



A Church of the Word and Sacrament
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Introduction

If queried about the most significant issues facing Presbyterians today, some folks would put at the top of their list issues related to sexual orientation and ordination. Others would push that a little further, and identify the nature of biblical authority as the most pressing issue. Others might say that even more important is working out what we mean when we say that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.

Those are important questions, but our preoccupation with them obscures an even more profound question that hardly forms a blip on our denominational radar screen. Is our primary vocation as a church to be profound thinkers, or to legislate on the great issues, or is it to be a doxological people? To rephrase the question: are we a church whose interest and preoccupation is thinking and voting *about* Christ, or are we a church grounded in a weekly engagement to meet the risen Lord? Every other question is dependent on how we answer this one.

Quite by accident, ours became a church centered on the Word, while the sacraments have been both marginalized among us and minimized. Apart from the sacraments, our preoccupation with the Word easily slides into words—explanations that appeal to the mind, and sometimes to the heart, but crowd out sacramental presence—meeting with the risen Lord. Calvin intended that, in our Lord’s Day assemblies, sacraments never be without the Word; but he also intended that the Word never be without the sacraments. When the two are held together, side by side, and when it’s clear that both Word and sacrament are doxological before they are anything else, our eyes are opened to discern them as vehicles by which the divine *presence* draws near to us. That presence is the work of the Holy Spirit.

A church that is truly Trinitarian, and truly rooted in the Genevan tradition, finds its life not in theological reflection alone, delicious as that is for most of us, nor in processes of legislation,

but, by the power of the Spirit, in *koinonia* with the Father and the Son.

Joe Small's essay pulls no punches. Without equivocation, he is calling us to get our act together. We don't have to start from scratch, because we have a marvelously rich tradition from which to draw. But we do have to pay attention, and to take the risk of engaging to move our church from a deeply entrenched *status quo* to become a church whose worship more nearly resembles the Word and Table tradition that animated the church of the early centuries and that Calvin envisioned in his reform. It's not enough simply to nod our heads and agree. Even if we take only baby steps, we need to set out on the journey of mending what Calvin himself called a "defect" – the breaking apart of Word and Sacrament. The journey will be difficult, but it will lead us to a more profound praise than will the debate *du jour*; and as we draw closer to the three-in-one, and one-in-three, we may even find ourselves nearer one another.

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A CHURCH OF THE WORD AND SACRAMENT**Joseph D. Small**

The 16th century Protestant Reformation led to unprecedented fragmentation within the Christian church. The unity of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” had never been fully achieved or maintained, of course. Schism was a reality, most notably in the cataclysmic break between the Orthodox Church of the Greek-speaking East and the Catholic Church of the Latin West, but also in other divisions of longer or shorter duration. The Reformation changed everything, however. First there was Martin Luther and the Reformation in Germany. Then Zwingli and later Calvin in Switzerland, together with reform movements throughout the European continent and England. Lutherans, Reformed, Anabaptists, Anglicans, and more, all in a dizzying pattern of diversity, experimentation, and local expression.

The Reformation’s centrifugal force was a matter of concern to the reformers themselves, and a cause of sharp rebuke from the Catholic church. Both the Catholic rebuke and the Reformation defense can be discerned in a remarkable section of the Second Helvetic Confession (*circa* 1566). The confession acknowledges that “We are reproached because there have been manifold dissensions and strife in our churches since they separated themselves from the Church of Rome, and therefore cannot be true churches.”¹ The reformers took seriously the Catholic indictment that disunity signaled defect, mounting a defense on two levels.

The first was to point to Rome’s own history of conflict and factionalism, and even to strife within the New Testament church, concluding that “there have at all times been great contentions in the Church . . . without meanwhile the Church ceasing to be the Church because of these contentions.”² It all remained

quite confusing, however. It was not sufficient merely to say that disunity was a fact of church life. The increasingly kaleidoscopic spectacle of a multiplying number of disputing churches caused confusion. How could believers make judgments about who was faithful and who was not? What was true and what was false? What communities claiming to be Christian were true churches? These were not casual questions, but matters of fundamental faithfulness to the gospel.

The reformers' second, and more substantive response addressed directly the question of the "true church." John Calvin is typical: "Wherever we see the Word of God rightly preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."³ The word of God rightly proclaimed and heard . . . baptism and the Lord's Supper celebrated in fidelity to Christ . . . *these* are the clear indicators of the presence of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. So central are these two marks, Calvin continued, that we must embrace any church that has them, "even if it otherwise swarms with many faults."⁴

THE CORE OF FAITHFUL CHURCH LIFE

Note that Calvin's "two marks of the church" center on lived faith within congregations. He does not speak in the first instance about a church's orthodox doctrine or its sacramental theology, but about the faithfulness of proclamation and reception, and the faithfulness of sacramental practice, within Christian communities. Calvin's marks of the true church point us to congregations, not academies; to churches, not libraries; to worship, not books. Theological purity and sacramental precision are not the primary issue. Calvin's marks are matters of fundamental ecclesial faithfulness that allows the gospel to be received, believed, and lived by ordinary men and women.

Perhaps it is because Calvin's marks of word and sacraments center on the lived faith of actual congregations that they

do not work well if they are used only as boundaries to determine who is in and who is out. After all, how could we determine whether the word is *purely* preached, let alone heard, and whether the sacraments are administered *according to Christ's institution*? Calvin's marks of the true church do not really function as boundaries, however. They are better understood as directional signs that point to the core of faithful church life. Any community claiming to be a *Christian church* must place proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ at the heart of its life, both through proclaiming and hearing the word and through faithful celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The identification of word and sacraments as essential marks of the church is not a 16th century curiosity, confined to the recesses of historical memory. The 1997 Formula of Agreement establishing "full communion" between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed churches – the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ – is based upon mutual acknowledgment that the churches affirm an essential core, sharing a foundational understanding of gospel and sacraments. Moreover, agreement on the essential core of word and sacraments is sufficient to warrant full communion of the churches even though they are not fully agreed on all matters: "Both sides [Lutheran and Reformed] can affirm each other in the perceived unity of the fundamental understanding of word and sacrament and admonish each other in the richness of interpretive diversity."⁵ Thus, the first article of the Formula of Agreement states that full communion among the churches means that the four churches "recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God."⁶

The continuing application of word and sacraments as marks of ecclesial faithfulness is not mere nostalgia for Reformation clarity. Word and sacraments provide the church with foundational identifiers of ecclesial faithfulness. The question to be asked of any congregation or denomination is whether word and

sacraments are found at the heart of common life. When we look at a Christian community, do we see – at the center of its life – proclamation of the gospel? Proclamation in word and sacrament is not the only thing churches do, of course. Congregations and denominations engage in a wide variety of activities that go beyond preaching and celebrating the sacraments. Designating word and sacrament as marks of the true church means that other church activities must not bury word and sacrament, or push them to the periphery of church life. Furthermore, the whole range of church programs must remain subject to authentication by word and sacrament, for these crucial realities are the embodiment of the gospel in the life of Christ's women and men. Word and sacrament stand as the controlling core of church activities, the marks of a church's true life.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledges this reality by calling its pastors "Ministers of the Word and Sacrament." Our *Book of Order* states that in the ministry of pastors, "primary emphasis is given to proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments."⁷ Too often, however, this "primary emphasis" is overlooked as pastors devote their time and energy to managerial tasks, multiplying programs to meet every need and organizing the congregation to accomplish successful expansion. It is a sad irony that when pastors do take seriously their responsibility as ministers of the word and sacrament they often place *themselves* at the center of proclamation, leading to the dangerous supposition that word and sacraments – proclamation, baptism, and the Lord's Supper – are the *pastor's* business, with the congregation as mere consumers of religious goods.

Remember Calvin's formulation: A true church is where the word is purely preached *and heard*. Congregations are active participants in proclamation, for hearing the word requires discernment, response, and faithful action. A true church is where the sacraments are celebrated in Christ, and members of the congregation are central to the gospel's sacramental enactment. The really interesting question, then, is what it would mean for a

congregation to be, truly and fully, a church of the word and sacrament. What would it mean for a congregation (or a presbytery or a denomination) to place proclamation and enactment of the gospel at the very heart of its life as the controlling characteristics of all that it says and does?

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Reformed Christians are relatively comfortable talking about a church where the word of God is purely preached and heard. We have been conditioned to think of sermons as the most important thing in worship, the climax of the Sunday service. Yet most Reformed churches neglect the sacraments, relegating baptism and the Lord's Supper to the fringes of worship. Reformed churches tend to be not churches of the word and sacrament, but churches of the word alone. Ignoring the sacraments while exalting the word, we have become obsessed with words. James White says of Reformed worship that it is "the most cerebral of the western traditions . . . prolix and verbose."⁸ Similarly, Brian Gerrish notes that the wordiness of the Reformed tradition can result in "an arid intellectualism that turns the worshipping community into a class of glum schoolchildren."⁹

The danger goes deeper than abstraction or even boredom. A church of the word alone is always in danger of becoming a church of *words* alone. And words are what we fight about, words are what we fight with. Reformed churches, so neglectful of the sacraments, so tied to words, are the churches that have divided and split more than any other ecclesial tradition, more than Lutherans, or Anglicans, or Methodists, or Catholics, or Orthodox. It may be that our history of schisms, always growing from disputes *about* words, fought *with* words, is a result of our deficiency as a church, our failure to be a Church of the word *and* sacrament.

If word and sacraments together are the heart of the church's true and faithful life, neglect of one leads inexorably to

deformation of the other, for when either word or sacrament exists alone it soon becomes a parody of itself. We Reformed Christians are aware of how easily the sacraments can become manipulative superstitions in churches where sacraments are exalted and preaching is minimized. But we may be less aware of how easily preaching and teaching can deteriorate into institutional marketing or human potential promotion or bourgeois conformity in churches that magnify preaching while marginalizing baptism and Eucharist. Reformed neglect of the sacraments has led to a church of the word alone, a church always in danger of degenerating into a church of mere words.

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

The need for a church of the word *and sacrament* is not just a cure for our terminal wordiness. It is not a matter of supplementing left brain thinking with right brain feeling, or replacing sharp words with warm communal affections, or suppressing the word's judgment in favor of creating group ties that bind the church together. Word and sacrament are not contrasting aspects of church life: brain and heart, abstract and concrete. On the contrary, Calvin placed word and sacrament *together* at the core of the church's life because he took it as "a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace."¹⁰ Calvin's view is remarkable in two ways. First, the purpose of the sacraments is the same as that of the word. Baptism and Eucharist have the same function as Scripture and preaching: to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving us true knowledge of God. Second, the purpose of both is to communicate the presence of the living Christ to us, uniting us to him in the power of the Holy Spirit. The word is not for imparting information and the sacraments are not for imparting feelings; both are occasions for the real presence of Christ in our midst.

Calvin was confident that word and sacraments are effective: they give to us precisely what they portray. Preaching God's word imparts Christ himself to us, maintaining Christ's living presence among us. The sacraments represent the person and work of Christ, making real among us the very presence of Christ. "I say that Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments," says Calvin, "for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him."¹¹ Thus, the Lord's Supper and baptism are not occasions for the Christian community merely to celebrate its own life. The sacraments impart to the community the substance of its life in Christ.

Word and sacrament together are instances of the real presence of Christ. In baptism and Eucharist, *Christ* is present to the community of faith. In a way that is not dependent on the ability or predilections of preachers and teachers, the sacraments proclaim the gospel, depicting the good news in bold relief. Thus, Reformed neglect of the sacraments has muted the gospel's proclamation, both by an absence of Christ's sacramental presence and by a sacramental gap in union with Christ.

Overlooking the sacraments' transparent proclamation of the gospel is particularly harmful to the church when a meager sacramental life is coupled with an odd North American scarcity of the word written and preached. In far too many congregations the Scriptures have become strangers to church members. This "strange silence of the Bible in the church" is particularly dismaying when coupled with preaching that is too often about the people of the congregation and their activities instead of the One who is Head of the body. In a church that experiences a "famine of hearing the words of the Lord," the absence of baptism's water and Communion's bread and wine is perilously enfeebling.

PRAYING AND BELIEVING

Perhaps Protestants should always avoid Latin phrases.

We never seem to get them quite right, even when one is central to who we are. When we intone *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, are we saying that the church is reformed and always reforming? . . . always being reformed? . . . always about to be reformed? Few of us know Latin, our translations are usually secondhand, and it seems a bit pretentious anyway.

Lex orandi, lex credendi is a venerable Latin adage that can be construed in two quite different ways. Literally, “law of praying, law of believing,” it is usually taken to mean that the church’s worship is a norm for its belief: *what is prayed shapes what may and must be believed*. Yet it is possible to reverse its force, making belief the norm for worship: *what is believed shapes what may and must be prayed*.¹² On a practical level, it works both ways. Clearly, the hymns we sing (and those we avoid), what we pray for (and what we ignore in prayer), the vestments we wear (or shun), the ways we participate (or remain passive), and the sacraments we celebrate (or neglect) all influence the shape of belief in the worshiping community. Just as clearly, however, how we worship is affected by conscious choices, some of which are theological. Theological convictions shape worship which, in turn, shapes the faith of the worshiping community. The dynamic interaction between doctrine and liturgy is continuous.

The 16th century Reformers sought to establish doctrinal control over worship precisely because they were acutely aware of worship’s power to shape the church’s faith and practice. Subsequent developments within Reformed churches have tended to replace worship with doctrine, however. The Reformed approach seems to assume that proper theological formulations about worship are sufficient and that attention to the forms and practices of worship is distracting at best and corrupting at worst. Thus the widespread conviction that “understanding” the Lord’s Supper is a prerequisite to participation and even the primary form of participation.

Because Reformed churches have tended to be acutely aware of the ambiguity of all human response to God's initiative, including the act of worship, they have insisted that biblical and theological norms should govern liturgical development. Perhaps, however, Reformed churches have been insufficiently appreciative of the lived experience of the Christian community. The church's piety can serve as a critical corrective to biblical and theological thought that may become divorced from the worshipping community. It would be naive to think that "right doctrine" can or should exercise exclusive control over the ways in which communities of faith worship. Similarly, it would be irresponsible to think that any and all liturgical practices are automatically faithful to the gospel. Theology cannot compel liturgy nor can liturgy proceed with indifference to theology. Instead, theological sensitivity to worship's faith-shaping capacity can lead to the shaping of worship that is faithful to the gospel. In this way the worshipping community can be shaped in fidelity to the gospel.

Reformed movement toward the fullness of word and sacrament depends upon the recovery of a vibrant sacramental theology *and* the grounding of that theology in vibrant sacramental practice. Thinking properly about baptism and the Lord's Supper is not celebration of the sacraments. Splendid liturgical texts for baptism and the Lord's Supper are not celebration of the sacraments. Thoughts and words are necessary, of course, but their sum is less than faithful sacramental practice. Pastors and elders must think deeply about the sacraments, and they must be discriminating in the selection of liturgical texts. Then, pastors and elders must shape congregational celebration with great care, for it is the *practice* of baptism and Eucharist that either discloses or obscures the presence of Christ, that either deepens or deflects faith and faithfulness. The experience of Presbyterians in North America is instructive.

BAPTISM

In the not-too-distant past, baptism in North American

Presbyterian churches was a customary rite, a routine act performed on babies as a matter of course. In recent years, however, baptism has been transformed into a chummy expression of congregational welcome. Everyone smiles as the family joins the pastor and an elder at the baptismal font. The congregation is poised in anticipation of the moment when something cute will happen so that everyone can coo and chuckle. The minister reads gracious words from Scripture and prays familiar prayers, well-known questions are asked and answered, and water moistens an infant head. Then comes the parade, with pastor bearing the baby up and down the aisle, introducing the adorable child to people who are rather arbitrarily identified as the baby's new "church family." The congregation may be reminded that the promises made to the newly baptized entail provision of quality child care and a fully staffed Sunday school. Everyone enjoys this genuinely human moment in a too often impersonal worship service.

In typical baptism services, everything focuses on celebrating the incorporation of an infant into the life of the congregation. While the words of Scripture and prayers may describe a broader, deeper reality, the action itself narrows the sacrament to only one aspect of its significance. The folksy demeanor of the pastor, introductions of the family and friends, a hasty recital of brief readings and prayers, the minimal sight and sound of water, reminders of church programs, and the leisurely stroll through the congregation all combine to collapse meaning into the reception of a singular child into a particular congregation.

Baptism is the sacrament of welcome into the community of believers, of course. But it is not only that. Baptism's capacity to unite us to God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is only hinted at in most actual baptismal services. A mere sample of New Testament baptismal texts reveals rich baptismal images cascading over one another in a stream of living water that sings of discipleship [Matthew 28:16-20] . . . forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit [Acts 2:37-42] . . . response to the good news and life in the community of faith [Acts 10:44-48]

. . . dying and rising with Christ and union with Christ [Romans 6:1-11] . . . a new exodus from slavery to freedom in Christ [1 Corinthians 10:1-4] . . . union with sisters and brothers in Christ [1 Corinthians 12:12-13] . . . distinctions no longer divisions [Galatians 3:26-29] . . . new circumcision [Colossians 2:11-15] and new covenant, new community, and new openness to the world [1 Peter 3:18-22]!

In short, baptism is a sign of the fullness of God's gracious love and effectual calling that, in one moment, is poured over a single human being. The moment is not isolated, however, as a point in time that recedes into distant memory. Baptism is the sure promise of God's continuing faithfulness, inaugurating new life within God's Way. *The French Confession of 1559* puts it nicely: "In baptism we are grafted into the body of Christ, washed and cleansed by his blood, and renewed in holiness of life by his Spirit. Although we are baptized only once, the benefit it signifies lasts through life and death, so that we have an enduring testimony that Jesus Christ will be our justification and sanctification forever."¹³

It is too small a thing that this ocean of meaning, deep and moving, should be reduced to a chummy ritual of congregational welcome. It is true enough that baptism welcomes persons into the church, but it makes all the difference whether our sacramental action is polite introduction to a friendly gathering or incorporation into a community of faith, the very body of Christ. How can our baptismal *practice* begin to open us to the flood of significance for our very being as humans together before God?

Baptism does even more than present the fullness of the gospel. Baptism is a means of grace, *communicating and bringing about* the very thing it signifies! Baptism does not merely tell us about Christ, or point to Christ, or signify Christ. In baptism, Christ is present with us as we are made one with him in a death like his so that we will become one with him in a resurrection like his. How can an unabridged sacramental theology, expressed in

rich liturgical texts, be incorporated in faithful sacramental practice?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has in place two of the elements necessary for full and faithful celebration of baptism: theology and texts. The church's *Directory for Worship* includes comprehensive chapters on "The Sealing of the Word: Sacraments" and "Baptism." These chapters set forth a theology of baptism that is biblically grounded, apostolically focused, and pastorally sensitive. The church also has biblically and theologically shaped texts that give voice to ecclesial convictions. The *Book of Common Worship* (1993) contains 85 pages of baptism liturgies, including six services of "Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant" for a variety of congregational occasions. Theology and texts are present in and for the church. What is lacking is the third necessary element: a developed baptismal practice that enacts the fullness of the church's baptismal theology and animates the church's rich baptismal texts.

Enacting baptismal theology and animating baptismal texts in faithful baptismal practice is a contextual pastoral task. There are common elements required of all – the use of water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – but there are no universal prescriptions for ecclesially faithful baptismal practice. It is essential, however, that the actual practice of baptism display the full range of baptismal significance set forth in Scripture and draw upon the baptismal tradition of the whole church. Ministers and elders in each setting can work to craft baptismal practice that incorporates the community of believers in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Sustained contextual attention is essential to the task of reforming Reformed sacramental practice.

EUCCHARIST

"It would be well," wrote Calvin, "to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of the Lord be held every Sun-

day at least as a rule.”¹⁴ Calvin failed in his efforts to convince Reformed churches to celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day, although this was the practice of the early church and remains the practice of many churches today. For centuries, “quarterly communion” was typical North American Presbyterian practice, although recent years have brought more frequent celebrations of the sacrament. The Lord’s Supper may be on its way to becoming a monthly rite, but an arbitrary designation of the first Sunday of the month as “communion Sunday” indicates its institutional rather than ecclesial function.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Common Worship* invites people to the table with the words, “Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God,” but in many (most?) Presbyterian churches the Lord’s Supper remains a gloomy exercise in silent introspection. This is not surprising, for we have been schooled to think of the Lord’s Supper exclusively in terms of the *last* supper. On the night of his arrest, in an upper room with disciples (including one who would betray him and another who would deny him), Jesus shared bread and wine, body and blood, and then went out to die. If that is the sole model for our sacrament, it is no wonder that our corporate demeanor is sad. Remembering the prelude to tragedy is hardly the stuff of joyful feasts.

In the first centuries of the church, the community gathered every Lord’s Day, sometimes at risk to liberty or life, to share eucharistic bread and wine. The church did not gather every Thursday night, but every Sunday morning; the church did not come together in remembrance of the last supper, but in celebration of life with the resurrected, living Lord. In the Gospels, eucharistic meals are dramatic features of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. The risen, living Lord eats and drinks with his disciples. Perhaps the most familiar of these resurrection meals took place on the way to Emmaus: “When [the risen Christ] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recog-

nized him” (Luke 24:30-31). The early church looked to resurrection meal texts more than to Last Supper texts because it recognized its own experience there. The community still ate and drank with the risen Christ, and in his presence they came to know him more fully and love him more deeply.

The church knew that eating and drinking with the Lord continued a pattern from Jesus’ life. The narratives of the miraculous feeding of the thousands are explicitly eucharistic (Mark 6:30-44 par). The church also remembered that Jesus was notorious for eating and drinking with sinners, and so the community knew that Jesus eats and drinks with sinners still. In all of this, the church hoped as well as remembered, looking to the great heavenly banquet when all the faithful will feast with God.

No wonder the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day! They were not commemorating the tragic death of a hero or mourning the premature death of an inspiring teacher. They were gathering in the presence of the risen, living Christ to be joined to him in his death and resurrection and to be fed by him, receiving nourishment for growth in the love of God and neighbors. If congregations experience the Lord’s Supper as a remembrance of Jesus’ death, a re-creation of the Last Supper, it is little wonder that they do it infrequently and that when they do they are vaguely puzzled or dissatisfied by it all.

Memory alone is not enough to sustain significant corporate life. For citizens of the United States, July 4 is Independence Day, the remembrance and celebration of the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. Although everyone knows the reason for the holiday, it no longer marks our participation in the deep national and personal significance of American independence, a time of reflection on the foundation of our liberties. The Fourth of July has become just a long midsummer weekend. We may go to a fireworks display, or even take in a parade, but none of it binds us to our liberties in a deeply communal celebration of our national independence. Memory alone

is not enough to sustain significant corporate life. Thus, celebrations of the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln have been collapsed into an increasingly obscure “President’s Day,” while Martin Luther King’s birthday is fast becoming one more three-day weekend. Remembrance alone is not sufficient to sustain significance, and so we reduce the number of times we try to force memory to do something new. Thus: infrequent communion.

Reduction of Eucharist to an infrequent memorial of Jesus’ death is also a factor in the reduction of church to a voluntary assemblage of individual believers. Calvin notes three benefits of the Lord’s Supper: first, we receive Christ himself and participate in the blessings of his death and resurrection; second, we are led to recognize the continuing blessings of Christ and respond with lives of gratitude and praise; and third, we are aroused to holy living, for by receiving Christ our lives are conformed to Christ. Calvin goes on to note that while conformity to Christ should be the reality in all parts of our life,

yet it has a special application to charity, which is above all recommended to us in this sacrament; for which reason it [the Lord’s Supper] is called the bond of charity. For as the bread, which is there sanctified for the common use of us all, is made of many grains so mixed together that one cannot be discerned from the other, so ought we to be united among ourselves in one indissoluble friendship. What is more: we all receive there the same body of Christ, in order that we may be made members of it.¹⁵

If the Lord is really present in his Supper, binding believers to himself and to one another, the absence of Eucharist may help to explain the fractured isolation that characterizes too many congregations and is a virtual description of denominational life. The risen Lord gives us himself in the bread and wine of com-

munion, and yet we say “no, thank you” more Sundays than not. Merely increasing the frequency of Communion will be unsatisfactory, however, if eucharistic practice continues to promote silent introspection that distances believers from each other, the world, and even their Lord.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) possesses sufficient theological resources to appreciate the substance of sacramental communion with the crucified and risen Christ. The *Book of Common Worship* sets forth full and faithful eucharistic liturgies for Lord’s Day worship and other services, including more than twenty richly evangelical Great Thanksgivings. The church’s theology and its liturgical texts envision individual hearers of an individually preached word becoming, in the Lord’s Supper, a community bound in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Theology and texts anticipate that as believers are united to Christ, they are united to each other in a communion that is the body of Christ and so is no longer closed in upon itself, but open to “the thousands,” including the “tax collectors and sinners.”

Biblically faithful eucharistic theology and theologically faithful eucharistic texts are necessary, but hardly sufficient. For the Lord’s Supper to nourish one holy, catholic, and apostolic community, Communion must be embodied in frequent eucharistic practice that enacts the fullness of the church’s eucharistic theology and animates the church’s rich eucharistic texts.

As with baptism, enacting eucharistic theology and animating eucharistic texts in faithful eucharistic practice is a contextual pastoral task. There are common elements required of all – bread and wine thankfully shared in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – but there are no universal prescriptions for ecclesially faithful Communion practice. It is essential, however, that the actual practice of the Lord’s Supper display the full range of significance set forth in Scripture and draw upon the eucharistic tradition of the whole church. Ministers and elders in

each setting can work to craft Lord's Supper practice that incorporates the community of believers in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Again, sustained contextual attention is essential to the task of reforming Reformed sacramental practice.

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Therefore, the sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there.¹⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Second Helvetic Confession, in *The Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), Chapter XVII (5.133), p. 126.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
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