

Communion: Roots and Wellsprings for Feeding, Filling, and Sending

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Introduction

The sacrament of holy communion, which has been at the heart of Christian worship and mission for nearly 2,000 years, was also foundational to the formation of our denomination. The Lord's Supper embodies unity, renewed hope, and mission as we are fed, filled, and sent forth. This message of unity, hope, and mission is needed as much in the present age as it was in the past. In many places, however, our corporate worship is truncated and "flattened," and misses its potential to show us God's kingdom. This flattening of worship will be further discussed near the end of this paper. When practiced in community with the church across space and time, the Lord's Supper overflows with an "inexhaustible wellspring of assurance,"¹ which can speak new life into a flattened world. As we celebrate Christ in the broken bread and drink the cup of the new covenant, we "proclaim his death until he comes"—the mysteries of incarnation and atonement (1 Cor 11:26). This essay will consider a slice of Evangelical Covenant Church denominational history focused on sacramental theology with suggestions for our own celebration of communion. May we live into these sacramental roots and wellsprings in order that all may be fed in unity, filled in hope, and sent out in mission to serve the world God so loves.

1 The phrase "inexhaustible wellspring of assurance" is used by C.O. Rosenius in his 1846 essay entitled "Communion," as quoted in Mark Safstrom, ed., *The Swedish Pietists: A Reader: Excerpts from the Writings of Carl Olaf Rosenius and Paul Peter Waldenström* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 137.

Waldenström on Atonement

Paul Peter Waldenström (1838–1917) was a Swedish theologian who became one of the founders, and later, president, of the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden. He emphasized God as a loving Father rather than a God of wrath. Waldenström followed Carl Olof Rosenius as the editor of *Pietisten* (*The Pietist*) magazine. The dominant view of the atonement in the preaching of the Lutheran Church of the time was based on Anselm's teaching of a juridical view, though Luther had embraced a classical/Christus Victor view.² Covenant leader Donald Frisk notes that during the Reformation period, there was a shift from God's offended honor to his "righteousness with its demand that the sinner be punished"; this introduced a division between the interests of the Son acting in love and the Father acting in justice.³ After an intensive study of Scripture in the original languages, Waldenström articulated a different biblical view of the atonement from the prevailing Lutheran view that harkened back to Luther's preferred classical/Christus Victor understanding. This Christus Victor understanding sees Christ as a victorious warrior who ransoms humanity and all of creation from the power of sin, death, and the devil (Mark 10:45; 1 Cor 7:23; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Because of the atonement, we can be united with Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and become part of a new, glorified humanity. This classical understanding was articulated by such theologians as Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 202) who wrote, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."⁴

Gregory of Nazianzus emphasized that Christ redeemed us as whole people:

If only half of Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it

2 Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Herbert (SPKC Publishing, 1931; republished by Crossreach Publications 2016), vi.

3 Donald C. Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1981; Covenant Publications, 2003), 98.

4 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 5, preface, in Alexander Roberts and Sir James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), vol. 1, 526; Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against_heresies_v/anf01.ix.vii.i.html, accessed February 7, 2024.

must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten,
and *so be saved as a whole*.⁵

In 1872, *The Pietist* published Waldenström's famous sermon for the twentieth Sunday after Trinity, in which he emphasized that God is a loving Father, rather than a God of wrath. This new emphasis meant that salvation occurs through a personal trust and relationship with Christ, *rather than intellectual assent*. His teaching differed from his predecessor in that Rosenius never spoke of God being reconciled, but only of people being reconciled to God. The atonement did not change God from being wrathful to loving; rather, it changed humanity. In this, Waldenström also differed with the terminology of the Augsburg Confession (1530) on which the Swedish state church was founded.⁶ Waldenström's teaching created controversy that contributed to the formation of the Covenant Church.⁷

Waldenström on the Lord's Supper

The celebration of the Lord's Supper was central to Waldenström's theology. In his teaching on the Supper, he incorporated three atonement metaphors. As well as the juridical and Christus Victor views, Waldenström incorporated elements of the exemplary theory, also termed the subjective or moral influence theory. This view was expounded by medieval church teacher Abelard (1079–1142) and nineteenth-century American Congregational minister Horace Bushnell (1802–1876). In this understanding of the atonement, Christ's suffering on the cross has the main purpose of showing us God's love. This leads to the human response of repentance, faith, and love, an attractive picture of our love responding to the love of the One who first loved us (1 John 4:19). However, an exclusive emphasis on the moral influence theory neglects the need for Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, and the Holy Spirit to transform us and empower us to be Christ's ambassadors.

Waldenström incorporated elements of these three theories when he

5 Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101, *To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius*, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), vol. 7, 440 (emphasis added); Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207/npnf207.iv.ii.iii.html>, accessed February 8, 2024.

6 Safstrom, 17.

7 James K. Bruckner, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, and Paul Koptak, eds., *Living Faith: Reflections on Covenant Affirmations by the Faculty of North Park Theological Seminary* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2010), 25.

wrote about communion. He taught that Christ's blood circulates through the believers who are grafted into him as they receive him by faith.⁸ However, Waldenström distinguished his thought from the exemplary understanding by stating it is not faith that saves us. In *The Blood of Jesus*, Waldenström reminds us that though reason tells us the communion elements are just bread and wine, Paul says there is more to it. Waldenström affirmed Luther's understanding that Christ is "in, with and under the wine,"⁹ and generally agreed with Luther's view of the atonement. Waldenström paraphrased Paul's words in 1 Cor 11:27, 29, that in communion, we are partaking of Christ's own life and body. The effect is the remission of sins,¹⁰ to sanctify and cleanse,¹¹ to make us "partakers of his life,"¹² and to unite believers into one body.¹³

Waldenström shared Rosenius's concern that people would not come to the Lord's Table because they feared they were too sinful. He said the Lord's body and blood are for Christ's disciples who are weak and tempted, for those who feel lacking in faith, but not for the "blatantly ungodly."¹⁴ He noted that the Word and prayer and devotion may at times taste like "dry wood" (quoting Luther),¹⁵ but that coming to the table can still make believers alive, strong, holy, and loving.¹⁶ Here Waldenström indicates that Word and sacrament are both vital; Christ reveals himself to us in a unique and necessary way in the Lord's Supper.

Waldenström also agreed with the early church fathers that the Lord's Supper is linked to the incarnation, Christ's birth by a woman, and his assumption of a human body.¹⁷ He emphasized that the new covenant in Christ's blood "truly cleanses from sins." The bread and wine are not

8 Frisk, 102.

9 P.P. Waldenström, *The Blood of Jesus. What Is Its Significance? Meditations on All the New Testament Passages in Which the Expression Occurs*, trans. J.G. Princll (Chicago: J. Martinson, 1888), 22. Frisk Collection of Covenant Literature, North Park College, https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/npu_swecc/id/26544/rec/2.

10 Waldenström, 11.

11 Waldenström, 29.

12 Waldenström, 10.

13 Waldenström, 11.

14 Safstrom, 141.

15 Safstrom, 142.

16 Safstrom, 143.

17 Safstrom, 139.

merely symbols; they are an “in-between meal,” looking back to the past and forward to the future when Christ will return.¹⁸ Waldenström wrote that “everything in heaven and earth testifies to this mercy,” in reference to the blood of Jesus that speaks mercifully from heaven.¹⁹ In this, he implied the participation of all creation in God’s redemption. Frisk notes that Waldenström’s teaching on the atonement includes other key features of the classical/Christus Victor view, such that Christ was victorious over sin, death, and the devil.²⁰

Waldenström believed himself called by God to bring about revival in the state Lutheran church. He created controversy in 1876 when he served communion at a gathering outside of a Lutheran church service, holding a “believers” communion in a mission house. This contributed to the birth of the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden in 1878 as a Swedish free church. Swedish immigrants to America founded the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant in 1885, which was the first official name of what today we call the Evangelical Covenant Church.

In defining the new “mission group,” the founders placed the Lutheran catechism lower than Scripture. However, in contrast with Calvinist Reformers, they maintained the Lutheran understanding of Christ’s “real presence” in the sacrament of communion. Waldenström directed Christ-followers to “the organic unity of the incarnation, the death on the cross, and the resurrection in the work of atonement and also highlighted the necessity of subjective involvement in the atonement which has its basis in an objective historical act.”²¹

It is evident that all three views of the atonement noted above are at the heart of our denomination’s formation, were illumined by the preached Word, and were received in the Lord’s Supper. It is also clear that Waldenström believed in a balanced combination of the human response of faith and God’s saving action through the bread and cup. His view of God working through the physical elements can be considered “sacramental.” The writer to the Hebrews says that Christ “suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood” (Heb 13:12). In effect, Waldenström “went outside the gate” by sharing communion—Christ’s own body and blood—in the meeting house, outside of an officially sanctioned Lutheran state church. He went “outside the gate” to combat the false teaching that held that intellectual assent was

18 Safstrom, 139–40.

19 Waldenström, 30.

20 Frisk, 102.

21 Frisk, 104.

all that was needed to be saved.

This episode from Covenant history calls us to consider how we share communion in our churches today and how communion can proclaim the riches of Christ's incarnation and atonement. How do we speak into flattened and truncated theologies that prevent us from sharing the good news where it needs to be heard? How do we hold to the teaching of the church across space and time, and still contextualize our celebration for our contemporary situation and the future to which God is calling us? Do we see communion in a missional way? Is it a means to lift up Christ "outside the gate" so that he may draw all people to himself? To explore these questions, I now consider the concepts of sacrament and revelation.

Communion as Sacrament

Waldenström expressed a rich and full understanding of incarnation and atonement in his understanding of communion. This reminds us that communion is more than a sign—it is a sacrament. In other words, Christ is present with us in a concentrated way in communion. The Holy Trinity is actively involved, bestowing grace as we worship. Different definitions of sacrament can help us better understand how God can feed, fill, and send us out with the Lord's Supper.

Many Word-centered Protestants resonate with Augustine's (354–430) definition of a sacrament, as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." The precise meaning of Augustine's phrase is disputed. Many evangelicals are comfortable with the emphasis on the invisible, which they take to mean an inward response of faith. Contemporary Reformed theologian Leonard Vander Zee emphasizes both the inward and the outward aspects of communion as a means of God's grace in Christ which confers that which it promises, and "involves a response of faith and commitment in and through Jesus Christ."²² Vander Zee explains that the sacraments are given by God to proclaim and seal "divine forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, justification, and sanctification." Sacraments disclose God as my Redeemer, as well as the Redeemer of the whole world.²³

Here I offer a definition of a sacrament in line with both Augustine's and Vander Zee's understandings, which elevates the physical aspect of

22 Leonard Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2004), 23, 155.

23 Michael Horton, *In the Face of God* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 119, as quoted in Vander Zee, 23.

the means of grace: a sacrament may be defined as “a physical means God uses to accomplish his eternal purpose of the redemption of humanity in Christ, working through God’s Word revealed in Scripture in a mysterious combination with the faith of the recipient.” As a Protestant, I acknowledge only two sacraments: baptism and communion. However, God also works powerfully through “sacramentals.”²⁴

Some Protestants may fear that such a high view of the sacraments is superstitious or idolatrous. I would counter that sacraments are not effective because humans magically manipulate the spiritual realm, but they are more than mere symbols; they bear Christ’s presence.²⁵ For Protestants, baptism and communion are the sacraments God uses in salvation, in combination with the faith of the recipient. A helpful way to phrase this is that the Word, and the sacraments of communion and baptism, are the “densest” way we encounter Christ.²⁶ In communion, we ascend with Christ to the heavenly realms where we receive a renewed vision of God’s already-but-not-yet kingdom (Eph 2:5–7; Col 3:1–4).

This understanding leads to an embodied faith—faith in the God who became incarnated as a human in Mary’s womb, faith in the God who calls us to embody the object of our faith in body, mind, and soul. This renewed vision is needed in this day and age, where a vision of reality based on God’s revelation, and even a vision of any reality existing outside of the human mind, is increasingly called into question. Such a vision is needed to revitalize the worship, witness, and mission of the church in an age where words are met with suspicion and seen only as a means to power for the speaker or writer. Such a vision is needed to capture the hearts and imaginations of the Western church, and to provide pathways for not-yet believers to know Christ, the source of all beauty, goodness, and truth. The sacrament of communion touches the whole person through sensory experiences that speak to memory and imagination, metaphor, and story, inviting individuals and communities

24 There is much to learn from our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers in Christ. I agree with the Catholic teaching that “sacramentals” can prepare a person to receive God’s grace and to cooperate with it.

25 John D. Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020), 6.

26 Rempel, 22.

to join God's metanarrative of salvation.²⁷

As we receive the bread and the cup into our bodies through sight, smell, touch, and taste, we can explain to our congregations that we are receiving God's love into our very selves, rather than earning it. We can teach and experience such truths through the sacrament, linking them to the preached Word. When we have our "sacramental lenses" on, much of what we preach (whether it is a Bible story or a topical theme) can be illumined and embodied in communion.

Christ Revealed

We need to be guided and empowered by God in order to live as citizens in God's kingdom. Christ "moved into the neighborhood" (Jn 1:14, MSG) and sent his Spirit to reveal God to us. Here I will share a bit of my personal story to illustrate how revelation is central to a Christian worldview in our increasingly secular age. This story also illustrates how Christ was revealed in Word, sacrament, and community in one church that intentionally explored communion.

In 2004 I served as the children's minister at an Evangelical Covenant Church. Parents asked for a family class on communion for children who had previously received the sacrament without formal explanation or intention when the plate of bread and tray of juice was passed once a month. I had read that the broken bread at Emmaus was the first communion with the risen Lord, and that Christ is revealed in Word *and* sacrament (Lk 24:35). I realized that though communion is mysterious, it is a tangible way to encounter God. I saw that Jesus had something to reveal to my community and to me each time we partook of the supper.

The Communion Class: Incarnation, Atonement, and Multivalent Meanings

The second year I taught the class, I received a Vital Worship grant from the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship to lead a year-long group project on communion. The grant project included meeting with a team of parents, pastors, and Sunday school teachers, and getting their input on the class, a book I was writing for the class, and a closing worship

27 For more on how we are formed through our sensory experiences, see James McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality: The Arts and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

service around communion. During the team meetings, one parent commented that she realized for the first time that worship was more than music. A pastor shared that many people think they are supposed to feel sorrowful and repentant when they receive communion, or else it is not effective. The closing worship service included a sermon on the Emmaus story and interviews with the children who participated in the class. Many children received communion for the first time with their families. Discerning together had helped us shape the class, the book, and the closing worship service. This intentional time of planning in community revitalized our worship for years to come. Planning in community can also help congregations address other relevant issues today, something I will comment on at the end of this essay.

Fed in Unity, Filled with Renewed Hope, and Sent Forth in Mission: The Emmaus Table and Communion

The Emmaus story offers a critical vantage point from which to consider how the Lord's Supper works and why we need it (Lk 24:13–35). I will consider three components that we see in this story: feeding in unity, filling in hope, and sending in mission. The context of the story resonates with today's world where there is much division, many are losing hope, and injustice abounds. The story begins when Christ meets two downcast disciples on the road, on the evening of that first Easter, and joins them on their journey. Cleopas is named and many scholars believe the other disciple was Cleopas's wife, Mary. The pair didn't believe the women's account of the resurrection and had lost hope.

Cleopas and the other disciple were *fed* by the risen Christ as he opened Scripture to them. When Christ offered them the broken bread, he was revealed and they recognized him. They said to one another, "Did not our hearts burn within us...?" They immediately went back to Jerusalem and gathered in unity with the other disciples. Christ appeared and stood among them all.

Together, the larger group of disciples were *filled in hope* with Christ's peace and the Holy Spirit who was imparted with Christ's own breath (Lk 24:36–42; Jn 20:19–23). A week later, Christ invited Thomas to touch his wounds. Thomas saw that God's Messiah had suffered and risen—overcoming sin, death, and evil as the Victorious One (Jn 20:24–29). In this *filling* the disciples had their hope renewed.

Christ then *sent them in mission* to all nations just before he ascended (Mat 28:18–20; Lk 24:27–53; Acts 1:6–11). When the Holy Spirit fanned the flame at Pentecost, the disciples began their mission to make

disciples of all nations. The sacraments were central as they baptized and broke bread together (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37). Let us now look more deeply at how these three categories are embodied in communion worship.

Fed in Unity: Passover Liberation for the Entire Cosmos

We feed on Christ together at the Lord's Table. The Lord's Supper is a pathway for union and communion with the Triune God, one another, and all of creation. Communion has its basis in the Last Supper, which is rooted in the Passover. In the Passover, the story of God's great deliverance is told every year and still experienced, as if the people present are the ones rescued from bondage. In communion we celebrate God's already-but-not-yet deliverance from sin, death, and evil of all kinds. God designed the act of communion itself to create unity in the body of Christ.

Just as the fall in Genesis had cosmic implications for the powers of good and evil, God's deliverance and redemption in Christ has cosmic implications for all creation (Col 1:20). In the creation narratives in Gen 1 and 2, God commissions humans to develop the potentials inherent in the creation (Gen 1:28) while serving and protecting it as good stewards of all created things (Gen 2:15). Bread and wine embody the goodness of God's creation and culture, the work of human hands. As a consequence of the fall, all creation groans and waits until Jesus returns and makes all things new (Rom 8:19–23). Many communion liturgies follow the Passover model in thanking God for the bread and the fruit of the vine, good gifts of the earth that God made. These liturgies recognize God as Creator and Sustainer of all. This type of communion liturgy proclaims the metanarrative of creation, fall, and redemption, and new creation, through the Christ who is Lord over the cosmos and all powers and principalities. This vision reminds us that we live and work in the power of the Holy Spirit, undertaking battles in the spiritual realm. As Michelle Sanchez writes, reconciliation is “individual, interpersonal, systemic, cosmic.”²⁸

Fed in Unity at God's Kingdom Table

In the Passover seder meal, people sit or recline. They celebrate that they are free to recline and remember how the Hebrew slaves in Egypt had to stand to serve their masters. Our Lord gave us the gift of com-

28 Michelle Sanchez, *Color Courageous Discipleship: Follow Jesus, Dismantle Racism, and Build Beloved Community* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2022), 156.

munion as a foretaste of God's kingdom table where all have a seat of honor around our great and humble host (Isa 25:6–9; Lk 22:14–30). Just as sharing a meal together in fellowship, Christ desires to unify us through the act of communion. We may sit at an actual table, kneel at an altar, stand in line or in a circle, or pass a plate of communion elements. All of these actions are significant; they shape and form us as we wait for one another, serve, and share with one another. As we plan communion worship, let us be attentive to how these actions shape and form us, and to how our practices can embody God's desire for our congregations. For example, do people in wheelchairs sit in the front or the back of the congregation? Who serves whom? How are children involved? What images of Christ and with what skin color is Christ represented in the sanctuary and other parts of the church building?

Sandra Van Opstal explores how the fourfold structure for the Sunday liturgy (gathering, word, table, sending) can be seen as a meal hosted for friends with hospitality that can be intentionally adapted for different styles and traditions.²⁹ Our king Jesus calls us to build friendships and to confront systematic injustice of all kinds. Celebrating the *agape* meal can do both; both are vital.³⁰ Paul's indictment of the Corinthians' love feast was because they showed partiality and favored the wealthy (1 Cor 11:17–22). David Swanson writes on this passage, saying God calls us to "servanthood at table."³¹ Dominique Gilliard explores the idea of a Christian revolution, saying "a proper understanding of our call to steward privilege empowers us to bear witness to God's love in innovative, surprising, and sacrificial ways that allow us to expand the kingdom, love our neighbor, and produce fruit in keeping with repentance."³² Let us remember that an intentional celebration of communion embodies Scripture's subversive call, as God's kingdom brings about a new social order where all are reconciled to God and one another, and invited to a table with seats of equal status.

29 Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 125. *The Covenant Book of Worship* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 44, includes this fourfold pattern of worship. Covenant pastor David Swanson explores this fourfold liturgy in chapter 6 of *Rediscovering the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 98–113.

30 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

31 Swanson, 71.

32 Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness: Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), xxvii.

Filled in Hope: Eschatological Joy

When Christ was revealed to the two disciples through the broken bread at the Emmaus table, their hope was renewed. First-century Christians were close to this story and thought the Lord might suddenly return when they broke bread together (Lk 24:35; Acts 2:42).³³ Even when Christ didn't return face to face, the believers were strengthened in their waiting because they had encountered the risen Christ in the bread and cup. After the meal, money and gifts of food placed on the communion table were distributed to the needy. Following this tradition, many Covenant churches take a deacons' offering on communion Sundays. Through sharing God's love in word and deed, the early church multiplied, and newcomers joined the kingdom banquet. John P. Burgess describes the early understanding of communion as "a moment of glimpsing the kingdom here and now...one...glimpsed all of life as transfigured by God's light."³⁴ In other words, communion is a space for eschatological joy as well as for the repentance that precedes it.

We have joy when we partake in communion because we are unified and because we ascend with Christ to the heavenly realms. We have joy as we step out of time and anticipate the reconciliation of all things to Christ. Communion is a foretaste of the "marriage supper of the Lamb" where all creation will join in worship (Rev 19:9; 5:13).³⁵ We have joy in communion because Christ reveals his beautiful face to us, and we begin to reflect his glory (1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 3:18). As Max Thurien of the Taizé community writes,

The Church today needs to remember this cosmic, ecological, positive and optimistic vision of the Eucharist and to celebrate in a liturgy expressing the joy of heaven on earth and our expectation of the Feast in the Kingdom of Heaven.³⁶

Communion embodies the suffering love of God—a mysterious coop-

33 Rempel, 61.

34 John P. Burgess, *Encounters with Orthodoxy: How Protestant Churches Can Reform Themselves Again* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 127.

35 For the story of communion in the Old Testament, New Testament, and today told with intergenerational levels, see Barbara Bjelland, *Supper with the Savior, Communion in the Bible and Today* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004). The self-published "Leader's Guide" includes tips for incorporating people with varied intellectual and physical abilities, available at www.BarbaraBjelland.com.

36 Max Thurien, *The Mystery of the Eucharist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 21.

eration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May our communion celebrations employ actions and language that make room for God's wonderful and mysterious work. I recently led a communion service in a retirement community saying these words: "This is the body of Christ, the bread of heaven." Without planning this, I was given the sense that we were together ascending with Christ to the heavenly realms. As communion leaders, we can remind our congregations that we celebrate with the church around the world, and with the saints and angels in heaven.

Sent in Mission

After Christ revealed his face at Emmaus, the two disciples returned to Jerusalem. They were soon sent out with the larger group of disciples by the Spirit at Pentecost and began to fulfill the Great Commission. As Christ is revealed, wellsprings of salvation overflow. As we participate in God's kingdom work, we continually need to encounter the risen King Jesus in communion. Christ is Lord of the church, and though we work to build the kingdom of God's justice and love, it is God who brings the growth. This perspective can keep the church from both a "hollow triumphalism and a shallow despair."³⁷ The church does not need to be triumphant by being perfect or powerful in worldly terms. On the other hand, this also means that the church need not despair in the face of its failures and unmet expectations. It is Jesus who is Lord and who will make all things right.

The New Gnosticism and a Truncated Gospel

The sacrament of communion speaks life into the tension between triumph and despair. The Eucharist also speaks to the tension between an overly individualistic gospel and the gospel of social liberation. As Al Tizon writes, a sole emphasis on my salvation in the life to come ignores the social dimensions of the gospel. He describes this as a "justice-less gospel" which loses "the power and fullness of genuine, life-changing commitment to Christ and his purposes."³⁸ On the other extreme, a sole emphasis on social liberation "keeps desperately lost people from experiencing a personal relationship with God...and dealing with personal sin."³⁹ Tizon describes this as a "no-conversion theology,"⁴⁰ which

37 Wright, 113.

38 Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 74.

39 Tizon, 74.

40 Tizon, 75.

teaches no personal transformation or special empowerment by the Holy Spirit is needed to follow Christ. Tizon says these are both “truncated” understandings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴¹ This thinking is echoed by Fleming Rutledge in her recent book on Epiphany and the glory of Christ. She writes that the understanding of God’s justice/righteousness as a gracious gift “is the ultimate good news for everyone,”⁴² whereas the gospel message is withheld by both an overly individual and an overly corporate view of sin.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “truncated” as without a top or end section.⁴³ The word “truncated” implies lack of roots and lack of vision from above. A truncated gospel is related to what theologians⁴⁴ deem a type of Gnosticism, which can be found in many churches today, including in evangelical churches. As N.T. Wright puts it, this Gnosticism “[thinks] of the present world as evil and the only solution being to escape it and to go to heaven instead.”⁴⁵ Wright calls us to realize our individual salvation leads to participation in God’s already-but-not-yet kingdom here on earth.

This new Gnosticism cuts both ways as it flattens the gospel either to what we do here and now (gospel of social liberation), or to what we do when we die (individualistic gospel). A Gnostic faith has a truncated understanding of Christ’s embodied incarnation and atonement in order to reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:20). Sanchez writes that “discipleship has always had *embodied*, geographic dimensions.”⁴⁶ A Gnostic system is *disembodied*, as it divides the whole human person which God wonderfully knit together with body, mind, and spirit. The sacrament of communion is a microcosm of an alternate universe to that of Gnosticism. This sacrament tells us that individuals and communities have an end, a *telos*, rather than seeing persons as disembodied individuals. God desires our *telos* to be union and communion with the Triune God and

41 Tizon, 74.

42 Fleming Rutledge, *Epiphany: The Season of Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 136.

43 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Truncate.”

44 Here I am referring to a new Gnosticism noted in Fleming Rutledge’s *Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2015) and Tish Harrison Warren’s *Liturgy of the Ordinary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), as well as in Al Tizon’s *Whole and Reconciled*, and N.T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

45 Wright, 197.

46 Sanchez, 189 (emphasis added).

all of God's creation. This type of communion tells us that what we do with our bodies matters, and how we care for the bodies of others matters, and how we care for creation matters. This sacrament tells us that the "physical stuff" that God made is broken, but it remains "very good" (Gen 1:31). Our end is not to escape the world with Gnostic enlightenment or the intellectual assent that Waldenström countered. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, instruments of praise.

We are formed by our practices and liturgies. Let us be intentional in linking the incarnation and the reconciling work of Christ—the atonement—with our celebration of the Lord's Supper. We can do this in our sermons, our communion liturgies, and in faith formation for all ages. In addition to the stories and suggestions noted earlier, here are more questions to prayerfully consider in community: How is the worship service planned, prepared, and celebrated? Who is included? How often is the Lord's Supper practiced? Do we serve one another, or are we served by the pastor? Do we stay in our seats or come forward? Do we kneel at the altar rail, or stand in a circle? What kind of bread is used, from which farmer and baker, and from which culture? What type of vessels are used for serving? How is the Holy Spirit called upon to bless the bread, the cup, and the people?

Prayers, music, Scripture, and sermons can all point to, and intertwine with, the Eucharist. Do we use historic liturgy, or do we write our own? Do we consider the local, regional, or global context of our church? Through the use of celebratory balloons on the altar table or barbed wire around the cross to remind us that Christ suffered outside the gate (Heb 13:12), different congregations have used the setting to enhance particular themes. As the service concludes, how are we sent out? How do we communicate that communion leads to mission as we go, bearing Jesus Christ within us, to share with the world? A favorite practice of mine is to invite the congregation to receive the benediction with open hands to embody hearts open to Christ as Lord.

What kind of creative or service projects can be incorporated with communion? For example, one church made a communion table together using broken tile pieces. They reflected on how Christ was broken for us that we may be healed in community. One church invited the surrounding community to help them clean up a local park and watershed, all tied to caring for creation. New people came to Christ and joined the church after feeling welcomed in this way. People were invited to journal on their experiences of communion and to share their experiences.

Conclusion

May we keep a multilayered feast at God's kingdom table central to our worship and be purposeful in how we celebrate. May we look to the revealed Christ to feed us in unity, fill us in hope, and send us in mission. May we be strengthened with the eschatological joy set before us, to go outside the gates of injustice, a new Gnosticism, and a truncated gospel. When Christ is revealed in his beauty, brokenness, and glory, we will be empowered to go outside the gates and raise the cross again in the world that God so loves.

I end with a quote by George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community in Scotland:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again, at the centre of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died, and that is what He died about. And that is where Christ's own ought to be, and that is what church people ought to be about.⁴⁷

47 George MacLeod, *Only One Way Left* (Glasgow: Iona Community, 1956), 38. Accessed Feb 7, 2024, Internet Archive, urn:oclc:record: 1150936427.