer nature of much worship.

Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Using both descriptive and statistical data, the authors "map" the landscape of adolescent religious affiliations and identities. A detailed and useful study.

Stauffer, S. Anita, ed. *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996.

The “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities” (23–28) forms the starting point for this book. It states that Christian worship is transcultural, contextual, countercultural, and cross-cultural, and provides a framework for discussions concerning the relationship between worship and culture.

Wheeler, Barbara G. *Who Needs the Church?* Louisville: Geneva Press, 2004.

A great conversation-starter pamphlet that describes the mainline church as “countercultural.” Wheeler describes American culture as individualistic, privatistic, suspicious of institutions, attracted to novelty, and insisting on personal choice. In the face of these cultural trends, the church offers “life together, over time, in a community that has come into being for the purpose of praising and serving God.”

Wuthnow, Robert. *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

This preeminent sociologist of religion shows how religious commitment has persisted despite the social upheavals of the late twentieth century.

This commitment is associated with a “significant broad-based upsurge of interest in spirituality.” The arts, both classical and popular, have played a vital role in this development. Therefore, the vitality of churches in America depends on promoting both spiritual growth and greater participation in the arts by all age groups.

Yount, David. *The Future of Christian Faith in America*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004.

According to this author, Christian faith in America is “a mile wide and an inch deep.” In this quick survey of the landscape of megachurches, church shopping, parachurches, fundamentalism, liberalism, social gospel, controversies over sexuality, and the charismatic movement, he envisions a kind of Christian faith that would support social progress, strengthen ecumenism, and revitalize congregations across America.

Note

13. Craig R. Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). See especially chapters 1–3.

Conclusion

How shall we speak thoughtfully about the difference Baptism makes for our lives as disciples of Jesus? How does a pastor respond when she learns that regular participants in the church's communion meal have never been baptized? How do we make pastoral or parental sense of the reality that some of the children who sit in our pews are officially welcome to eat and drink at the Lord's table and others, who are not baptized, are not? What is going on when someone new to our worship—someone from another, non-Christian faith—is moved to come forward for communion? What would we need to think about before holding a service of Holy Communion with homeless neighbors at the community soup kitchen? What place should the table and the font have in the ways we nurture unchurched young adults toward committed faith in Jesus Christ?

None of the questions that have been raised here has a simple answer. The essays in this resource point clearly to a careful pattern in the life of the church from its earliest beginnings that ties the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper together in a particular way, both theologically and in practice. In fact, the two sacraments are most obviously related when the church is welcoming newcomers into its fellowship, precisely the situation around which today's questions are being raised. We would be unwise to disregard the integrity of the church's long-standing pattern, and yet there is also integrity in the new questions that are being asked.

If we invite all those who wish to come eat and drink at the Lord's table, do we risk trivializing the Lord's Supper, or making Baptism irrelevant, or rendering the sacramental patterns of the whole church incoherent? Do we even risk ignoring the real hunger that brings people to the table in the

first place, the hunger for more than bread and wine, more than community—the hunger to know Jesus Christ and to learn how to live life as one who belongs to him? On the other hand, if we withhold the bread and wine from some of those who come to the Lord's table, do we act inhospitably, appearing more concerned with rules than with persons? Do we even risk turning away from Jesus Christ those who are hungry to know him?

Surely one of the responses we need to make to the challenges before us is enhanced sensitivity to the variety of circumstances from which people come to the church and its worship in Word and Sacrament. When persons who have not been baptized present themselves at the Lord's table to be fed, we would be ungracious to respond with rules and regulations and send them packing on the spot. But at the same time, we would be unwise to act as if there was nothing further to discuss. We would be insensitive not to hear, in their coming to the table, the unspoken request for deeper union with Christ. We would be failing both them and the church if we did not extend to them, in the appropriate time and manner, an invitation to Baptism.

Admittedly, the question of *who is served* when they come to the Lord's table is different from the question of *who is invited* to the table. The essays collected here speak primarily to the question of *who is invited*. But the question of *who is served* arises often enough in the life of the church that two brief comments may be useful. First, as we serve the bread and wine to all those who come to the Lord's table, we need to look for ways to invite to Baptism those who are newly responding to Christ. Second, it is the church's teaching ministry, specifically the recovery of a serious process of preparation for Baptism, that can help the church be clear about the

deep significance of its sacraments without being inhospitable to those who come seeking Christ. With such teaching in place, it becomes possible to say to individuals preparing for Baptism, “There is good reason to refrain from eating and drinking at the Lord’s Supper until after you are baptized.” And it becomes possible to offer a blessing at Christ’s table to those who are still making ready for full sacramental participation in his church.

One pastor says this: “I have long held the conviction that if I can just help people understand the significance of their Baptism, I will have done

enough as a pastor.” It is in this spirit that all the churches are invited to embark on a journey of sacramental renewal—to reclaim our Baptism as a life of discipleship, to expand our practice of Word and Sacrament, to reflect deeply on what we do together at pulpit, font, and table, and in all of that, to renew the church’s very life together in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world God loves.

As we proceed on this journey, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit abide with us all!



Amy E. Gray

Summary of “Open Table” Literature

(opening the table to the unbaptized)

One way that some biblical scholars have sought to uncover the central meanings of the Lord’s Supper is by trying to discern the relationship between the different meals of Jesus. These meals include the ones in which Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners throughout his ministry, the miraculous feedings, the images of the great banquet in his teaching, the Last Supper, and finally, Christians’ celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. People disagree about how best to characterize and understand the meaning of all these meals and how these meals are best translated into the Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Literature in Favor of an “Open Table”

One option for understanding these relationships is often associated with the New Testament scholar Norman Perrin, and it seems to characterize the arguments of Mann, Fabian, Deibert, and others as they advocate for “open table” practice. In this view, Jesus set up a counter-community formed around inclusive meals during his ministry that included the conscious breaking of purity rules and inclusion of those normally excluded. Given this, the central meaning of Jesus’ meals, including the Lord’s Supper, was the breaking down of walls between classes of people and the elimination of other exclusive purity requirements that kept people from freely experiencing God’s love, fellowship, and justice with each other. One writer of one of the “open table” overtures to the Presbyterian General Assembly (Overture #98-33) resonates with these emphases as he explains that the Lord’s Supper is “about telling people they are loved by God! Everybody is loved by God” (2004 interview with Steve Van Kuiken).

The obvious practical implication of this would be to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in such a way that these meanings would come to the fore; an “open table” best points to the meal practices of Jesus as understood by these authors.

Several other scholars such as Tanner, Welker, Williams, and Moltmann do not depend upon Perrin’s historical reconstruction, yet still emphasize that the inclusive character of Jesus’ larger meal practice casts some light on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. Some of these scholars point to two other parts of the biblical witness that also alert us to inclusive meanings of Jesus’ Last Supper and the early church’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

One of these is the fact that the Gospels clearly show Jesus celebrating the Last Supper with disciples who would desert, deny, and betray him. This aspect of the gospel witness makes it clear that “Jesus’ community is jeopardized not only ‘from outside,’” as the Passover celebration emphasizes, “but also ‘from inside’—even by his disciples.” The impact of this recognition tells us that the meal as a whole must be connected to the theme of forgiveness of sins, and suggests that the Supper should be prevented from “being misused for the purposes of moralism and church law” (Welker, 53).

Another relevant part of the biblical witness is Paul’s response in 1 Corinthians to certain dynamics of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the Corinthian church. Paul’s critique of the Corinthian church, especially his statements about their eating “unworthily” and bringing “judgment” upon themselves, has often been used as a means of excluding others on moral bases and keeping those deemed “unworthy” from full participation in the Lord’s Supper. Much recent New Testament scholarship has concluded that the celebration of the

Lord's Supper that Paul deems unworthy involves the rich members of the Corinthian church taking out their own food and eating it in front of the poor without sharing. In this way, ironically, the Eucharist became a meal in which the divisions within the society were being mirrored and reinforced rather than broken down. Paul's critique of such practices indicates that a fundamental meaning embedded in the Lord's Supper is the breaking down of these divisions.

These themes of the inclusion of the marginalized, the forgiveness of sins, and the breaking down of societal divisions must be taken into account, and our practice of the Lord's Supper must be measured according to them, as Welker, Williams, Tanner, and Moltmann all agree. Tanner specifically argues that these themes are best embodied by "open table" practice.

Literature against an "Open Table"

In the articles that specifically argue against "open communion," we tend to find meanings of the Eucharist that emphasize the role of the covenant community as witness to and partial embodiment of the Kingdom. Authors such as Farwell, Cartwright, and Dipko find these meanings within Jesus' words at the Last Supper, which emphasize the idea of "covenant," and the reflections of Paul about the meal. For example, Farwell, working especially with 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, argues that there is a certain "logic of participation" in the meal, which involves "an adoption of the commitment to the reign of God and the hope for redemption as Jesus preached and embodied it" (Farwell, 223). What we receive in the meal is the "shape of a life" that we are committed to live, as well as abundant forgiveness of sins for our stumbling along the way (Farwell, 227).

The understanding that the Lord's Supper should in part reflect a commitment to be a community of disciples is also strengthened by the recognition that a central aspect of Jesus' ministry as a whole was his calling out a community of disciples who were to be the seed of the renewed people of Israel. N. T. Wright is one of many contemporary biblical scholars who emphasize this as a key part of Jesus' intentions and his understanding of his role as Messiah (Wright, 244–319). It is then fitting that the central practice he left his disciples reflects this covenantal meaning: "those that shared the meal, not only then but subsequently, were the people of the renewed covenant" (Wright, 563).

These authors also point out that such meanings are embedded in the liturgical texts and prayers of the early church that surround the Lord's Supper, as well as in the widespread practices of serious and extensive preparation for Baptism (see essay on "Sacraments in History").

Such meanings of the Lord's Supper, stemming from Jesus and Paul, support understanding the Lord's Supper as a meal intended for the followers of Christ, who are committed to following him in the community of the new covenant. Baptism has marked the boundaries of that community, the church, and been the initial symbol of that commitment for most of the church's history.

It is worth noting that such boundaries also push us to certain kinds of inclusivity. Boersma writes that the ecumenical effort towards a hospitable and open table between denominations and traditions is based on our common Baptism (Boersma, 73).

Given the other meanings of the Lord's Supper mentioned above, this central meal must also be characterized by an openness and inclusion, especially toward those who are seen as marginalized or suspect by typical religious standards or who are excluded by societal divisions. This theme of inclusiveness is in fact affirmed by those who argue against "open table" practice; they do not agree, however, that the normative practice of Baptism before the Lord's Supper is discriminatory or exclusionary. These authors point out that all are freely invited to Christ and the life he gives without regard to sin or to any societal status that may mark a person. Given that such a new life requires repentance and is to be lived in a community under the sign of the cross, however, they argue that it makes sense for the beginning of such a new life to be marked by spiritual preparation and Baptism.

Baptism and an "Open Table"

This question leads us to another nest of biblical issues that impact the conversation about "open table" practice: that of Jesus' stance toward purity rituals and purity standards during his ministry. Admittedly, there has been little attention focused on Jesus' attitudes toward Baptism and ritual washings by those who argue for or against opening the table to the unbaptized. But there does seem to be an implicit assumption, by many who argue for an "open table" on the grounds of Jesus' hospitality, that Baptism "has become a barrier to Jesus' hospitality rather than an opportunity for grace"

(Moore-Keish, 19–20). Perhaps seeing Baptism as a barrier stems in part from Jesus' criticism of certain Jewish purity practices in the Gospels. Complicating this is the typical Protestant suspicion of purity codes and rituals, because they seem Roman Catholic in appearance, a suspicion tied to the Reformation's theological critique of works righteousness.

Jesus did criticize those who used purity laws to establish boundaries between people, rather than understanding them as part of one's journey toward God. Thus, in his washing practice, Jesus was interested in hospitality in the sense of knocking down walls that were erected with exclusionary intent. But in doing so he did not overthrow those practices of washing entirely; rather, his primary concern was to highlight the necessity of purity of heart before God and corresponding ethical practices. He would bend and break certain purity regulations in very specific ways when the purposes they were intended to serve were in fact not being served by the practice. In this way, he was calling Israel back to practices in line with the central meanings of their covenant life rather than overthrowing them.

Applying these reflections on Jesus' stance toward purity rites to our practice of Baptism and the Lord's Supper may suggest that Baptism should, as a matter of general practice, precede partaking of the Lord's Supper; however, such a requirement should not be used in a merely legalistic way or in a way that excludes particular people from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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Appendix II

Acknowledgments

The Sacraments Study Group of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that prepared and wrote the original version of *Invitation to Christ: A Guide to Sacramental Practices (2006)* included the following fourteen Presbyterians and one Lutheran. Several have since moved on to new ministry settings from the ones listed below. The Rev. Dr. Stanley R. Hall passed away in February 2008; The Rev. Chip Andrus died in 2018. Their contributions to this work is remembered again here with deep gratitude.

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In the end, it was the Sacraments Study Group's shared practice of Word and Sacrament, at every meeting over their three years together, that led to the decision to commend to the churches not a set of ideas *about* the sacraments, but a set of basic sacramental *practices*—trusting that the practices themselves would lead to renewal and a new openness to the Spirit in the life of the church.

In the years since the Study Group concluded its work, that hope and trust have been richly rewarded. The Office of Theology & Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has overseen wide distribution of *Invitation to Christ*, and provided ongoing resourcing and nurture for numerous congregations committed to the five sacramental practices.

In fact, it is the evidence of this renewal across the church that led the Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship to broaden the scope of *Invitation to Christ*, and offer it to the wider Reformed community as *Invitation to Christ—Extended*.

The editorial work on this 2012 revision of *Invitation to Christ—Extended* was coordinated by Marney A. Wasserman, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Consultants who worked with her include:

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Feature Articles

In Praise of Living Water: Ritual Experimentation in Times of Ecological Crisis

Paul Galbreath

Christians and Water

Four years ago, I was invited by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to speak on the role of water in the Judeo-Christian tradition—a rather daunting assignment, but nevertheless an interesting one. I briefly highlighted the central role of water in biblical texts—from the creation narratives in Genesis to the river for the healing of the nations in Revelation. I drew attention to three interrelated biblical stories: the Exodus, the crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land, and the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. It is interesting and important to balance the theme of water in general with that of local water that holds the memory of particular events, whether it is the Hebrew children crossing the Jordan River to the Promised Land or the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, or a significant cluster of events in the Gospels that are located on the Sea of Galilee—from the calling of disciples, to the stilling of the storm, to the appearance of the resurrected Christ in John 21. Water has a story to tell us if we can learn to listen to it. We can start by paying closer attention to the appearance of water in the biblical narratives themselves. Remembering the role that water plays is a first step to finding our identity and our connection to the earth.

More recently, though, I have noted the tendency of preachers and interpreters of texts to quickly spiritualize references to water or the earth in order that they may point to some sort of deeper, spiritual truth.¹ From this perspective, the river (or land) is there to prompt us to higher associations of new birth or life. Consider, for example, the ways in which the text itself uses the language of “living water” in John 4. Here, the text itself seems to indicate that the living water of which Jesus speaks

to the Samaritan woman is superior to the (regular) water from the well. The “living water” quenches thirst whereas other water provides only temporary relief. Biblical commentaries have built further on this insight and heightened the divide. Some scholars have seized on this as a spiritual teaching of Jesus that underlines the teachings of new birth in John 3. Here, spiritual life as a permanent condition of new birth takes precedence over the temporal needs of our physical conditions (thirst). Other scholars like Raymond Brown have argued that John is explicitly using this metaphor to point to the role of baptism in the formation of the Johannine community. Here the sacramental imagery of baptism takes precedence over the material elements of water.

While not denying the tension and preference for living water that exists in the text itself, I do wonder if contemporary readers of this text are missing out on a key insight from the ancient world—namely the need and preference for living water as basic to daily existence. Living water was the fresh, flowing water from a river or spring on which healthy life depended. Water that was stagnant or collected ran the risk of contamination. Thus, on one level, the emphasis in John 4 on “living water” as the source of life is one that would resonate easily with the hearers who themselves knew the importance of fresh water sources. In this sense, living water points to an ongoing stream/supply that continues to provide a basic necessity for life.

In this regard, it is also helpful to note the way in which the early Christian practice of baptism showed its own preference for living water. The *Didache* records the following instructions about baptism:

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1. Concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, “baptize, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,” in running water;
2. But if thou hast no running water, baptize in other water, and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm.
3. But if thou hast neither, pour water three times on the head “in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”²

These ancient baptismal instructions suggest a couple of key insights: (1) the preference for running or living water as correlative of the baptismal event (note how even the pouring of water as a last resort seems to mimic the movement of water in nature itself); and (2) the insistence on water as a physical element that is central to the act of baptism; here any “spiritual” or “higher” understanding of baptism cannot be decoupled from the presence of (living) water itself. Living water was recognized as the source of all life (here physical and spiritual are held closely together).

The insistence on water as a physical element . . . is central to the act of baptism; here any “spiritual” or “higher” understanding of baptism cannot be decoupled from the presence of (living) water itself.

In her important book, *From the Beginning to Baptism*, Linda Gibler makes this point clearly. In the earliest Christian liturgies water did not need to be blessed—it already was blessed. “For at least the first two hundred years of Christian tradition water was not blessed for baptism. Clean, living water did not need to be blessed.”³ Early Christians understood their dependence on water. It is only over time that the presence of water is minimalized and that water is increasingly treated as a spiritual metaphor, a kind of religious-liturgical prop that will lead us to a deeper truth.

As we have turned away from the resources in Scripture and early Christian practice that point to the central and basic role of water to support life and to enrich our communal and sacramental life, we seem to have lost our way to a basic insight on the ways in which we depend on

water for life each and every day including in our Sunday services. Thus, Christians, especially affluent, Western ones, need to recover/discover ways in which honoring, preserving, and protecting water is both an environmental necessity and a basic part of Christian faith.

Learning from Ojibwe Women How to Honor Water

My talk at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation was followed by a presentation by Beth Roach, a member of the Nottoway Tribe, who spoke about ways that indigenous people viewed water. “In our Iroquoian culture, we practice seven generations of sustainability, and water is completely integrated into that,” she said. “Nothing is separated, everything is connected.”⁴

It is important to acknowledge that most indigenous people live closer to the land and to the elements than I do and for that basic reason have a clearer sense of earth’s travail, degradation, and significance than I do. It has been clear from the events at Standing Rock that we are all indebted to our indigenous brothers and sisters for bringing to our attention the environmental catastrophes and exploitation that have become commonplace in our times. We have also finally become aware that the front lines of pollution and toxicity have always been borne by people of poverty. From the Native people of South Dakota who fought the pipeline expansion across their own land to the inner-city poor who continue to suffer the health consequences of lead pipes and toxic water in places like Flint, Michigan, we have seen the devastating effects of reckless development and corporate greed.

In the face of these tragedies, I was struck by the hopeful way in which she described the growing practice of Nibi Walks—water walks where participants walk the entire length of a river as a prophetic way to highlight the environmental dangers that have damaged our water sources. I was particularly moved by the way that Beth Roach described her participation in the walk that followed the path of the James River. When it was her turn to carry the pail of water taken from the head of the river, she described how as she walked across a bridge over the river that she felt the water in the bucket leap with joy that it would be reunited with the water in the river below. I decided to look into the history of these walks and look for ways that we could learn from the wisdom of our indigenous sisters.

In 2003, Josephine Mandamin, an Ojibwe grandmother, led the first water walk around Lake Superior. Her decision to undertake this walk was prompted by growing concerns about pollution, the privatization of water, and a sense that the ancestors were prompting her to respond to the urgent needs of water which is the source of life.⁵ In conversation with other Native women about ways that they could reclaim their role in caring for the water, she recalled her childhood experience as the one who was sent to carry buckets of water for the household needs. This memory prompted her to lead the first group of water walkers who carried a bucket of water drawn from Lake Superior. The initial walk occurred during the spring of 2003 and lasted for thirty-six days.

Josephine created a ritual to honor the water by drawing on a memory of carrying water in her childhood and the central role that water played in her family's life. She surrounded this ritual with traditional spiritual practices, and over time the walks became woven into the fabric of indigenous identity and the handing down of wisdom from the elders.

From this first experience, Josephine decided to lead an indigenous walk each year around one of the Great Lakes. During the walk in 2005, she met with tribal leaders and urged them to encourage men to join the effort. Since that time, the walks have included women who carry the water taken from the body of water and men and women who carry an eagle staff for protection. She continued to lead walks through 2017 and died in February of 2019. She was affectionately called Grandmother Water Walker or Grandmother Josephine, and

“Through all of the years of Josephine’s determination and dedication to raise awareness through her legendary Great Lakes Water Walks, it is my hope that the world hears her message—that water is life!” stated Grand Council Chief Hare. He continued,

Our world is a better place because of Josephine’s efforts and those of us who will continue her work to protect our life-giving Nibi, not only to honour her legacy, but to ensure water, the world over, is protected. What a remarkable Anishinaabkwe we have had the absolute pleasure of knowing and learning from.

Grandmother Josephine founded Mother Earth Water Walks—an initiative that brings awareness to the risks and threats to the health and sustainability of our waterways. Through that initiative, she has walked the shorelines of the five Great Lakes as well as in all four directions of Turtle Island, bringing water from all oceans together. She has walked the equivalent of half of the earth’s circumference while building awareness about pollution, laws, fracking, and the selling of water.⁶

Others were inspired to join her efforts, including Sharon Day, an Ojibwe woman who participated in the first water walk around Lake Superior and who was chosen/recognized as a spiritual leader and designated as a protector of the water. In 2011 she led her first water walk and has been active in

Josephine created a ritual to honor the water by drawing on a memory of carrying water in her childhood and the central role that water played in her family’s life. She surrounded this ritual with traditional spiritual practices, and over time the walks became woven into the fabric of indigenous identity and the handing down of wisdom from the elders.

she dedicated her life to protecting the water and giving it a voice. She made it her life’s mission to raise consciousness about the fragility of water and emphasize that water is precious, sacred, and one of the basic elements required for all life to exist. Water is life.

leading river walks since that time, including along many of the major rivers: the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and James Rivers.⁷

I decided to join one of these walks, and last June I travelled to Cleveland in order to participate in the Cayuhoga River Walk. The walk was in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the

river catching on fire due to the high volume of industrial waste that was pumped into the waterway. While there has been significant progress cleaning up the river and developing parks and pathways along the river, much more work remains to be done to restore the river to its central place as an artery and vital ecosystem. Nibi (water) walks serve as both a form of prayer for the healing of the water as well as a way to bring attention to the ongoing needs of the water and its surroundings. Sharon Day led the eighty-five-mile walk that followed the path of the river from its headwaters at the East Branch Reservoir near Burton, Ohio, until the river runs into Lake Erie near downtown Cleveland.

I arrived in Cleveland on a Tuesday afternoon and made arrangements to meet with the leaders of the group in the hotel lobby in order to ride with them to the walk site the next morning. Early the next morning, we drove out to the site and met up with a handful of other participants in the walk. Each walk day begins and ends with a gathering ritual that consists of Nibi (water) songs, a tobacco offering, a call to the four directions, smudging of the ritual objects (water bucket and eagle staff) as well as the walkers, and a brief time for the participants to speak. The walk itself generally takes the form of a relay with a woman (as the water bearer) carrying the bucket of water that is drawn from the head of the river and a man (or woman) carrying the eagle staff alongside of them. The staff carrier is also charged with making tobacco offerings as a prayer for any dead animals along the walkway and as a blessing for any running water that is crossed over or passed by during the walk. When not walking, participants ride in the cars that help mark the route and provide support for the walkers. The rule for those walking is that the water is never allowed to stop during the walk nor is it allowed to backtrack (the bucket of water is supposed to follow the path of the river and to be carried at approximately the same pace as the river).

I learned an important lesson on the walk: while it is framed as a prayer walk (each step as a form of prayer), this is not a serene, meditative experience. Instead the Nibi Walk is an intense immersion into the loud, messy environment that humans have created that contribute to the plight and health of rivers and waterways across our country. The challenges of walking state highways and urban streets while carry an eagle staff should not be underestimated. The staff carrier follows the pace

of the woman carrying the bucket (which in some cases may involve jogging) while remaining alert to the challenges of road traffic and offering the appropriate and required tobacco offerings along the way. Hand-off of the objects include repeating the phrase “Ngah izitchigay nibi ohnjay,” or, “I’ll do it for the water.”

There is a distinct beauty to participating in the Nibi Walks. As the only nonindigenous person who travelled from a distance to join the walk, I experienced incredible hospitality and was immediately welcomed to participate in the experience. There is a sense of solidarity among the walkers who share a common commitment to honor the water and to work for its improvement. When the walkers reach the conclusion of the walk, there is an extended ceremony in which the water in the bucket which was taken from the head of the river is thrown into the larger body of water (in this instance Lake Erie). In the words of Sharon Day, “The water speaks to one another and lets the Nibi know that there are still humans who care for the water.” The beauty of this statement lies in both its compassionate eloquence and in the way it points to a worldview in which the lively spirits of the earth around us interact and respond to our actions.

Creating a Christian Ritual that Honors the Earth

Inspired by my participation in a Nibi Walk, I decided to create an alternative ritual that draws on distinct Christian resources.⁸ While this ritual would share a common commitment to honoring the earth and underscoring the central role of water as the source of life, it seeks to draw on the central place of Word and Sacrament for Presbyterians while at the same time seeking to push these out into the world so that we can experience them in a different light. The ritual is an important part of a yearlong project that I am leading with six pilot congregations in the Pacific Northwest. The project provides an opportunity to return to the work that I did with these congregations in 2010–2011 that led to the publication of *Leading into the World*.⁹ In that book, I presented the need to develop new liturgies that more clearly show the connections between worship and creation—namely, to help communities see the relationship between the language of Sunday morning worship and their commitments to earth care. This time around, I am starting from outside the church in the hope of helping congregations recognize the ways in which

worship depends on the elements of creation. Here the focus is to enable participants to more clearly see the source of baptismal rituals and their inherent connection to living water. This form of water walk is an attempt to provide a curated experience that helps participants see the world and themselves in a different perspective.

The focus is to enable participants to more clearly see the source of baptismal rituals and their inherent connection to living water.

One of the pilot congregations in the earth care project that I am working with this year is located in the small coastal town of Newport, Oregon. Their sanctuary is located about a mile inland from the Pacific Ocean. On a visit in the early summer, I identified a path to walk from Nye Beach (a central and popular beach) through the town and up to the church. The walking path follows along the route of Nye Creek, which runs through a park and at times flows through underground culverts. Participants were invited to meet at the church and to carpool down to the beach. The walk includes three stops: (1) an initial gathering on the beach, (2) a brief time of reflection in the middle of the large park, and (3) a brief concluding ritual in the sanctuary around the baptismal font.

- (1) We gathered as a public witness, forming a circle on the beach as onlookers and beach walkers passed by. There we were reminded of the gift of water as central to creation and to our own lives and listened to a reading from Psalm 104. The hearing of Scriptures both calls us together and prompts us to act in particular ways. We introduced ourselves by name and by listing a way that we frequently use water (bathing, making coffee, swimming, watering plants, etc.). While the group sang, I took a bucket and went into the ocean to fill it with water. When I returned, I led the group as we walked off the beach and made our way through the streets of town.
- (2) A portion of the walk follows a foot path through a city park that runs alongside Nye Creek. We paused about halfway through the park to share reflections on what we had seen on the walk. Participants were invited to name aloud sights

and sounds that they had noticed on the walk. A primary goal is to encourage participants to anticipate and to attend to the divine presence in creation.

- (3) We processed into the sanctuary, where the water was carried to the chancel and slowly poured into the baptismal font. We were reminded that in baptism we are named as God's beloved children and invited to care for one another and for creation as part of our Christian discipleship. To conclude our time together, we were invited to come to the font and take a beach rock that had been placed in the font as a reminder of sharing this experience together.

The goal was to create a shared experience in which participants learn to link baptism with their experiences of the sacred in nature by (1) building associations and creating kinesthetic memories that will shape ritual participation in future gatherings (e.g., how does the memory of carrying water and walking into the sanctuary shape future experiences of walking into the building and gatherings around the baptismal font); (2) prompting participants to identify and name their sensory experiences as part of a spiritual pilgrimage; and (3) linking baptism and discipleship with acts of caring for the earth.

Next Steps

One short water walk is not going to save the planet, nor is it even likely to make permanent changes in the lives of the participants. Instead, it offers an opportunity to stop and reflect at a critical juncture on the role that our communities of faith and our actions as individuals play in the world. Each congregation could look for a nearby water source and create its own water walk as a way of strengthening awareness about our dependence on clean water for every aspect of our lives.

For Reformed Christians, the challenge of saying "yes" to the world requires us to change the ways that we have privileged spirituality over materiality and accepted distinctions between the sacred and secular. While this will require significant shifts to the ways in which we have defined believing, behaving, and belonging, our historic emphasis on Word and Sacrament offers a guide to us on this journey. Scripture's constant witness to the earth as the place to encounter the divine challenges the privatized, individualistic hermeneutic that seeks to escape this world in order to reach a "higher plane."

Similarly, the physical presence of water, bread, and wine (even in their frequently minimized form in many of our congregations) continues to confront us in the celebration of the sacraments and demands that our senses and bodies respond to the practices at the center of Christian faith and life.

It is my hope that developing ritual experiences like a water walk will provide an important way to reframe and reclaim our communal practices in ways that align them with the ethical challenges that face us. Such a move will help Christian communities discover our own unique voices, but will also open up opportunities for us to partner on critical ethical issues with people of other faith traditions.¹⁰

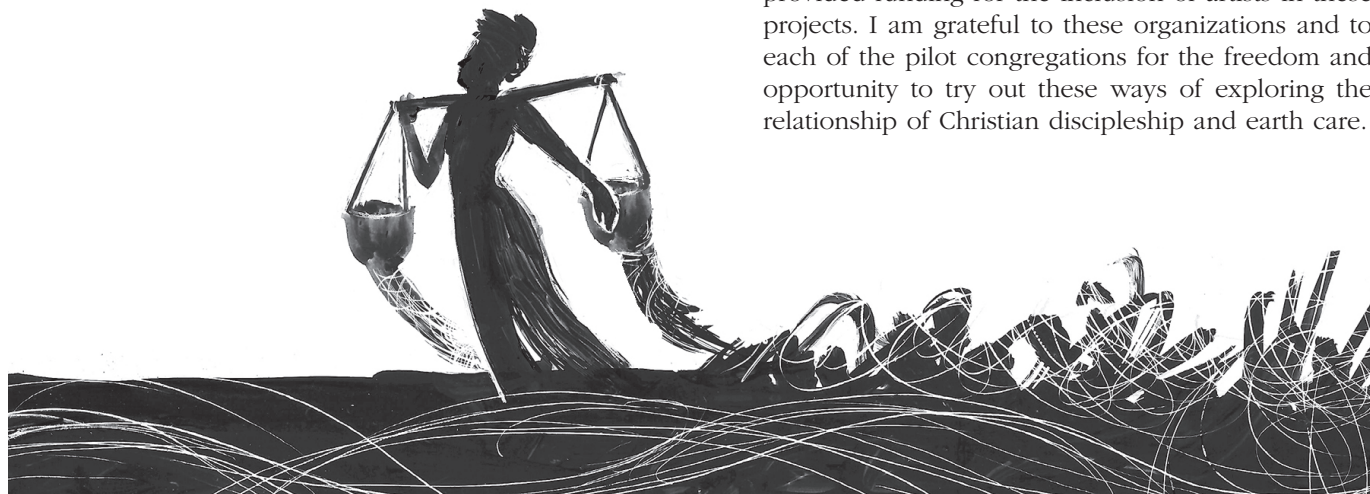
Editor's note: You can view Water Walk: Linking Creation Care with Discipleship, a brief film about Paul Galbreath's water walk in Newport, Oregon, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ry7QkyDnA&t=36s>.

Notes

1. See Paul Galbreath, *Re-Forming the Liturgy: Past, Present, and Future* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 132–33.
2. Didache, VII, www.thedidache.com.
3. Linda Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 24.
4. “Interfaith Summit Seeks Spiritual Activism,” https://www.pilotonline.com/news/article_8847371d-d6b2-5962-b0f3-401405ee4182.html.
5. In an interview Josephine recalled hearing a prophecy that urged listeners to respond to the need to protect the water: “It was in 2000 when Eddie Benton was at this big gathering in Pipestone, Minnesota, where we go for our sun dances. He was one of the speakers at the gathering to the people there, and he talked about the prophecy—that 30 years from now, an

ounce of water is going to cost the same as an ounce of gold if we continue with our negligence. [He] talked about how women have to start working to pick up their bundles about the water, and how water is going to be so precious that there might even be wars about water. When he finished talking, he said, ‘What are you going to do about it?’ to all the people.” See Kim Anderson, “Aboriginal Women, Water and Health: Reflections from Eleven First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Grandmothers,” (a paper commissioned by the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health and the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence, 2010), p. 28, www.pwhce.ca/pdf/womenAndWater.pdf.

6. “Anishinabek Nation Mourns the Loss of Grandmother Water Walker Josephine Mandamin,” *Manitoulin Expositor*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.manitoulin.ca/anishinabek-nation-mourns-the-loss-of-grandmother-water-walker-josephine-mandamin/>.
7. See nibiwalk.org. To get a picture of these walks, watch a video from the St. Louis River Walk at <https://vimeo.com/115937651>.
8. I learned of attempts to incorporate aspects of the Nibi Walks from a recent presentation at American Academy of Religion by Kiara Jorgenson entitled “I Speak for the Water: Ojibwe Nibi Grandmothers and Watershed Discipleship in Midwestern Protestant Communities.” She reported the use of Nibi songs in Christian communities and a water walk for ELCA members along the Minehaha Creek led by Sharon Day. The goals for this walk were to (1) disrupt the ordinary, (2) provide a new noticing of water, and (3) attend to the image of water as spirit.
9. Paul Galbreath, *Leading into the World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).
10. This project has been generously funded by a teacher-scholar grant from the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship that made my visits to congregations in the Pacific Northwest possible and by a grant from the Howie Center for Theology, Science, and Art that provided funding for the inclusion of artists in these projects. I am grateful to these organizations and to each of the pilot congregations for the freedom and opportunity to try out these ways of exploring the relationship of Christian discipleship and earth care.



Amy E. Gray

On Weekly Communion and Invitation to Christ

Tom Trinidad

I suspect every Christian would agree that the value of a text can be assessed in part by the questions it answers. “Bible only” Christians return over and over to the sacred Scriptures looking for guidance. Others of us also include testimonies from the “tradition” or the confessions of the church. Even more broadly, some of us have favorite devotional writers or works of fiction to which we turn for answers to our questions.

In the spring of 2020, the church—and indeed all faith communities around the world—was forced into a time of questioning. A novel coronavirus had provoked the worldwide pandemic known as COVID-19. The disease has caused periods of quarantine during which communities of faith have been advised against or prohibited from meeting, and later only in groups of limited size and activity.

Churches, mosques, synagogues, retreat centers, even small groups have been faced with a number of questions including: How can we maintain community, how can we minister to one another, how can we receive from our faith community the resources upon which we have come to depend to sustain and nourish our spiritual lives? For many Christian fellowships, the question about sacramental observance has taken center stage. How can we celebrate baptism and the Lord’s Supper and other related sacramental worship including funerals, weddings, and ordinations?

Back in 2006 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) published a study entitled *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table, A Guide to Sacramental Practices*. It was the result of a three-year investigation by theologians and pastors who were responding to a particular question: What is the relationship between baptism and the Lord’s Supper? More specifically, is it necessary to have received baptism before receiving the bread and cup of communion?

In answer to these questions *ITC*, as it came to be abbreviated, was commended for study and practice among congregations in the PC(USA). A website was created in which congregations could share the results of their engagement with the five simple practices that form the foundation of *Invitation to Christ*. In subsequent years *ITC* would be observed to have contributed to a season of sacramental renewal in the PC(USA) that would lead to the development of a new hymnal, a revised Directory for Worship, and a revised worship book.

In 2012 the Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship, comprised of Reformed denominations beyond but including the PC(USA), edited *Invitation to Christ* to answer a new question: Would a wider audience of congregations also benefit from these five simple disciplines, even if they were not asking the original questions posed by the Presbyterians? The Association’s *Invitation to Christ—Extended* was the result.

So, in the spring of 2020, when congregations were faced with the question about sacramental celebration in the age of COVID-19, some of us turned once again to *Invitation to Christ*. It again proved to be, in its most recent “extension,” a valuable resource. This article will present some of the salient points from *ITC-X* (as fans affectionately abbreviate it) to the question of virtual sacramental celebrations.

Invitation to Christ presents five sacramental practices in which congregations are encouraged to participate and upon which they then reflect. It is essentially a curriculum for a modern *mystagogy*, instruction following sacramental celebration intended to continue one’s spiritual formation. These five practices are to

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that is direct, concrete, and compelling.”

- (1) set the font in full view of the congregation
- (2) open the font and fill it with water every Lord’s Day
- (3) set cup and plate on the Lord’s table every Lord’s Day
- (4) lead appropriate parts of weekly worship from the font and table
- (5) increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated

Already we have a criterion for any consideration of sacramental celebration while in quarantine. The congregation must be able to see what is in “full view,” namely the font, the water, the table, the plate and cup, and the liturgical leader. At the very least, then, sanctuaries must have video and audio streaming equipment, and members of the congregation must have access to this stream.

The biblical basis for *ITC-X* comes from the encounter of two disciples with the risen Christ while walking on the road to Emmaus as presented in Luke 24:13–35. The risen Christ joins the two and teaches them from Scripture. Arriving at their destination he then breaks bread with them and they suddenly recognize him. Combining shared journey, Word, and sacrament, Christ is more fully known by the disciples. Thus, “The Emmaus story holds together different and indispensable ways of human knowing: hearing and sensing, word and symbol, Scripture and sacrament” (*ITC-X*, p. 6).¹

The five sacramental practices presented in the context of a worshiping community are intended to emulate this original pattern of formation. To encounter the triune God through the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit is the purpose of the sacraments. By augmenting cognitive knowledge, the sacraments offer us an experience with God that satisfies our spiritual hunger for God. “In an age of spiritual hunger, the sacraments help the church extend the gospel’s invitation to know and follow Jesus Christ in a way that is direct, concrete, and compelling” (p. 12).

Our culture maintains an appetite for the spiritual as evidenced by claims some make to be “spiritual but not religious.” One hears this self-designation not only from people who have become disenchanted

by institutional religion but also among those who do not feel the need to participate in worship. Sacramental worship stands in stark contrast to this idea. One is spiritual by being religious when the sacraments are celebrated. Sacraments are expressly religious in that they involve (1) sacred objects (2) ritually handled (3) by a community of believers. All three of these characteristics bear on the question of whether and how the church can celebrate the sacraments.

Sacred objects are found throughout the Bible, and *ITC-X* identifies many of them in the “Scripture and Sacraments” section. Objects are sacred depending on their function and use. We understand the bread of communion to be sacred because on several occasions Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. One function of this bread is to bring us into remembrance of him as he instructed at the Last Supper (see *ITC-X*, p. 15, 29).

We consider the water of baptism to be sacred because of the many ways water is used by God throughout the Bible. From the first day of creation to the last day of Jesus’ life to the vision of our eternity with God, water figures prominently in stories of life, death, rebirth, cleansing, refreshing, transition, and paradise (see *ITC-X*, pp. 14, 29).

Objects that are sacred by their function and use share in common first, that they are gifts of God, and second, that they are drawn from creation. “[T]he sacraments are fundamentally about gift, about God’s abundant grace” (p. 30). Because sacraments are gifts it is right to receive them as such. Since they are gifts of God over which the church is merely a steward, we cannot withhold the sacraments except perhaps with only very compelling justification.

At the same time, as the sacraments are gifts of God, we are not entitled to them. This understanding is at odds with the values of our consumer society in which “we are inclined to understand the bread, wine, and water of the church’s sacraments as spiritual goods available for distribution to individuals who desire them” (p. 37). During quarantines, the church may explore whether this consumer mentality is at work when members “just want communion” but cannot articulate why.

The sacraments are gifts from God but also gifts from creation. In sacramental celebrations we incorporate elements from the natural world into our worship of God. In this way the sacraments remind us of the interdependence that God has woven into existence. They testify that all of life is a gift from God, and even so, they call us to good and faithful stewardship over all life—our own lives and the life of the world.

On one hand, as we worship with sacraments, “we celebrate our embodied selves as creatures of the earth” (p. 29). And on the other hand, “as ordinary things made holy, water, bread, and wine turn us toward and not away from our fragile planet home” (p. 31). Creation is essential to the sacraments, and so any contingency of the environment, whether the result of natural

or human causes, underlies our celebrations. The sacraments evoke these realities to mind, and while they may still be able to do so in a virtual setting, such messages might actually be more powerfully experienced in their absence.

Ritually handling sacred objects is part of what makes them sacraments and means of grace. The primary means of proclaiming God’s gracious good news is through the Word read and proclaimed. Even so, “sacraments make the word of God more clearly known by adding sight, taste, touch, and action to the mere hearing of God’s Word” (p. 23). The “action” that is added to God’s Word is essential because of the embodied nature of the sacramental symbols—the water, bread and wine, along with our own bodies and the bodies of the created order.

Action is also important as an embodiment of faith. Adults who hear God’s calling and request baptism, and those who come forward to answer God’s invitation to the table, are all participating in the action of the sacraments that also embodies their faith.

Action, that is, ritual handling, makes the sacraments real, personal, and alive. Action is to the sacraments as imagination is to the hearing

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of God’s Word. On the road to Emmaus Christ helped the disciples imagine a new way of interpreting Scripture and understanding his death. Their hearts burned within them on the road, but they could not articulate it until they took part in the action of Christ breaking bread at the table.

The necessity of ritual handling helps Reformed churches avoid reducing the presence of Christ and the Spirit to static elements of water, bread, and wine. Without ritual handling, water, bread, and wine cannot be sacraments. The water must be parted. The bread must be broken and given. The wine must be poured. Just as John Calvin identified the church as wherever God’s Word was proclaimed and believed, so also the sacraments have to be “administered” [ritually handled]

according to Christ’s institution (see *Institutes*, 4.1.9; *ITC-X*, p. 30).

The hearing of the Word can be a very secret and solitary experience. Not so the sacraments. God ordinarily speaks to us through the Word read and proclaimed. We receive this Word through reading and listening, and usually our initial response to it is cognitive. Reading, listening, and thinking can be more active or passive, but they may also be very private, even in public. Because sacraments are ritually handled it is necessarily a public display. Ritual handling of the sacred objects of bread and wine is what Jesus intended when he said to “do this in remembrance of me.” We have many examples of Jesus expecting his disciples to remember things (see e.g., Matt. 28:20, Mark 8:18, John 15:20). And upon reflection, especially after his resurrection, the disciples do “remember” Jesus’ words in a new way (see John 2:13–22).

But the sacraments offer us more than mere thinking and remembering. It is in the doing of them, the public ritual handling of sacred objects, that we know God in a different way. “The auditory and verbal learning that happens through words is amplified when we can use our other senses of sight,

touch, smell, and taste in the church's sacraments" (*ITC-X*, p. 37). Remembering in a liturgical sense is already more than simple cognitive recall, and *ITC-X* notes this: "The Greek word for 'remember,' *anamesis*, means more than simply calling a memory to mind, but has a more active sense of making present through enactment" (p. 19, note 6).

But the knowing that occurs through the doing of a sacrament is even more particular. In the Emmaus story, the disciples recognize Jesus when he breaks the bread. We might expect them to remember something he said (and of course the Gospels want us to remember the stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes, in which he also took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it). But he had already spent the walk instructing them from the Hebrew Scriptures. Now, Luke tells us, they recognize him. The Greek is *epiginóskó*, "to know," but with an intensifying prefix. It is knowledge specifically related to the act, to the doing, to the ritual handling of the sacred object.

With regards to the possibility of virtual communion, the question to which these insights from *ITC-X* direct us is: Does the ritual handling of the sacred objects of bread and cup require the shared physical presence of the community of believers? If the answer is no, then virtual communion remains a possible alternative to traditional liturgical gatherings. But what of the third characteristic of sacramental celebrations, the community of believers?

At the time *ITC-X* was written, congregations were meeting ordinarily on Sundays and routinely for celebrations of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Recall that the fifth of the recommended sacramental practices is increasing the number of Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated. So the situation in which we found ourselves with the COVID-19 quarantines rests far outside the imagination of *ITC-X*. The possibility of virtual communion was at the time only a fringe interest among some Internet users.

Since the quarantines the question has become paramount, especially for those congregations that are accustomed to frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper. The possibility of virtual communion assumes the possibility of virtual community, specifically a virtual community of believers, necessary for the sacrament to be the sacrament. What insights does *ITC-X* have to offer with regards to these possibilities?

The sacraments are part of the church's answer to what *ITC-X* identifies as a spiritual hunger within our culture. This hunger includes the longing for "community . . . ministry and mission . . . a world made right . . . hospitality . . . evangelism . . . peace." These expressions of spiritual hunger and how the sacraments address them all assume the presence of a gathered community in *ITC-X*. "The sacraments establish community and embody the gift of shared communal life for which people hunger" (p. 38).

Our spiritual hunger reflects the larger condition of sin in which we exist. We are alienated from God, from one another, and even from ourselves, as Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich described it. And while there is this spiritual hunger in our culture, there is also a significant challenge: individualism. A "fierce individualism makes the inherently communal nature of the sacramental life together in the church hard to comprehend and even harder to practice" (p. 37).

While there is this spiritual hunger in our culture, there is also a significant challenge: individualism. A "fierce individualism makes the inherently communal nature of the sacramental life together in the church hard to comprehend and even harder to practice."

The sacraments are part of the church's solution to the problem of sin and our spiritual longing because they proclaim, establish, and maintain the community that is covenanted with the God of salvation. "We sinful people come to Word and Sacrament in need of redemption, and in the sacraments we encounter and receive reconciliation with God and one another. . . . In Baptism, we enter into the covenant life as disciples of Jesus Christ. At the table, God feeds us and calls us into community where we renew our covenant promises" (p. 28).

According to Reformed theology, the covenantal unity that we have with God and with one another is affected by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as we require the blessing of the Spirit to hear God's Word, so we depend on the power of the Spirit to encounter the divine in the sacraments.

We recognize that “God is indeed free to convert, save, and liberate in whatever way suits the divine purpose, but that does not lessen the power and centrality of the Word rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered to nourish, guide, and empower Christians” (*ITC-X*, p. 31).

The truths of God’s Word regarding our reconciliation with God and one another are dependent on the Spirit’s blessing, and they are proclaimed through the sacraments. These spiritual truths are communicated through the use of material means including water, bread, wine, ritual action, and, lest we forget, the church as the body of Christ. We ourselves are a necessary part of the sacramental celebration. We are part of the embodied truths of the sacraments.

Sacramental worship is the means by which the church as covenant community uniquely witnesses to the reign of God.

Sacramental worship is the means by which the church as covenant community uniquely witnesses to the reign of God. The sacraments remind us of our unity together in Christ. They create opportunities to pursue reconciliation when necessary, to exercise forbearance with one another, and to be sent into the world as God’s reconciling ambassadors. “The movement of the sacraments is always twofold—into the center of the gathering and out again into the world” (p. 31).

With these insights from *ITC-X* regarding the nature of the community of believers, we are better equipped to answer the question about the ritual handling of sacred objects and the possibility of virtual communion. The elements of communion are taken, blessed, broken (as to the bread), poured (as to the cup), and given. Implied and necessarily, they are also received. These represent the ritual handling of the sacred objects by the community of believers that make sacraments what they are.

As the sacraments bind us together in covenantal unity with God and one another, then send us out to bear witness to the reign of God in the world, they include the community of believers as necessary elements. The community of believers is as necessary as the water in baptism, the bread and wine of communion, and the ritual handling of these sacred objects. Emulating this reality in a

virtual context without compromising some of the meaning and purpose of the sacrament may pose an insurmountable challenge.

If that is the case, if liturgical leaders determine that too much is jeopardized in the offering of some form of virtual communion, what consolation can they offer those who deeply desire the benefits of the Lord’s Supper?

The first assurance such congregations should receive is what Calvin affirms and *ITC-X* also acknowledges, “that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us. . . .” (*Institutes*, 4.14.17; *ITC-X*, p. 32). In other words, the resurrected Christ whom we encounter in the sacraments is present to us also in the Word read and proclaimed. While we may yearn for sacramental celebration, and while God has provided sacramental celebration for our edification, Christ is no less present to us when we have heard God’s Word read and proclaimed, which can be done in present actuality or virtually, live or recorded.

Secondly, there is inherent value in our longing for the sacrament. The third sacramental discipline urged by *ITC-X* is to set the Lord’s table every Lord’s Day, whether or not the sacrament is celebrated, with the plate and cup. “Even empty, they may speak to us of our hunger for Christ who feeds us at this table” (p. 7). The absence of communion on a Sunday, or the abstention from communion during a quarantine, serves to awaken our desire for and direct our longing to God’s presence.

This dissatisfaction is part of the nature of sacraments themselves. Symbols of the reign of God, like all symbols, reach a point of deficiency. Sacraments point to, even participate in, the reality which makes them sacred objects. But they do not encapsulate that reality, and part of their power and purpose is to generate in us a longing for that reality. “The sacraments rehearse the way things ought to be, the way God has promised they will be—and in fact the way things already are, if only we have eyes to see. Practicing them, we become unable to be satisfied with less, with living in a world of violence and pain, discrimination and meaninglessness. And so we welcome the outcast and provide shelter to the homeless because we know that in God’s future reign, all will sit together at the great welcome table” (p. 32).

Even if the sacrament is only suggested by an empty table setting or not included in virtual worship, the sacraments nonetheless can serve this purpose—perhaps even more than when they are actually celebrated. The sacraments present God’s promises, promises that are real but yet to be fulfilled. They redirect our hope, hope that is present but future-oriented. They reveal our inadequacy while proclaiming God’s adequacy. They affirm our dependence upon God and compel our interdependence upon creation and one another.

It is the nature of the sacraments both to satisfy and to arouse our hunger and thirst for righteousness. Abstaining from celebrating the Lord’s Supper, whether for reasons of baptismal preparation, the need for reconciliation with another (see Matt. 5:23–24), a feeling of contrition, or while

observing quarantine, can be spiritually beneficial for the increased longing it kindles within us for God and God’s reign.

Invitation to Christ, in both its original and extended forms, has proved its faithfulness in offering guidance through various questions of sacramental practice. Besides clarifying the relationship between baptism and Lord’s Supper, and encouraging and equipping sacramental renewal, *ITC-X* continues to help the church navigate our way through new challenges around font and table. Thanks be to God.

Note

1. Page numbers for quotations from *Invitation to Christ—Extended* are from the document included in this issue of *Call to Worship*.

Why Bother with the Book of Common Worship?

Ronald Byars

When early in pastoral ministry I first realized that my growing interest in the practice, history, and theology of the church's Sunday worship was shared by at least a few other people, I was both surprised and delighted. Nevertheless, in Presbyterian circles, the accent fell on the "few"—at least, in my acquaintance. As early as the first edition of the *Service for the Lord's Day*, in 1964, critics exhibited suspicion of anything that might be described as "liturgical." Presbyterian theologian James Hastings Nichols expressed his indignation.

And are we to be delivered into the hands
of the ecclesiastical milliners and the Ladies'
Altar Guild with the "colors of the season"? . . .
Surely these are borrowed feathers.¹

And, a similarly prominent voice from a future Moderator of the General Assembly charged that

the "pristine purity" of the "sources" which
are cited with such reverence mean no more
and no less than "from a long time ago." . . .
The D.A.R. state of mind in the church
skirts dangerously close to superstition.²

One might detect in both quotes a familiar theme at the time: that liturgical concerns reflect a kind of effeminacy, a quality clearly not meant to be admired.

In the same era, discussions among ministers could easily lead to indirect as well as direct suggestions that colleagues who were interested in liturgical issues were likely to be those who were failing as preachers. Such as, from the future Moderator, "Forms and rituals offer those who are

groping some support. . . ."³ The suggestion seems to be that anything beyond the liturgical status quo of the era presumably served as a diversion, a method by which preachers "who are groping" could find a substitute to redirect the attention of their congregations. Can't preach? Why not distract the congregation with "smells and bells"?

The same critic who was wary of "the D.A.R. state of mind" also declared that "for many reasons we might shrink from worship which threatens a direct experience of literal Christian reality."⁴

Even in 1964, one could not avoid the question of what "literal Christian reality" might mean. Is it meant to imply that it is possible to say something about God that is directly relatable in human speech without metaphor or simile, without making use of verbal images, in an analytic kind of prose that makes no use of story, song, parable, poetic form, or ritual? Or does it mean that a pulpit-centered liturgy that makes occasional use of font and table finds no use for indirection to testify to the truth? No need to tell it *slant*, as the poet Emily Dickinson declared? Is a lean service of prayers, hymns, Bible reading, sermon, and benediction something received directly from God rather than a product of specific histories, of decisions made "a long time ago"?

In the decades since 1964, Presbyterians and others have been exposed more frequently to worship that reflects classical liturgical forms, thanks to the Worship and Music Conferences offered by the Presbyterian Association of Musicians, as well as to broader acquaintance with the Directory for Worship and the 1993 and 2018 versions of the *Book of Common Worship*. Marney Wasserman notes that the incremental transformation that has been at work among us from as recently as the

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first publication of *Invitation to Christ*⁵ “reveals that the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* is equipping a different church for worship than the church its predecessor liturgical book addressed in 1993, over a quarter of a century ago.”⁶

Except among fundamentalists, no one who has studied Bible or theology, not to mention liturgical theology, is likely to imagine that there is such a thing as an unmediated “literal Christian reality,” much less any possibility of worship without ritual, whether it be simple or elaborate.

Among other possible misconceptions, it is very easy to think of worship as though what is at stake has something to do with making a sale. If that should be the case, then the means of making the sale might be getting the aesthetics “right,” on the presumption that “the customer is always right.”

Nevertheless, among other possible misconceptions, it is very easy to think of worship as though what is at stake has something to do with making a sale. If that should be the case, then the means of making the sale might be getting the aesthetics “right,” on the presumption that “the customer is always right.” The object would seem to be to please a consumer variously described. One consumer prefers so-called “high” culture, while another prefers “popular” culture. Since there seem to be more of the latter than of the former, the many published books that offer instruction on how to raise all the longed-for numbers tend to be oriented to strategizing about how to exploit popular culture in worship. But neither “high” nor “popular” culture is the issue here. If they were, the problem could be solved easily enough just as many of the fixers have suggested: multiple services targeting persons of different tastes, often shaped by their position on the generational timeline. But Christian worship at its heart is not about aesthetics, and not about closing a deal, and not about segregating people by taste or generational categories or any other. Nor is its value assessed by how much text worshippers do or do not read aloud off the page or screen, as though unison reading equates with “liturgy.”

Christian worship is first and foremost about God and meeting with God.

Christian worship is first and foremost about God and meeting with God. And not just any deity, but the triune God made known in Jesus Christ. This God is the One to whom all of Scripture testifies, making use of a variety of modes of written representation. This is the God whose identity and disposition towards human beings has been the object of the church’s reflection over many generations and from the perspectives of countless persons under an astonishing variety of circumstances. Fidelity to this triune God, rather than some other, as well as the integrity of our discipleship, requires that care be taken that we do not misrepresent God’s character and purpose as the gospel has led us to understand them, while acknowledging our human fallibility. A broad allowance ought to be made for personal limitations, but the teaching and mentoring church is a corporate body whose stewardship of holy things is part and parcel of its very identity. Accountable to God, an ecclesial body bears a heavier responsibility than any single individual. That responsibility includes the challenge as well as the risk of setting standards, formally and informally, knowing itself to be answerable to the God who has called it into covenant relationship.

The standards to which we owe particular attention are foundational and widely shared by the ecumenical church. These standards derive from basic theology—that is, speech about God—as represented in three authoritative sources:

- Scripture
- “Conciliar” theology, centered on the creeds/confessions and catechisms
- the theology that is embodied in liturgy

In a theological seminary, responsibility for teaching Scripture—both Testaments—is lodged in the Bible department. The theology department explores academic theology that makes use of organized thought, ancient and contemporary, to reflect on issues linked, ultimately, to varied “conciliar” affirmations—(those of councils, synods, etc.). In theological studies there will be some overlaps with the history department. Liturgical theology, in Protestant seminaries at least, is likely to be housed

in the practical theology department if it is taught at all.

“Practical” is a worthy and dignified designation that has to do with the importance of “practice” of all sorts: pastoral care, administration, church polity, preaching, and worship. However, in many seminaries faculty and students alike will perceive “practical” to mean something like “technique.” Bible is taken seriously, theology as well, but “technique” may seem to be of a decidedly secondary order. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a philosophical theologian in the Reformed tradition, has observed that

liturgical theology is significantly different from both biblical and conciliar-creedal theology. Liturgical theology does not contradict those other forms of theology; at many points, it overlaps them. But it has its own distinct configuration. . . .⁷

Wolterstorff offers a definition:

liturgical theology, as I understand it, is that site where the church, by means of the work of its theologians and philosophers, arrives at a self-understanding of the theology implicit and explicit in its liturgy.⁸

He further contends that, while biblically-based and conciliar theology have both been much discussed, “the distinct character of the authority of the liturgical dimension of the church’s tradition has been discussed less, and hardly at all by Protestants.”⁹ In other words, what happens in worship seems to have been written off as less important theologically, as though what we do in the assembly is a matter of indifference as long as whatever is done is undertaken with the right disposition—one might say, undertaken “from the heart.”

Sincerity, among some Protestants, has survived as the key liturgical virtue, deriving, as far as I can tell, from various forms of pietism in Protestant history, including that of the Puritans. Pietist movements have held that as long as one is earnest in one’s devotion, nothing else matters. Of course, that is true, in a narrow sense. For those who are committed, worship is possible even in daunting circumstances. But for a regularly scheduled assembly, a requirement that worship be sincere/earnest/heartfelt sets a high bar, as anyone capable of introspection should be able to testify.

Earnestness is not a steady state; it can be fleeting and is not easily scheduled, and the stresses of ordinary life and distractions of the moment can undermine it. God may be more gracious than scrupulous in measuring personal earnestness, if God measures that sort of thing at all. (In any case, the Bible would suggest that the best test of sincerity in worship is made after worship, in ordinary life; e.g., Amos 5:21–24.) And, although worship may certainly be an expression of a sincerely felt praise and thanksgiving, it is not only a matter of feelings coordinated to be expressed on schedule, as though we are all doing our private devotions at the same time in public.

Worship is something that the church, the body of Christ, *does*, and necessarily does differently than what one does when engaging in private prayer. We do it when in the mood for it and when we are not. We do it when happy or depressed, distracted or fully attentive, experienced or novices. We do it in language both homely and elevated. The accent is on the *doing*, together.

Worship is something that the church, the body of Christ, *does*, and necessarily does differently than what one does when engaging in private prayer. We do it when in the mood for it and when we are not. We do it when happy or depressed, distracted or fully attentive, experienced or novices. We do it in language both homely and elevated. The accent is on the *doing*, together. The form and content of worship as it has developed in the historic churches has developed organically, perhaps beginning with the dominical direction to “*do this* in remembrance of me.” The operative verb is “do,” not feel this, not explain this, not think about this, but *do* this. It is in the doing that the heart and core of the gospel is embodied—embedded specifically in what is done. Word and Sacrament. Speech and action. Spirit and body. All in a unique context in which past, present, and ultimate future are joined for a moment in a setting broader than any other setting to which we are exposed. The horizon of Christian worship

opens out to the eternal, to the ultimate object of Christian hope: a new creation. “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!”¹⁰

In short, it is in the assembly on the Lord’s Day where the theological rubber hits the road. The theological student’s study of Bible and academic theology reach their intended landing point here, in the midst of the living church, forming us for our shared mission in the world. And yet, they cannot land here direct from the classroom. They need to be re-formed into a liturgical mode that is existentially apprehensible: that is, in various ways that engage body, mind, and spirit. Both the Bible and the professed theology of the church (rather than some alien theology)¹¹ meet and take shape in the form of a more or less scripted set of actions performed in and by the worshiping assembly. What is at stake is the faith of the church, which is particularly challenged in this era when the most visible options for faith seem to be either various fundamentalisms associated with hegemonic sorts of tribalism, or, on the other hand, religious skepticism—a recoiling from faith—that offers itself as the inevitable alternative. In such a confusing environment, it may seem prudent to treat the gospel as though it had to do only with the *teachings* of Jesus, as though his death, resurrection, and promise of the renewal of all things¹² were too risky to put out there for fear of identifying ourselves with repugnant forms of Christianity that we may have overheard accidentally from a radio preacher before quickly changing the station. By contrast, *Invitation to Christ* invites us to rediscover the sacraments, in which we meet the person of Christ, who is not separable from his teachings, but rather embodies them in who he is and what he does.

Invitation to Christ invites us to rediscover the sacraments, in which we meet the person of Christ, who is not separable from his teachings, but rather embodies them in who he is and what he does.

It may help keep us on the right path if we will remember that the invitation the sacraments extend is an invitation not just to water, not just to bread and wine, but to Christ himself who becomes present through these elements.¹³

Sacraments, considered at a distance, are odd things. Their oddness is, in fact, a virtue, in that it may cause one to pause and take a second, more careful look. The oddness lies in the fact that these curious actions lead us directly to the person of Jesus Christ in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promise to come again. Because they do that, they serve to remind Reformed people that preaching must meet the same standard, also leading to Christ himself, even though it might prove tempting in a time of doubt to present him only in the more culturally acceptable role of an instructor in ethics and, as such, a social visionary. Indeed, the sacraments, as long as they are held intact, complement and reinforce the sacramental character of preaching.¹⁴

It is in the worshiping assembly where the greater number of Christians are most likely to be formed as Christ’s disciples week by week. It is not only formal Bible study or group discussion of a theological book that shape our sense of God’s identity, God’s disposition toward us and the world, and a dawning sense of how God’s mission shapes our shared mission. It is in the liturgical *doing* that we “know”—brush up against—the triune God who has called us together and graciously meets us in Word and Sacrament: speech, bodily presence, washing, eating and drinking, song and gesture.

The Lord’s Day liturgy is sensitive and adaptable to a variety of cultural contexts, and it may take either very simple or more complex forms without losing its integrity. But it is easily subverted if it should be taken to be only a jumble of “techniques,” tools assembled indiscriminately *this way or that to draw a crowd or win its approval*. Nor is the object of worship to seek as much novelty as possible, avoiding repetition as though the closely interwoven theological themes that derive from Scripture and communally shared theological affirmations can be expected to be reproduced in a novel way every Sunday, depending only on the learning and ingenuity of whoever planned this week’s service or will preside over it.

A ritual that contains repetition within its structure, such as the repetition of words or actions, facilitates the internalization of the ritual’s content in many ways. . . . Reiterating the same gestures and the same formulas in identical circumstances and following a fairly regular periodic rhythm, it implants the

values of the group into the body of each member.¹⁵

Theology—what we have to say about God—matters. Theology can lead us or mislead us. Biblical and conciliar theology are embedded and encountered in an experiential form in the liturgy, that third pillar required to support the faith recognizable as the faith of the church. The shape, form, and basic content of that liturgy matter theologically, and thus essentially. Service books such as the *Book of Common Worship* take seriously the grand sweep of ecumenical tradition viewed through reformed and reforming lenses. What has been preserved, in one form or another, has survived the tests of time and circumstance, as well as biblical and theological scrutiny.

To engage in theological reflection on Word and Sacrament is to do theology in its proper context in the life of the church, and in the common language of the church's worship as it gathers week by week around pulpit, font, and table.¹⁶

The primary reason for being or becoming interested in the liturgy of the Lord's Day is not making a sale. Neither is it aesthetics, whether of a masculine or feminine sort, should such categories actually exist—nor is it compensation for those who are unsuccessful in their preaching, nor, for musicians, is it to find the most hospitable framework for whatever music one already knows and loves. It is simply this: it is here that we encounter most often, most consistently, and most personally the foundational theology that testifies to the triune God. And we encounter it experientially, sometimes vividly but often subtly. One learns it over time—absorbs it—just as one practices playing scales in order, eventually, to make music.

Notes

1. James Hastings Nichols, "Is the New 'Service' Reformed?" *Theology Today* 21 (October 1964): 365–366.
2. George E. Sweazey, "On the New 'Service for the Lord's Day,'" *Monday Morning* 29 (April 20, 1964): 5. Sweazey later became Moderator of the 181st General Assembly of the UPCUSA.
3. *Ibid.*, 18.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Invitation to Christ: A Guide to Sacramental Practices* (Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2006).
6. Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts* 53.2 (2019): 37.
7. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 166.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.
9. *Ibid.*, 165–166.
10. Office of Theology and Worship for the PCUSA, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 27.
11. Gal. 1:6–7. "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you. . . ."
12. Matt. 19:28.
13. *Invitation to Christ—Extended: A Guide to Sacramental Practices at Font and Table* (Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship, 2012), 11. Adapted with permission from *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table: A Guide to Sacramental Practices*. 2006.
14. Miroslav Volf, a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, laments the way the absence of the Eucharist affects preaching. He is "disturbed by the failure of many preachers to make the center of the Christian faith the center of their proclamation." While some of them may be tempted to "redesign the Sacraments," when sacraments are left intact, they "point straight back to Christ's suffering on the cross. . . . By drawing the church back to the cross of Christ, the Eucharist furnishes the church with resources to resist the injustice, deceitfulness and violence that mark the world for which Christ died." Miroslav Volf, "Proclaiming the Lord's Death," *The Christian Century* (March 3, 1999): 253.
15. Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 162–3.
16. *Invitation to Christ—Extended*, 13.



On Liturgy: The Posture of Receiving

Kendra Buckwalter Smith

From the earliest encounters of humanity with God, we have been trying to take our life into our own hands. In the garden, the serpent told Eve that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would not bring death, but rather would make her like God. In prideful ambition, seeing that the tree was to be desired, Eve reached out and grasped the fruit, taking it for herself (Gen. 3:1–7). We’ve been grasping for our desires ever since. When the Lord’s regard for offerings seemed unfair, Cain grasped for favor over Abel (Gen. 4:1–16); swindling from Esau, Jacob grasped for blessing and inheritance (Gen. 25, 27); and even as the very presence of God walked alongside them, the disciples argued, grasping for status (Mark 9:33–34; Luke 9:46; Matt. 18:1).

Certainly, this kind of grasping is prevalent in the academy. Members of the seminary community I serve inevitably experience an emphasis on personal performance and accomplishment—ideas are learned and developed, papers completed, exams taken, grades earned. Yet this emphasis is not limited to academic institutions. So much of society is structured around ambition, on identifying what we want and reaching out to grasp it for ourselves. This directs us away from the needs of those around us as well as the actual needs that reside deep within our own souls. The world conditions us to trust in all sorts of little saviors—in our own abilities and hard work, in our health, in financial resources, in anything that gives us a sense of success and security. We know well that all these false saviors can so easily slip through our fingers, yet we remain determined to take life into our own hands. The trouble is that this blinds us to the presence of Christ at work in our midst because we are too busy looking for salvation elsewhere. That

is why we are invited to the Lord’s Table time and time again. It is there that Christ promises to meet us, to welcome us as we are, and to redirect us toward his claim on our lives. “In sin, people claim mastery of their own lives, turn against God and each other, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. They lose their humanity in futile striving and are left in rebellion, despair, and isolation.”¹ Yet when we approach the Lord’s Table, such selfish striving has no place. What is offered at this table is not something that we can work towards, earn, or exploit. Rather, what we find there is grace, which can only be received as a gift. And receiving necessitates a certain posture.

We cannot receive if our hands are clenched tightly around that which we have claimed for ourselves. We can only receive what is offered with open hands. The grace of God’s kingdom is far more than something you or I can clench in our fists and keep for ourselves. The kingdom is not something we take hold of, but something that takes hold of us. Though God is beyond our grasp, God continues to reach out to us in this meal reclaiming our lives, nourishing us in every need, and conditioning us into a new way of being.

And so, we approach the Table, hungry for God’s grace, not reaching out to take it for ourselves, but opening our hands to receive it. A sibling in Christ, knowing well that this grace is given for all, takes a piece of the bread, places it in our open hands with the assuring words, “You are a beloved child of God. This is Christ’s body given for you.” This is why we worship together. In and by the presence of Christ’s gathered body, we are invited to experience the truths about God and about ourselves that on our own we often fail to see. This is not to say that we need a mediator in order to receive God’s grace.

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We do, however, need the blessed community into which God has called us to keep pointing us to that grace.

This is why at the seminary we have chosen to invite communion servers to place a piece of the loaf in the open hands of each worshiper rather than asking worshipers to take the bread for themselves. It is an embodied reminder of the truth that when we try to reach out and take for ourselves, we place our trust in anything but the Savior we meet here.

The sacraments extend to us an invitation to encounter and receive the reality of that which Christ alone has accomplished. To be sure, it is an invitation that asks of us a certain vulnerability. We approach the sacraments not with entitlement, but as those who know our broken selves all too well. That can be scary. When we are asked to posture ourselves to receive, we also have to release our grasp on all our own attempts at success and security. Yet we find that empty space filled with the very bread of life. And as we receive it, we are prepared to receive all of life as a gift. We find that our broken lives have been enfolded into the life of the triune God. We find that we are given a place

at God's Table to share in the abundant banquet of transforming love and grace. And we find that none of this comes to us by our own reaching, but by the God who graciously reaches out to us in love.

No matter what you have been striving for or what you have been holding onto, Christ keeps welcoming you back to his Table. No matter what other savior has abandoned you, leaving you empty and fearful and insecure, Christ keeps pouring into your open hands again and again. The biblical narrative and our own experience show that for all our grasping, we cannot take our lives into our own hands. Yet God still sought Adam and Eve in the garden; God marked Cain with protection; of Jacob, God made a great nation; and through the disciples God's Word has been proclaimed through the ages. This same God continues to reach out to each of us in abundant grace. May we open our hands to receive him.

Note

1. *The Confession of 1967—Inclusive Language Version* (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002), Part I, Section A, 2.

On Preaching: Timely Preaching?

Buz Wilcoxon

Thank you, Pastor; that sure was a timely sermon.” How often have ministers heard something of this sort when shaking hands in the narthex after worship? A timely sermon? I suspect when this phrase is uttered by beloved worship leavers, it usually means that the preacher did a fine job of drawing connections between the biblical text and current events going on at the national or local level. I suspect, however, that I am not the only one to have sat through or even preached through some “timely sermons” that really missed the mark. In seeking to come across as “ripped from the headlines” some such homiletical offerings have felt quite disconnected from the timeliness of circumstances that worshipers are experiencing. It may be an election year, but it’s also a season of separation and divorce for that family. An atrocity may have been uttered on Twitter, but this is also the first anniversary for a family who lost its matriarch. Congress may be considering a crucial vote, but her son is in rehab, his dad’s dementia is getting worse, they are having to file for bankruptcy, her daughter just came out, he is failing out of college. While no one sermon could or should ever be able to speak directly into all of our diverse life circumstances, I’ve been wondering recently about where (or maybe when) our temporal focus should fall for truly timely preaching.

As I write this reflection, we are fully in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic that is touching nearly every strand of our world, our nation, and our congregations. A colleague of mine has begun using the term “Corona-tide” to describe the nonliturgical season that we are thrust into as pastors, musicians, and church professionals. It has been extremely moving to see how so many church leaders are exercising timely creativity and faithful imagination

in navigating the difficulties of this crisis in their communities of faith. Many are experimenting with online worship for the first time. Some are leading worship from their homes, others from empty sanctuaries. We’ve long professed the truth that the church is not a building but the people, and yet we are all struggling with how to be the church when our people cannot be together in one place. “For everything there is a season,” but we sure are ready for this season to come to an end.

In our congregation, we discovered that it works best to prerecord our Sunday services and load them onto websites in advance. Most weeks we have been recording our services on Fridays but not “premiering” them until Sunday mornings at our regular worship time. While we have gotten used to the pattern a bit, it is still very disorienting to be leading worship days before the time our congregation will gather together electronically. I have begun to feel as if these worship services are occurring in a time machine. Through some quirk of quantum liturgical physics, it is both Friday and Sunday at the same time. For scheduling purposes, we needed to record our Easter Sunday worship service even earlier on the morning of Maundy Thursday, which meant that for the five of us in the sanctuary that morning, Jesus had risen (in our service) before he had even died (on the liturgical calendar). As I left the house that morning my spouse said, “He is risen,” and I responded, “He will have been risen, indeed.” I can’t even begin to remember what Greek verb tense that would be.

The last time we had worshipers in the sanctuary—weeks and weeks ago—a saint of the church leaving worship said, “Thank you, Pastor; that sure was a timely sermon.” I wonder now what she would say. What would I say to her?

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Is this timely preaching? At times it feels as if we're stuck in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Timequake*, seeking to wrap our heads around the disorienting experience of being temporally displaced. And yet, in its essence preaching is supposed to be "stuck" between times: between ancient texts and modern contexts; between Friday—*that* Friday—and Sunday—*that* Sunday; between the already and the not-yet; between memory and hope. Around the baptismal font and the Lord's Table we participate simultaneously in *anamnesis* (the connection of past and present) and *prolepsis* (the connection of present and future). "Christ *has died*. Christ *is risen*. Christ *will come again*." All are true together at the same time. Perhaps, this is the root of timely preaching.

James Weldon Johnson's poem "Listen, Lord: A Prayer" is based upon the communal gathering prayers of worshipers in slave communities in the American South. It is a prayer calling for God's transforming presence to come upon the worshiping body. The poem ends with a portion of the prayer given for the preacher that would make for a mighty powerful prayer for ordination. It includes phrases like "make [their] words sledge hammers of truth," "Lord, turpentine [their] imagination," and "set [their] tongue on fire." As I wonder about truly timely preaching, I'm drawn back to these words for the would-be bringer of the Word:

"Lord God, this morning—
Put [the preacher's] eye to the telescope
of eternity,
And let [them] look upon the paper walls
of time."¹

Indeed, there is "a time for every matter under heaven." During this season of Corona-tide, I find myself wrestling with how to proclaim the "old, old story" into the particularities of this new time of struggle. Could it be that timely preaching invites worshipers to locate their lives within the distance of eternity and the paper-thin walls of this season . . . at the same time? Could it be that the timeliness of timely preaching is more about the timelessness of the gospel, which speaks to both the headline-making communal events of our days and the scattered struggles of our personal lives? It seems to me that right now, at this time, the good news of the gospel is that the triune God who is "our help in ages past" is at the same time "our hope for years to come."

Note

1. James Weldon Johnson, "Listen, Lord: A Prayer," in *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Viking Press, 1927), 14.

On the Arts: Invitation to Christ

Lauren Wright Pittman

For tens of thousands of years, people have created symbols to find identity and unity. Symbols are a shortcut to access larger concepts and complex ideas; and when used widely, they take on collective meaning, functioning as defining, unifying marks.

I am a graphic designer, and fundamentally, my job is to boil down concepts to their most essential elements. I work primarily with churches to create logos that effectively communicate the core facets of their identity. I research their mission, history, architecture, demographics, worship style, ministries, and more. Before the design process begins, however, I often find myself defending the importance of visual identity. Visual elements can be seen as trivial, merely decorative, and even distracting, especially in a church context. The Protestant church has an estranged relationship with images, and the continued impact of that tension greatly influences my work.

I start each project focused on intentionality. When leadership teams recognize they are always communicating through visual means regardless of their intent, the gravity of visual identity starts to settle in. Our visual communication is often at odds with the reality of our community's identity, and that is a problem. When we are not intentional with visual communication, it can be detrimental to our community's sense of identity and unity.

I have found most churches feel strongly identified with and by the cross. The cross is certainly the symbol most strongly associated with Christianity; however, I wonder if we were to spend time engaging with the depth of meaning present in that image, would we actually feel identified by it?

In the early church, followers of Christ used symbols like a fish or an anchor to subversively

communicate their identity, and when Christianity was named the official religion of the Roman Empire, the cross became the predominant Christian symbol. We also see identifying symbols in other world religions which were created and claimed by people of faith—the Star of David in Judaism, the Om in Hinduism, the yin yang in Taoism, to name a few.

So, as a designer, my question is this: If we were to distill the Christian faith and extract its most essential elements, what would those elements be?

I believe it is the sacraments—bread, wine, and water. Table, cup, plate, and font. The potency of the sacraments lies in their simplicity and accessibility. Each common element holds such a wealth of meaning, and they are all rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Sacraments were not created in our human grasping for meaning and identity; they are a divine gift from the image of God, Christ himself. As the body of Christ, we have the gift of these tangible elements with which to engage and find deeper meaning, understanding, and identity. These symbols masterfully communicate the heart of the Christian faith, and they have the ability to shape and unify us.

I went from attending a church with a robust liturgical arts committee to a church with little emphasis on visual elements in worship. After worshipping there for almost a year, I wouldn't be able to describe what the baptismal font looks like. As a visual person, this is shocking to me. I can tell you that the sanctuary has white walls and ornate chandeliers hanging from above, a tall, golden, backlit cross hanging behind the choir, and purple and green stained-glass windows with minimal imagery like geometric shapes, greenery, and columns. This is a lovely church, but I would say it is missing some connective tissue.

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Like many worshipping communities, my church is rooted in its way of doing things and vigorously resists change. Suggesting adjustments to the worship environment felt like an impossibility, and I almost began to believe that this desire was frivolous. Thankfully, I was introduced to the PC(USA) document *Invitation to Christ*. Honestly, when I read through it, it almost felt too simple, too obvious; however, I had not been able to explain effectively the importance of a visually curated worship space, and this document did so beautifully. It offers simple solutions, through practical, intentional, theologically grounded steps. Let's just say it is difficult to argue with, and though the five practices feel so simple, they are catalysts for truly meaningful transformation in communities. This document works from a place of intentionality, with the hope of reclaiming, reestablishing, and revitalizing our connection with the sacraments, these central images that define us.

Once my church's leadership became aware of *Invitation to Christ*, subtle, yet impactful changes began to take place. The font was moved from a corner, mostly hidden from view by a railing, out to an open space between the chancel and the first pew. Recently, a pastor did the prayer of confession and the assurance of pardon while pouring the water

into the now visible font. As I saw the water ripple and heard the sound of splashing, it was almost as though I could see this connective tissue—this deeper sense of identity and unity taking shape.

As we find ourselves in this unprecedented time of physically distanced worship, I have found that it is more important now than ever for us to be rooted in our communal identity. The practices of *Invitation to Christ* can help shape the way digital worship space is curated. The venue for worship now fits the dimensions of our screens, and we need to approach it intentionally, helping ground people in their identity as part of the body of Christ. The visual rhythms and repetitions of sacramental elements will enable our congregations to feel less distant from their worshipping community.

What would it look like if the church held as core to its identity the visible elements Christ gifted us through the sacraments? On the horizon I see that so much is possible as we continue to learn, grow, and root our identity more deeply in Christ, as sacramental people. My hope is that we would see the church more fully communicating and embodying Christ's life and mission in the world while cultivating strong, unified, sacramental identities as communities of faith.

On Music: The Invitation to Sing

Phillip Morgan

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.

—Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26

Two things are striking to me about this verse of Scripture. The first is that this is the only time in the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, present in both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, that Jesus sings. The second is that this moment occurs after Jesus shared a sacred meal, breaking, blessing, and giving the bread to his friends. The birth of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is tied to singing.

That singing and celebration of the sacraments of baptism and communion are a natural pair is not a novel idea. I don't know a time when I've experienced either and not sung. But *Invitation to Christ* is not about doing something new; it is about doing something very old with deeper meaning. This document invites us "to renewed sacramental practice—expanded, deepened, reflected on."

The invitation presented in Part One reminds us that "it has become urgent that our ministry focus clearly on these simple and central gifts we have been given—Word, water, wine, and bread—and that we explore anew how best to offer them and the new life to which they point to a hungry and wanting world." I would add that we should also consider singing a gift from our Creator, and in exploring how to center our lives as the faithful around the sacraments we should consider what singing means to that renewal.

My earliest recollections of hearing that particular verse from Matthew are from the celebrations of the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each month as a child. After we had sung and prayed through the

meal, the pastor would conclude with that verse. It resonated with me deeply because the name of our church was Mt. Olivet Baptist Church. I always thought this verse must have been special to the faithful who had formed our congregation. After the declaration everyone would rise from the pews where we had received and taken the elements, begin to sing "What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine," and, one by one, shake each other's hands, moving about the sanctuary until we had encircled it. We called this ritual extending the right hand of fellowship, and it concluded every celebration of communion and each baptism. From this circle of love and community we were sent forth to spread the gospel as people changed by the sacraments.

Even though music has always been a part of these acts for me, there was a moment when I almost forgot how essential it really is. Two years ago, in the spirit of *Invitation to Christ*, Central Presbyterian Church in Louisville, where I serve as music director, decided to rethink our Maundy Thursday services. After talking to some great friends and colleagues we borrowed a tradition from Central Presbyterian in Atlanta. We would have services in homes with our Lenten book study groups. Other groups that included those who had not participated in a book study were also formed so that everyone was involved.

In our initial planning, the service ended with the celebration of communion followed by a prayer and dismissal. The liturgy included several options for singing, but eventually we decided that leading singing was perhaps more than people wanted to handle. Some wouldn't have a piano to accompany a hymn, and singing a cappella might be too difficult or uncomfortable. Sharing the meal was the

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important part for us and what we wanted to be the central experience, so we did not initially include any options for singing.

Just before printed worship aids went to print, however, I remembered those words of Scripture from my childhood. I immediately said to my colleagues that we had to include a hymn. When they asked why, still thinking of the limitations some would face making that happen, I told them I could not forget that verse from Matthew. If this was the pattern we were hoping to recreate, we had to follow Scripture all the way through the departure. The meal isn't finished until we've sung. Not until we have sung a hymn can we go out to our own Mount of Olives to pray, discern, and do the will of the One who has created us. The invitation we were extending to our congregation to rethink communion had to also include the invitation to sing.

On Maundy Thursday we arrived at the home of our hosts, some of us with covered dishes, excited to share a meal with friends. It made me wonder who had brought the bread and wine to the upper room the night Jesus broke and blessed it. The conversation was lively and robust. This group had been having profound discussions each week as we dived into *No Innocent Bystanders*, a book about becoming fuller allies for racial justice by Shannon Craigo-Snell and Christopher Doucot. That night we told more stories about our lives surrounding those themes and even traded a recipe or two as we ate.

After a brief liturgy, with the manicotti and brownies still on the table, the freshly baked biscuits and potato bread we had eaten for dinner became the gifts of God given for the people of God. The blessed feast had a wholly new meaning to us.

I went to the piano, situated in the dining room with us, and began to lead those gathered in "What Wondrous Love Is This." Then, mostly in silence,

we packed up the leftovers, washed the dishes, and went home. But we did not leave the way we had come. It was an experience like none I'd had before.

The same sentiments were echoed for weeks by those who participated, and when people told me their stories I always asked if they had sung after the meal. The responses moved me. Everyone had found the singing to be an important part of the service. I heard about people leading a song unaccompanied from the dinner table and even learned that some hosts who had pianos that often sat unattended had found a reason to sit down and play again. The music had given the service deeper meaning, and the whole experience had enriched our sacramental lives.

Invitation to Christ encourages congregations to consider practicing five simple disciplines. I invite you to accompany these disciplines with music and singing in as many ways as you can and begin by reflecting on how and why you already do that. Without music the celebrations of the sacrament are not totally fulfilled. The singing is the final step, making us ready to go out into the world. As you find ways to enrich your congregation's worship practices around the sacraments remember these words from Fred Pratt Green's "When in Our Music God Is Glorified":

And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night
when utmost evil strove against the light?
Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight:
Alleluia!¹

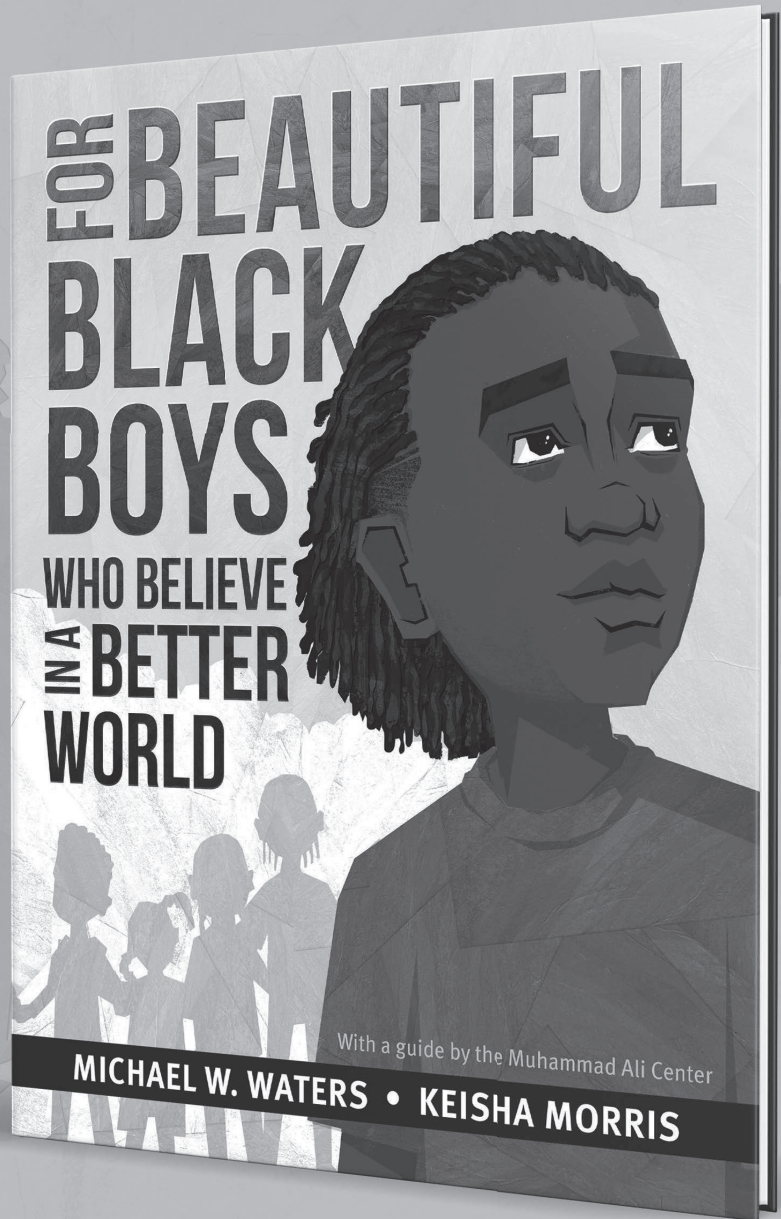
Note

1. "When in Our Music God Is Glorified," Fred Pratt Green, 1972 ©1972 Hope Publishing Company.

Upcoming Picture Book Celebrates Black Boys



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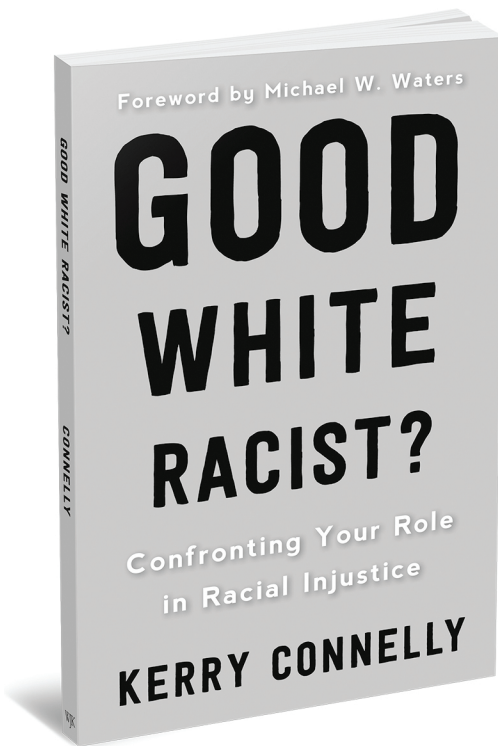
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“A no-nonsense call to action for all those willing to confront their complicity, *Good White Racist?* promises ‘This is going to be hard, and you are going to be uncomfortable. but it will be worth it.’”

— FOREWORD REVIEWS



\ good · white · racist \ noun

1. A well-intentioned person of European descent who is nonetheless complicit in a culture of systemic racism
2. A white person who would rather stay comfortable than do the work of antiracism

In *Good White Racist?*, Kerry Connelly exposes the ways white people participate in, benefit from, and unknowingly perpetuate racism—despite their best "good person" intentions. *Good White Racist?* unpacks the systems that maintain the status quo, keep white people comfortable and complicit, and perpetuate racism in the United States and elsewhere. Connelly shows us that even though it may not be our fault or choice to participate in a racist system, we all do, and it's our responsibility to do something about it.



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Invitation to Christ



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