

# *Invitation to Christ*



*A Guide to Sacramental Practices*

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# PART ONE

## INVITATION

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

## PASTORAL LETTER

To all the congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We write to invite you on a spiritual journey to explore the deep and joyful waters of baptism.

As members of the Sacraments Study Group of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we are convinced that a rediscovery of the gift and the call of our baptism can transform the church for ministry in the 21st century. We believe that the Christian life, engaged as a life of discipleship springing from baptism, can help to center and unify the church around its foundational calling from the risen Christ, to “go and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).

Earlier this summer, on our recommendation, the General Assembly voted to call all our congregations “to renewal, through Word and Sacrament, of our life together in Jesus Christ, by engaging in practices that deepen baptismal life and discipleship.” Specifically, we invite every church to practice five simple disciplines over the next two years:

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.

Concrete suggestions for engaging these Sacramental Practices are enclosed. A set of brief papers prompting your theological reflection on the sacraments and your practice of them will follow shortly. And a means for sharing your experience with others in the PC(USA) will soon be in place so that we may learn from one another.

The Sacraments Study Group consists of fifteen people who have met together for three years. At our first meeting, we determined that it would be important for us to do our *thinking about* sacraments in the context of a shared sacramental *practice*. For that reason, we celebrated the Lord’s Supper and we reaffirmed the covenant of our baptism at each meeting. We worshiped in grand sanctuaries, intimate chapels, and sterile hotel conference rooms; but in every location, we had water and God’s Word, bread and wine, amid a gathering of God’s people. It is impossible to say how profoundly we were nourished, formed, and led by the Spirit, through our shared practice!

In the end, it was this practice that gave birth to our recommendations to the General Assembly and to the whole church. While we prayed, studied Scripture, read history, talked theology, wrote papers, surveyed churches, interviewed congregational leaders, and visited

with ecumenical partners—it was the power of God’s presence in our worship together, around pulpit, font, and table, that we came deeply to trust. Consequently, it is this same attention to sacramental life and immersion in rich sacramental practice that we are now eager to commend to the whole church, with the support of the General Assembly.

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 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.

So we invite you to renewed discipleship and to joyful, passionate, baptismal living. We encourage you to join us in these five practices and in reflective dialogue with others, both in your congregation and across the church. We will be eager to hear about what you are learning and how you are being led by the Spirit of God.

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 renewed 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 the whole church.

Faithfully,

The Sacraments Study Group of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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## RATIONALE

The Spirit of God is at work, through the Word and Sacraments, to form and reform the church. Therefore, we invite the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to renewed **sacramental practice**—expanded, deepened, reflected on, in all of our congregations. We trust the church to be the body of Christ, and we trust God’s Spirit to lead us. As we do this faithfully and well together, God will be at work among us.

A season of renewed sacramental practice can refocus the church for discipleship and mission. These recommendations are fundamentally about directing the church’s attention to our primary commission from the risen Lord: **to make disciples**. Our regular Sunday practice of Word and Sacrament has everything to do with how well we carry out Christ’s commission: disciples are washed in the waters of baptism, formed by the Word of God, and nurtured at the Lord’s Table. Strong, maturing disciples are expressions of the church’s faithfulness.

In an age of widespread spiritual hunger, in a time of theological confusion about the central tenets of the faith, in a time of prolonged membership decline in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a renewed sacramental life can strengthen the church’s ministries of **evangelism and hospitality**. In the church’s practices at font and table, the gospel’s invitation to know and follow Christ is clearly extended to those outside the church; seekers are invited to confess faith in Christ as they are welcomed into the community to learn the practices of discipleship, and maturing disciples are continually nurtured and strengthened for living the baptized life.

We believe a renewed sacramental life will bring into clear focus the gospel’s call to ministries of **compassion and justice**. Christ sends us out as disciples to love our neighbors, to serve the poor, to do justice and show mercy. The church’s practices at font and table teach us to feed, to serve, to wash, and to welcome so that we might learn how to feed and wash, welcome, and serve those around us in the world. The gospel imperative to love God and neighbor that we hear in the Word, we see at the table and the font so that we can obey Christ’s command.

Our baptismal identity in Jesus Christ unites us as the church; it is the foundation for our communal life and the ground of our ministry in the world. A renewed focus on baptismal identity and sacramental practice will enable us to live together with our differences and enjoy the **unity** that is Christ’s gift to his church. The church may become better able to recognize this gift as we gather regularly and deliberately around the font and the table.

The historic relationship between baptism and the Lord’s Supper is shared with the whole church of Jesus Christ. Throughout the **ecumenical church**, the Lord’s Supper is practiced as the meal of the baptized, at which those who have been initiated into Christ at the font gather around his table to be strengthened for living as disciples. Consideration of change in this historic pattern has significant implications for all of our ecumenical partners.

A two-year discipline of expanded sacramental practice is **an invitation to discernment**, a way of inviting the church to listen together to what the Spirit of God is saying to us about our identity and mission. The sacraments we celebrate, together with the Word of God we proclaim, both define that identity and send us on that mission. As we gather around pulpit, font, and table to listen, we believe we will hear more clearly who and whose we are, and how we are called to live for Christ in the world in this time.

## INVITATION

## BACKGROUND

These recommendations are in response to the following referrals:

- 1998 Referral: Overture 98-33. *On Amending W-2.4006 and W-2.4011a to Establish Open Communion—From the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area* (Minutes, 1998, Part I, pp. 86–87, 671–72).
- 2002 Referral: Item 10-01. *Recommendation that the General Assembly Council Office of Theology and Worship Conduct a Comprehensive Study of Sacramental Theology and Practice with Special Attention to the Ways in Which the Catechumenate Relates Baptism and the Lord's Supper and Report to the 217th General Assembly (2006)—From the General Assembly Council* (Minutes, 2002, Part I, pp. 21, 503).
- 2004 Referral: Item 08-06. *On Amending W-2.4006 and W-2.4011 Concerning Who May Participate—From the Presbytery of Central Washington* (Minutes, 2004, Part I, pp. 17, 612-15).

In 1998, Overture 98-33 was sent to the 210th General Assembly by the Presbytery of the Twin Cities, requesting that the Assembly amend the Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order* regarding the invitation to the Lord's Supper. The overture asked that W-2.4006 be amended:

to replace the third sentence, "All *the baptized faithful* are to be welcomed to the Table, and none shall be excluded because of race, sex, age, economic status, social class, handicapping condition, difference of culture or language, or any barrier created by human injustice,"  
with, "All *persons of faith* are to be welcomed to the Table, *baptized or not, child or adult, in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.*"

It asked that W-2.4011(a) be amended:

to replace the first sentence, "The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to *all who have been baptized*, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love,"  
with, "The invitation to the Lord's Supper shall be extended to all *persons of faith present*, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, *but a grace extended to all.*"

And it asked that in W-2.4011(b), the initial word "baptized" be deleted, so it would read,

"Children who are being nurtured and instructed in the significance of the invitation to the Table and the meaning of their response are invited to receive the Lord's Supper . . ."

The 210th General Assembly referred this overture to the Office of Theology and Worship. The Office of Theology and Worship, observing that "the underlying issue which needs to be addressed is the relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper," recommended that

the 214th General Assembly authorize, “a full and substantive study of the sacraments both within the Reformed tradition and in the ecumenical context, in order to help the church discern the history and theology of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as their appropriate relationship.” This Assembly, meeting in 2002, authorized the appointment of a study group, and asked for a report back at the 217th General Assembly (now, 2006).

In 2003, a study group was formed, consisting of the following members: David B. Batchelder, Heidi Worthen Gamble, Scott Haldeman, Stan Hall, Martha Moore-Keish, Thom Nelson, Neal D. Presa, Craig A. Satterlee (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), David L. Stubbs, Tom Trinidad, Jane Rogers Vann, and Marney A. Wasserman (convener). Alan Barthel joined us, representing the Presbyterian Association of Musicians. Staff assistance from the Office of Theology and Worship was provided by Paul Galbreath and Chip Andrus.

The study group sought to understand the biblical, historical, theological, and confessional foundations of the sacraments, as well as the context of contemporary North American culture in which they are celebrated. Additionally, the study group sought to learn of the sacramental practices and understandings present in congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today, and to engage in churchwide consultation and dialogue.

In 2004, a second overture to the General Assembly, Overture #04-50 from the Presbytery of Central Washington, was referred to the study group. It sought to amend the same two sections of the Directory for Worship but with different language. This overture asked that in W-2.4006, the third sentence (see above) be amended to read:

“All who *acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior* are to be welcomed to the Table, and none shall be excluded because of race . . .”

And it asked that in W-2.4011(a), the first sentence (see above) be amended to read:

“The invitation to the Lord’s Supper is extended to *all who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior*, remembering that access to the table is not a right . . . ;”

and that in W-2.4011(b), the initial word “baptized,” before “children,” be deleted (as above).

The Sacraments Study Group met six times over three years, with members researching all aspects of the issues involved, while being intentional about practicing Word and Sacrament in our worship together. In addition to having a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America among our number, the Study Group met with ecumenical representatives from the United Methodist Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Church (USA).

While this was expected to be a final report to the 217th General Assembly (2006), the Office of Theology and Worship believes that the issues call the whole church to deepen baptismal identity and to reflect together on sacramental practices as they shed light on the church’s identity and mission and give visible shape to our common life in Christ.



## SACRAMENTAL PRACTICES

*With joy, you will draw water  
from the wells of salvation.*

—Isaiah 12:3

### INTRODUCTION

In Luke 24, the evangelist narrates the first postresurrection appearance of the risen Christ to two disciples who have departed Jerusalem for Emmaus in a state of dejection. In this well-known encounter, Jesus appears as their companion along the way. Conversation around the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the Messiah leads to a meal where the stranger acts as host. It is a revelatory meal, 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. The Gospel narrates that they said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” Returning to share this 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.”

This story holds together different and indispensable ways of human knowing: hearing and sensing, word and symbol, Scripture and sacrament. Only after their experience of a shared meal did the two disciples recognize Jesus. The meal made it possible for them to return to their hearing of the Word and discover a depth they had not previously understood. 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, we offer these practices for sacramental renewal. We believe that a richer, stronger baptismal practice will help us see more clearly how to be a Word and Sacrament church in a needy world. In our pastoral letter, we commend five simple disciplines to the church. For some congregations, they will be familiar; for others, they will be entirely new. These 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 that is 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 congregation.***

Locate your church’s baptismal font and bring it into the space where the congregation assembles for worship. Consider placing the font in a location where it is well seen and accessible to the congregation on a weekly basis. 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, which would include space for people to gather around the font and, if the church celebrates the Easter Vigil, a paschal candle (see next page). In preparation for Sunday, spend some

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time during the week experimenting with different placements of the font, and imagine how each one changes the significance of baptism for the congregation every time members enter the worship space. What does the location of your font and table communicate to the congregation?

- The paschal candle is a reminder of the paschal (Passover) mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Lit with new fire at the Easter Vigil, this candle is placed near the font and kept lighted for all occasions to recall our dying and rising with Christ through baptism.

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

Remember that the font is the receptacle for the primary and central symbol for baptism, which is water. Let the water be present all the time—whether there is a baptism to celebrate or not. You might even remove font covers if possible. Covers used to be necessary to protect the water from being stolen for superstitious reasons.

It is appropriate to start with some water in the font and to have 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, an assisting elder, 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 might it be timely in the liturgy 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 on every Lord's Day.***

Together these vessels point the congregation to the core meaning of our eucharistic life, a life of thanksgiving for who we are in Christ. When you are not celebrating the Lord's Supper, keep an empty paten and chalice central on the table so that these symbols may speak to us of our hunger for Christ, who feeds us at this table. Just as the font must be visible to express its meaning, so will the Lord's Table be allowed to function as a symbol. Be sensitive to what the presence of other things on the Lord's Table says about the meaning of the 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 so 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 hands as the words of forgiveness are spoken makes this connection even more strongly.

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, including youth, 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 into the water and remember their baptism actively.

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

Leading the intercessions 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 Eucharist 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. As the only repeatable part of Christian initiation, the Lord's Supper draws us more deeply into the paschal mystery of our dying and rising with Christ. Trusting the integrity of our Reformed tradition and its affirmation of Word and Sacrament as normative for each Lord's Day, we encourage the increased frequency of the Lord's Supper. Congregations might consider adding particular Sundays in the liturgical year or try celebrating the Lord's Supper through an entire season, like the season of Easter. Whether you increase the annual number of Communion Sundays by one or by several, more frequent and regular use of these means of grace strengthens the church in its baptismal identity and call.

In addition to existing resources like the Presbyterian Planning Calendar, the Directory for Worship, *Book of Common Worship*, and *Holy is the Lord*, the Office of Theology and Worship will be producing aids to assist congregations that desire to increase the frequency of Communion.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you begin 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 will be 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 and 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.

The final question on the next page 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?

# PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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

*Charlotte serves as pastor of a church in a Midwestern presbytery 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 children in her church. Mindful of the Directory for Worship, Charlotte was uncertain about what, if anything, she might 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 to a Presbyterian and worships in a new congregation where the minister says, before each Holy Communion, “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?” She also volunteers in an urban ministry that offers daily meals and weekly Eucharist to homeless men and women in her city.*

*First Presbyterian Church is a block and a half from the community college and enjoys a surge of visitors each time a new semester begins. With Communion once a month, the Worship Committee knows it is preparing more communion trays 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.”*

## INTRODUCTION

While the case studies above are fictional, they point to actual scenarios that are happening with increasing regularity all across the PC(USA). Today, as Presbyterians 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 fact, in 1998 and again in 2004, overtures were submitted to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that raised questions about the current language of the invitation to the Lord's Table, regarding who should be invited to receive Communion. In response to these overtures, a Sacraments Study Group was formed. It has met for three years to explore the concerns of the overtures in particular, and the larger issues they raise about sacramental understanding and practice.

The overtures asked that the language in the *Book of Order* be changed (sections W-2.4006 and W-2.4011), so that instead of inviting to the Lord's Supper "*all who have been baptized,*" we might extend that invitation to "*all persons of faith,*" or to "*all who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.*" To some, such changes may sound reasonable or even crucial to meet an urgent pastoral need; to others they may sound heretical. As members of the Sacraments Study Group, we came to be deeply grateful for the questions and those who have raised them 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 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 the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. In numerous places in the country, 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 our fellowship where Christ, working through us, may shape all our lives in the ways of discipleship.

The new realities in which we live place important questions before the church, not only about whom we invite to the Lord's Table, but also about how we lead people to baptism. Even more profoundly, they 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, we wonder: What kind of formation prior to baptism will give adult believers the spiritual resources they need to know God more deeply? 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 preparation for reaffirmation of faith will help new members reclaim their baptism and discover within it the Spirit's call to grow in faith in community? And 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? For that is in fact the central invitation that both baptism and the Lord's Supper extend, together with the Word—the invitation to know the Lord Jesus Christ and to live in the world as his disciple.

In an age of spiritual hunger, the sacraments can 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

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and a call to discipleship, can reenergize needed ministries of evangelism and hospitality. In our theologically diverse tradition 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 we respond to the opportunities and challenges before us. 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 help prompt continuing conversation among the members of every congregation and a list of additional resources for those interested in further reading.

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 do Word and Sacrament in Sunday worship both expresses what we believe about Christ and shapes how we live for Christ in the world. 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.

We encourage you to engage in "renewal, through Word and Sacrament, of our life together in Jesus Christ, by engaging in practices that deepen baptismal life and discipleship" as the General Assembly has called on us all to do. We invite you to join us in these five specific disciplines:

- Set the font in full view of the congregation.
- Open the font and fill it with water on every Lord's Day.
- Set cup and plate on the Lord's Table on 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 we encourage you to engage in lively and sustained theological reflection on your congregation's sacramental practice. We hope you will do that reflection in thoughtful dialogue with both church tradition and contemporary culture, using the essays in this resource. And we hope you will do it in dialogue with one another in your church and with others across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).



## 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.<sup>1</sup> While we rely on the instructions contained in Scripture concerning them, 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 these provide us with a broad framework for understanding the sacraments.

As the Sacraments Study Group, we studied 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, we studied the scriptural arguments made by those supporting and opposing changes to the current language in the Directory for Worship about the invitation to the Lord's Table.

### 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, circumcisions, 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.

Israel's sacrifices and feasts, their washings and circumcisions are all vehicles of the covenant relationship between God and this called-out people. 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. 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 central requirement of the covenant system. The practice of circumcision developed from the belief that circumcision made males more fertile. It also came to be a sign of initiation into the covenant of 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 or baptized on 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 to the promised land—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 these 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 echo among us 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 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**

Sacramental practice in the New Testament is summarized in our Directory for Worship in this way:

The early Church, following Jesus, took three primary material elements of life – water, bread, and wine – to become basic symbols of offering life to God as Jesus had offered his life. Being washed with the water of Baptism, Christians received new life in Christ and presented their bodies to be living sacrifices to God. Eating bread and drinking wine they received the sustaining presence of Christ, remembered God's covenant promise, and pledged their obedience anew. [W-.3033(1)]

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.

### **A. 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 subsequently presented themselves to be washed.

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 still today when we baptize our children and other 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 baptism 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. In Romans 6, Paul 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 the 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, 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.

### ***B. The 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 institution narratives found in the synoptic gospels and Paul (Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–23; 1 Corinthians 11:22–26; Matthew 26:26–29) are central. 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 in the breaking of bread to disciples on the Emmaus road (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 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 becomes a central action in which Jesus is encountered and that empowers the early church in its life and mission.

In conclusion, basic patterns for baptism and the Lord’s Supper develop in the early church, once these practices are placed in the context of a distinctive Christian narrative. 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.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in the Lord’s Supper, a shared meal becomes connected to this same central gospel narrative. The commandment in the institution narratives to remember Jesus (*anamnesis*) grounds the lives of believers in the pattern of his life, death, and resurrection.<sup>3</sup> 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**

Our study group was charged with responding to overtures that asked for the *Book of Order* to be modified so that people who are not baptized Christians might be invited to the Lord’s Table if they are “persons of faith” or “acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.”<sup>4</sup> This is often referred to as “open table” practice; however, that phrase has shifted in 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 want to respond to Christ, whether or not they are baptized.

This question has emerged in many Christian traditions in addition to the PC(USA), and a body of literature has developed around the issue. In our review of these published articles and books that advocate for or against an open table practice, those who enter the discussion tend to focus on the biblical-theological rationales for open table practice, the reasons in our culture that this question is emerging, or 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. From the Bible, it is not clear that there was a specific requirement for Christian baptism before 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> God’s plan to defeat evil, sin, and all that holds us captive is mediated through the call of Abraham and the creation of the people of Israel, and through the birth of the church out of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This telling of the good news certainly includes the forgiveness of sins, but it also preserves a strong role for Israel and the church in God’s economy of redemption. The new community, while not fully embodying the coming Kingdom of God, 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 foregrounded.<sup>7</sup> Based on these meanings, the potential equivalence or exchangeable order of baptism and the Lord’s Supper is understandable.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, those who argue against an open table emphasize the meanings of the meal that involve the covenant community. Through “eating 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 foregrounded, 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.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, in our review of the literature 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 those sacramental practices 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?

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## 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? This historical overview is not exhaustive, but it suggests 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, or rebirth, 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 Lord's Table for the 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 was 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 and are washed in the water 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.<sup>10</sup>

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, 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.<sup>11</sup>

In ancient Christianity, there was a unity of Word, 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 c.e.) the process of Christian initiation underwent significant change. As Christianity became the established religion, belonging to the church became a compulsory step for all in society. Since the way of life expected of baptized Christians was demanding, it became possible in the fourth century for people to become 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, this expanded pattern commonly included: 1. enrollment for baptism, 2. instruction, 3. exorcism, 4. renunciation of sin, evil, and the world, along with profession of allegiance to Christ, and 5. baptism, followed by the post-baptismal rites of 6. anointing and Eucharist. 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, Augustine's doctrine of original sin, coupled with a high infant mortality rate, led to a dramatic increase in the practice of presenting infants for baptism, which 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 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 were sown for its eventual separation 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 previously blessed by the bishop. Thus candidates in the Eastern Orthodox churches, usually babies, are baptized, anointed, and communed on one occasion.

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## **THE MIDDLE AGES: 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 into three occasions—baptism, confirmation, and first communion—often separated by years. The churches of the West were less concerned about the unity of the rites of initiation than were their Eastern neighbors 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 postbaptismal anointing. This meant that as Christianity spread, especially into the vast, tribal dioceses of northern Europe where visiting bishops were scarce, 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.

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, the withholding of the cup from the laity made it difficult to commune newly baptized infants, who were too young to digest the bread. Baptized infants had to be confirmed before turning eight, but often children took their first communion at a younger age. A thirteenth-century church council made confession mandatory before communion—proof that communion at the time of infant baptism had disappeared. And beginning in the fourteenth century, councils and synods decreed that baptism should occur within eight days of birth, 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 festival of Easter/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 discontinued and 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, John Calvin, the great Reformed theologian, radically reinterpreted the sacramental theology he had inherited. Brian Gerrish argues, "Calvinism actually begins its existence in the Reformation era as a distinct variety of sacramental theology, more particularly as a distinct interpretation of the central mystery of the Eucharist."<sup>12</sup> Calvin asserted that both sacraments are signs of our incorporation, our engrafting, into the body of Christ. In addition, Calvin, along with such Reformers as Martin

Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, was dedicated to the celebration of baptism (and Eucharist) in a manner that would be a sign of God's grace. Presbyterians come from the heritage of sixteenth-century reform that held onto a strong doctrine of God's grace of which the sacraments are a means for Calvin.

Calvin inherited from the medieval church a temporal separation between baptism and Eucharist by typically eight years or more. Yet Calvin maintained theologically the sense of union between baptism (almost always infant) and first communion (almost always in adolescence).

The medieval practice of baptism had become a form of urgent rescue, a rite of salvation generated, at least in the understanding of the Reformers, by the superstitious belief that magical water would save the fragile infant. These Reformers were utterly opposed to the idea that baptism was anything other than the symbolic expression of divine grace: the God who loved them and so graciously made them members of the covenant community would be just as gracious to their children. Calvin writes:

As for our sacraments, the more fully Christ has been revealed to men, the more clearly do the sacraments present him to us . . . For baptism attests to us that we have been cleansed and washed; the Eucharistic Supper, that we have been redeemed. In water, washing is represented; in blood, satisfaction. These two are found in Christ . . . who," as John says, "came by water and blood" [1 John 5:6], that is, to wash and to redeem.<sup>13</sup>

This language points to the close connection between baptism and Eucharist in Calvin's theology. According to Calvin, the purpose of both sacraments was 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. 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, it was the role of teaching (catechesis) that held the two sacraments together.

In Reformed congregations of the sixteenth century, baptism generally occurred in infancy. Confirmation, which in the medieval period had been understood as the bishop's act, confirming a prior baptism, became in the Reformation the candidates' act of professing baptismal faith. Parents made promises at baptism to raise a child in the church, but the actual baptismal vows were delayed until confirmation, when they could be spoken by the confirmand. First communion followed, usually immediately after confirmation. Although he was insistent on maintaining infant baptism, Calvin believed in baptismal formation; and it is here that we see the distinctive Reformed theological pattern. In Calvin's practice, infant baptism was followed by postbaptismal formation through childhood, in preparation for 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



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baptism of infants, was restored in the Reformed churches as postbaptismal 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 profession of faith (confirmation) and Eucharist, Calvin maintained the historic order of the sacraments, at the same time strengthening their integral theological connection.

For Calvin, there is a unity of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Catechesis, the church's teaching of baptized children, leads directly from baptism to communion. This can be seen as a journey to the Lord's Table from the actual waters of baptism or from the baptismal vows professed at confirmation; either way, the relationship of the two sacraments is affirmed. Baptism in 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. There is unity of baptism and faith. There is unity of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

### **SACRAMENTS AND THE CONFESSIONS OF THE CHURCH**

All of our Reformed confessions place priority on the Word of God, written in Scripture, proclaimed in preaching, and revealed in Jesus Christ. In relation to the sacraments, we find the written Word of God instructive not only in the narratives of our Lord's institution of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but more broadly in the teachings of Jesus by word and example and in the promises of God and the narratives of God's people throughout the Old and New Testaments. Additionally, our confessions affirm that the Word of God may be found in the witness of the church and in the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

In our *Book of Confessions*, 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 increases and assures 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 a means of grace.

Clearly the *Book of Confessions* upholds an important role for the sacraments. It is therefore important for the 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 also important for the churches 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 also communal actions in which we may respond to God's Word. 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 are 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 to others around us. In regular returning to font and table, the faithful learn to hope for God's presence, not just at the time of sacramental celebration, but throughout our lives.

The confessions of the church 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 who compels 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.

A number of the confessions in the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* have sections dedicated to the sacraments. The following references provide a starting place for study:

- *The Scots Confession*: 3:21, *The Sacraments*
- *The Heidelberg Catechism*: 4.065—4.082, *The Holy Sacraments, Holy Baptism, The Holy Supper*
- *The Second Helvetic Confession*: Chapter XIX, *Of the Sacraments of the Church of Christ*, especially sections 5.169, 5.172, 5.178, 5.195;
- *The Westminster Confession of Faith & The Catechisms*: 6.078, 6.149–6.168, *Of the Sacraments, Of Baptism, Of the Lord's Supper*
- Questions 88 and 91–97 in *The Shorter Catechism*, 7.088, 7.091–7.097;
- Questions 35, 154, 161–177 in *The Larger Catechism*, 7.145, 7.264, 7.271–7.287;
- *The Confession of 1967*: 9.48; 9.51–2, *The Equipment of the Church, Baptism, the Lord's Supper*<sup>14</sup>

### **RECENT HISTORY AND ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council mandated a recovery of the catechumenate in the Roman Catholic Church. Since that Council, the Roman Catholic 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 catechumenate 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 (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 different from other members in that they are preparing for baptism and Eucharist.

Recently, several Christian traditions have been engaged in conversation and experimentation with the catechumenate. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, the Reformed Church of Canada, the Methodist Church in America, 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 not only the character of adult formation and initiation, but also the prospect of enhanced and unified sacramental practice.

The issue of communing the unbaptized has arisen as various Christian traditions have lowered the age of first communion from confirmation to newly baptized infants. For example, in the UPCUSA (the northern Presbyterian church), there was a change in the Directory for Worship in 1971 to allow baptized children to come to the table (reflecting a change in practice that was already in place in some congregations).<sup>15</sup> At least by the early 1970s, some in the PCUS (the southern church) adopted this practice, but it was not approved by the General Assembly until 1976 and did not enter the *Book of Church Order*

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until 1980.<sup>16</sup> At the 1983 reunion of the two denominations, the new *Book of Order* of the PC(USA) included the former UPCUSA statement advising the session to counsel parents who permitted baptized children to take communion. Thus, language that was intended to open the Lord's Table to all baptized Christians, including children, has now appeared in parts of the church to be "fencing" the table from the unbaptized, and so has raised the issue of whether we shall also commune those who are not baptized.<sup>17</sup>

As Presbyterians 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, it is important to consider our place in the whole church of Jesus Christ. Like us, our ecumenical partners are exploring the practice of communing the unbaptized. Presently, they maintain that baptism normally precedes 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. The 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

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- Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co, 1992.
- White, James F. *A Brief History of Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

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## THEOLOGY AND SACRAMENTS

We are inviting you into deeper sacramental practice and reflection 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 this light, the Sacraments Study Group looked at these particular resources: John Calvin's theology; *The Book of Confessions*; the Directory for Worship; *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (as well as other ecumenical statements); the work of contemporary Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox theologians; and articles on open table practice.

What we offer here is not a comprehensive systematic theology, but we are providing the church with a foundation for further theological reflection. We offer this in the hopes that it will allow your congregation to examine, reflect on, and deepen sacramental practice. These questions have guided our reflection, and they may be useful in stimulating conversation in your community.

### 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, 10.3). 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” (Confession of 1967, inclusive language version, 9.12). 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 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” (Second Helvetic Confession, 5.076). 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” (Nicene Creed, 1.3). 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 (Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.037). 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.

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**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 Scots Confession 3.06). 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 known to us 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” (Heidelberg Catechism, 4.053). 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, and eat 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 not only can hear, but can see, feel, and taste. Baptism cleanses us of sin, 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: participation in Christ's death and resurrection; conversion, pardoning, and cleansing; the gift of the Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and the sign of the Kingdom. The current Directory for Worship of the PC(USA) attends to these meanings of baptism, and it adds a more pronounced understanding of baptism in relation to covenant: "In Baptism, the Holy Spirit binds the Church in covenant to its Creator and Lord" (W-2.3003; cf. W-2.3000, entire).

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 and recognize our equality. 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 the supper 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: thanksgiving to the Father; memorial of Christ; invocation of the Spirit; communion of the faithful; and meal of the Kingdom. These same five images appear almost identically in the Directory for Worship (W-2.4003–4007).

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 our table we eat with Christ on that last night as disciples ourselves and as guests at the great feast of the Lamb that is promised and will surely come to pass.

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***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,i.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 sins, a free offer of relationship, but this offer of relationship is simultaneously 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 Westminster Confession of Faith 6.039–6.042). 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 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 the divine promise and dominical warrant. 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” (see, e.g., Westminster Confession of Faith 6.075–6.077). 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 a prized possession of the church. 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, 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

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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!" 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 God may not come when we want, but God 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 and discrimination and meaninglessness. And so we welcome the stranger and provide shelter to the refugee 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 us in 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*, IV, xiv.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 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 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 we are still left with the question: 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 is first, leading 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, font as womb and the table as the place where the body of Christ is re-membered) lose symbolic power when the practice is revised.

The concluding section of the theological reflections on "Scripture and Sacraments" discusses the current biblical arguments for and against open table practice. The conclusion there coheres with the conclusion here: that 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

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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 each 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 also 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. The 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. The 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?
  - 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 communion 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 the 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 the sacrament call you?



5. The essay describes the sacraments as events that take us back to 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

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

Presbyterian scholar and pastor Ron Byars has written this book for a general reading audience, particularly for Presbyterians who want to think more deeply about the heart of Christian worship. Throughout, he argues that the Word and the sacraments cannot be separated, and that the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Lord's Supper belong together as the usual pattern of Christian worship each Sunday.

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

This scholarly exploration of John Calvin's theology suggests that the entire shape of the great Reformer's theology is Eucharistic: God as father feeds his children, and we respond in gratitude. The Lord's Supper presents this most clearly, but the theme of grace and gratitude runs throughout Calvin's work.

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

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

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

This is a much briefer summary of the argument made in *Holy Things* that the essentials of Christian worship are the acts that revolve around pulpit, font, and table.

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

This is a small, accessible reflection on the sacraments in mainline Protestant churches by a Methodist liturgical historian. He suggests that practice leads to theological reflection, which leads back to renewed sacramental practice. The last chapter is a response by Edward Kilmartin, a Roman Catholic liturgical theologian.

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

This more recent work by White takes an historical look at the theology and practice of sacraments in Protestantism over the past five hundred years.

*The Study Catechism: Full Version*. Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2003. Questions 68–79, on the sacraments.

Particularly for Presbyterians who want to reflect on the significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, this recent document, commended to the church for study by the General Assembly, is a good starting point.

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## SACRAMENTS AND CULTURE

### LISTENING TO THE CHURCH

From the start of its work, the Sacraments Study Group made a commitment to listen closely to the church and to give sustained attention to the way the sacraments are actually celebrated and understood in various Presbyterian congregations today. The fictional scenarios described earlier reflect the real experience of congregations across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the challenges addressed there are raising important questions for the church's practice of Word and Sacrament.

In our listening to the church, the study group invited broad participation and sought particular input from those we felt had insights to offer that might be especially fruitful for our work. This included persons who submitted the two overtures referred to us from the General Assembly. We were also eager to listen to new church development congregations, multicultural congregations, and congregations that are known for their careful attention to worship. We asked for detailed descriptions of current practices at font and table that could reveal how congregations are being formed in their sacramental understandings. And we asked about challenges to sacramental practice that churches are facing from the culture, along with resources they feel they need for the future.

Members of the study group initiated conversations with the church through public hearings, surveys, interviews, postings on the PC(USA) Web site, and articles in denominational publications.<sup>18</sup> We heard from elders, pastors, seminarians, members, and judicatory leaders. In addition, previous surveys by the Presbyterian Panel<sup>19</sup> and documents that accompanied the overtures informed our work. Once gathered, this data from actual church practices formed the context within which the study group engaged its theological work. Among our sources, we consulted contemporary theologians to help us assess the impact of contemporary culture on the church's sacramental practice.

In addition, the study group's commitment to a shared practice of Word and Sacrament significantly informed all our work. The convictions we offer here grow as much out of God's leading in this shared practice of worship as out of our theological reflection and data gathering.

### THE CULTURE ADDRESSING THE SACRAMENTS

In North America in the opening decade of the 21st 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 4th century and lasted into the second half of the 20th century are no longer the reality we inhabit. Whether we lament or welcome this change, or more likely engage in a little of both, here we want simply to take note of 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 and positive 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 worshiping communities of people who have never been baptized is challenging the church to think again 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 over 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 pay more attention, for example, to the solemnity and order of serving of the elements than to the 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 18th- and 19th-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 cultural 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

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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 church membership, baptism, and participation in the Lord's Supper 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. As the study group listened to the stories and experiences of the church, we heard contemporary people giving voice to a number of things for which they and the people they see around them are hungry and thirsty and sometimes even desperate. We identified these eight hungers, which it seems 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;
- or 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 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, 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 told us, "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 covenant relationship from which the rest of our lives are offered as fulfillment of that covenant."

Some congregations we contacted practice the sacraments with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and 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 renewal of the baptismal covenant and that it is a time for all present to renew their baptismal covenant." According to a pastor in a new church development, "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 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.

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### **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 segmented or 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.<sup>20</sup> A new church development pastor put 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 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 said, "We are always looking for ways of linking our sacramental life with the 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. Church members report that 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. Gathering regularly around pulpit, font, and table we may yet become a holy people, going out into the world to serve the needy, speak words that sustain the weary, and 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 frequently follow the *Book of Common Worship*,<sup>21</sup> so pastors say something like, "All who trust in Jesus Christ are welcome at this table." Many report that persons "self-select" in response to this general invitation, and pastors never know who is baptized and who is not. Unlike the *Book of Common Worship*, the Directory for Worship<sup>22</sup> makes plain that the baptized are invited to the table. This apparent lack of consistency in our documents adds to the confusion.

In addition, thorough preparation of ministers in the theological, liturgical, and pastoral dimensions of sacramental practice is inadequate. One pastor reports that it was not until his second call that he became aware of the directions of the Directory for Worship. "I will confess that I didn't know about the 'baptism requirement' until a few years ago! I was never taught it. But about four years ago, when I came to this church, I had an elder who told me that they 'fenced' the table in this way—that you have to be baptized. I looked it up in the Directory for Worship 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 it 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 baptismal requirement 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 it? Jesus welcomed everyone."

In congregations where hospitality and evangelism intentionally lead to baptism, leaders report increasing numbers of adult baptisms. "We had six adult baptisms in our little church last year," reported one enthusiastic elder. 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. Conflicts within the PC(USA) in recent decades have left the church exhausted and with a deep longing for relationships that express our unity in Christ. The work of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force is an expression of this longing. The practice of the sacraments is an especially

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welcome gift to the church as we attempt to heal our divisions. In baptism each one is engrafted 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. For Presbyterians this is good news indeed! Rather than a competitive struggle for particular understandings of peace, unity, and purity, the sacraments enact and make real the peace, unity, and purity that are already ours in our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. They call the church to enlarge the demonstration of this peace in every aspect of our unified life in Christ. Congregational leaders report 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.<sup>23</sup> This unity is increasingly important given the church's current position in society. In one multi-denominational congregation, celebrations of 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 are eager to understand Presbyterian distinctives, it is equally important always to affirm the unity of the whole church of Christ, enacted in the sacraments.

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.
  - What are the people around you most deeply hungry for?
  - 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. The 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?

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Baumann, Gerd. *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.
- Driver, Tom F. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. Boulder: Westview, 1998.
- Miller, Vincent J. *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Stauffer, S. Anita, ed., *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996. See especially "Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities," 23–28.
- Wheeler, Barbara G. *Who Needs the Church?* Louisville: Geneva Press, 2004.
- Wuthnow, Robert, *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Yount, David. *The Future of Christian Faith in America*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004.

## APPENDIX TO SACRAMENTS AND CULTURE: SACRAMENTS STUDY GROUP PUBLIC HEARINGS

### DESCRIPTION OF PRACTICES

- Please describe the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper in your community. We are most interested in what is distinctive about such practices in relation to your particular congregational situation. Are there distinct things that you do or say (different from neighboring churches) because of "what you have seen and heard"?

### WORSHIP RESOURCES

- What do you sing at these celebrations? Where do the words of your prayers come from?
- Do you employ the *Book of Common Worship* and/or *The Presbyterian Hymnal*? Other books?
- What new and/or supplementary resources, if any, would you like to see produced by the denomination to enrich what you do?

### INITIATION AND FORMATION

- At what age are folks normally baptized in your community? What do you think this custom means for the ways in which your community thinks about and celebrates baptism?
- At what age are members invited to the table? What do you think this custom means for the ways in which your community thinks about and celebrates the Lord's Supper?
- How are members prepared for font and for table?
- How often does your community talk about the sacraments—whether in formal educational settings or in discussions of why we do what we do?

### THE ROLE(S) OF CHILDREN

- How are children and other young people involved in the sacraments?
- Are those who have not yet been baptized invited to the table or to some alternative way of participating in the Lord's Supper?

### OTHER RESPONSES AND INFORMATION

- What else are you thinking about that we have not yet asked about?
- What else do you think we need to know in order to complete our work?

If you think of further reflections you would like to share with the task force, please contact:

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## CONCLUSION

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 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 a worship visitor from another, non-Christian faith is moved to come forward for Communion? What would we need to think about before holding a Communion service 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.

It may even be that in the church today, we need to confess 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. And in various 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 extends is an invitation, not just to water, not just to bread and wine, but to Christ himself who is represented in 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 the 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.

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, this 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 latter question is the one that the recent overtures have raised and that has been the focus of this report. Still, the former question arises often enough in the life of the church that it is important to address: As we serve the bread and wine to 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.

One pastor with whom we spoke said this: "I have long held the conviction that if I can just help people understand the significance of their baptisms, I will have done enough as a pastor." It is in this spirit that we invite you to join us on this journey 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.

We are eager to hear about what you discover, your insights, and the directions you sense God's Spirit is leading the church. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit abide with you all!

## Notes

1. In fact, the word “sacrament” does not even 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. In its pre-Christian use, the Greek word often referred to religious rites such as the Eleusinian mysteries. The Latin term commonly referred to an object given as a pledge of future loyalty to a leader, as in the oath of loyalty taken by soldiers to their commander; emphasis fell on the thing that was given in pledge. The early church referred to the new life in Christ as the great mystery; this mystery was entered into in baptism and celebrated in the breaking of the bread. In the early 3rd century, Tertullian translated the Greek word *mysterion* by the Latin *sacramentum*. Eusebius in the 4th century is the first to use the word *mysterion* to refer to the church’s rites themselves. In time, the word sacrament came to focus attention on the elements in these rites: the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Cf. “Sacraments,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990).
2. In this way the earlier Latin meaning of “sacrament” (*sacramentum*) as an oath of loyalty to a leader makes sense.
3. 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. See “ἀναμνησις” in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. See also Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
4. Overtures 98–33 and 04–50.
5. 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.

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, Diebert 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 PC(USA) 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 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.

6. 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 the words of institution themselves, 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 (e.g., Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 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

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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 (cf. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), chapters 1 and 3.

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 preparation for baptism and baptism.

7. This question leads us to another nest of biblical issues that impact the question of 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 open table practice. 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, "Washing Before Supper?" 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.



8. Michael Welker captures these central Reformation themes in the phrase “liberation from the power of sin.” Welker, chapter 10 of *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, “Liberation from the Power of Sin—or Preservation for Eternal Life?,” 149–160.
9. Welker calls this emphasis “preservation for eternal life.”
10. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom, Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). 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. The quotations are from pp. xv and 21, respectively.
11. 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*, 5 (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 3.
12. Gerrish, Brian, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 2.
13. Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4. 14. 22
14. *The Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
15. See Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order* of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1971–72), chapter V, section 2, par. 10 (20.02); cf. 21.04 and 41.06
16. See *Book of Church Order*, Presbyterian Church in the United States 1980/81 edition (Atlanta: Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, PCUS, 1980), Part II, chapter 7–3.
17. The 1987 Proposed Draft of the Directory for Worship included the following recommended addition to W-2.4011 (after the paragraph about baptized children being welcomed to the table): “Adults who were baptized as children but who have never made public their personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ may be led by the Spirit to come to the Table. Responding to the invitation to receive Christ in the Supper calls then for a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When the Holy Spirit calls to Christ’s Table one not yet baptized, that call also appropriately leads to the water of Baptism. Having received Christ in bread and cup, one thus called shall then request Baptism.” While this addition was never approved, it points to an earlier intuition in the church to preserve the close relationship of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
18. A sample questionnaire is attached.
19. “Public Worship” by *The Presbyterian Panel: Listening to Presbyterians*, May 2000.
20. See Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, especially chapters 1–3.
21. *Book of Common Worship*, Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1993.
22. W-2.4006: “All the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table, and none shall be excluded because of race, sex, age, economic status, social class, handicapping condition, difference of culture or language, or any barrier created by human injustice. . . .” W-2.4011: “The invitation to the Lord’s Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. . . .”
23. *Book of Order*, Directory for Worship, Preface: “This Directory for Worship reflects the conviction that the life of the Church is one, and that its worship, witness, and service are inseparable.” See also W-2.4006: “Around the Table of the Lord, God’s people are in communion with Christ and with all who belong to Christ.” Or W-2.3005, “Around the Table of the Lord, God’s people are in

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communion with Christ and with all who belong to Christ.” Or see W-2.3005. “The body of Christ is one and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ.” Or see W-7.4004: “In Baptism and the Lord’s Supper believers are united in Christ, are made one in the church through the Holy Spirit, and recognize one another across all boundaries and divisions as sisters and brothers in the faith.” See also G-15.0101: “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to manifest more visibly the unity of the church of Jesus Christ and will be open to opportunities for conversation, cooperation, and action with other ecclesiastical bodies and secular groups.” Or note the theme of Christian unity in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission, 1982.