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Re-Imagining the Lord's Supper as a Place of Belonging and Hospitality in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

RE-IMAGINING THE LORD'S SUPPER AS A PLACE OF BELONGING AND
HOSPITALITY IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES/CHURCHES OF CHRIST

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

KATY DRAGE LINES

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reimagines the independent Christian Churches' practice of Communion as a means of belonging within a community—and as an opportunity for hospitality and welcoming others. Unfortunately, the deficient theological understanding and trivializing of communion within many independent Christian Churches contributes to a lack of ecclesial identity and authentic openness to others. It will be argued that when an independent Christian Church congregation prioritizes and collectively practices communion, it strengthens their identity, mission, and connection to one another and puts in place opportunities to welcome outsiders into their community through shared meals. The concept of permeable belonging will be introduced, with the ability to both create a space for trust and identity, while also allowing for new potential members to be fearlessly welcomed into circles of belonging. The intended outcome of this dissertation is an independent Christian Church congregation seamlessly connected to God and one another through both the communion (formal) and potluck (informal) tables, which become bases for the congregation's relationships to the world around them. Chapter 1 identifies individualism's problem of isolating and fragmenting people, spiritualizing faith rather than embodying it, and preventing communities from addressing injustices. Chapter 2 sets a scriptural foundation for the Lord's Supper as a place of belonging and hospitality. Chapters 3 and 4 survey Eucharistic writings of pre-Nicene Christians and independent Christian Church leaders, respectively. Chapter 5 explores the important role of both the Communion table and the kitchen (or potluck) table in offering hospitality to others. Finally, Chapter 6 offers thoughtful applications of how to creatively think about

and practice both the Lord's Supper and shared meals in ways that foster both belonging and openness to others.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF FAITH ON THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

Prelude

Jennifer enters First Christian Church's auditorium, along with hundreds of people from across the city. She is ready to be filled and encouraged after a long week of balancing work, two young children, and her husband away on a 3-day business trip. She grabs an all-in-one packaged communion cup from a basket as she enters the auditorium, stuffing it in her purse.

During the service, the band moves from upbeat tunes ("My Savior loves, my Savior lives, my Savior's always been with me") to background instrumentals; lights drop low and the Executive Minister steps onto the stage. He declares, "Our sermon series has focused on God being for us, not against us. Remember, God takes care of your future so you don't need to worry about it, and God was for you when Jesus died for you." He reminds the audience of the communion containers they picked up at the entrance; Jennifer rummages in her purse to find hers. She pulls it out and holds it while the minister prays, "God, we just want to thank you that Jesus came so we could call you Dad. Thanks for being for us, not against us. In Jesus' name, Amen."

The band plays quietly, allowing for individual reflection, while an image appears on the front screens, encouraging people, “Reflect on your relationship with Jesus. Take the bread and cup when you’re ready.” Jennifer closes her eyes to think about Jesus dying for her, though her thoughts wander to her afternoon errands. She pulls open the top of the cup, drops the wafer in her hand and, like swallowing Tylenol for a headache, washes the wafer down with grape juice. In minutes, communion is complete and the service culminates with the sermon, followed by the band returning for more worship. Jennifer sings along, “I have a living hope, I have a future, God has a plan for me, of this I’m sure.”

While she knows God loves her and meets her needs, Jennifer exits the service to pick up her kids from KidzMin, feeling let down and unsatisfied. In the lobby, she signs up to attend a small group in their neighborhood and to watch videos on discipleship. She thinks this might be a good way to feel fed, and maybe even convince her husband to join her, though she has her doubts.

Social Location and Methodology

Social Location

It might be helpful at this point to give readers a glimpse into the context in which I write this dissertation. I am a woman in my mid-forties; I have served in ministry for nearly twenty-five years and recently celebrated the twentieth anniversary of my ordination. I have served in youth and children’s ministries, as a missionary overseas in rural Kenya for a decade, as a lay leader, and now as a co-lead pastor. I have taught undergraduate and graduate courses in ministry. I have lived all over the United States, in

three time zones. I grew up in a large Christian Church in Colorado but East Tennessee is my second home, and Southern California is a special place for me as well.

When I began this dissertation I was working in a college library in Southern California. By the time I completed the dissertation I had moved across the country and settled in downtown Indianapolis. I now serve in downtown Indianapolis at Englewood Christian Church as co-lead pastor, where I have the honor of serving a congregation that has already resolved much of what I write here. Over the course of my life I have visited and worshipped with a vast array of Christian Church congregations across the United States and around the world. Beyond paid jobs, I have also volunteered with a refugee organization, creation care entities, and hunger alleviation projects. I serve as board chair for a mission organization that works with Arab believers in Israel. I love to bake bread, garden, and share meals with others. I believe all of this is helpful in understanding why I focus the dissertation on revitalizing the Christian Churches' ability to foster belonging and hospitality through shared meals, specifically the Communion ritual.

When I began pondering the direction of my dissertation, I was encouraged to make a list of themes I was passionate about. This is what I wrote:

Bread

Creation

Well-crafted words

Openness to the Other

The Church being the Church

Thoughtful worship

Long conversations

Eating together

Collaboration

Refugees

Obviously it did not look that pretty when I scribbled these ideas down on paper, but as I considered them, I discovered threads in these themes, which shaped my focus. One essential thread is this: I love the church. In all its messiness, I believe the church is a crucial component in God's work of *shalom* in the world. Another thread is that of food and meals. And a third thread is outsiders moving into belonging. I imagine some of my passion for outsiders stems from my own experiences of frequently being the "new person" in a group or community.

Throughout over twenty years of ministry, I have attended or visited innumerable Christian Churches across America. I've worshipped with churches in Colorado, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Florida, Southern California, Illinois, Georgia, Kentucky, Oregon, Indiana, and probably places I've forgotten as well. I've been in large mega-church worship services, small urban and rural churches, and everything in between. As a missionary, youth minister, children's minister, and lay leader, I've served many of these churches. Now, as a pastor of a thriving urban church in Indianapolis, I have the opportunity to reflect and practice many of the lessons I've learned. Here are a few things I've observed over the years:

- Much to my chagrin, most of the Christian Churches I have visited or served look a lot like me. That is, they are primarily homogenous; they are predominately white, middle class, and suburban. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of those descriptors— they describe me, after all!— but I also observe that much of

America does not fit those descriptors. I asked myself, why do Christian Churches look so homogenous when the rest of the country is diversifying in a multitude of ways?

- I have met many people who have a diminished view of “church,” with two primary responses. One response is the perspective that one need not “attend church” in order to be a Christian; in other words, church is optional to one’s faith in Christ. Very much related to that is the perspective that one “goes to church” rather than one *is* part of the church. Both of these viewpoints assume “church” is something one *does*—usually for a limited or constrained time, such as Sunday mornings—rather than church being an identity one is part of.
- I have observed isolation and fragmentation, marginalization and loneliness in American culture. Ideally, the church being the church, as Christ desires us to be, would resolve those challenges, but I do not see that occurring. Rather, I hear friends lament that they do not feel welcomed within churches. Throughout writing this dissertation, I have carried in my mind friends like Michael, Rachel, and Kenny, who have all been hurt by churches who had difficulty offering hospitality to them. Likewise, I see the dissatisfaction of people who perhaps attend church, but do not truly experience belonging to others in Christ; perhaps this is one reason many have decided that “attending church” is optional.

I believe God desires more for the Body of Christ. I recognize that this dissertation thesis—reimagining how churches practice the Lord’s Supper—is merely part of a multi-faceted approach to reigniting American churches to be more faithful expressions of Christ’s Body.

Methodology

This dissertation covers a wide spectrum of disciplines. I began with the assumption that churches, with all their assets, were missing something that a more robust practice of Communion could answer. I was uncertain what was missing at this point, but an obvious place to begin was with my own church movement's history. I knew how the Christian Churches commonly practice Communion today, but was it always understood and practiced this way? Thus my first research was historical. In my early research I realized I needed a better grasp of the definition and expressions of hospitality. How do scholars broadly understand hospitality in the way of Jesus, specifically within meals, and even more specifically in Communion? Thus I next delved into the sociology and theology of hospitality.

The Restoration Movement highly values scripture and an exploration of particular scriptural passages was warranted if I was to make a solid argument for leaders in these churches. Along with a scriptural study was the need to understand how the church throughout history understood the role of Communion. However, it quickly became apparent to me that a full survey of Eucharistic history would be beyond the scope of this dissertation; everyone from Cyprian to Catherine of Siena to Calvin had something to say about the Eucharist. I note in chapter 3, on early church understandings of the Eucharist, that many Christian Churches discount much of church history; thus my historical focus was narrowed to comprise only the early centuries.

After all this substantive work, I was finally ready to identify a root problem within the Christian Churches; but in reality, many American churches and the broader culture struggle with this as well: Our atomistic society's consequential fragmentation.

What is the social and spiritual climate in America today? What do people need? They are hungry for relationships, to know and be known. Do Christ and His Church have something to nourish that longing?

As I worked my way through both the consequences of extreme individualism and Communion as part of the solution, I was surprised to find myself grappling with an apparent tension between the two outcomes I was moving towards: belonging to a trusting community *and* opening “safe spaces” of belonging to others. A short period of trauma ensued: Did I need to scrap my thesis? Were these two goals incompatible? The anxiety was short-lived as I crafted and articulated the concept of permeable belonging, as explored in chapter 6. With that friction resolved, I began to imagine ways churches and leaders could re-envision robust practices of communion as part of the process of congregations being places of both belonging and hospitality.

Introduction

There is much to value in the American understanding of individualism. It echoes scripture’s recognition that each person has been created in the image of God. Even within Paul’s metaphor of the church as a body, each individual plays a vital role—a foot, a hand, an eye (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). David Brockman suggests that individualism “encourages difference and dissent from social and religious norms.... Individualism makes social space for the artist with her own experimental styles, the entrepreneur developing the next new thing in their garage, and the immigrant who opens a

neighborhood convenience store. Individualism also fosters the prophetic side” of those voices who speak out against injustice.¹

Individualism is intrinsic to a democratic society, where, at least in theory, “all [people] are created equal.” Within this context, Americans deeply value “a society that provides opportunities for individuals to cultivate their potential... [with] respect and tolerance for individual opinions and pursuits.... Those of us who have been lucky enough to live in communities that uphold such individualistic values would be justly loath to do without them.”² And yet, extreme or excessive pursuits of autonomous identities have created some dangerous consequences for individuals themselves, for society, and for understandings and practices of being the church, the people of God; people who should belong to one another in Christ and welcome others into their midst.

Many experiences distinguish between the positive and negative connotations of individualism. Within my own congregation, Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, we address the difference this way: “We value the highly personal nature of our relationship with God, but caution against the ways a personal relationship can become a private relationship with only loose and unaccountable ties with other church members” and “We are careful with the use of the word ‘individual....’ The word often masks the false idea of the possibility of a sustainable life ‘divided’ from others.”³ This caution is found in other theologians as well, such as Orthodox theologian John

¹ David Brockman, *Dialectical Democracy through Christian Thought: Individualism, Relationalism, and American Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 42.

² James M. Albrecht, *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

³ Englewood Christian Church, “Orientation to Englewood Theological/Philosophical Themes,” Unpublished document.

Zizioulas, as he works through “person” in its Trinitarian sense.⁴ Evangelical Soong-Chan Rah differentiates between the two concepts, identifying them as “healthy individuation” and “excessive individualism.” He describes “excessive individualism” as the process of “enslaving the individual to the tyranny of individualism, leading to personalism and privatism.”⁵ In this dissertation Rah’s definition of the concept of excessive individualism will be used.

The goal of this chapter is to establish that the individualization of faith in American Evangelicalism contributes to deficient ecclesial identity and authentic openness to others. This chapter will explore the historical and current contexts of individualism in America and the American religious sphere, and specifically the stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement known as the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ or Independent Christian Churches.⁶ It will also look at the negative effects of extreme individualism in the diminished practice of the Lord’s Supper,⁷ which highlights a lack of community and hospitality in Christ. This chapter establishes the problem of

⁴ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 211 n9.

⁵ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 15-16.

⁶ In this dissertation “Stone-Campbell Movement” is used interchangeably with “the Restoration Movement.” These two terms can refer to either the movement as a whole in the present context, or more commonly, to the movement prior to its fragmentation in the early twentieth century. The movement has fragmented into three primary streams: a capella churches of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ). When focused primarily on the central stream of the movement, I refer to the “Christian Churches” or “Independent Christian Churches” interchangeably.

⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms “Lord’s Supper,” “Communion,” and “the Eucharist” interchangeably. This choice recognizes that churches have used all three terms for the same ritual. My choice of a particular term is generally based on two factors. First, if a cited source uses a term, I follow their choice for consistency. Second, when referencing a particular part of the church or historical time period, I select the term that is most frequently used in that context. For instance, in Chapter 3, “Eucharist” is chosen almost exclusively, as that is the term used by the Ante-Nicene leaders and those who write about that time period. In contrast, Chapter 4 primarily uses “Lord’s Supper” or “Communion,” following the terms commonly used by the Christian Churches.

fragmentation, in preparation for building a solution that proposes that the Lord's Supper can assist in reforming the sense of belonging and welcome within the church.

Historical Context

Early Evangelical History

David Bebbington's seminal work on the emergence of Evangelicalism notes that the movement was identifiable from previous expressions of the Church in four distinct ways: conversionism, Biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism.⁸ He distinguishes it from Puritanism with the addition of *activism* to complete the quadrilateral. However, it is the concept of *conversionism* that highlights the focus on the individual. For both Luther and Calvinist Reformers, the "individual moral accountability for sin" was paramount to distinguish "separate soteriological destinies" of those who were saved and those who were not.⁹ This was a significant shift in the concept of salvation: "In the Protestant paradigm, one's salvation comes not from participation in collective acts in the sacramental and penitential systems but by personal faith alone—*sola fides*."¹⁰ Reducing the focus onto personal salvation and conversion experiences of individuals and away from a shared or communal expression of faith fit well with Enlightenment confidence in

⁸ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 3. This is commonly known as "Bebbington's Quadrilateral," though Bebbington himself does not title it. See, for instance, W. R. Ward, "Evangelical Identity in the Eighteenth Century," in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald M. Lewis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

⁹ Brockman, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

human ability and its programmatic processes of evangelism to prepare the individual soul for heaven.¹¹

During the Protestant Reformation, the beginnings of the “inner isolation of the individual,” emerged from extreme expressions of the doctrine of predestination. For a person’s eternal salvation,

He [sic] was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity. No one could help him. No priest, for the chosen one can understand the word of God only in his own heart. No sacraments, for though the sacraments had been ordained by God for the increase of His glory, and must hence be scrupulously observed, they are not a means to the attainment of grace, but only the subjective *externa subsidia* of faith. No Church, for though it was held that... whoever kept away from the true Church could never belong to God’s chosen band, nevertheless the membership of the external Church included the doomed... Finally, even no God. For even Christ had died only for the elect, for whose benefit God had decreed His martyrdom from eternity.¹²

Coupled with the shifting theology of the Protestant Reformation were the technological advances of the same era. With the advent of the printing press (c. 1439), inadvertently

The focus shifts from what people do together to what happens ‘inside’ each individual. It shifts away from God’s Word as a holy event to God’s Word as a holy text.... Corporate worship recedes, is no longer seen as foundational and fundamental. Now Christians can imagine their private, individual acts of worship—devotions or quiet times or daily offices—as foundational and fundamental.¹³

It was in this era of focusing on personal piety, individual assurances of faith, and technology that placed scripture in the hands of laity that the ideas for a new nation began to emerge.

¹¹ See Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 114, 117.

¹² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 105, 104.

¹³ Rodney R. Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 120.

American History

The ideas of empirical philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) were extremely influential in shaping the new American spirit. According to Robert Bellah, Locke held that “the individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest.”¹⁴ This utilitarian individualism contrasts with what Bellah terms “biblical individualism” which derives not from self-interest, but the reflection of the image of the Trinitarian God.¹⁵

It was Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in 1834, who first identified the individualistic nature of American identity. He warned that individualism “might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom.”¹⁶ De Tocqueville observed that

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself [sic] from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself.... [I]ndividualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness. Selfishness is a vice as old as the world, which does not belong to one form of society more than to another; individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of condition.¹⁷

While Locke influenced and Tocqueville identified the rise of individualism in America, it might best be personified in the life and writings of Romantics such as Henry

¹⁴ Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 143.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., vii.

¹⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abr. ed. Thomas Bender, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Modern Library, 1981 [1945]), 395.

David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In Emerson's aptly titled essay, "Self-Reliance," he "defines self-reliance as 'a new respect for the divinity of man [sic].'" He encourages each person to "trust *your* emotion" and not conform individual faith to others: "If therefore a man [sic] claims to know and speak of God and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered [sic] nation in another country [such as Israel?], in another world, believe him not."¹⁸

One trademark of American religious identity was the revival phenomenon. According to Clapp, "Privatizing and etherealizing faith, and altogether depending on the cultural formation of the surrounding society, revivalism inevitably 'deteriorated into a technique for maintaining Christian America.' For revivalistic evangelists like D.L. Moody, separation from the world was more or less purely inward."¹⁹ While revivals drew people to personal repentance through both conviction and social peer pressure, they did little to incorporate a theology of broader salvation beyond the individual.

The transition to extreme individualism in America grew exponentially following World War II, with the rise of consumerism and "an expressivist revolution" where "individual authenticity" took precedence over group identity, and rights and choices were based on personal fulfillment.²⁰ According to Diana Butler Bass, this reality of a fractured world led to loss of "the threads of memory" in the practice of religion.

¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Essays* (New York: Harper, 1926), 48, quoted (with emphasis and bracket addition) in Clapp, 35-36.

¹⁹ Clapp, 164, quoting David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 282. Revivals or frontier camp meetings in early America, such as the Cane Ridge Revival in 1801, which was a decisive event that epitomized the identity of the Stone segment of the Stone-Campbell Movement, are referenced again in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2002), 63.

Previous generations had practiced the “*how* of faith” but neglected to share the “*what* and *why*,” or the meaning and purpose behind the practice.²¹ Without these threads of memory, there was no compelling reason for individuals to maintain obligatory group identity or be challenged to open up tables, homes and relationships to outsiders. For instance, especially in the ritual of the Eucharist, the focus on *how* it is practiced without threaded connection into *why* the ritual is important may contribute to the apparent loss of value in the ritual. A disconnect occurs between the multifaceted purpose of the ritual and how it is lived out in the daily lives of the participants.

Christian Churches (Restoration Movement) History

There have been many histories written on the Restoration Movement, but Nathan Hatch’s *The Democratization of American Christianity* offers the best source I have found for the individualistic nature of the historic Christian Churches. Along with American sects like the Latter-Day Saints, or denominations such as the Baptists and Methodists, the Christian Churches exemplified a unique American Christianity that was characterized by charismatic religious leaders “short on social graces, family connections, and literary education” and “an overt rejection of the past as a repository of wisdom.”²² From a positive perspective, these movements leveled the playing field; they provided the marginalized voice, value and platform; and they supported an emphasis on populist

²¹ Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 141-142.

²² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5, 10.

theology in the “priesthood of all believers,” and the “primacy of the individual conscience.”²³

For founders and early leaders of the Christian Churches, history or tradition, church hierarchy, and institutionalism were all suspect. Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) separated from the Presbyterians, created and then dissolved his own presbytery, and then announced that dissolution as “the declaration of our independence.”²⁴ Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), himself highly influenced by Locke,²⁵ mocked “the pretension of the clergy,” exalted “the conscience of the individual over the collective will of any congregation or church organization,” and argued that each person should be able “to read and understand the New Testament for themselves.”²⁶ Significant weight was placed on “private judgment” over against “the roles of history, theology, and the collective will of the church.”²⁷

What emerged as the movement’s legacy and contribution to American individualistic religion is the concept of “no creed but the Bible.” According to Hatch, “this emphasis grew out of a popular demand for ‘private judgment’ and was ‘tacitly if not openly conditioned always by the assumption that every man [sic] is authorized and bound to get at this authority in a direct way for himself, through the medium simply of

²³ Ibid., 69, 35; cf 58.

²⁴ John Rogers, *Biography of Elder B. Warren Stone* (New York: np, 1972), 47.

²⁵ Leroy Garrett, “Alexander Campbell” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ*, eds. Douglas Allen Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 116.

²⁶ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptist* July 4, 1823, 280, in Hatch 71, 75, 73, respectively.

²⁷ Hatch, 182.

his own single mind.’”²⁸ What adherents to the movement failed to realize however, was that the emphasis on “private judgment” would ultimately fragment and isolate people, casting doubt on any sense of common, agreed upon authority and practices, and isolating from each other those very individuals seeking God’s guidance.

Current Context

What is the general state of the present-day American context, and particularly the American evangelical faith, in terms of community, belonging, and isolation? In brief, the historical drive towards individual autonomy continues to be reflected in modern iterations of both the broader American context and the dominant expression of evangelical faith. This is represented specifically in the very practice that has potential to counter individualism in the church: the Lord’s Supper.

American Context

Robert Bellah asserts that “individualism lies at the very core of American culture.”²⁹ A nation founded on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has distilled

²⁸ Hatch, 81, quoting John Williamson Nevin, “Antichrist and the Sect,” in *The Mercersburg Theology*, ed. James Hastings Nichols (New York: n.p., 1966), 98-99.

²⁹ Bellah, 142. *Habits of the Heart* is foundational for understanding individualism in America and has been generally accepted across disciplines for those who engage in its ideas. The few exceptions to *Habits’* premise include a reality that even Bellah’s team recognized: the study was primarily limited to white middle class Americans. This limited scope does not diminish from my argument, as the largest demographic of the Independent Christian Churches is white middle class Americans. Another constraint of *Habits* is proposed by sociologist Kelly Besecke. Instead of *Habits’* theory that “religious individualism” is “evidence of the weakening of religious commitments” according to Besecke, “people for whom religion becomes more compelling, and whose religious commitments become more solid” have “adopted a mode of religiosity that prioritizes individual reflection.” However, Besecke fails to see that “individual reflection” might be a sign of what Rah terms “healthy individuation” and what Zizioulas distinguishes as “personal.” It is a necessary component to each person’s engagement into a faith community, but is not considered “excessive individualism.” Kelly Besecke, “Not Just Individualism: Studying American Culture

those three ideals down to individual pursuits, rather than principles for national or community flourishing. According to Robert Wuthnow,

Our society seems to be at a loss for community. Critics say we have become a nation of individualists, obsessed with our jobs, our bank accounts, our feelings—our selves. We live in anonymous places, jealously protecting our personal privacy, and whatever hopes we entertain of finding a warm, supportive community are threatened by our incessant moving about and the pressures that impinge upon our time.³⁰

In the attempt to be unique, one of a kind rebels rejecting established institutions, Americans have inadvertently been walled off from one another, isolated, fragmented, and alone. And yet, hunger for a place to belong remains.

There is much to be said about the value of individualism. Indeed, dignity and the sacredness of each human being is part of what lies at the positive core of the concept. Individualism gives rise to creativity and innovation. It offers voice to the voiceless and value to those left behind. Yet for all the commendable—nay, invaluable—attributes of individualism, when taken to the extreme, it becomes isolating and manipulative.

Robert Bellah identifies the heroic individual within America's mythic narrative, the cowboy or the lone detective, sacrificially isolated to serve society. This mythic hero stands alone, does not need others or their judgments, and refuses to submit to other's wishes. And yet, the hero is always on the verge of despair. For the mythic hero, "there is no return to society, no moral redemption. The hero's lonely quest for moral excellence ends in absolute nihilism."³¹ The solitary hero personifies the irony America finds herself

and Religion after Habits of the Heart," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 197. cf. Rah, 16; Zizioulas, 164.

³⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University, 1995), 32-33.

³¹ Bellah, 146.

in today: “the autonomy of the successful individual...[is] increasingly in doubt.” In extreme instances, Americans have “come loose from an understanding of the ends and purposes of life... there is no longer any purpose to involvement with others except individual satisfaction.”³² And when personal satisfaction diminishes, people withdraw and move on to the next hypothetical place of gratification.

American is now at a place where the pursuit of private fulfillment is illusionary. Being a responsible American means ““finding oneself” in autonomous self-reliance, separating oneself not only from one’s parents but also from those larger communities and traditions that constitute one’s past,” including faith communities and traditions.³³ Instead of finding fulfillment in this quest, it often ironically leads to emptiness, a sense of meaninglessness, and despair.

American Faith Context

How is faith expressed in the context of the early twenty-first century? To begin, note that the above subtitle is not “American Church Context,” as it is now common for individuals to identify as “spiritual, not religious” and to claim a private faith without the need for a church community (or at the most, that church participation is optional to one’s faith).³⁴ In the past, the traditional pattern “assume[d] a certain priority of the religious community over the individual. The community exists before the individual is born and

³² Ibid., 150.

³³ Ibid., 163.

³⁴ See Wuthnow, 5.

will continue after his or her death.”³⁵ The primacy has shifted in today’s context to give precedence to individuals over the community.

While this transition may be more apparent in Evangelicalism than other Christian traditions, Catholic liturgical theologian Francis Mannion provides helpful framework for the shift: “the majority of Americans now assume a personal rather than a social or ecclesiastical source for their religious beliefs. God is conceived more likely as an ‘inner voice’ than as the voice of community or tradition.”³⁶ The process of moving the voice of God inward subjectifies and privatizes faith, and the results are disturbing. Mannion observes, “the Bible, worship, preaching, ministry, doctrine, ecclesiastical structures and communal life are thought useful [only] to the extent that they serve the experience of inner truth and personal encounter with the divine. They become little more than functional guides for the discovery of inner realities and personal dispositions.”³⁷ Indeed, no longer is the concept of “church” even obligatory for a personal faith, but optional, if it helps enrich a person’s own spirituality.

This transition to hearing and knowing God primarily within the self harkens back to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, which asserted a dualistic hierarchical nature of spirit over matter, and that secret knowledge is only revealed under the proper circumstances. Rodney Clapp quotes literary critic Harold Bloom in describing the quintessential American religion: “‘Salvation, for the American, cannot come through the community or congregation, but is a one-on-one act of confrontation’ with God. The American

³⁵ Bellah, 227.

³⁶ M Francis Mannion, “Liturgy and the Present Crisis of Culture,” *Worship* 62, no. 2 (March 1988): 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

Jesus... 'cannot be known in or through a church, but only one on one.' This Jesus 'is not so much an event in history... as he is a knower of the secrets of God who in turn can only be known by the individual.'"³⁸ Hatch confirms Clapp's allegation of Gnosticism in Americans' faith. In Hatch's description of the writings of journalist Theophilus Gates, early in America's formation, Gates "proposed a millennium that was explicitly individualist." According to Hatch, Gates declared that

the age of ecclesiastical corruption would be supplanted neither by the personal advent of Christ... [nor] by the patterning of churches on New Testament models.... Instead, Christians should shun all institutions, soon to topple around them, and allow the Spirit to work within. It was the disappearance of the church and the unmediated operation of the Spirit upon the individual soul that would mark the advent of the millennium. Christ would not return in visible person, 'but... in the hearts of many individuals.'³⁹

As religion has become privatized and "church" optional, churches are now considered "voluntary organizations to which people belong" for their own personal benefit, simply a means to an end, the end being one's own "spiritual well-being."⁴⁰ Churches, therefore, must be opponents of one another in a capitalistic market, drawing the religious consumer to them in order to remain in existence.⁴¹ Like consumer-driven enterprises, churches are compelled to offer regular changes to their programming, new and engaging amenities, and idealized leaders in order to "win" new members/customers and continue to maintain the loyalty of their existing members/customers.

³⁸ Clapp, 34, quoting Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 65.

³⁹ Hatch, 176, quoting Theophilus R. Gates, "Observations on the Signs of the Times; intended as a supplement to Truth Advocated," in *The Life and Writings of Theophilus R. Gates* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1818), 354.

⁴⁰ Brockman, 42.

⁴¹ This consumerist drive to avoid disappearing is touched on in the final section of this chapter, in a discussion from William Cavanaugh's text on torture.

Finally, recalling the emphasis on “Biblicism” in Bebbington’s quadrilateral, Evangelicalism in America inadvertently dilutes engagement with the world through poor exegesis of scripture. Bellah challenges that

Direct reliance on the Bible provides a... language with which to resist the temptations of the ‘world,’ but the almost exclusive concentration on the Bible, especially the New Testament, with no larger memory of how Christians have coped with the world historically, diminishes the capacity of their... language to deal adequately with current social reality. There is even a tendency visible in many evangelical circles to thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfillment.⁴²

The repercussion that poor exegesis has on American Evangelicalism will be explored more in the following section of this chapter.

Many Independent Christian Churches are some of the fastest growing churches in America,⁴³ and some of the largest mega-churches in the country.⁴⁴ As these churches have become bigger and have drawn in new members from many different Christian traditions, they have sought to create worship experiences that align with individualistic consumer approaches in order to maintain and expand loyal membership. However, in their attempt to appeal to an autonomous transcendental experience, one effect is that the

⁴² Bellah, 232.

⁴³ “100 Fastest-Growing Churches 2017,” OutreachMagazine.com, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/outreach-100-fastest-growing-churches-2017.html>. At least 4 of the top 10 listed are part of the Christian Churches: Eastside Christian Church [#2], Shepherd Church [#3], Traders Point Christian Church [#5], and Elevate Life Church [#6].

⁴⁴ “100 Largest Churches 2017,” OutreachMagazine.com, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/outreach-100-largest-churches-2017.html>. At least 3 of the top 15 listed are part of the Christian Churches: Christ’s Church of the Valley [#5], Southeast Christian Church [#10], and Flatirons Community Church [#14]). See also “2017 Megachurches,” *Christian Standard* April 13, 2018, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://christianstandard.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2017-Megachurches.pdf>, which lists 59 Christian Churches with over 2000 members, and 2 with over 20,000 members.

purpose and value of the Lord's Supper has been questioned and diminished. That consequence will be explored later in this chapter.

Implications for American Evangelicalism

Up to this point, I have explored a brief overview of the emergence of individualism within western churches, its flowering in the new American nation and, specifically, the individualistic foundations of the Christian Churches. I have identified some current characteristics of individualism within American society and particularly the faith of Americans. This section will investigate five implications of individualism within American Evangelical faith. This research reveals that when individualism is excessively expressed, it not only cripples the individual, but it also affects the church community and the broader society.

First, according to Rah, excessive individualism actually becomes damaging for individuals themselves. Rather than a healthy sense of personhood, people adopt narcissistic tendencies and “the individual [is enslaved] to the tyranny of individualism, leading to personalism and privatism” which reflects “American culture rather than the redemptive power of the gospel message.”⁴⁵ Bellah questions whether this extreme individualism is sustainable: “What is at issue is not simply whether self-contained individuals might withdraw from the public sphere to pursue purely private ends, but whether such individuals are capable of sustaining either a public *or* a private life.”⁴⁶ I echo Bellah's concern. I believe that valuing individual autonomy over community

⁴⁵ Rah, 16.

⁴⁶ Bellah, 143, emphasis in original.

belonging is not sustainable, as cries of despair increase, escalating diagnoses of depression,⁴⁷ and a rise in the U.S. suicide rate.⁴⁸ While I have not found a confirmed direct connection between the isolating aspects of individualism and the rise of depression and suicide, the loss of community belonging may play a role.⁴⁹

Second, philosophers and thinkers of the Enlightenment challenged an expression of faith that had been mostly unquestioned up to that point: Ritual. Beginning in that era, “ritual came to be viewed as staid and outmoded, a superstitious remnant of a primitive past, a past that prevented humanity from truly advancing. Ritual... became a matter of suspicion and derision.”⁵⁰ This disdain for rituals later came to be emphasized in the new American religious landscape, specifically in the Restoration Movement, as noted earlier in this chapter. Twentieth century sociologists such as Emile Durkheim also observed “a connection between social anomie in modernity (the fragmentation of shared, collective identity and the weakening of social institutions) and the shrinking fortunes of ritual in the West.”⁵¹ Durkheim was not alone with this assessment; for Mary Douglas, “rejection of ritual... is the rejection of public forms of solidarity and institution building, and

⁴⁷ “Major Depression on the Rise among Everyone, New Data Shows,” *NBC News*, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/major-depression-rise-among-everyone-new-data-shows-n873146>.

⁴⁸ “Suicide Rates Rise Sharply Across the United States, a New Report Shows,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/06/07/u-s-suicide-rates-rise-sharply-across-the-country-new-report-shows/?utm_term=.7552c0ec4e37.

⁴⁹ In “Major Depression on the Rise,” Dr Laurel Williams, Texas Children’s Hospital chief of psychiatry is quoted as saying “There’s a lack of community.... If you don’t have a community to reach out to, then your hopelessness doesn’t have any place to go.”

⁵⁰ Barry Stephenson, *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 103.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

hence, a failure of nerve.”⁵² In contrast, a focused gathering of people becomes “a society through a shared experience of the sacred;” that is, renewed practices of rituals (specifically the Eucharist), as I will argue throughout this dissertation.⁵³

Highlighting the negative consequences of individualism, Mannion recognizes that ritual traditions provide meaning, and that the loss of those valuable rituals, “leads to the privatization of religious experience, and finally to a reduction of the religious sense to humanistic philanthropy.”⁵⁴ As a result, the language to provide meaning in faith, and the ability to engage critically and justly with the world around us, is lost. The challenge becomes that, “without engagement with an objective liturgical system, the individual is literally cut off from the necessary sources of Christian existence. There is a loss of confidence not only in the church and its rites and institutions, but ultimately in meaningful inner experience as the believer finds nothing ‘inside’ and in disillusionment loses faith.”⁵⁵ As noted previously, Bass argued that the purpose and meaning for the practice of rituals has not adequately been conveyed from one generation to the next. I believe that this disconnect is due to the uncertainty of the value of the rituals in the individual hearts, minds and daily lives of adherents.

Third, when approaching public worship from an individualistic position, the focus is primarily on intimacy, ‘me and Jesus.’ As Rah notes, “worship in the white captivity of the church is oftentimes a collection of individuals who happen to be in the

⁵² Ibid., 108.

⁵³ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁴ Mannion, 107, referencing Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Pelican, 1973), 19ff.

⁵⁵ Mannion, 107.

same room. Worship is just between the individual and God, and the church service exists to help facilitate that individual communion.”⁵⁶ Ryan Klein, an Eastern University undergrad student who identified the qualitative and quantitative differences between hymns and contemporary worship songs has creatively explored this concept. His conclusion was that lyrics of hymns (older songs of worship) assumed a community of singers that “suggest both that the Christian has a relationship with God primarily *as a part of her community* rather than as an individual, and that she is more focused on God’s work in the world in general than in his work in her particular community.”⁵⁷ In contrast, lyrics of contemporary worship songs indicate that “the Christian has a relationship with God primarily as an *individual* rather than as a member of a community, that most of a Christian’s knowledge of God is directly related to her individual life, and that the Christian should focus more on God’s actions in her own life than in the world in general.”⁵⁸ Worship, even in a community setting like a church, is reduced to a collection of individuals each connecting directly and autonomously with God, rather than collectively.

Instead of worship being liturgy in the truest sense of the word—“a public work”—profound spiritual moments have become identified with private moments of intimacy with God; in other words, “our primary model for the sacred ‘is *intimacy*, *not*

⁵⁶ Rah, 17.

⁵⁷ Ryan Klein, “From Martin Luther to Hillsong United: Individualism in Contemporary Christian Lyrics” *Adorans*, 3 no 3 (Spring 2016), <http://adorans.org/?article=from-martin-luther-to-hillsong-united-individualism-in-contemporary-christian-lyrics>. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

liturgy.”⁵⁹ This leads to public worship gatherings shifting towards intimacy and familiarity, including darkening lights in the worship setting to create a performance-driven atmosphere and a sense of private connection between the individual and God, irrespective of nearby fellow participants.

A worship service’s primary focus on the individual is especially highlighted in sermon messages that are crafted as practical advice to navigate through life abundantly.⁶⁰ Whether a worship service When worship becomes all about ‘me,’ it feeds self-absorbed desires. And rather than “the church becoming an expression of a spiritual life lived in the community of believers or a spiritual life expressed in the context of a neighborhood community,” church often becomes solely the fulfillment of individual needs.⁶¹ Rah continues, “Elements of the worship service, including the preaching of the Word and the worship of God, become reduced to a form of therapy that places the individual at the center of the worship service.”⁶² Worship services have been transformed from a communal response to the work of God into personalized therapy

⁵⁹ Mannion, 112, quoting Nathan Mitchell, “The Sense of the Sacred,” in *Parish: A Place for Worship*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 71; emphasis in original quote.

⁶⁰ For instance, Christ Church of the Valley had a recent message series titled “Smooth Criminals” which identifies four “enemies of the heart” that “rob us of good” (guilt, jealousy, anger and greed). Viewers learned “how God’s word can help us defeat them and bring true freedom to our lives.” <https://ccv.church/watch/series?SeriesId=261>, accessed October 11, 2018. The problem with series like this is that they do not significantly differ from non-Christian therapeutic messages, such as this video from a popular YouTube star: Kristina Kuzmic, “Mr Guilt”, YouTube, October 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3W5w49Lwgc>, Accessed October 11, 2018. Lee Eclov, “The Danger of Practical Preaching, Part 2,” *CT Pastors*, September 2006, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/september-online-only/danger-of-practical-preaching-part-2-allowing-scripture-to.html>, argues that “We need far more training in the ways of grace, of spiritual perceptions, and of what God is really like, than we do in how to communicate with our spouse.” Larger churches are not the sole perpetrators of this type of message; I have heard this style preached frequently in both mega-churches and in churches of 200 or less people.

⁶¹ Rah, 18.

⁶² Ibid.

sessions or practical “how to” advice. The sermon message becomes the pinnacle of the worship service, the primary vehicle for captivating participants in the service, in contrast to the diminished emphasis on the Eucharist. The practice of the Eucharist in this type of setting is accomplished as quickly as possible and is shaped to inform/accommodate the practical, individualistic narrative of the rest of the worship service.

A fourth consequence of excessive individualism in Evangelicalism is the rise of consumer choice: individuals looking for a church that best fit their needs. This browsing leads to churches competing to “win” the consumer to their brand of faith, “the race to please the individuals so that the pews might be filled.”⁶³ Churches have struggled to find their role in the faith of individuals. If salvation is solely individualistic and church becomes optional in the life of a believer, then churches are no longer in a position to transform society. It is left then to individuals as ‘voting blocks’ or market-driven consumers to affect change, rather than the social institution of the church.⁶⁴

Therefore, the gospel itself has been “reduced to individual salvation, [and] that salvation has itself become the purpose and program of the church.”⁶⁵ This diminished soteriology leads to the demanding question, “what are ‘the keys of the kingdom’ if we have reduced the kingdom to individual and personal salvation?”⁶⁶ When salvation becomes solely for the individual, Christians then have difficulty articulating good news

⁶³ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁴ See Mannion 107.

⁶⁵ Guder, 117.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

that imagines a Kingdom where God reconciles *all* things to God in Christ (Col. 1:20), including creation, institutions, cities, social structures, and so on.

I devote significant space to this fifth consequence. Going hand in hand with the “privatization of spirituality” is the “loss of an extensive, overarching social consciousness.”⁶⁷ This individualistic Evangelicalism expresses itself in four substantial, concrete ways. First, it implicitly suggests that corporate sin does not exist. In Rah’s harshly critical words,

Evangelicalism’s idolatry of the individual has crippled the church’s ability to view sin and salvation outside of the narrow parameters of a personal faith. Evangelical theology becomes exclusively an individual-driven theology instead of a community-driven theology. In an individual-driven theology, individual sin takes center stage. Individual sin leads to a sense of personal guilt.... Because the individual is only responsible for an individualized and personal guilt, there is no sense of shame for corporate actions that are also expressions of human sinfulness.... Sin, therefore is found only in the individual, not in structures and systems. The possibility of redemption, therefore is also limited exclusively to the individual.⁶⁸

One example of how this plays out is white American Evangelicalism’s inability to address racism and sexism. As Rah frustratingly notes, “by focusing on individual prejudice, we limit the understanding of racism to strictly a personal issue.... we do not feel the debilitating shame of the corporate sin of racism.”⁶⁹

Second, the loss of social consciousness is expressed in Evangelicalism’s conundrum with urbanization and the city. For instance, like many other churches and

⁶⁷ Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 16.

⁶⁸ Rah, 19. Brockman agrees, “individualism...undermines the sense of the common good... and discourages Americans from recognizing their responsibilities for the lives and destinies of their neighbors,” Brockman, 43. cf. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 105.

⁶⁹ Rah, 20.

denominations, many Christian Churches moved from urban areas to the suburbs in the 1970s and 1980s, in response to both their target audience relocating to those locations and to the perceived increase in problems due to changing racial demographics of the cities.⁷⁰ Evangelicalism's individualistic focus is primarily "other-worldly;" that is, "we have aimed to get people to heaven, with all too little interest in liberating them from earthly hell."⁷¹ By each person being responsible only for his or her personal salvation (that is, 'getting to heaven'), Evangelicals lack the instruments to understand structural racism and institutional policies that foster residential enclaves, and how social challenges such as these are connected to soteriology.⁷² While cities are not solely an "earthly hell," they are pluralistic, express rapid social change, and magnify social problems. However, Evangelicalism is, in Hollinger's terms, a "nativistic movement" that perceives "urban society as a threat to the individual, the church, and traditional values." Its solution is "to perpetuate a simpler, rural way of life with its individualistic orientation,"⁷³ especially fostering Evangelical white flight to suburbs and smaller towns, inadvertently even advancing the disintegration of neighborhoods.⁷⁴ And according to

⁷⁰ For instance, in 1981, Southland Christian Church in Lexington, KY, relocated from inside the city center out to the southern boundary of town. In the mid-1980s, East 49th Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, IN, relocated north of the city to become East 91st Street Christian Church and East 38th Street Christian Church moved east of the city to become Post Road Christian Church. These are merely three examples among many. See also "Englewood Christian Church - Our Story," *Englewood Christian Church*, accessed October 11, 2018, <http://www.engagewoodcc.com/history.html>.

⁷¹ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics: An Evangelical Syncretism* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1983), 228, quoting E. Luther Copeland, "Urbanization and Salvation: Can the City be Saved?" in *Disciplining the City*, ed. Roer S. Greenway (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 64.

⁷² See Mark T. Mulder, *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015). See especially 7, 99.

⁷³ Hollinger, 228.

⁷⁴ Mulder, 5.

Hollinger, “corporate realities are easily neglected, for the heart of social problems in urban culture [according to Evangelicals] is really the ‘hearts’ of human beings.”⁷⁵ The remedy for Evangelicals is to focus on individual change even more.

A third consequence of the extreme atomization of faith is the homogenization of churches, to the exclusion of the stranger or those who are different. It is a tragic irony that individualism—what makes people stand out from the crowd—ends up moving individuals into groups of people that are similar to them. When focusing on satisfying individual needs in selecting a church, the intimate and familiar become primary. Quoting Parker Palmer, Mannion notes that

‘When an idealized image of family is imposed upon the church, our experience in the congregation becomes constricted.’ Thus ‘the church—where we might experience creative conflict, heterogeneity, and freedom for innovation—becomes dominated by the expectation of closeness and warmth.’ In such a community, ‘people with whom we cannot achieve intimacy, or with whom we do not want to be intimate, are squeezed out.’ The church easily becomes a preserve for persons of similar class and status. The strange is eliminated and the familiar is cultivated. Indeed, ‘such a church can neither welcome the stranger nor allow the stranger in each of us to emerge.’⁷⁶

The recognition of this deficiency is vital to identifying barriers to hospitality within churches, where even “the stranger is regarded as a threatening figure.”⁷⁷ A rethinking of the way Communion is practiced as a place of hospitality has potential to help churches move away from apprehension or ignorance of the “other.”

The Church Growth movement, from the late twentieth century until the present time has perpetuated the homogenization of churches, which “reflect[s] the values of

⁷⁵ Hollinger, 228.

⁷⁶ Mannion 111, quoting Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 120.

⁷⁷ Mannion, 109.

individualism, materialism and racism...[of] Western, white culture.”⁷⁸ For Christian Churches, this is particularly relevant, as the Church Growth movement emerged out of the Christian Churches and their church-planting models have been highly influenced by its methods and patterns.⁷⁹

Robert Bellah and his team recognize that individuals need the larger structures of a community and institutions. We pay a high price and are simply a “self that hangs in the void, slowly twisting in the wind” if we forget that we are part of a larger whole.⁸⁰ In their observations, individualists “objecting to its authoritarianism and paternalism... have often left the church or sect they were raised in. Yet such people often derive more of their personal strength than they know from their communities of origin.” Without maintaining connection to a community, “they have difficulty transmitting their own sense of moral integrity to their children” and have “difficulty sustaining it themselves when their only support is from transient associations of the like-minded.”⁸¹ Their conclusion is that even one’s healthy individualism “can only survive in a renewed relationship with established religious bodies.”⁸² The challenge however, is that most “religious bodies” in America, especially those of the Evangelical persuasion, continue to cater to the very individualism which fragments rather than connects. These very entities

⁷⁸ Rah, 44.

⁷⁹ Donald McGavran, founder of the Church Growth movement, was a member of the Disciples of Christ. See Herbert Works, “Church Growth Movement,” and James C. Smith, “McGavran, Donald A (1897-1990)” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ*, ed. Douglas Allen Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnavant, D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 210-211, 508.

⁸⁰ Bellah, 84.

⁸¹ Ibid., 247-248.

⁸² Ibid., 248.

to which the American faithful gravitate in their search for communities of belonging are themselves individualistic-focused. Participants will continue to starve for community and continue to seek it elsewhere.

Excessive Individualism Diminishes the Lord's Supper

Within the broader scope of my work, I propose that a more robust practice of the Lord's Supper, supported by substantive theology, can be a place to begin countering the negative effects of individualization and the privatization of faith. However, the reality is that the practice of the Lord's Supper itself in many Independent Christian Churches has seen the harmful effects of individualism. The shift from a common cup and shared loaf to tiny, self-contained units quickly distributed in order to move on to "more important" aspects of the service suggest to participants that they, atomistic individuals, are more important than the whole of the Body of Christ present together. The service surrounding the Lord's Supper—prayers, songs, sermon, scripture reading—all reinforce the inferred message that the individual is of greater value than the community, and that the community is only there to meet the needs of individuals.

The sense of the sacred has shifted inward, away from communal rituals and liturgy, including the Eucharist. Consequently,

The result is that modern Americans 'look for the holy to reveal itself, not in the awe-inspiring rites of baptism and Eucharist, but in the awesome precincts of the self....' [L]iturgy begins to be reconceived as a resource for getting in touch with the inward God or for celebrating inwardly constituted faith. The focus of engagement shifts from the transcendent God to the God apprehended in the mystery of the self.⁸³

⁸³ Mannion, 106, quoting Mitchell, 74.

With the shift of the sacred inward, the practice of the Eucharist loses its role and meaning for the individual and the community. It then becomes acceptable for the Eucharist to be absorbed into consumerist spirituality. William Cavanaugh suggests that “the presence of Jesus could become another kind of commodity to be appropriated for the benefit of the individual user.”⁸⁴ The Eucharist should be practiced to resist misappropriation though, “because the consumer of the Eucharist is taken up into a larger body, the body of Christ. The individual consumer of the Eucharist does not simply take Christ into herself, but is taken up into Christ.”⁸⁵ For this to occur, Christian Churches will need to rethink how they practice and speak about the Lord’s Supper.

The practice of the Lord’s Supper in the Independent Christian Churches has become a symptom of the very problem it could potentially address. In surveys I conducted for this dissertation research, the majority of survey participants perceive both sermons and prayer as higher priorities for their church’s leadership than Communion.⁸⁶ Efficiency is valued over thoughtful practices: Most survey participants’ churches use individual elements (bread and cups) rather than single loaves or shared cups.⁸⁷ Rather than members serving one another, many churches now have participants serving themselves, either by retrieving pre-placed elements (received as participants entered the

⁸⁴ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 54.

⁸⁵ Ibid. While Cavanaugh writes from a Catholic position, Christian Churches need not fear a Catholic concept of transubstantiation here. Rather, I believe it is possible to understand the concept of “taking Christ into herself” in a metaphorical sense without parsing out the rationalistic nuances of transubstantiation.

⁸⁶ Katy Drage Lines, “Worship Practices Survey,” November 16-19, 2016, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-35BD5YF7V/>.

⁸⁷ Katy Drage Lines, “Communion Practices Survey,” November 16-19, 2016, accessed December 7, 2018 <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-JBNFQ2F7V/>.

worship space, or found at their seats) or by moving to designated tables to take and eat elements set on the tables. Nearly seventy percent of survey participants' churches have church leaders rather than laity presiding at the Communion table. Through researching worship services, I discovered that Communion is only a brief part of the overall service, often lasting only four to eight minutes in hour-long services.⁸⁸ Finally, individual-centered purposes for Communion were one and a half times more commonly selected than communal purposes among survey participants.⁸⁹ All of this substantiates my claim that many Independent Christian Churches have trivialized Communion and focused on individual relationships with Jesus rather than shared responses to God's work in Christ.

Valuing efficiency over thoughtful and reflective practice has led many of the Independent Christian Churches to virtually tag on an obligatory and abbreviated "me and Jesus" moment for individuals to take the Lord's Supper, like chasing a daily medication down with grape juice. This is the individualistic approach to the Lord's Supper in its most extreme. This cheapened ritual simply reflects the rise in hopelessness and fragmentation in the broader American culture. It also points to the way in which consumerism has shaped American Christians into a group of religious consumers.

⁸⁸ As a participant-observer I noted that at Eastside Christian Church, Anaheim, CA, December 10, 2016, Communion meditation, distribution, and consumption took a combined total of four minutes. Audience estimate was about 500 participants. My participant-observer notes from Eastview Christian Church, Normal, IL, November 19, 2017, suggest that Communion meditation, distribution, and consumption lasted eight minutes (in a 75-minute service). Audience estimate was about 2,000 participants. In participant-observer notes from Anaheim First Christian Church, Anaheim, CA, over a period of ten services (October 2-11, 2016), I note that Communion averaged six and a half minutes with about 150 participants.

⁸⁹ Lines, "Communion Practices Survey." Individual purposes included "Personal time to reflect on my relationship with God," "Introspection on my sins and the forgiveness I receive through the Cross," and "Remembering my baptism and giving thanks for my relationship with God through Jesus." Community-oriented purposes included "Ritual to connect to God with others," "Eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood with Jesus' Body (the Church)," and "Reminder of the unity of the Body of Christ."

The most common method of partaking of the Lord's Supper within the Christian Churches is the passing of trays containing little pieces of bread and little cups of grape juice, with individuals "ingesting when you're ready." Recently, a new trend has emerged within larger churches to distribute "all in one" individual elements (Fig. 1) as participants enter a



Figure 1 Pre-filled Communion elements

worship space, and leaders encourage them to take the elements "on your own, when you're ready." This is very different from sharing a common cup and tearing from a common loaf. Although this method is certainly quick and convenient, Dale Brown asserts that in the Eucharist, "the emphasis is not as much on eating bread as on breaking it. Bread already broken in many places constitutes a private symbol of chewing and swallowing, of individual possession. The breaking of bread signifies the intention to share it, to give it to others, thus portraying the character of Christ's body."⁹⁰ Both of the methods utilizing little cups and bread—whether passed in trays or pre-filled—reflect and contribute to individualism and privatized religion.

Finally, I want to ponder more extensively William Cavanaugh's writing on the connections between torture and the Eucharist, and the similarities between torture and individualism. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will touch on the early church's identification of martyrdom as a symbol of the Eucharist and way of joining in Christ's bodily suffering. In modern times, reflecting on the role of the Catholic Church and the practice of torture during the Pinochet regime in Chile, Cavanaugh notes that for the

⁹⁰ Dale W. Brown, "An Anabaptist Theology of the Sacraments," (presidential address presented at the Midwest Section of the American Theological Society, April 25, 1986), 17, quoted in Clapp, 108.

Church, “torture should be read as aspiring to the disappearance of the visible body of Christ.”⁹¹ When citizens of Chile were arrested, tortured and never heard from again, they were said to have ‘disappeared.’ Torture was useful for the regime. It “isolate[s] individuals... in large part because of the inability of people to share pain. Pain is incommunicable beyond limits of the body, and the sufferer must suffer alone.”⁹² The bishops of Chile recognized the “regime’s concerted attempts to silence, *fragment*, and remove the church to a religious sphere.”⁹³ While incomparable in the physical pain that torture produces, extreme individualism (what Bellah called “slowly twisting in the wind”) fragments and isolates people from one another. Underlying both torture and excessive individualism are powers and principalities that drive people away from what God intends. Cavanaugh challenges, “if the church is to resist disappearance,⁹⁴ then it must be publicly visible as the body of Christ in the present time, not secreted away in the souls of believers or relegated to the distant historical past or future.”⁹⁵ Churches must look for practices that bear public witness as expressions of the Body of Christ.

Practices that “expose the torture system to the light of day... help make the true body of Christ visible. [These practices] resist the disappearance of the church into the

⁹¹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 70-71.

⁹² Cavanaugh, *Torture*, 280.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 111, emphasis mine.

⁹⁴ Mannion’s reflection that individualism leads to the church’s inability for social transformation comes to mind here (Mannion, 107).

⁹⁵ Cavanaugh, *Torture*, 234.

interior ‘soul’ of the individual.”⁹⁶ Cavanaugh’s primary thesis throughout his text is that the public practice of the Eucharist is exactly that type of practice. Participation in the Eucharist is “to live inside God’s imagination,” standing “in opposition to the forces of the world.”⁹⁷ If churches within the Restoration Movement hope to offer public witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, and be true communities of belonging, a re-imagining of the practice of Communion must take place. If the status quo is maintained, individuals seeking to live faithfully in the way of Jesus in individual-oriented churches are comparable to the invisible, fragmented, voiceless life of the tortured, the “disappearance of the visible Body of Christ.”

Limited Scope

There are two topics related to Communion, which I do not discuss in this dissertation, that regularly cause debate and disunity among Christians. First, I have purposefully chosen not to engage robustly in the case for whether or not unbaptized children should be welcome at Communion.⁹⁸ Though I do believe that a case might be made to open the Communion table to children for the sake of formation and welcome—including Jesus’ model of welcoming children (Matt. 19:13-15). All who seek Jesus are invited by him to come to his table to receive nourishment from him. On the other hand, an argument can also be made that the initiation ritual of baptism guides a believer into belonging in the Body of Christ and that the ritual of Communion reinforces that

⁹⁶ Ibid., 280.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 279, 236.

⁹⁸ The Independent Christian Churches do not practice infant baptism. I do briefly discuss this in Chapter 6.

belonging. Therefore, unbaptized believers miss the purpose of Communion and should not participate.⁹⁹ This has been the long-standing traditional practice of most expressions of the Church, including the Independent Christian Churches. Both of these views are valid and offer persuasive support, but I do not believe a decision for either viewpoint necessarily changes any argument I make in this dissertation. Therefore, by choosing not to engage with this debate myself, I encourage churches to consider their particular context and historical precedent.¹⁰⁰ Personally, I am more inclined to favor welcoming all those who seek to receive the gifts of Christ at the table and draw fewer boundaries rather than more.

I also avoid discussing whether Communion is a sacrament or an ordinance,¹⁰¹ and whether or not the elements become the “actual” body and blood of Jesus through transubstantiation.¹⁰² I mention these two questions here only to acknowledge that I am aware of them, but do not see any particular conclusions that might be drawn to bear weight on my argument. Because of the considerable amount of written material

⁹⁹ See Hwarang Moon, “When Is It Appropriate for Children to Participate in The Lord’s Supper? A Perspective from Developmental Theory,” *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1 (2013): 30–47, for an example of both the historical perspective and an argument in favor of children’s participation in Communion.

¹⁰⁰ Traditionally, the Independent Christian Churches have generally affirmed that Communion was for baptized believers, although in practice, the decision to participate is left up to individuals or the parents of unbaptized children.

¹⁰¹ K. C. Richardson, “The Lord’s Supper as a Sacrament in the History of the Stone-Campbell Movement” (M. Div., Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, TN, 1996), does a fine job of articulating these alternatives for the Stone-Campbell Movement. cf. Blowers, Paul M. and Bryon C. Lambert, “The Lord’s Supper,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ*, ed. Douglas A. Foster (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 489–496.

¹⁰² As a Protestant expression of the church, the Independent Christian Churches do not recognize this Catholic doctrine. Blowers, et. al, “The Lord’s Supper” supplies a brief explanation on this stance.

regarding Communion, it has been necessary for me to limit my scope to how Communion facilitates belonging and encourages hospitality within a church community.

Conclusion

A person's value as an individual is significant. Each person has been created and named, redeemed and gifted by God. Individualism is a concept that values the personhood of each human being. When individualism emerges from the biblical concept of humans created in the image of God, it is a valuable reminder for people to see others as equally valued as themselves. The uniqueness of each person allows everyone to develop their own skills, personalities, and quirkiness. A beautiful trait of individualism is the crazy-quilt variety in those that compose a community. But "where history and hope are forgotten and community means only the gathering of the similar, community degenerates into lifestyle enclave. The temptation toward that transformation is endemic in America."¹⁰³ The "lifestyle enclave" of superficial community is tempting, but prohibits residents from welcoming the dissimilar into the circle.

Extreme individualism is detrimental to both individuals themselves as well as the community in which they live. Ultimately and ironically, individualism's destructive end can lead to nihilism, isolation, and despair for individuals themselves. Communities are fragmented and lack coherence, as each person seeks to look out for themselves rather than the common good. America's religious landscape is not immune to this trait, and the consequences for both faith adherents and the institutional church are significant. In the drive to remain relevant in order to maintain a loyal base of individuals, churches have

¹⁰³ Bellah, 154.

become simply reflections of the commercial character of the larger society, rather than consolidated larger voices able to speak prophetically into the structural and institutional injustices deeply rooted in local communities and the nation. The fragmentation of the church into individuals is mirrored in the fragmentation of the Eucharistic elements themselves.

The next chapter will consider meals found in scripture, and specifically the Lord's Supper. Chapters 3 and 4 will look at historical understandings of the ritual; specifically within the early church (Chapter 3) and the Restoration Movement (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 of this dissertation will challenge Christian Churches to reconsider the ritual of Communion as a place of both belonging and hospitality, as a means of resisting the fragmenting and isolating nature of individualism. Communion cannot be the only place where belonging and hospitality are fostered within the life of a church community, but must at least be an essential part of the larger conversation on what it looks like to welcome and belong. Finally, Chapter 6 will offer recommendations for ways the Christian Churches can reimagine practicing the Lord's Supper.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, there are instances of God relating to people, reinforcing belonging through meals, and offering hospitality around tables. In order to imagine a more robust practice of the Lord's Supper as a place to counter the insidious fragmentation of individualism in both the culture and churches, it is imperative to begin with a survey of scripture. In this chapter, I explore a select number of these stories, rather than an exhaustive examination. While an in-depth exploration of meals in the Bible might be intriguing,¹ I limit this survey to a few specific meals shared between people and God in order to highlight ways to understand the place of the Lord's Supper in the lives of God's people. The goal of this chapter is to set a scriptural foundation for the Lord's Supper as a place of belonging and hospitality. It will begin with a story from the Old Testament, followed by an extensive overview of Jesus' Last Supper as recorded in the gospel of Luke. This will be followed by a few other New Testament examples of eucharistic or eucharistic-style meals, and will conclude by exploring Paul's reflection on the ritual in 1 Corinthians.

¹ For in-depth studies of meals in the Bible, Peter Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel: Deuteronomy's Identity Politics in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), offers the thesis that God's provision of feasts for the Israelites solidify their identity as God's people. Regarding New Testament studies, I recommend Esther Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and Its Historical and Cultural Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). Like Altmann, Kobel proposes communal meals being the central location for community identity in the New Testament era.

Old Testament: Bread from Heaven

In Exodus 16, God rained down “bread from heaven” (Exod. 16:4)² upon the Israelite people as they travelled through the wilderness from slavery in Egypt towards the land God promised their ancestors. Throughout their forty years of wandering, God continued to daily provide daily sufficient bread, manna, for the entire assembly.

When God explained to the Israelites how to collect the manna, the expectation was for people to take only what they needed. However, those who greedily or fearfully gathered more than they needed discovered wormy, rotten manna the next morning. God’s daily provision of “bread from heaven” was meant not only to physically nourish the travelers and foster their trust in God, but also to nurture the trust and unity of the community. Angel Méndez-Montoya, a Dominican professor of theology, suggests that “rather than encouraging the accumulation or possession of God’s gifts for private or individualistic purposes, the story of the manna is a call to share with one another and thus nurture the life of the community, particularly those who are in greatest need.”³ While God super-abundantly and compassionately provides sufficient nourishment for each day, the rotten manna was an example of humans’ tendency towards autonomy and self-reliance.

For Méndez-Montoya, manna is seen as a welcome gift from “the other” (in this case, God), to bring unity and transformation into the community. Thus, “this strange bread, the manna from heaven, is... a sign of interdependence, hospitality, and solidarity,

² All scripture taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ Angel F. Méndez-Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 124.

for it is a material demonstration of God's ultimate compassion."⁴ The concept of "bread" then, continues into the New Testament as an image or symbol of communal belonging to one another and to God. Jesus referred to this Old Testament story when he likened himself to the bread God provided in the wilderness. After feeding the multitude on the hillside, Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51). In the context of a hillside feast, manna becomes an image of a eucharistic-style meal, emerging from a super-abundant God who nourishes the people of God.

New Testament

The identity of the people of Israel, and then the early church, was often expressed in sharing meals, especially bread. Manna was one way for God to show compassion for the community, and to encourage the people towards community. Just as God "became bread" in the reality of the manna (and, ultimately in the Eucharist), so God calls on Christians to "'become bread' for one another."⁵ God "became bread" in the reality of the manna—and ultimately, in the Eucharist—nourishing and providing superabundantly for the community. Likewise, imitating God, followers of Jesus "become bread" for each other by caring for and trusting one another in the new community of the church. This portion of the chapter will primarily focus on two significant Eucharistic texts: Luke 22 as an example of the synoptic narrative of the Last

⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵ Ibid., 127.

Supper, and 1 Corinthians 10-11— Paul’s description, criticism, and hope for how the eucharistic ritual should shape the church in Corinth. While this chapter does not cover all the meals in the New Testament, it will briefly touch on a few others to highlight the role of meals, specifically the eucharistic meal, in building belonging within a community and offering hospitality to others.

Luke 22: The Last Supper

Luke 22:14-23 (cf. Matt. 26:26-30, Mark 14:22-25) is a picture of an intimate gathering of those closest to Jesus in the hours leading up to his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, death, and ultimately, his resurrection. It provides a glimpse into the early church’s retelling of what is commonly known as the Last Supper, the night Jesus shared a meal with his devoted followers and gave them bread and wine to remember him. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright offers this perspective:

When Jesus wanted to give his followers... a way of understanding what was about to happen to him, he didn’t teach them a theory. Theories about how Jesus’ death dealt with our sins have come and gone throughout church history.... But they weren’t the main thing Jesus gave his followers. He gave them an act to perform, ... a meal to share.”⁶

This shared meal has become, along with baptism, one of the two primary identity rituals of the Church.

In Luke’s version of the narrative, Jesus sends Peter and John to prepare an upstairs room for Jesus and his disciples to eat the Passover meal. The original Passover meal (Exod. 12) was a “pre-enactment” of the motley collection of enslaved people who became God’s covenant people at Sinai. In the original meal, God gave specific

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 261-262.

requirements for preparation and participation in the ritual in order that participants might undeniably recognize the power of God to redeem enslaved people and give them a new identity as God's people. The Passover meal was observed sporadically throughout the history of the Israelite people,⁷ but was intended by God to be celebrated annually as "a day of remembrance" (Exod. 12:14), perpetually observed as the time when the origin story of the Israelites was told and re-told. Only those who belonged to the "congregation of Israel" were to observe the Passover (Exod. 12:43, 47); it was an annual reminder of identity and belonging. In that context then, the Passover as Jesus' Last Supper is significant. That Jesus chose to institute what became the Eucharist in the context of the Passover meal is a critical recognition that Jesus' followers become the new covenant people, the Body of Christ, the church. Just as the Passover recognizes the Israelites as God's people, the Last Supper plays the same role for the church.

During the meal, Jesus gave his followers a cup to share amongst themselves and told them he would not drink wine "until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). Jesus then took some bread, gave thanks and broke it, then passed it out to them with words that have become very familiar within the Church: "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (v. 19). Finally, after eating the meal, he passed around a cup, announcing, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (v. 21). Jesus concludes by recognizing his betrayer at the table with him, and a warning to that betrayer. In this section, I will explore some of the commonly identified elements or purposes behind Luke's account of the Lord's Supper.

⁷ See, for instance, Josh. 5:10, where the Israelites observed the Passover after crossing the Jordan; and 2 Kings 23:21-23, where the author notes the Passover had not been observed since the time of the judges until the time of Josiah.

In the following paragraphs, I will look at the Eucharist from five perspectives: from an eschatological perspective, as a memorial, as a sacrifice, and for the purposes of unity and hospitality.

New Testament scholar John Nolland suggests that the Lucan story has an **eschatological** component to the meal. For early followers of Christ, the Last Supper was seen not only as a look back at the Passover meal, but also as an imagining forward towards the messianic banquet of the kingdom of God at the end of time.⁸ This eschatological feast is open to all who come at the invitation of Jesus, especially those often overlooked or considered insignificant (see Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24). According to leading New Testament scholar Xavier Léon-Dufour, Jesus' followers "held unwearingly to the hope that the Lord would one day gather all of his own at the final 'eschatological' banquet which symbolizes life given in its fullness."⁹ At the Last Supper, Jesus celebrated with the disciples as one who serves; at the messianic banquet he will be the one who "bestows the kingdom" (see Luke 22:16). Bookended by those two meals, there is the "cultic meal," the Eucharist, which churches continue to observe in this middle time and space between the Last Supper and the messianic banquet.¹⁰ It is in this middle space that the eschatological hope observed in the Eucharist is grounded in physical bodies and the physical elements, words and actions of the ritual, as churches "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 1050. cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, vol 28A, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1390.

⁹ Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

Participation in the Eucharist as a “resurrection meal” reminds participants that Jesus was a victim¹¹ of torture by the state and betrayed by one close to him, reminding them of Christ’s forgiveness and offer of new life.¹² This allows participants to find solidarity with Jesus, in the midst of the pain and violence of this world, with the hope of redemption for physical bodies, communities, and all creation in the resurrected Christ.¹³ When people of God gather together to participate in the Eucharist, it is “*the action itself*... the thing Jesus told us to do, [which] announces to the principalities and powers, the unseen forces in the world, that Jesus is Lord, and that his cross has won the victory over all evil.”¹⁴ The *shalom* (peace) of God is a recognition that God is and will ultimately reconcile all things in Christ (Col. 1:19). It is that hope in the eschatological kingdom of God that participants in the Eucharist declare.

The Last Supper represents not only the messianic banquet. Inseparable from that concept, it is a **memorial** or *anamnesis* (remembrance) to relive and recall the passion of Christ. Jesus’ instruction to his followers, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19), recalled the annual Passover practice of the Jews, “a yearly *anamnesis*.” It brought his followers into the bigger story of a covenant God who saves and preserves God’s people.¹⁵ The Last Supper provided a way to evoke the memory of their time with Jesus,

¹¹ Jesus himself declares that he was a *voluntary* victim. See John 10:17-18.

¹² See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 549.

¹³ Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁴ Tom Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2002), 77. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Fitzmyer, 1391; cf. Léon-Dufour, 283.

observing and participating in Jesus' reconciling work in the world. More than any other understanding of the purpose of this ritual, the Christian Churches recognize the Lord's Supper as a way to remember what Christ's death has done to save people. This purpose will be explored more in Chapter 4, on the historical understandings of the ritual in the Stone-Campbell movement.

On another level, however, there is a sense that the Eucharist as a memorial transcends time. According to Léon-Dufour, two types of "remembrance" are connected to Jesus' final meal before his death: what is typically considered the Eucharist (the bread and cup), and the servant-style action of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13). Léon-Dufour challenges that Jesus' "words over the bread and cup and his action of washing feet: these are what believers are to 'do in remembrance of him' or to 'do in accordance with the example given.'"¹⁶ *Anamnesis* is not simply remembering fondly or with nostalgia an event that happened in the past, but rather the functional sense of "remembering," pointing towards an action, specifically in the form of life-giving love for one another. In other words, *anamnesis* is an active remembering.

There is also a **sacrificial** understanding of the meal, recognition that Jesus' suffering somehow dealt with human frailty. Jesus' followers must "'eat his body' and 'drink his blood,' finding their life through his death."¹⁷ Jesus gives his body and his blood to those seated at the table with him (Luke 22:19-20) as an active and symbolic way for his present and future followers to join in his service, sacrifice and suffering; they experience a solidarity in their own suffering (cf. Luke 22:15). It is in Jesus'

¹⁶ Léon-Dufour, 283.

¹⁷ Wright, *Luke*, 263; cf. Fitzmyer, 1391.

brokenness, his *kenosis* (pouring out) that humanity, in a beautifully ironic manner, finds wholeness, healing, and motivation to live sacrificially (see Phil. 2:1-13). Méndez-Montoya calls this sacrificial element of the Lord's Supper "divine *caritas*" and recognizes that, as a paradox, "it is the humble power of bread broken into pieces for sharing; it is the washing of feet that means a life of service to one another; it is the power of giving one's life for the other. In other words, this is the theopolitical power of *caritas*, where the extraordinary embraces and transfigures the ordinary."¹⁸ The sacrificially broken and shared pieces of bread emerge again in the early Christian identification of martyrdom with the Lord's Supper.

Next, in practicing the ritual introduced by Jesus in Luke, Christians recognize the **unity** of believers in Christ and with one another. Léon-Dufour describes the unity as "the twofold relationship which believers have with God and neighbor: since there is but one loaf we form a single body, while the one cup expresses the unity of those who drink from it with Jesus and among themselves."¹⁹ This unity with Christ and with one another will be explored more in upcoming chapters, but a few highlights might be helpful here. First, Léon-Dufour notes that a common term for the Eucharist, "breaking of bread," might better be described as "sharing of bread." This occurs because Christians are giving of what they "continuously receive from the Lord," distributing or sharing from an abundance, imitating Jesus' feeding of the multitude. It is "in giving the bread and the cup [that] Jesus gives himself to us as food in order to transform us into himself" as the

¹⁸ Méndez-Montoya, 115-116.

¹⁹ Léon-Dufour, 299.

Body of Christ.²⁰ The sharing of bread, eating together, becomes a dimension of how we both hope for and actualize the unity believers have with one another in Christ. This will be explored more in the discussion on 1 Corinthians.

The unity of Christ's followers embodied in the Eucharist is one that Christ himself prayed for and for which God yearns (see John 17:11). Because of "God's very characteristic longing to be in relationship with us[,] God creates this community, this body of Christ, through God's Spirit-love and power.... When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we... are recreating the community."²¹ When participating in the Eucharist together as a people, Christians fulfill Christ's prayer and usher in the new reality of the kingdom of God, or, in Henri de Lubac's words, a "new *polis*" or the mystical body of Christ— "*corpus mysticum*."²²

A second highlight of the unity realized in the Eucharist is a passage found only in Luke's gospel. After Jesus offers the bread and cup to those at the table with him, the disciples quarrel about who is the greatest (Luke 22:24-27). Jesus exhorts them that "there can be no domination, jealousy, or rivalry among brethren [sic] who share the same Supper of the Lord. A commitment to brotherhood must unite the sharers of Jesus' table: each must even want to be the servant of all."²³ Just as Jesus' *kenosis* and sacrifice models giving up of oneself for others, so the posture of being a servant enables

²⁰ Ibid., 298.

²¹ L. Shannon Jung, *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 135.

²² Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xi. cf. Méndez-Montoya, 133.

²³ Ibid., 246.

Christians to become unified as sisters and brothers in Christ and not lord over one another.

The tendency to spiritualize the practice of the Lord's Supper is a detriment to the unity of the people of God. In my research and observation, many Independent Christian churches have shifted the ritual into minimalistic symbolism that ignores the hoped for and actualizing of unity that is expressed in the material elements and physical actions of the Eucharistic table. The common practice of passing out individual miniature tablets of crackers and thimble-sized cups, together with the "close your eyes and reflect" script contribute to the disembodied and fragmented nature of the practice. It is of greater value to have an "embodied theology of the Eucharist." This is one that focuses "not exclusively on the 'elements,' but on the bodies of people.... It is important... that there be no divide between the material and the spiritual world. *It is by the material means of eating and drinking that community is created* among participants in the meal and with God."²⁴ The unity observed in Jesus' actions at the Last Supper is disregarded in the Christian churches today when the Lord's Supper is practiced in such a utilitarian way.

Finally, there is a thread of **hospitality** that runs throughout Luke's telling of the Last Supper. This thread will be explored more in the following section on other New Testament meals, but the place to begin is in Luke 22. After Jesus gifts the disciples with the bread and cup as his body and blood, he observes that someone at the table will betray him. It is significant that Jesus knew his betrayer was at the table when he shared the elements, and yet he chose to practice "hospitality, even to his death. No one was

²⁴ Bieler and Schottroff, 23. Emphasis mine.

excluded from his table fellowship.”²⁵ Even at this most intimate event, Jesus identified the very person who would hand him over to Jewish leaders to be killed, yet still welcomed him to the table to receive the shared bread and cup. Jesus pointed out to one of his dearest friends and closet followers that he, Peter, would deny even knowing Jesus. Still, Jesus offered his body and blood to Peter. Jesus’ willingness to give away his own flesh and blood for the sake of his guests—even the ones who would deny and betray him—suggests a sacrificial holiness. Jesus denying himself for his guests (and future guests) in the Last Supper makes the connection of the “gracious provision” of meals and hospitality evident: “Jesus not only breaks bread with sinners, but he becomes bread for sinners.”²⁶ It is not hospitality that creates unity or belonging within a group, but a willingness to give up oneself (*kenosis*) for the sake of others.

Feeding the Multitude

Jesus’ feeding of the multitude²⁷ provides another significant meal where Jesus serves as the host, gives thanks and breaks bread, and shares it with others. In this instance however, it is not his closest followers to whom he offers bread, but rather a massive crowd. The crowd is hungry, having followed Jesus to a deserted place. Jesus’ request for his disciples to feed the people fits into his character: “Nothing could be more normal... in the context of Jesus’ preaching and actions, than to include satisfying hunger and celebrating a feast as part of the Kingdom of God. The happiness of the hungry is at

²⁵ L. Shannon Jung, 46.

²⁶ Naomi Walter, “Lord’s Supper and Hospitality,” *Leaven* 22, no. 4 (January 1, 2014): 186.

²⁷ See especially John. 6:1-15, 22-58; cf. Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17.

hand, since they will be filled.”²⁸ Like the eschatological messianic banquet, the miraculous feeding points “in the same direction: Jesus is... the one who serves (at table) and who sets the table, open to all” who hunger and thirst for him.²⁹

The feeding of the multitude also feeds an “eschatological imagination” for the kingdom of God. After the bread was distributed and everyone was “satisfied, Jesus told his disciples, ‘gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost’” (John 6:12).³⁰ Bieler and Schottroff creatively identify this as “the reality of brokenness and a hope of wholeness.”³¹ This language of gathering the broken pieces into wholeness will appear again in the exploration of the early Christian communities’ practice of the Eucharist in Chapter 3.

If the Last Supper was an intimate gathering of committed members who belonged to one another because of their mutual identity as disciples of Jesus, then the feeding of the multitude is representative of Jesus’ broad hospitality, open to everyone who was hungry, no matter their closeness to Jesus. According to Méndez-Montoya, “the message in both the miraculous feeding and the Last Supper echoes the message of the manna tradition: God’s superabundance and a generous sharing that nourishes communities and invites them to repeat this same gesture among one another.”³² Both of

²⁸ Érico João Hammes, “Stones into Bread: Why Not? Eucharist--Koinonia--Diaconate,” trans. Paul Burns, *Concilium* 2 (2005), 27.

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁰ Bieler and Schottroff, 7

³¹ Ibid.

³² Méndez-Montoya, 136.

these meals serve as Jesus' witness to being the "bread of life" (John 6:35) to all who are hungry for him, no matter their proximity to him.

Breaking the Bread: the Emmaus meal and Early Christians

After Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to select disciples, including two who walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Along the journey, the disciples did not recognize Jesus, but were devastated by his death and confused by reports of his resurrection from some disciples. At their destination, they invited their unknown companion to stay with them for a meal. Jesus turned the tables however, and the guest became the host— taking, blessing, breaking and sharing the bread with them. It was in that action, the guest becoming host and breaking the bread, that the disciples recognized Jesus. This strange encounter points to the unanticipated hospitality of God.³³

Early on, the young Christian community began to refer to the new ritual informed by the Last Supper as "breaking of the bread," recognizing Christ's presence in the action. The Emmaus disciples did not recognize Jesus when they visibly saw him, but spotted him, rather, in the "breaking of the bread."³⁴ Later, early Christians met regularly together to "break bread" (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11). Méndez-Montoya proposes that "the early Christian communities believed that God had not abandoned them, nor had he left them malnourished: God's saving actions... continue in and through the Holy Spirit, who

³³ Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 189.

³⁴ See Fitzmyer, 1559, 1569.

shapes a new sense of being ‘one Body’ with one another and with God.”³⁵ For this reason, “the breaking of bread” becomes so important for these early communities’ understanding of their identity as the people of God, the body of Christ. The physical body of Jesus, the incarnation of God, is no longer present among his followers, but the action of breaking bread is a reminder to ongoing followers of Jesus of the enduring reality of “God with us.” In other words, breaking bread in the Eucharist is “*our occasion to share a meal with Jesus.*”³⁶

*1 Corinthians: The Eucharistic Meal Shapes the Eucharistic Community*³⁷

Throughout scripture, only Paul identifies the church, the people of God, as the Body of Christ. But from the earliest expressions of Christianity, “the Eucharist has always been considered in relation to the Church.”³⁸ In 1 Corinthians, Paul recognizes the solidarity of the people of God as one Body connected to God and to one another through the one loaf of the Eucharist. From the time of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians onward, “the Church had never ceased to appear linked to the Eucharist.”³⁹ It was unfeasible in Paul’s theology to consider the Eucharist as a solitary or individualistic ritual.

³⁵ Méndez-Montoya, 138. cf. Byrne, 173.

³⁶ Ben Witherington, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord’s Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 133. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ Sub-heading title inspired by Méndez-Montoya, 139, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 21.

³⁸ Lubac, 248.

³⁹ Ibid.

Paul's retelling of the event-turned-ritual in 1 Corinthians 11 (and more broadly, the theme of divisions in the entire epistle; specifically the recognition of the church as Christ's Body in 1 Corinthians 10- 12) is invaluable to understanding how the early church practiced the Lord's Supper. 1 Corinthians 11 examines the sacrificial and soteriological character, the memorial and eschatological nature, and the unifying elements of the Lord's Supper. This section will focus primarily on the unity and generosity that Paul believes the Eucharist should encompass.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, Paul introduces the two elements of the Eucharist in order to make the argument against joining rituals of idol worship: "The cup of blessing that we bless, it is not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Do believers have fellowship (*koinōnia*) in the meal with Christ himself, or with companions who share in the meal? Gordon Fee suggests the answer is "both."⁴⁰ Verse 17 certainly highlights the believers' solidarity in sharing with one another as one body breaking one bread. On the other hand, it is the cup, according to Fee, that commemorates new life through the blood of Christ. Christ as host brings believers into fellowship with himself and with one another. Certainly, "it is this unique relationship *between believers* and *with their Lord*, celebrated at this meal" that makes it impossible for the Corinthians believers to participate in other religious rituals ("the table of demons," v. 21). In 1 Cor. 10:16-17 at least, "the cup seems to focus on the

⁴⁰ Fee, 466. cf. N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2014), 151.

vertical dimension, the bread on the horizontal.”⁴¹ Those who participate in the “one bread,” proclaim, “through Christ’s death they are ‘partners’ in the redeemed community, the new eschatological people of God.”⁴² According to Fee, Paul believes the participants become part of the Body of Christ, not through sharing in the meal, but through their common baptism in the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:13). Participation in the meal affirms the reality that was created through Christ’s death and resurrection.⁴³

One focus of Paul’s argument on how the Corinthians need to better practice the Lord’s Supper is that the nature of the ritual is both active remembrance and hopeful eschatology, made real in present time. The ritual is “the moment at which the past event comes forward to live again in the present, and the future moment of the Lord’s return comes backwards in time to challenge us in the present.”⁴⁴ When the present practice of the Eucharist is inextricably connected throughout time to Christ’s past and future actions, it is another reminder that what is performed in the ritual matters, that believers’ lives and life together bear witness to the work of Christ in the world.

The primary goal that prompted Paul to write to the fractured Corinthian church is the unity of the Body of Christ, or more specifically, solidarity among the gathered assembly. Paul sees their practice of the Lord’s Supper as both a symptom of discord and a means of healing. He laments their current practice as indicative of divisions among them: “Not that the Corinthians are profaning a holy rite, but... are fragmenting a holy

⁴¹ Fee, 466-467. Emphasis in original.

⁴² Ibid., 469.

⁴³ Ibid., 470.

⁴⁴ Wright, *Paul*, 150. cf. Witherington, 58, Fee, 533, and especially Léon-Dufour, 21. This distinctive view of time is represented again in Chapter 4, specifically in the theology of William Robinson.

society,” by not eating together.⁴⁵ Meals, including festival meals, were commonly shared in homes during this time; what was clear in Corinth was that there were disparate social classes at these Christians’ meals, and a lack of sharing with each other.⁴⁶ In whatever way the ritual was actually practiced, whether as part of a communal meal or feast, or as representative of a meal, members of the assembly were self-focused rather than considering other sisters and brothers, most likely those more marginalized in society. As a means of healing, in 1 Cor. 11:28-29, Paul instructs self-examination in order to discern the Body of Christ, because the church is “guilty of splitting... apart and mistreating its humbler members.”⁴⁷ This is fundamental for the Corinthian assembly; they have been eating and drinking in an unworthy manner, in their “mistreatment of persons present... injuring the body of Christ by breaking up the unity.”⁴⁸ The solution to this problem, more than merely “waiting for one another” (1 Cor. 11:33), is to “welcome one another, show gracious hospitality to one another, partake together with one another without distinctions in rank and food.”⁴⁹

However, the unity of the people of God as expressed in the Lord’s Supper is not simply unity for its own sake. Méndez-Montoya suggests that the breaking, thanking, and sharing of bread and wine *re-enacts* the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching: It is the life-

⁴⁵ William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *I Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 269. cf. Witherington, 47, Orr and Walther, 270.

⁴⁶ Léon-Dufour, 19.

⁴⁷ Orr and Walther, 274.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁹ Witherington, 60.

giving idea of shaping the Body of Christ into a “communal resistance to hunger.”⁵⁰

When the Body of Christ cares for one another, no one starves or is malnourished. But “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). Therefore, the “eucharistic meal shapes [and is shaped by] a eucharistic community.”⁵¹ Meaning, belonging, and nourishment are found in the sharing of the Lord’s Supper together as the people of God, the Body of Christ, welcome all those who thoughtfully wait for one another to eat together as we progress toward the ultimate *shalom* at the Messianic banquet.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to survey biblical meals, in order to establish an understanding of the connection between participants and with God. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the gift of bread from God has been to nourish the people of God and draw them closer to God and one another. In the words of Méndez-Montoya, the manna from heaven, Christ’s body and blood, is “a symbol of liminality wherein divinity and humanity intersect. Christ, the Word made flesh, becomes food and drink, and so abides in the world: *the extraordinary becomes ordinary, and this kenotic movement makes the ordinary extraordinary, from within the everyday nature of bread.*”⁵² In both the vertical and horizontal relationships, God fosters relationships through the giving of the bread of life to the people of God.

⁵⁰ Méndez-Montoya, 139.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 141. Emphasis added.

The narrative of the Last Supper in the gospels introduces what became the ritual of the Eucharist. The words and actions of Jesus during the Last Supper serve as both a point of memory and an eschatological hope. In other words, the gospel narrative calls for both an active recalling of Jesus' death and resurrection, and a proleptic look forward to the hoped-for *shalom* of God becoming the reality of the kingdom of God. In breaking the bread and pouring the cup, Jesus' *kenotic* sacrifice is remembered and offered to the people of God as a challenge to serve and give of themselves, and as Jesus' solidarity with believers' suffering. Jesus prays for the unity of his followers, and offers generous grace to those who come to his table, regardless of their "qualifications" or status.

In the Gospels, meals such as Jesus' feeding of the multitude recall the generous hospitality and compassion of a super-abundant God, as well as the "eschatological imagination" of fragmented pieces being made whole. That imagination draws on the ability to see things as yet unseen; a reality made known in the *shalom* of the Kingdom of God. During the breaking of the bread, Jesus is recognized as the host of the meal, and participants are reminded of Christ's presence in the action of breaking the bread.

Finally, in Paul's letter to the fractured Corinthian church, he challenges them to remember their solidarity with one another, those who are made the Body of Christ through their common baptism in the Holy Spirit and expressed regularly as they share in one loaf. Their connection to God as the Body of Christ comes as they together share in the one cup, the *kenotic* sacrifice that solidified the new covenant Christ promised his followers. In the following chapter, I show how some Christians in the early centuries of the church continued to address the role of the Eucharist for unifying the Body of Christ.

CHAPTER 3

SURVEY OF ANTE-NICENE EUCHARISTIC THOUGHTS AND PRACTICES

For the fire made the likeness of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and he was within it not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked, or as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a fragrant smell as the scent of incense or other costly spices.

-- *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Introduction

The previous chapter established a biblical foundation for the Lord's Supper as a place of belonging and hospitality. This chapter proposes that the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper in the early churches can provide valuable grounds for a more robust practice of the ritual in the Christian Churches today. How did the early churches understand and practice the Lord's Supper? Church practices today are often disconnected from their roots and origins by ignoring the history of God's people after the canon of scripture. The intention of this chapter is not to encourage churches to merely replicate an idealized version of the Eucharist from the Early Christian era, but rather, to consider the choices that need to be made both in light of today's needs and what has been practiced in the past.

This chapter explores early Christian writings on the Lord's Supper, with brief synopses of primary Ante-Nicene church leaders and early texts: specifically, the *Didache*, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin, Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, Macrina, and Polycarp. It also touches briefly on the role of deaconesses surrounding the Eucharist in early churches. The scope of this chapter is limited for two reasons to the

time period beginning after the narratives of the New Testament and continuing up to the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE). First, the Council of Nicaea is often considered a bookend for what's commonly known as Early Christianity. Second, the Independent Christian Churches value the early historical church—even seeking to “restore” New Testament Christianity—but tend to be quite critical (or more commonly, ignorant) of the historical church as it became more institutionally structured and hierarchical after the first Nicaea council.¹ If this proposal is for the benefit of the Christian Churches, it is imperative to craft a coherent model appropriate to their ideals.

After the New Testament era, churches matured and became institutionalized during the second and third centuries. As the good news of Jesus spread to distant corners of the Roman Empire, the oral stories of Jesus' life and the writings of the apostles guided the practices of early believers. While the young church continued to move into different contexts, it faced heresies from within and persecution from without. As a result, a new group of leaders arose who developed theologies and practices to meet those challenges. One topic that these leaders addressed was the practice of the Lord's Supper.

¹ One of the two primary founders of the Restoration Movement, Alexander Campbell, claimed that “tradition of the church and the testimony of those called primitive fathers [sic] supported our claim” for weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. He then cited theologians from the first three centuries to support his claim and argued that it was during the fourth century that decline of legitimate church authority began. Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things—No. IX, The Breaking of Bread—No. IV,” *Christian Baptist* 3 (Nov. 7, 1825), 195. One the other hand however, the prolific Campbell was also inclined to contradict himself. Twenty years later he argued, “from what authoritative source can anything be learned touching this ordinance more fully and explicit than from Christian Scriptures?” Beyond the “essentials” found in the New Testament, everything else is “a matter of Christian prudence and discretion.” Alexander Campbell, “The Nature of the Christian Organization—No. VIII,” *Millennial Harbinger* 11 (Nov. 1842), 512.

The *Didache* and earlier (possibly c. 65-80)

As churches spread throughout the Roman Empire, the Lord's Supper was practiced in commonly accepted diverse ways.² According to Paul Bradshaw, Jewish rituals highly influenced the way the early churches practiced the Lord's Supper. He asserts, "the 'blessing' or *b'raka* was the context in which the Eucharist took shape.... But Christians soon displayed their originality and specific character."³ Within both Judaism and Roman culture, feasts and festivals were common and influenced the nascent practice of the Lord's Supper.

The meal initially observed by Jesus and his followers in the gospel texts was the prototype for the evolving practice of the body of believers sharing bread and wine together. Initially, the church shared full meals together, which included the "breaking of bread" and the sharing of wine in remembrance of Jesus, utilizing ordinary elements of the meal. By the third century, the full meal was discontinued in lieu of the Eucharist ritual as the number of those worshipping together increased, worship services moved out of houses and became more formal, and churches became institutionalized. The Eucharist developed as an "antitype" of Jesus' Last Supper, with the bread and wine corresponding to the elements as model-types used in the Last Supper; that is, the Last Supper foreshadowed the ritual practice of the Eucharist.⁴ During this time of evolution from

² Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 159.

³ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴ Enrico Mazza, *The Celebration of Eucharist: The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Books, 1999), xiv-xvi.

meal to ritual, early Christians began to develop and articulate full-bodied explanations of the purpose of the Eucharist.

The *Didache*, a first-century worship manual, recognizes that this meal was “seen as a time where the unity of the community of Jesus’ followers is both recognized and prayed for.”⁵ Two chapters (9, 10) of the *Didache* offer prayers of blessing (or thanksgiving, *eucharistia*) for the bread and cup shared among believers in worship. For instance, a united community is likened to the shared bread: “Just as the bread broken was first scattered on the hills, then was gathered and became one, so let your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom, for yours is the glory and power through Jesus Christ for all ages!”⁶ *Didache* 10.3, 6 states,

All-powerful Master, you created all things for your name’s sake, and you have given food and drink to the children of men [sic] for their enjoyment, so that they may thank you. On us, moreover, you have bestowed a spiritual food and drink that lead to eternal life, though Jesus your servant.... May grace come and this world pass away! Hosanna to the God of David.... Maranatha. Amen.

These prayers have an eschatological orientation, comparable to Paul’s instruction to celebrate the meal “until he [Christ] comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).⁷

The *Didache* reminds believers that, when they gather “on the dominical day of the Lord” and “break bread and give thanks,” reconciliation among those present should occur first, “lest your sacrifice be profaned.”⁸ Thus even at this early stage of development the church understood the actions of the participants sharing a meal or ritual

⁵ Witherington, 93.

⁶ *Didache* 9.4.

⁷ See Witherington, 94.

⁸ *Didache* 14.

of bread and wine as being a sacrifice, unifying the gatherers, and pointing to Christ's return.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-107)

Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters to churches. These letters focused primarily on the heresy of Docetism, which wrestled with the relationship of Christ's divinity and humanity, elevating the belief that Jesus' human body was only an illusion. Ignatius wrote at the beginning of the second century, during a major shift "from Jewish thought in terms of function and relationships, to Greek philosophical thought about ontology and substance."⁹ In combating Docetism, Ignatius argues, "I have no taste for Corruptible food or for the delights of this life. Bread of God is what I desire; that is, the Flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for my drink I desire His Blood, that is, incorruptible love."¹⁰ This conviction of "sacramental realism"¹¹ led to his primary thesis on the Eucharist: that of unity of the community in Christ. In Ignatius' letters to the Philadelphians and the Smyrnaeans, he writes extensively to, "be careful to participate in only one Eucharist, for there is only one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup to unite us in his blood."¹² The significance of this text for readers of Ignatius' letter was the unity of the community—which celebrates the Eucharist sharing real bread and a real cup—united in the real risen Christ.

⁹ Everett Ferguson, "The Lord's Supper: The Early Church through the Medieval Period," in *The Lord's Supper: Believers' Church Perspectives*, ed. Dale Stoffer (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 23.

¹⁰ Ignatius, *Rom.* 7.3. cf. Ignatius *Smyrn* 7.1.

¹¹ See Mazza, 105.

¹² Ignatius, *Phil.* 4, referring to 1 Cor. 10:16-17; cf. *Smyrn.* 1, 2.

Ignatius was killed in Rome for his faith. Like Cyprian after him, he saw participation in the Eucharist as an imitation of Christ's suffering, even in his death. Ignatius wrote to the Roman church, "God's wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground that I may prove Christ's pure bread.... Once I have suffered, I shall become a freedman of Jesus Christ and united with Him."¹³ Mazza observes that for Ignatius, "the imitation of Christ takes place both in rites and in life... the eucharistic celebration should be a real imitation of Christ."¹⁴ Ignatius himself stressed, "faith is the flesh of the Lord and...love is the blood of Jesus Christ."¹⁵

Justin (100-165)

Justin was an early Christian apologist from Samaria. An itinerant philosopher, Justin travelled throughout the Roman Empire, teaching until he was beheaded in Rome in 165 CE. Two of Justin's books, *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho* describe the Eucharist as a consistent rite throughout the Roman Empire. In *First Apology* Justin explains that only baptized believers share in the Eucharist.¹⁶ Justin connects the two sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist to the formation of a believer. He also stresses the unity of the community by instructing that the Eucharist elements be shared with those who are absent.¹⁷ The faithful assemble on Sunday, because it is "the day on which

¹³ *Rom.* 4.1, 3.

¹⁴ Mazza, 106.

¹⁵ Ignatius, *Trallians* 8.1.

¹⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 66, 1.

¹⁷ *First Apology*, 67, 5.

Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.”¹⁸ During this gathering, the words of the prophets or memoirs of the apostles are read and expounded on, connecting scripture and the Eucharist.

In Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, he writes that the Old Testament ritual offering of flour at the Temple by those healed of illness prefigured “the bread of the Eucharist, which our Lord Jesus Christ commanded us to offer in remembrance of the Passion that he endured for all the souls who are cleansed from sin.”¹⁹ Believers partake of Eucharistic bread to “thank God for having created the world... for having saved us from the sin... and for the total destruction of the powers and principalities.”²⁰ In this passage the term *eucharist* (thanksgiving) is connected to its source and was in memory of Jesus’ suffering, rather than the Last Supper, although the two separate events (Jesus’ last meal and his death/resurrection) ultimately become connected into the one single ritual.

Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202)

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, is known primarily for helping design orthodoxy within the early Christian movement. His most recognized treatise, *Against Heresies*, combats the Gnostic concept of separating the material (bad) and the spiritual (good). His arguments against this heresy include the material goodness of the Eucharist. Irenaeus writes,

¹⁸ *First Apology* 67, 7.

¹⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 41, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Although the Lord could have served wine and fed the hungry without using any preexistent matter, he did not do so. On the contrary, he took loaves produced by the earth and gave thanks over them; so too did he change water into wine. Thus he fed those who were eating, and quenched the thirst of the wedding guests [at Cana]. He showed us thereby that the same God who created the earth and commanded it to bear fruit and who created the waters and made the springs flow, now, in these last times, gives the human race the blessing of good food and the gift of drink through his Son.²¹

For Irenaeus, the Eucharist points to the sacramental and inseparably dual nature of Christ as body and spirit, material and spiritual. Moreover, it points to the nourishment and salvation of the full person, both body and soul. Later in the discourse, Irenaeus connects that good creation with the cup and bread as Jesus' blood and body:

If the flesh cannot be saved, then neither did the Lord redeem us with his blood, nor is the cup of the eucharist a participation in his blood, nor the bread we break a participation in his body. For blood comes only from veins and flesh...which the Word of God assumed so as to become man and truly redeem us.... The cup which comes from his creation he declared to be his blood that mingles with ours, and the bread which comes from his creation he asserted is his body which gives growth to our bodies.²²

The metaphorical association between Christ's body and blood and the Eucharistic bread and wine is a valuable case to counter Gnostic tendencies within churches today, tendencies which prioritize an interior, atomistic salvation rather than a soteriology that views the work of Christ as "reconcil[ing] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:20).

²¹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 11, 9.

²² *Adv. Haer.* V, 2, 2.

Origen of Alexandria (c. 184-253)

One of the most influential theologians of the early Christian era was Origen, a scholar originally from Alexandria. Origen's understanding of the Eucharist is twofold, as he writes about its relationships to the Church, and to the word of God. First, he offers, "we give thanks to the Creator of the universe and eat the loaves that are presented with thanksgiving and prayer over the gifts, so that by the prayer they become a certain holy body which sanctifies those who partake of it with a pure intention."²³ As noted here, the bread as Christ's body cannot be separated from the Body of Christ who receive it. A biographer of Origen observes that, "the very realism of the 'Body of Christ' forbids isolating one aspect of the reality of this body, namely, the eucharistic bread, from the other aspect, which is the holy people that celebrate the eucharist."²⁴ As Origen reflects on Paul's call for the Corinthians to examine themselves, it is not simply one of self-examination, but to question what it means to be in communion with others. Indeed, "communion with the Body of Christ is communion not only with the eucharistic bread but with Christ's Church as well. The authenticity of the eucharistic assembly and of each of its members is no less important than the reality of the eucharistic bread."²⁵ Both the bread of the ritual and the participants of the ritual are understood as vital and valuable components for communion with Christ.

²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII, 33.

²⁴ Patrick Jacquemont, "Origen," in *The Eucharist of the Early Christians*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Liturgical Press, 1990), 185.

²⁵ Ibid., 186. cf. Origen, *Homiliae in Ps.* 37, 2, 6.

Origen also equates both the eucharistic bread and cup *and* scripture with the body of Christ: “What else can the body or the blood of God the Logos be but the word which nourishes and the word which gives joy to the heart?”²⁶ For Origen, both the Eucharist and scripture promise the gift of divine nourishment: “It is only in the kingdom of God that we shall eat the true food and drink the true drink, thereby obtaining and strengthening the true life in us.”²⁷ Scripture and the Eucharist are “anticipatory symbols” of the ultimate reality of God, the Logos. However, an eschatological understanding of both the Eucharist and scripture should not exclude nourishment in the present.²⁸

Cyprian of Carthage (200-258) and Polycarp (c.69-155)

Cyprian, an African pastor, wrote extensively on the ecclesiological nature of the Eucharist during a time of persecution, writing specifically to church leaders who wrestled with how to restore lapsed believers. Cyprian believed that the elements of the Eucharist themselves unite us in Christ and to one another. The churches in Carthage were offering only water without wine in the eucharistic cup, possibly to avoid persecution: “by using wine for the morning sacrifice one might smell of Christ’s blood.”²⁹ Cyprian’s argument against this practice is poignant:

²⁶ Origen, *Mat. ser.* 85.

²⁷ *Mat. ser.* 86.

²⁸ cf. *Mat. ser.* 86 and *Homiliae in Numeros* 23.6.

²⁹ Cyprian, *Letter 63*, 16.1. Water was traditionally mixed with wine for the ritual, representing the blood and water that flowed from Jesus’ side on the cross (John 19:34); this practice continues in the Catholic Church today. See Raymond Johanny, “Cyprian of Carthage,” in *The Eucharist of the Early Christians*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Liturgical Press, 1990), 159.

When we consecrate the cup of the Lord we cannot offer water alone, any more than we can offer wine alone. If we offer wine alone, the blood of Christ is present but without us; if the water is alone, then the people are there alone, without Christ. But when the one is mingled with the other and the two fuse to become one, then the spiritual, heavenly mystery is accomplished.³⁰

Continuing his case, Cyprian sets forth, likewise, the ingredients for the eucharistic bread:

The cup of the Lord, then, cannot contain water alone or wine alone but only a mixture of the two, just as the body of the Lord cannot be flour alone or water alone but only a mixture of the two that is required for making bread. Here we also find the unity of the Christian people represented: Just as many grains are brought together, ground, and mixed so as to form a single loaf, so in Christ, the heavenly bread, there is... only one body, and with it our multiplicity is united and fused.³¹

For Cyprian, unity was not a “fruit of the Eucharist,” but a way to deepen and express the connection of the Church that was already present.³² In fact, this unity conveyed in the Eucharist was a central theme throughout Cyprian’s writing, most notably expressed in the phrase he coined, “it is not possible to have God as our Father if we do not have the Church as our Mother” and “it is not possible to approach the Eucharist if we are not united with the Church.”³³

The church, as the Body of Christ, inseparable from the eucharistic “body of Christ,” is united, as the Triune God is one. In *De oration dominica*, Cyprian “speaks of the people as united by the unity which exists in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This

³⁰ Cyprian, *Letter 63*, 13.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 5.

³³ Cyprian, *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, 6-7.

unity of the people, however, has the eucharist for its context.”³⁴ For instance, when praying through the Lord’s Prayer, “give us today our daily bread,” Cyprian writes, “we say ‘our bread’ because Christ is the bread of those who, like us, are united to his body.”³⁵

Another theme for Cyprian was one of sacrifice: the church celebrated the Eucharist as a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice, his death and resurrection. He says, “The reason why Christ offered his sacrifice toward the end of the day was to signify by the very hour itself that the world’s day was declining and had reached its evening.”³⁶ This was the primary reason it was observed in the morning (in memory of Christ’s resurrection) rather than the evening (observing the Last Supper).

Like others before him, Cyprian’s life ended in martyrdom. During this age of persecution, Cyprian recognized that believers—like Christ— were a sacrifice; by sharing in the Eucharist, Christians learn to become sacrifices. Believers in prison, according to Cyprian, have been

placed on the threshing-floor of the Lord, you see the chaff burned with unquenchable fire; you yourselves, as grains of wheat purified and precious harvest, already tried and found faithful, count the lodging of the prison as a granary....The harvest is pressed...and the grape destined to fill the cups is trodden in the wine presses; you, rich clusters from the vineyard of the Lord and bunches with fruit already ripe, trodden by the persecution of worldly pressure, feel our wine press in the tormenting prison; you pour out blood in place of wine; brave for enduring suffering, you willingly drink the chalice of martyrdom.³⁷

³⁴ Johanny, “Cyprian”, 169; cf. *De oration dominica*, 23.

³⁵ Cyprian, *Epistle 57*, 3.

³⁶ Cyprian, *Letter 63*, 16, 2; cf. *Letter 63*, 17,1.

³⁷ Cyprian *Epist.* 37, 2.

For Cyprian, martyrdom itself is a “form of eucharist,” a means of “complete union with Christ.”³⁸ Also, the Eucharist is a form of practice, of participating in the passion of Christ.

The metaphor of the martyr as eucharistic elements is repeated in the deaths of other early believers, too; most notably, Polycarp (c. 69-155), disciple of John and bishop of Smyrna, as indicated in the epigraph of this chapter. In his old age, Polycarp was burned at the stake because of his faith. While Polycarp’s death by fire was “like a loaf baked in the oven,” many early followers of Jesus were killed in ways other than fire.³⁹ Martyrdom, by whatever method, reflects the “paradox of *kenosis*, a commitment to life, even when there might be death involved.”⁴⁰ Both martyrdom and the Eucharist imitate the passion of Christ: Martyrdom to the full extent of offering oneself as a sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, and the Eucharist indirectly as a ritual that reflects the actual offering of Christ. In the case of Polycarp, when he was placed on the burning logs, he offered a Eucharist-like prayer of thanksgiving for his martyrdom. Polycarp himself recognized his own death as “a rich and acceptable sacrifice,” in imitation of Christ.⁴¹

For early believers, it was not merely the sacrificial death of a believer that was the expression of martyrdom, but rather the whole life. In Mazza’s words, Cyprian’s life and writings suggest “evidence of a profound harmony between worship and life,

³⁸ Johanny, “Cyprian,” 175.

³⁹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.2. See Mazza, 135. Perpetua and Felicity, for instance, were killed in the coliseum at Carthage.

⁴⁰ Méndez-Montoya, 146.

⁴¹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.2.

between spirituality and liturgy, between eucharistic rite and ethical commitment.”⁴² Both Cyprian and Polycarp (and the many martyrs of the early Christian era) reflect the reality that practicing the Eucharist is an active participation in the passion of Christ.

Deaconesses and Macrina (c. 330-379)

In the vein of the “profound harmony between worship and life,” I turn briefly to the role of women in the Eucharist during the early Christian era.⁴³ This section explores both a function of deaconesses and one specific woman, Macrina the Younger.

While the office of deaconess has existed from the beginning of the church, the roles assigned to the office varied. Within early monastic communities, deaconesses often served beside the presider during the Eucharist.⁴⁴ Besides training female candidates for baptism, deaconesses also regularly prepared women to receive the Eucharist.⁴⁵ One deaconess from the early sixth century was Mary of Aksaray, Cappadocia. Her tombstone reads that she “raised children, practiced hospitality, washed the feet of the saints and distributed her bread to those in need.”⁴⁶ Distributing daily bread can connect Mary’s act

⁴² Mazza, 137.

⁴³ It is challenging to find works written by women in the early Christian era; when something has been written by a woman of that era, the chance that it is about the Eucharist is highly unlikely. However, writings alone do not tell the complete story of women’s interaction with and response to the emerging Eucharistic ritual. Rather than merely quarrying for a narrow stream of writing, I glean here from the customs of women, to infer how theology knits together with practice.

⁴⁴ Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 106.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁶ Ibid. cf. Philip M. Beagon, “The Cappadocian Fathers, Women and Ecclesiastical Politics,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 49, no. 2 (1995): 170.

of common hospitality with the model of Christ, who multiplied loaves for a hungry hillside crowd.

Likewise, Macrina regularly engaged with the physical elements of the Eucharist. Macrina, sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, two of the Cappadocian Fathers, was born shortly after the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE). Macrina, a nun, converted her family estate to a monastery, with women on one side of a river and men on the other. She is credited with influencing both of her brothers' theology and understanding of monasticism. Remarkably, Macrina, as head of her monastic community, insisted on baking the community's daily bread, as well as bread for the Eucharist.⁴⁷ Bread, eaten in either manner, requires someone to prepare it, and the leader of the community chose that task for herself. I imagine that perhaps she, like myself, found the discipline of baking bread to be one of grateful service, a chore that provides intimacy with Christ, who is both the bread and giver of bread. The chore of baking bread offers the opportunity to pray for her sisters and brothers who will receive both the Eucharistic bread and the common daily bread. And perhaps for her it was a reminder that both the holy bread and the ordinary bread emerged from the same hillside, same kitchen, and same fingers.

Conclusion

Throughout this brief survey of ante-Nicene Christians' theology and practice of the Lord's Supper, several consistent themes appear. First, the ritual regularly practiced by Christians, initiated by Jesus at the Last Supper, is not solely in remembrance of that meal, *per se*, but includes the broader suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus'

⁴⁷ Swan, 130.

sacrifice. The commemoration in the Lord's Supper is an active "stepping into the story" participation: Jesus' sacrifice is imitated in both the ritual *and* in the lives of participants. Second, partaking of the Lord's Supper is an intersecting of the past (*anamnesis*), the present, and the future. By participating in the Eucharist, believers actively remember the passion of Christ and bear witness to the eschatological messianic banquet of the Kingdom of God. Third, the women who make the Eucharistic bread are reminders of both the physicality of the ritual—it grounds participants away from a solely spiritualized faith—as well as the intersection between the ordinariness and holiness of bread and life. Finally, and most significantly for this dissertation, the unity of the Body of Christ in union with Christ himself is enacted and made visible in sharing this meal together. The breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup, the sharing together of this ritual, in some way both bears witness and helps imagine the reality of union with one another in Christ. Unity with one another in Christ, while hoped for, is not meant to be uniformity; that is, a consistent "white bread" type of unity. Rather, in Christ, those who share together in the ritual ideally reflect the diverse nature of body parts as the Body of Christ; or even a varied "multi-grain bread" type of unity.

A substantial contradiction exists between today's common practice of a highly individualized presentation of the Lord's Supper and the social and theological understandings and practices of both the New Testament passages explored in the previous chapter, and the early churches. By maintaining an individual-centered communion, recognition of the way God works among a community of people is limited. The church community is more than merely a collection of individuals, but is rather

united in unity with God. Participation in the Lord's Supper is an active participation that draws believers into joining their lives into Jesus' sacrifice.

In the following chapter the focus will be on a historical survey of the Lord's Supper within the Independent Christian Churches. My hope is that, by providing theological and historical foundations for the Lord's Supper, imagination for the practice of the ritual can be enriched, connection to one another can deepen, and witness among the world can broaden.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORICAL PRACTICES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT (INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES)

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Church, participation in the ritual commonly known as the Lord's Supper has been nearly universal.¹ Yet varied practices of this ritual also frequently divide church from church. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the historical congregational practices and leadership interpretations of the Lord's Supper within one particular stream of the Church: the Restoration Movement, with special focus on the central stream of that movement, the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. Within the Christian Churches, early leaders and a few reformers sought to prioritize the Lord's Supper within the worship service (and for one reformer, provide robust theological and ecclesiological foundations), but for the most part, both theory and practice never moved beyond unsystematic prescriptivism.

The Restoration Movement developed in early nineteenth century American revivalism. It is also known as the Stone-Campbell Movement after its two leading

¹ An exception to this is the Salvation Army. The Quakers practice a form of the Lord's Supper without using physical elements.

founders, Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell² were disturbed by the fracturing of the universal Church and sought “Christian unity” through returning to a place of common ground, primarily the New Testament church.³ Interestingly, the movement emerged partially from issues related to the practice of the Lord’s Supper. In 1809, Thomas Campbell, a minister in the Seceder Presbyterian Church in rural western Pennsylvania, disagreed with the practice of closed communion. Upon celebrating the ritual with other Christians, he was removed from his pulpit. Likewise, in 1804, Barton Stone, a Presbyterian minister in the Lexington area of Kentucky, held a massive camp meeting, the well-known Cane Ridge Revival. The number of participants was so large that Stone was unable to be heard, and he called for all Lexington ministers, including Methodist and Baptist leaders, to come assist him. In an act of fellowship, together they served the Lord’s Supper to all believers, which angered Stone’s presbytery, leading to his dismissal. It was “out of these two instances—inviting other Christians to the Lord’s Supper in an equality of fellowship and cooperating with all Christians in evangelization—the Disciples of Christ had their origin.”⁴ Both Stone and the two Campbells gathered like-minded believers around them

² Around the same time Alexander Campbell that left the Presbyterians, his father, Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), was grappling with similar concerns. Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Pittsburgh: Brown & Sample, 1809) identifies with both Alexander Campbell’s and Stone’s plea for unity and is traditionally the marker for the founding of the Campbell portion of the Movement. cf J.J. Haley, *Makers and Molders of the Reformation Movement: A Study of Leading Men among the Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1914), 21-22.

³ “The Disciples are primarily committed to Christian unity in order to the redemption of the whole world to Jesus Christ. The unity of Christendom is as fundamental as the death of Jesus on the Cross and His resurrection from the tomb.” Peter Ainslie and H. C. Armstrong, *A Book of Christian Worship for Voluntary Use among Disciples of Christ and Other Christians* (Baltimore: Seminary House, 1923), 8.

⁴ Ainslie and Armstrong, *A Book of Christian Worship*, 5-6.

to form loose affiliations of “Christians” or “Disciples,” rejecting denominational structures or creeds. In 1832, the two growing movements made the decision to merge their expanding number of churches into a single non-denominational movement. Although ideally a “unity movement,” the Restoration Movement remains acephalous, composed of independent congregations, each espousing “persistent individualism and spirit of independence.”⁵ Thus, communion practices vary among congregations, although this study seeks to describe ones most commonly practiced.

Early Leaders

Alexander Campbell

By far the more prolific writer of the two primary founding leaders of the movement, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), hoped that the centrality of the Lord’s Supper in worship services could help unify the divided Church.⁶ He greatly valued the ritual, calling it “the richest banquet ever enjoyed on earth.”⁷ Yet he wrestled with whether or not only baptized (immersed) believers could participate in receiving the Lord’s Supper. When Campbell was asked, “When the table of the Lord is spread in your church, do you... permit these to partake of it who have not been immersed, or who belong to churches that do not immerse?” Campbell responded:

We give no permission to any to partake with us of the Lord’s Supper whom the Master of the feast has not invited. And he has not invited any for whom he has

⁵ Blowers and Lambert, 491.

⁶ Richardson, “The Lord’s Supper as a Sacrament,” 42.

⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Letter from the Senior Editor,” *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (April 1858), 215.

not provided a wedding garment. Or to speak without a figure, he welcomes none to his table who have not obtained the answer of a good conscience.⁸

However, at other times Campbell also appeared to welcome an open Table, inviting anyone “satisfied of his [sic] own baptism” to partake:

We do not suppose all unimmersed persons to be absolute aliens from the family of God—nor are they absolutely excluded from any participation with us in prayer or in the Lord’s Supper; on the contrary, if any of them take upon himself [sic] the responsibility, being satisfied in himself of his own baptism, to participate with us at a table which is not ours, but the Lord’s we have no power to forbid him, and would not withhold from him the symbolic loaf and cup.⁹

This suggests that, although he frequently wrote publicly on the issue of who could participate at the Lord’s Table, he continued to personally wrestle with both conclusions.¹⁰

Campbell was more reflective when it came to who could *preside* at the Table.

Both he and his spiritual descendants held strongly to the concept of the “priesthood of believers” (1 Pet. 2:5):

May not, then, *holy* and *royal* priests thank God for the Lord’s table [sic], its loaf, and cup of wine? May they not, without a *human* priest to consecrate the way for them, approach the Lord’s table, and handle the loaf and cup?.... I trust it is apparent that the royal priesthood may approach the Lord’s table *without fear*, inasmuch as they are consecrated to officiate by a blood, as far superior to that which consecrated the fleshly priesthood, as the Lord’s table, covered with the sacred emblems of the sacrifice of the Lord himself, is superior to the table which held only the twelve loaves of the presence; and as they are, to say the least,

⁸ Alexander Campbell, “Queries,” *Millennial Harbinger* 7 no 8 (August 1857): 475.

⁹ Alexander Campbell, “The Christian Magazine,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 no 3 (March 1845), 139. Cf. Alexander Campbell, “The Lunenburg Letter,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1 no 9 (September 1837), 411.

¹⁰ Blowers and Lambert, “The Lord’s Supper,” 492.

called by as holy and divine an election, and are as *chosen a race* of priests, as were those sprung from the loins of Levi.¹¹

He argued that laypeople, not those ordained to the ministry, could, and should, preside at the Table, as all those who are in Christ have access to Christ.

While he suggested that “much depends upon the manner of celebrating the supper,”¹² most of Campbell’s written reflections on the Lord’s Supper revolved around *how often* a congregation should celebrate the meal rather than how or why it was practiced. Reacting to the common Protestant practice of celebrating the ritual less frequently (monthly or quarterly), Campbell found ample argument in the New Testament writings to advocate for weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper on “the Lord’s Day” (Sunday).¹³ He was concerned that churches not observing the ritual weekly were contributing to poor spiritual health.¹⁴ Citing 1 Corinthians 10:17, Campbell believed it was important that the elements used in the meal should include an unbroken loaf of bread rather than broken crackers or wafers or pre-torn loaves.¹⁵

¹¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: in Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation* (Cincinnati, OH: Central Book Concern, 1839), 306-307. Emphasis in original.

¹² Alexander Campbell, “The Breaking of the Loaf,” *Millennial Harbinger Extra* 2 (December 1830): 86.

¹³ James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement*. (Cincinnati: Standard, 1962), 51. cf. Alexander Campbell, “Weekly Communion,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6 no 6 (June 1857): 317.

¹⁴ Campbell, “Letter from the Senior Editor,” 217. Campbell wrote, “The loss of appetite is, in most cases, an unfavorable symptom [of bad health.] The loss of a spiritual appetite for the rich provisions of the Lord’s Table, is always a symptom of a spiritual decline or consumption.”

¹⁵ Alexander Campbell, “Query,” *Millennial Harbinger* 5 no 2 (February 1834): 96. His reasons, however, would differ somewhat from early church theologians. While he believed Paul affirmed the unity of the church in a single loaf, he also suggested that cutting a loaf (or pre-made individual pieces) would not represent the breaking of Jesus’ (physical) body and would misrepresent Jesus’ sacrifice.

Alexander Campbell's theology was highly individualistic, yet he also recognized the community that is created from those who—in Christ—participate together in the Lord's Supper:

To every disciple [the Lord] says, for you my body was wounded; for you my life was taken.... Each disciple, in handing the symbols to his [sic] fellow-disciple, says, in effect, 'You my brother [sic], once an alien, are now a citizen of heaven; once a stranger, are now brought home to the family of God. You have owned my Lord as your Lord, my people as your people. Under Jesus the Messiah we are one.'¹⁶

In this statement, Campbell has nurtured an important connection between the concepts of healthy individualism and the communal nature of the Lord's Supper. This community is a reflection of the Trinitarian relationship of the Godhead, the church being the "mystical body of the Lord Jesus Christ," immortal, with Christ as the head and the Holy Spirit the heart.¹⁷ As both early and contemporary theologians recognized, Campbell saw also that perfect "communion" required at least three entities, "I, thou, and he [sic]."¹⁸ As I explore and recommend ways for Christian Churches to reimagine the Lord's Supper as a place of belonging and hospitality, this relationship between individuals and community reflected in the Trinity, as articulated by a founder of the movement, provides a strong foundation.

¹⁶ Campbell, "The Breaking of the Loaf," 68.

¹⁷ Campbell, "Letter from the Senior Editor," 216.

¹⁸ Ibid. "As the life is in the head and heart, and through these flowing through every member of the body, there is a communion as well as a union amongst all the members of the true church of the true Christ... There is no society without a... plurality of personalities. Perfect communion, in its fullest conception, requires at least the three personalities, *I, thou, and he*." See especially the writings of Ignatius and Irenaeus who recognized that the community created in the Eucharist flowed out of the Trinitarian community of God. cf. the Eucharist's Trinitarian eschatological nature as well, in John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1997), 21.

Barton W. Stone

Barton W. Stone (1772-1844), like Campbell, also affirmed weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, but not to the detriment of unity.¹⁹ He was also much more willing to participate in the Lord's Supper with un-immersed believers,²⁰ than was Campbell. Stone believed that, if he could participate with other believers—both those immersed as adults or sprinkled as infants—in every other part of worship, then there was no scriptural reason why he should not share in communion with “unimmersed” Christians. In his words, “We neither invite nor exclude from our communion, any orderly Christian of any name. The table is spread; we do not sit as inquisitors on the consciences and hearts of God's people; and invite this person, and debar that,”²¹ although Stone affirmed the primacy of immersion over sprinkling in baptism.²² Although Stone was willing to share communion with believers who had been sprinkled, he did limit participation at the Table to those who were Christians: “None but Christians who are united in the one body, are permitted to participate of the one loaf. They are joint partakers of the blood and body of Christ, and they alone; for they alone can keep the feast with unleavened sincerity and

¹⁹ Barton W. Stone, “Query-- By Elder John Scott of Indiana,” *Christian Messenger* 4 (September 1830): 228–229. cf Barton W. Stone, “Remarks,” *Christian Messenger* 5 (June 1831): 1835.

²⁰ “Unimmersed believers” here refers to those who identified as “Christian” yet had been sprinkled as infants. Sprinkling, especially of infants, was a practice the Movement's leaders strongly reacted against, suggesting it was not biblical.

²¹ Barton W. Stone, “Sectarian Objections Answered- No. 2,” *Christian Messenger* 7 (September 1833): 260. cf. Barton W. Stone, “Union,” *Christian Messenger* 5 (August 1831): 18, where Stone contrasts his portion of the group's willingness to “fellowship and commune with unimmersed persons” with Campbell's group's unwillingness. This article was penned before the two groups merged in 1832.

²² Barton W. Stone, “The Lord's Supper,” *Christian Messenger* 8 (June 1834): 177.

truth.”²³ Regarding qualifications to preside at the Table, like Campbell, Stone also referenced 1 Peter’s “priesthood of all believers,” but understood it to differentiate between the ordained leaders and the “church” (laypeople). For Stone, therefore, only the ordained could preside.²⁴

Finally, Stone, like Campbell, believed the New Testament prescribed a single unleavened loaf be used, as one loaf represents “the one body of Christ suffering and dying.”²⁵ It was to be unleavened because that was the kind of bread used by Christ at the Last Supper. Unlike many of the Christian writers of the early centuries, Stone, in referencing the King James Version’s “mistranslation” of 1 Cor. 10:16-17,²⁶ adamantly rejects the concept that Christians themselves are the bread of which they partake in the ritual. Stone writes, “The translation would lead us to this conclusion, that Christians were the one bread, and that they partook of themselves; than which nothing can be farther from the truth. The body of Christ, crucified on Calvary, is represented by the one bread or loaf, and Christians united in one body are joint partakers of it.”²⁷ Stone seems unable to imagine that the loaf of bread sitting on a church’s communion table might hold

²³ Stone, “The Lord’s Supper,” 177.

²⁴ “If then all are kings, who are the subjects? If all are priests, and teachers, who are the taught? But the church has the right to set apart men [sic] to baptize.... We do not find one instance of an unordained person ever baptizing any, in the New Testament. Do the churches wish to take this authority from the ministry, and assume it to themselves.” Barton W. Stone, “Scriptural Manner of Ordaining,” *Christian Messenger* 9 (March 1835): 51.

²⁵ Stone, “The Lord’s Supper,” 176. cf. Milton Douglas Partin, “An Analysis of the Views of Barton Warren Stone and Alexander Campbell Regarding the Lord’s Supper” (M. Div., Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, TN, 1988), 79.

²⁶ No mention is made of which translation Stone is referencing, but it matches the KJV. “The cup of blessing, which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread.”

²⁷ Stone, “The Lord’s Supper,” 176-177.

multiple meanings and truths; that it can be a representation of both the physical human body of Jesus *and* the Body of Christ, the Church.

It might be helpful here to recognize a few similarities and differences between the two founding leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement. First, a reminder that Campbell was a much more prolific writer than Stone, and articulated his theology more thoroughly. Both Stone and Campbell argued for weekly practice of the ritual, contra to their Presbyterian origins. Stone, however, while recognizing the positive practice of weekly communion, did not see a scriptural command to do so. For Stone, unity within congregations was more important than bondage to the ritual. Another difference between the two men was in whom they believed could participate in the Lord's Supper. At times, both Campbell and Stone were open to unimmersed believers sharing in the Table, although Campbell seemed to struggle more with it, and publically stated so occasionally. Both agreed however, that the Lord's Supper was meant only for believers. A third difference was disagreement in who could preside at the table. Campbell argued for the right of all church members to participate in all aspects of a church service.²⁸ Stone, however, argued for only ordained members (including elders and deacons) presiding, because "an ordained ministry reflected the ancient order, which [Stone] sought to restore."²⁹

Their differences were not significant enough to prevent the two leaders' groups from merging in 1832. Both leaders expressed value for unity of believers based on New Testament scriptures. Both Campbell and Stone suggested that a single loaf and a single

²⁸ I did not note any gender limits in Campbell's assertion of communion presiding being open to all church members, although in practice, my assumption is that presiding was limited to men.

²⁹ Partin, 93.

cup of wine were the most scripturally authentic elements to use in the Lord's Supper. Campbell however, also believed that the actual practices of breaking bread and pouring wine were important representations of Christ's sacrifice.

In researching these two men's thoughts on the Lord's Supper, I realized that neither one had compiled a treatise or collection of articles on the *meaning* of the ritual. While both Stone and Campbell thought very highly of the Lord's Supper, they were much more concerned with correcting how churches practiced the ritual rather than the meaning behind it,³⁰ and most of the corrections were focused on transitioning to weekly adherence, rather than more occasional observance. My assumption is that they felt that churches hadn't departed from the New Testament purposes of communion as much as they had from the practice.

Influences in Britain

In Britain, members of the early eighteenth-century Glasite breakaway movement of Presbyterianism (known as Glasites in Scotland and Sandemanians in England and New England) were concerned with the primacy of preaching in the Presbyterian tradition of which they had been members. They elected to return the Lord's Supper and "reading the Sacred Word" to their "primitive position[s] as the centre of the Church's corporate worship."³¹ In the late 1700s, many of them also rejected infant baptism, including a leader, Archibald McLean. He then created a new group of churches, the Scotch Baptist. Many of these British churches later found common ground with the

³⁰ cf. Partin, 96.

³¹ William Robinson, *What Churches of Christ Stand for. The Origin, Growth, and Message of a Nineteenth Century Religious Movement*. (Birmingham: Berean Press, 1946), 83.

American stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement in the 1840s and adopted the name “Christian Churches.”³²

The Glasites understood that the Lord’s Supper was the sign of the new covenant God made with the church. Because of the nature of the union of the church into the sacrifice of Christ, all members of a church need to participate in the ritual together, in order that the body of Christ not be divided. In other words, they arrived at the “conclusion that the Lord’s Supper could not be observed by an individual person or be administered to an individual person” and still be considered the Lord’s Supper.³³

Movement Maturity and Social Developments

As the young, vibrant Movement spread across North America, new generations of leaders stepped up to lead churches and expand on the founders’ perspectives. One of the developments influencing the practice of the Lord’s Supper was the transition from elder-led congregations to paid pastor-led churches, as described by Keith Watkins:

Early in the 20th century, it became commonplace for most Disciples congregations to have a settled, full-time pastor....The elders did their part with communion early in the assembly and the preachers did their part, which consisted primarily of preaching, when everything else was finished. The result was the Lord’s supper [sic] became a devotional time at the beginning of the service and the sermon became the climax of the worship assembly.³⁴

³² See David M. Thompson, “Churches of Christ in Great Britain and Ireland,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement : Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ/Churches of Christ*, ed. Douglas A. Foster (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 369.

³³ Lynn A. McMillin, “The Centrality of the Lord’s Supper for 18th and 19th Century Scottish Restorationists,” in William R. Baker, ed., *Evangelicalism & The Stone-Campbell Movement*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: ACU Press, 2006), 157

³⁴ Keith Watkins, *Shifting Left/Shifting Right the Stone-Campbell Eucharistic Tradition since 1940* (Oberlin, OH: American Society of Church History, 1994), 1-2.

This transition was symbolic of a shift of focus in the worship service from communion to the sermon, from lay leadership to professional authority. The transition also eventually led to the common practice of the pastor both preaching and celebrating the Lord's Supper. William Robinson (1886-1963), a leading British theologian in the Restoration Movement and professor at Butler Seminary (now Christian Theological Seminary), was frustrated by this trend:

It goes without saying that the sermon should be delivered by someone other than the Celebrant. At odd places, more recently, I have noticed the introduction of the practice of the same man preaching and celebrating. Apart from the fact that this is contrary to all our usage, it destroys corporeity, and is the following of a bad practice in some other Churches at a time when the minds most sensitive to worship in those Churches are anxious to be rid of it.³⁵

Another trend was the emergence of numerous Communion guides, meditations, and manuals.³⁶ Because the Movement is congregation-led, it appears as if nearly every pastor, elder, and scholar compiled meditations, created guides, and published manuals to offer direction and insight to others on the practice and priority of the Lord's Supper, though I found very little written on the actual preparation of the elements.³⁷ These handbooks and meditation anthologies, which crested between the Civil War and 1920s,

³⁵ William Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper* (Birmingham, England: Berean, 1947), 27. Watkins suggests this transition occurred in by the 1930s, primarily due to pastors' "desire that the administration of communion be strengthened." Watkins, *Shifting Left/Shifting Right*, 3.

³⁶ Among many, these include: J. H. Garrison, *Half-Hour Studies at the Cross* (St Louis: Christian Publishing, 1895); G. L. Brokaw, *The Lord's Supper* (Des Moines: Christian Union, 1903); J. A. Lord, *On the Lord's Day: A Manual for the Regular Observance of the New Testament Ordinances for the Help of Scattered Brethren* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1904); John L. Brandt, ed., *The Lord's Supper* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1913); Benjamin Lyon Smith, *A Manual of Forms for Ministers: For Special Occasions, and for the Work and Worship of the Church* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1919); and Byrdine Akers Abbott, *At the Master's Table: A Book for Those Who Participate in the Rite of the Eternal Atonement*, (St. Louis: Bethany, 1925).

³⁷ See Watkins, *Shifting Left/Shifting Right*, 3-4.

are “wholly unsystematic” and generally give imperative descriptions.³⁸ Some manuals dealt with “practical” considerations, such as the importance of removing one’s gloves before receiving communion as a “mark of reverence,” and ensuring a committee was established to prepare the weekly meal and care for the “Communion silver and supplies.”³⁹ N.J. Aylsworth suggested one reason for the increase in guides. He lamented that, if the value of the Lord’s Supper is not fully understood, church members became bored with the regular repetition of it.⁴⁰ Aylsworth wrote his study to convince Christians of the significance of the ritual, but the need to do so “may point to a general trend in this period. It is possible that the Lord’s Supper had come to be an empty ritual for many churches, and, therefore, communion guides were published to enrich its observance.”⁴¹ This would support Bass’ argument (see Chapter 1) on the loss of “threads of memory” that understood not only the “*how* of faith” but also the “*what* and *why*.”⁴²

Finally, a shift occurred in the elements themselves. Whereas most congregations into the late nineteenth century primarily used leavened bread loaves and a common cup of wine, by the early twentieth century, the majority of congregations had switched to unleavened wafers and individual cups of grape juice. This was a Protestant-wide trend, not simply one confined to the Restoration Movement. The shift from wine to grape juice

³⁸ Bryon C. Lambert, *The Restoration of the Lord’s Supper and the Sacramental Principle: With Special Reference to the Thought of William Robinson* (Los Angeles: Westwood Christian Foundation, 1992), 7-8.

³⁹ Ainslie and Armstrong, *A Book of Christian Worship*, 32, 72.

⁴⁰ N.J. Aylsworth, *Frequency of the Lord’s Supper: Considered with Reference to Its Nature and Uses, or a Study of the Law of Repetition in Its Relation to Public Worship* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1899), 68, 64ff.

⁴¹ K. C. Richardson, “The Lord’s Supper as a Sacrament,” 76.

⁴² Bass, 141-142. Emphasis in original.

was championed by the Temperance Movement, whereas the loss of the common cup occurred due to supposed health risks and the spread of tuberculosis.⁴³ D.L. Brokaw's 1903 manual wrestled with the validity of printed advertisements for "individual communication cups." He contended, "Let not the alarmist or the careless class prevail here. Some bacteriological enthusiasts exaggerate the danger from disease-transmission through drinking vessels.... Christians who love one another will not allow a difference...on the number of cups to be used at a communion service to destroy harmony."⁴⁴ In researching, I found no mention of the purpose behind the shift from a single loaf to individual pieces of unleavened bread, although I suggest the decision might be based on efficiency.

Renewal

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a few leaders in the Restoration Movement sought to provide deeper reflection in the preparation and practice of the Lord's Supper. Both Robert Richardson (1806-1876),⁴⁵ Alexander Campbell's physician and later an editor for the *Millennial Harbinger*, and Robert Milligan (1814-1875), a professor at Kentucky University (later Lexington Theological Seminary) sought

⁴³ Blowers and Lambert, "The Lord's Supper", 491. cf Jennifer Woodruff Tait, "New Wine, New Wineskins," *Christian History*, accessed October 19, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-85/new-wine-new-wineskins.html>. Mrs R.T. Brown, "Communion Wine," in John L. Brandt, ed., *The Lord's Supper* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1913), 468-469, would be a good example of the Temperance influence to resist the "cup of intoxication." See also Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 30, where Robinson suggests this transition from wine to grape juice occurred on "doubtful hygienic grounds."

⁴⁴ Brokaw, 146.

⁴⁵ Robert Richardson, *Communings in the Sanctuary* (Lexington: Transylvania Print & Publishing, 1872), 58-59. cf Richardson, "The Lord's Supper as a Sacrament," 62.

to revitalize this “empty ritual.”⁴⁶ Richardson did so by returning the common elements to a mystical, sacramental position in the worship service, and Milligan urged reflective preparation to receive spiritual nourishment.⁴⁷ According to Lambert, Milligan argued “for the need to prepare for taking communion through fasting, prayer, modest attire at services, and the avoidance of all unseemly worldly activities on the Lord's Day.”⁴⁸ This was due to Milligan’s understanding that Campbell had rejected the melancholic Presbyterian “communion seasons” in favor of celebration and feasting. Lambert argues that Milligan encouraged believers to prepare for communion in order to “truly be led to discern the body of the Lord, dine spiritually on his flesh and blood, and receive a foretaste of the marriage Supper of the Lamb.”⁴⁹

One of the most prolific and thoughtful voices on the renewal of the Lord’s Supper in the Restoration Movement came from William Robinson. He suggested that the Lord’s Supper is “the most definitive act of Christian worship.... In it the whole Gospel is contained and set forth. Besides this, it is the only act of Christian corporate worship, apart from Baptism, for which we have our Lord’s direct command.”⁵⁰

Robinson operated from the perspective of the Lord’s Supper as “realized eschatology;”⁵¹ that is, it is in the *action* of the presider, servers, and participants that the “whole drama

⁴⁶ R. Milligan, *An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption: As It Is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures*, Rev. ed. (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1885) 441-442. cf Lambert, *The Restoration of the Lord's Supper*, 6.

⁴⁷ Blowers and Lambert, “The Lord’s Supper,” 493.

⁴⁸ Lambert, *The Restoration of the Lord's Supper*, 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid. cf. Milligan, *Scheme of Redemption*, 441-442.

⁵⁰ Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 7.

⁵¹ Watkins, *Shifting Left/Shifting Right*, 10.

of God's redemptive work" is made a reality in the present time and place.⁵² Robinson believed God's time—God eternal, above and outside of time— and earthly time meet together in the action of the church in the Lord's Supper. Lambert explains Robinson's eschatology of Luke 22:19, "Do this in remembrance of me":

Just as Jesus could give His Body and Blood to the disciples *before* they had been offered on Calvary, "so in the same way He can actually give the same Body and Blood *after* they have been offered." Jesus' relation as Son of God to the time process is not chronological but eschatological.... "The eschatological understanding is that when the sacrament is celebrated by the Church, the crucified Lord becomes our contemporary." Jesus is not re-crucified at every moment in history when the Lord's Supper is celebrated... rather, the crucifixion... is always in effect for those who lay claim on it in faith.... In Abraham, Moses, and David the power was working in the anticipatory mode.... It can do so because the redemptive benefits of Christ's sacrifice are bound to time in the same manner in which God is, i.e., omni-temporally. If Christ can be "present" to the Israel of the Exodus and be eaten in the manna and drunk at the rock, then surely He can be eaten and drunk today when we recall Him in the Eucharist. The transformation of the time principle works both backward and forward.⁵³

This is a core point to understanding Robinson's theology and the practical outcomes practiced in the Lord's Supper. For Robinson, participation in the Lord's Supper brought together "saints on earth and the saints in heaven."⁵⁴ It was meant to be a *corporate* act,⁵⁵ an *ethical* act of unity,⁵⁶ and because of the divine presence of the Lord in the *action* of

⁵² Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 20; cf. 23.

⁵³ Lambert, 13-14, quoting William Robinson, "The Meaning of Anamnēsis," *Shane Quarterly* 14 (January 1953): 20-24. Emphasis in original quote.

⁵⁴ Lambert, 1. See especially William Robinson, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church* (St Louis: Bethany, 1948), 92.

⁵⁵ Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 34-35.

⁵⁶ Lambert, 15.

the ritual, a place where “we meet Christ” and “salvation begins on earth.”⁵⁷ If the “whole drama of God’s redemptive work” takes place in the Eucharist ritual, then even the preparation of elements, method of distribution, and choice of participants and presiders are all significant.

Robinson believed that the ritual of the Lord’s Supper was, like God, omni-temporal, spanning across and outside of time. One may conclude that his concept can be viewed as a liminal experience for the community.⁵⁸ When crossing the threshold of serving and receiving the elements (the actions themselves), participants in some way become part of the activity around the table of the Last Supper, as well as the global, historical, and future tables of fellow believers. Rites of passage transform participants from one state of being into another. The ritual action of the Eucharist re-identifies participants from individuals who have recognized they have some kind of relationship with Jesus into becoming members of the Body of Christ, the people of God. After discussing his understanding of 1 Cor. 10:17, Robinson adds, “It is as individuals that we accept Christ and become members of the church, but immediately we are more than individuals; we are members of his body and, because of that, members of one another. *We are not solitary individuals. There is a togetherness which we ignore at our peril.*”⁵⁹ Participants move from being atomistic individuals into belonging to something, and Someone, greater than themselves when they gather at the Lord’s Table.

⁵⁷ Blowers and Lambert, “The Lord’s Supper,” 494.

⁵⁸ The Eucharist as a liminal experience is not a concept unique to Robinson. See especially Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 32. cf. Carl F Starkloff, “Church as Structure and Communitas: Victor Turner and Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 58, no. 4 (December 1997): 662.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Doctrine*, 66. Emphasis added.

Like the writers in early centuries of Christianity (see Chapter 3), Robinson identifies the eschatological nature of the Eucharist. As the Bride of Christ in John's Revelation and referencing Paul's writing (2 Cor 11:2), Robinson suggests the Eucharist as the appetizer or foretaste of the "Lamb's Bridal Feast."⁶⁰ The feeding miracles (John 6, Mark 6), in a eucharistic sense, are also eschatological.⁶¹ This concept integrates into Robinson's understanding of the omni-temporal nature of the ritual.

Robinson recognized that one of the practical results of the sacramental nature of the Lord's Supper is a strong connection with the choice of elements used for the ritual. He believed that, because "Christ's gift of his body and blood is structurally tied to reality in the eschatological sense,"⁶² a whole loaf of bread, broken in the ritual, and a "flagon" of wine poured out, were essential.⁶³ In fact, Robinson makes a strong case for the whole loaf and single cup as *symbols in action*:

Where the rite has been mutilated by the introduction of the modern so-called hygienic practices of cutting up the Bread and having "individual cups," the action becomes almost impossible. Certainly, the symbolism, which is all-important, is impaired in the same way that the symbolism of Baptism is impaired by the substitution of affusion for immersion. Everything here depends on *action*, and action should be made *significant*.⁶⁴

The elements themselves, for Robinson, are meant to be embodiments of the entire ritual.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 73; cf. 209.

⁶¹ Ibid., 89.

⁶² Blowers and Lambert, "The Lord's Supper", 494.

⁶³ Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 30.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

Practices

The Lord's Supper was, at the Restoration Movement's founding, an essential part of the weekly worship service. For many of the early leaders, it was meant to be the climax of congregational worship. According to James DeForest Murch's history of the Restoration Movement, "The Disciples from their beginnings have followed the apostolic practice and made the Communion the center of worship."⁶⁵ Yet congregations struggled to maintain the priority of the Lord's Supper, both in terms of where it fell in the service and where the communion table was physically located in the worship space.

Ainslie and Armstrong addressed this in their *Book of Christian Worship*: "The Communion Table should occupy the most exalted place in the church. The position in which it is given greatest prominence and in which it is the best view of all the People is on the pulpit platform."⁶⁶ Huron's *Minister's Manual* (1984) suggests that the focus of the ritual should be on Christ and not on the particulars of how it is observed. Contrary to Huron however, how the ritual is observed determines how participants "focus on Christ." Reminding the reader of the independence of each congregation, Huron encourages, "Let each congregation thoughtfully arrange for that procedure that will be most helpful to those who gather at this place of remembrance. The Communion table should be placed in full view of the congregation and the Communion trays, cups, and linens kept immaculate. Have the emblems prepared each Lord's Day, using unleavened

⁶⁵ Murch, *Christians Only*, 371.

⁶⁶ Ainslie and Armstrong, 28. Note there is no discussion on the purpose of its placement.

bread and unfermented grape juice.”⁶⁷ Robinson challenges worshippers to remember, “Disciples have always placed great stress on the Lord’s Supper as the supreme act of Christian *worship*. With then the whole service in which the Holy Communion is received is an act of thanksgiving (eucharist)—the place where the earthly and the heavenly planes meet in sacramental action.”⁶⁸

One theme echoed throughout the pages of the manuals, guides and meditations is the unity of the Body of Christ through the communion ritual. Many emphasize the use of one loaf to represent both the one Body (church) as well as the broken body of Christ and the unity with each other and Christ through the bread. Harold Fey poetically summarized unity based on the words of Jesus from the Last Supper:

In the upper room Jesus was talking. One of the words he used was 'you.' He used it in the collective sense. Jesus addressed the disciples as a group. The bread, he said, was a symbol of unity. Like grains of wheat gathered from scattered places, ground into flour, kneaded into dough and baked as bread, they had merged their identities and become one. Jesus, in surrendering his body to death, henceforth would live in them. The breaking of bread was therefore a compact between himself *and the Christian community*. The disciples in partaking of this bread were affirming their unity with him *and with each other in the church*. For the relationship which [was] obtained between Jesus and his disciples would henceforth hold between him and his church.⁶⁹

Even Alexander Campbell himself, when asked, “Ought the loaf used in the Supper to be presented on the table whole and unbroken?” answered,

⁶⁷ Rod. Huron, *Christian Minister’s Manual* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1984), 67. Again, other than “helpfulness,” there is no discussion on the purpose of this practice or choice of elements used.

⁶⁸ William Robinson, *The Ministry and Sacraments, the View of the Disciples of Christ or Churches of Christ* (Birmingham, England: Berean Press, 1937), 12.

⁶⁹ Harold E. Fey, *The Lord’s Supper: Seven Meanings* (New York: Harper, 1948), 61. cf William Robinson, *A Companion to the Communion Service: A Devotional Manual* (Birmingham: Berean Press, 1963), 24. Emphasis added. Note that Fey, with his statement, “Like grains of wheat gathered from scattered places, ground into flour kneaded into dough and baked as bread” seems to suggest a reference to either the *Didache* or Cyprian, though no such mention is made.

So I am taught by Paul, and so I would infer from the fitness and propriety of things which appear in every branch of the Christian economy. Paul argues from the unity of the loaf to the unity of the church, or affirms the unity of the church from the unity of the loaf, I Cor X.17. "Because there is one loaf, we, the many, are one body; for we all participate of that one loaf." If a loaf is put on the table, cut or broken, as is the custom in most of the religious sects, the primary idea in the supper is not represented by the partakers. There is no representation of the breaking of the body of Jesus.⁷⁰

Likewise, Robinson frequently connected the symbolism of the elements with the unity of the Body; unity with each other and Christ. Reflecting on the same passage in 1 Corinthians, he writes,

By the intimacy of all sharing the one loaf and the one cup there is visibly depicted the community life of the Church, a community life which is to leaven that of the world. It is a community in which if one suffer, all suffer with that one; in which all have 'the same care for one another'; in which 'if one member is honoured, all members rejoice with that one.'⁷¹

And again,

We have communion with each other through our communion with Him. Here the symbolic action is significant. We all eat of the *one* Bread and drink of the *one* Cup. Where wafers are substituted for the *one* Bread, or the Bread cut up beforehand, and where individual cups are substituted for the *one* Cup, the symbolism is impaired and practically destroyed. To tamper with a rite of this kind, so delicate in its symbolism, is dangerous indeed....The deep mystery of the Christian Faith is that we should be ourselves and yet one with our Lord, just as the Father and the Son are two persons and yet One; and that we should be ourselves and yet one with each other in the Body of Christ. The Communion which we have with each other as members of Christ's Body, the Church, reaches beyond the borders of death and of the local Church. It is "the communion of saints." It is not only the Church on earth which is at worship, but the Church in heaven.⁷²

⁷⁰ Campbell, "Query," 96.

⁷¹ William Robinson, *The Sacraments and Life* (Birmingham: Christian Action Fellowship (Churches of Christ) 1949), 11. cf. Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 34-35.

⁷² Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord's Supper*, 34-35. Emphasis in original.

Fewer writers of manuals were concerned with a single cup than with a single loaf. While Robinson believed a common cup maintained the symbolism of unity, Huron assumes more recently that congregations will use trays of individual cups.⁷³ This transition, as noted earlier, most likely occurred due to hygienic and social considerations, and to efficiency as congregations grew in size, rather than thoughtful theology. Ainslie and Armstrong, writing much earlier, suggest a balance between individual cups and a common cup: “In order to preserve the ancient symbolism of the Communion cup the flagon may be retained and placed on the Table between the trays containing the individual cups.”⁷⁴ Ainslie and Armstrong ignore that it is not solely through the action of the presider (breaking and pouring), but the actions of the participants (tearing, giving, and receiving) that embody the active symbolism of the ritual.

Cookbooks: Practical responses

A common tradition among all churches, not simply those in the Restoration Movement, is compilations of common congregational recipes, usually gathered by women, often as church fundraisers. For the purpose of this paper, I referenced over thirty Christian Church cookbooks from 1900-2009, most from the 1920s (10) and 1980s (6).⁷⁵ The goal was to survey recipes as part of the social culture of the church, seeking to

⁷³ Huron, 67-68.

⁷⁴ Ainslie and Armstrong, 28.

⁷⁵ See Cookbooks as a separate section in the Bibliography.

identify recipes for homemade communion bread.⁷⁶ A presence of these recipes within a cookbook could indicate a translation of theory into practice, a recognition that the type of elements used in the ritual were thoughtfully considered by those preparing them. Only one cookbook contained a user-submitted “Lord’s Supper Bread,”⁷⁷ which came from a congregation that continues to make its own communion bread to this day.⁷⁸ One unexpected gem was hidden in John Brandt’s book of communion devotions. Embedded among dozens of communion meditations was a single entry by a woman, Mrs R.W. Drew, who insisted that communion bread must be unleavened, then concluded with her recipe proportions.⁷⁹ In spite of these two instances, it appears that the symbolism of these elements do not favor Robinson’s theology of the Lord’s Supper or Campbell’s reading of the New Testament, but rather decisions on how to practice the ritual based on efficiency and convenience.

Conclusion

Early founders of the Restoration Movement were concerned with how often to observe the Lord’s Supper and who could participate. They wrestled with a balance

⁷⁶ Wine or grape juice was not found in any cookbooks referenced. However, Brokaw’s manual has a buried description of church-made alcohol-free grape juice: “Our churches appoint committees to prepare the fruit of the vine for the communion. The grapes are gathered. The juice of the grape, fresh pressed and boiled, is canned at boiling heat and then sealed as carefully as we seal our fruits for preservation. This will keep, free from alcohol, for months and even years. Fifty-two cans... are filled when the grapes are ripe, and thus a supply is obtained for a full year with little expense. It is opened on the Lord’s day... and is in its purity a fit emblem of the life-giving blood of the Lamb of God.” Brokaw, 152.

⁷⁷ Katherine Hendrix, “Lord’s Supper Bread,” in *Serving Up Love from Hopwood Memorial Christian Church* (Milligan College, TN: n.p., 1988), 182.

⁷⁸ Rosemarie Shields, e-mail message to author, December 7, 2016. Interestingly, this congregation has also chosen to move fully to serving gluten- and lactose-free communion bread in order to include all participants in receiving from a common loaf.

⁷⁹ Mrs. R.W. Drew, “The Communion Bread,” in Brandt, 41-42.

between their interpretations of New Testament passages and current realities of how other churches around them practiced the ritual. They struggled to maintain both faithfulness to their own understanding of scripture and, at the same time, their goal for Christians to be unified.

As the Movement matured, a few leaders sought to develop the theology of the Lord's Supper more thoroughly. They were reacting against apparent trivialization of the ritual. Their response was the creation of communion manuals and meditation compilations, each seeking to recover meaning for the ceremony. One reality is the lack of deep theological writings on the Lord's Supper in the Restoration Movement. With the exception of William Robinson's work, most of what I encountered was either sentimentalism found in the communion meditation compilations, or practical guides. I found the worship service guides lacking robust content as well. Very little was included on how to prepare the elements and what elements to use. There was also little to no theological reflection on *why* the authors suggest a particular structure or choice of elements. The exception to that lack of reflection is simply references to scripture on Jesus' Last Supper (including, especially, Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 10). Most authors appear to conclude that a prescriptivist, "Jesus said to do it so we do it" is sufficient contemplation.

In practice, churches at the turn of the twentieth century transitioned away from using single loaves and common cups and began using pre-cut prepared pieces of bread and individual cups of "unfermented grape juice." This transition is evident in both communion manuals written by men and church cookbooks created by women. I note the near-complete absence of communion bread recipes in the church cookbooks, showing a

lack of connection between the *life* of the church and the *worship* of the church. The Lord's Supper can serve as a place and foretaste of belonging and hospitality; unfortunately, the lack of connection is significant in recognizing a disembodied Body, which separates its ordinariness from its holiness. After completing an exploration of scripture and historical snapshots of both the early Christian era and the Stone-Campbell movement, Chapter 5 will develop the role of meals and Communion in offering hospitality to others.

CHAPTER 5

HOSPITALITY IN THE PRACTICES OF THE EUCHARIST AND EATING

TOGETHER

Introduction

As I write this chapter on Christian hospitality around tables, I find myself in a disconcerting season. To put it in context, this past week, October 21-27, 2018, America has seen a white supremacist attempt a massacre in a black church, resorting instead to shooting two African Americans in a grocery store. A would-be homegrown terrorist sent pipe bombs through the mail to over a dozen opponents of the current political administration. An anti-Semite opened fire in a synagogue, killing eleven people. And, as a caravan of migrants from Central America move toward the border of this country to seek asylum, the federal administration has sent the military to guard the borders; more armed forces than the number of approaching migrants. This is a season where extreme hardening of borders and identities has led to a deteriorating environment for the marginalized and voiceless.

Therefore, it is all the more important for Christians to consider the role hospitality has within the church. The thread hospitality weaves between “us” and “them” allows those “outside” to come into a place of belonging. This chapter begins with an exploration of the concept of hospitality in general; what does hospitality mean from a Christian context and who is involved in this relationship? Next, I build a brief survey on select Old and New Testament scriptures regarding hospitality, specifically in the context

of meals. I then reflect on the role of the Communion Table as a place of God's hospitality; and finally, ponder the role of the kitchen table or shared meals, as opportunities for hospitality. The conclusion of this chapter arrives at a place where the concept of *permeable belonging* within the practice of the Lord's Supper can be introduced in order to move into the applications of the final chapter.

Defining Hospitality

Hospitality expressed among many Christians today appears to mean something quite different than what God desires. Christian Church pastor, Sean Palmer, critiques hospitality often practiced as “coffee pots and nametags”¹ in churches, fancy centerpieces in homes, or simply “hosting” others.² Christine Pohl, in her foundational text on hospitality, highlights this dominant and diminished perspective:

Today when we think of hospitality, we don't think first of welcoming strangers. We picture having family and friends over for a pleasant meal. Or we think of the “hospitality industry,” of hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards. Perhaps large churches come to mind, with their “hospitality committees” that coordinate the coffee hour, greet visitors, or help with the parking. In any case, today most understandings of hospitality have a minimal moral component—hospitality is a nice extra if we have the time or the resources, but we rarely view it as a spiritual obligation or as a dynamic expression of vibrant Christianity.³

The practice of hospitality needs to be reimagined. Hospitality, when done well, reinforces relationships with those whom “we already have established bonds and

¹ Amy Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 7.

² Sean Palmer, “Open Table” *Christian Standard* (June 21, 2015).

³ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

significant common ground,”⁴ and can lead to reconciliation, as a type of “sacrament of forgiveness.”⁵ But even more than eating well together, true hospitality challenges Christians to “intentionally break patterns... [of] usually eat[ing] with people who are similar to themselves. When strangers and hosts are from different backgrounds, the intimacy of a shared meal can forge relationships, which cross significant social boundaries.”⁶

Philoxenia is the primary Greek word in the New Testament translated in English as “hospitality” (see Rom. 12:13 and Heb. 13:2). More than simply a combination of *phileo* (“love or affection for people who are connected by kinship”) and *xenos* (“stranger”), this term has the potential to ground an understanding of the reciprocal nature of hospitality, especially the paradoxically inverted hospitality of God toward humans.⁷ On a deeper level, *xenos*, like its Latin counterpart *hospes*, “carries the same double meaning” of referring to *either* the host *or* the guest, maintaining the fluidity and richness of the language.⁸ On a larger scale then, *philoxenia* suggests more than a love of strangers, but “a delight in the whole guest-host relationship, in the mysterious reversals and gains for all parties which may take place.”⁹

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 48.

⁶ Pohl, 73.

⁷ Pohl, 31. cf. Walter, 185.

⁸ Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 32, fn 3.

⁹ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 8.

Rather than being mono-directional—*from* the host *to* the guest/stranger, New Testament scholar John Koenig prefers to describe hospitality as “partnership with strangers;” that is, “the establishment of committed relationship between guests and hosts in which unexpected levels of mutual welcoming occur, whether or not the participants are already known to one another. In a sense everyone involved is or can become a stranger.”¹⁰ Koenig also likens this hospitality relationship to various biblical covenantal relationships. Unlike most covenants, the hospitality relationship “always tends toward a greater inclusiveness,” continually broadening the circle of those who participate in the shared practice.¹¹ The inclusive nature of hospitality points to the nature of God’s abundance, to which I will return later in this chapter.

How, then, might hospitality be defined for Jesus’ followers? In its simplest form, it might begin with: “Hospitality is the act or process whereby the identity of the stranger is transformed into that of guest.”¹² That, however, is reductionistic, ignoring both the motivation and the determination behind the potential relationship. In a more comprehensive vein, Arthur Sutherland, a Catholic theologian, suggests another definition from the perspective of the host: “In the light of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and return, Christian hospitality is the intentional, responsible, and caring act of welcoming or visiting, in either public or private places, those who are strangers,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Koenig, 8. Exclusive covenants include God’s covenant with the Israelites at Sinai, distinguishing them from non-Israelites/Gentiles (Ex. 20, Deut. 5). Even more narrow is the covenant with the Levites (Jer. 33.21) and specifically, Aaron’s descendants within the Levites (Num. 25.13). Another example of an exclusive covenant is the one God made with David (2 Sam. 7).

¹² Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 3.

enemies, or distressed, without regard for reciprocation.”¹³ Parker Palmer, on the other hand, approaches a definition of hospitality from the posture of the one receiving it, the guest/stranger:

[Real hospitality] means being received openly, warmly, freely, without the need to earn your keep or prove yourself. An inhospitable space is one in which we feel invisible—or visible but on trial. A hospitable space is alive with trust and good will, rooted in a sense of our common humanity. When we enter such a space we feel worthy, because the host assumes we are. Here there are no preconceptions about how we “should” or “must” be. Here we are accepted for who and what we are.¹⁴

All of these descriptions push back against two popular misnomers of hospitality: that hospitality is “similar to ‘entertaining,’” and that it is “the domain, if not the obligation of women alone.”¹⁵ I conclude that hospitality is a deliberate receiving of one another as either/both guest and host, in the name of Christ, welcoming (and being welcomed) into a place of unconditional belonging. The emphasis however, remains on hospitality given and received in light of the very nature of God’s hospitality.

From a social Trinitarian perspective, the hospitality of God to humans emanates from God’s very relationship with Godself in the Trinity. According to Wirzba:

Trinitarian theology asserts that all reality is communion—the giving and receiving of gifts—because it has its source and sustenance in the eternal Triune

¹³ Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), xiii.

¹⁴ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 67-68.

¹⁵ Ibid., xiii, xiv. This common perspective of hospitality as a role for women to entertain or prepare a lovely centerpiece is well expressed in such titles as Pat Ennis, Lisa Tatlock, and Dorothy Kelley Patterson, *Practicing Hospitality: The Joy of Serving Others* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). A more robust reflection on a historical sphere of women emerges later in this chapter.

love described by theologians as *perichoresis*, a making room within oneself for another to be.¹⁶

This concept is essential for followers of Jesus to understand hospitality, especially those who join Jesus around the Communion table. God's Triune nature is such that "God is both truth and host in one. In his self-giving in Christ, God offers abundant, costly, and holy hospitality to a humanity hopelessly entangled in practices and habits of sin. God's own distinct and radical hospitality culminates in opening Israel and thus in welcoming Gentiles into God's house."¹⁷ The ultimate welcoming of Gentiles into the people of God took place at the Incarnation and the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In light of God's overflowing nurture and welcoming hospitality of all people into the Kingdom of God, participants at God's Eucharistic table are thus compelled to share with and care for others.

Meal Hospitality in Scripture

A substantial amount of Jesus' time was spent walking with, teaching, and modeling for his disciples what it meant to participate in the Kingdom of God. However, much of Jesus' life also involved spending time and eating with people as diverse as religious and financial leaders (Pharisees and Simon) and tax collectors (Levi and Zaccheaus).¹⁸ In fact, Shannon Jung acutely observes,

¹⁶ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xi-xii. cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18.

¹⁷ Reinhard Hütter, "Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine," in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 214.

¹⁸ See Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 11:37-52; 19:1-10.

Jesus practiced... hospitality, even to his death. No one was excluded from his table fellowship. Jesus himself often depended on the hospitality of others, and even... saw the receiving of hospitality as a gift that matches the giving of hospitality. He acted both as host and guest. Surely his practice of eating with every kind of person—his closest friends, the disciples, Samaritan women, tax collectors, and the disreputable—stands as a witness to the centrality of hospitality to the gospel.¹⁹

This inclusive hospitality that characterized the life of Jesus is one that seems to be absent in many churches today. Thus, I now turn briefly to examine biblical examples that portray how God's people responded to strangers in the context of shared meals. This is not an extensive survey, but meant to highlight God's desire that people be amenable to relationships of hospitality.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah welcomed the three visitors at the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18), served them a meal, and were then informed that they would have a child. In response to this story, the writer of 1 Clement offered, “on account of his faith and hospitality, a son was given [Abraham] in his old age.”²⁰ These three strangers are never named,²¹ but as they share a meal with Abraham and Sarah, they reverse their role as guests and, in a host-like role make resources (information, a promise) available to the barren couple.

¹⁹ Jung, 26.

²⁰ *1 Clem.* 10.7. cf. Amy Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 18.

²¹ Although not named, like Rublev's iconic painting *The Trinity* (or *Hospitality of Abraham*), the three visitors are often considered the first biblical expressions of the Trinity. See, for instance, Christine Chaillot, “Contemplating Rublev's Icon: The Authority of the Trinity and the Community of Women and Men in the Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 60, no. 1–2 (January 2008): 137–144; and Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, 2d, revised ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 18.

Throughout the Old Testament, God regularly promises nourishment to everyone: For instance, the “Lord of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” (Isa. 25:6), and “*everyone* who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isa. 55:1).²² God also regularly reminds God’s people to care for *and love* the marginalized—the widow, orphan, stranger—because they themselves were aliens, slaves in Egypt.²³ It is because God offered them hospitality, welcomed them into a place of belonging to God, giving them an identity as God’s people, that the Israelites themselves are tasked with replicating that process with others who need a place to belong.

In this vein, Boaz offered Ruth, a foreign widow, a place to feast at his table with his servants (Ruth 2:14). Like Abraham and Sarah’s encounter with the visitors, the widow of Zarephath’s interaction with the prophet Elijah inverted the host/guest relationship of hospitality (1 Kings 17:8-16). When she baked the last of her bread for the prophet, Elijah turned the tables and asked God to continually provide food for this non-Israelite widow and her son. Stories abound repeatedly in scripture about God’s people giving and receiving hospitality through shared food.

New Testament

In the New Testament, as noted above, Jesus regularly ate with those considered “unclean,” tax collectors and sinners, earning him the disreputable title of glutton and drunkard (Matt. 11:19). Amy Plantinga Pauw suggests that Jesus’ fellowship meals

²² Italics added.

²³ See, for instance, Exod. 22:21, Lev. 19:33-34, Deut. 10:18-19.

“surrounded by thousands or alone with his disciples, hint of this joyful communion [which] began to heal the pain and brokenness of human life.”²⁴ Jesus’ choice of meal companions disturbed the status quo and is possibly even one of the causes of his death.²⁵

Jesus’ table fellowship with the marginalized represented his recognition of the superabundance of God, linking his “‘excess’ of food and ‘excess’ of grace.”²⁶ Jesus’ table fellowship was more than satisfying his dietary needs and more than a metaphor for his ministry. These meals with outsiders paralleled Jesus’ announcement that the Kingdom of God was at hand, a kingdom of feasting for all (Isa. 25:6); this gave substance to the new reality.²⁷ But Jesus also ate with Pharisees, those considered “insiders” in his context (Luke 7:36-50). His practice of eating with everyone rejected the social system of using table fellowship as a way to network or to gain status (Luke 11:12-14); rather, Jesus chose to welcome others for their own sake.²⁸

On more than one occasion, Jesus reversed the host/guest relationship: As a guest, he played the role of the host. His exchanges with Zaccheus, Simon the Pharisee, and the couple on the road to Emmaus are a few examples of this. His reversal mirrors the central story of the gospel: God coming as guest to dwell among humans (John 1:14). Indeed, “Jesus’ life narrates the presence of God-with-us in scandalously vulnerable

²⁴ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Jesus Christ as Host and Guest,” in *Renewing the Vision: Reformed Faith for the 21st Century*, ed. Cynthia M. Campbell (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000), 13. cf. Jung, 46.

²⁵ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics : Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 81. See Luke 14.1-14 and 15:1- 2.

²⁶ Chester, 14.

²⁷ Chester, 14. cf. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 14.

²⁸ Wirzba, 148.

ways: as a homeless baby; as an adult with no place to lay his head; as a convict, abandoned and scorned by others. He epitomizes the needy stranger, dependent on the hospitality of others.”²⁹ For instance, Jesus asks for and receives hospitality from a Samaritan woman (John 4), a rich tax collector (Luke 19) and many others, including Pharisees and his friends in Bethany. I return to the concept of Jesus as both host and guest later in this chapter.

Much has already been said about Jesus’ Last Supper in Chapter 2 of this dissertation and it will be discussed again later in this chapter, but here I will note that Jesus’ choice of his closest followers, those gathered with him throughout his ministry and at this final feast before his death, also represent “a kind of parable” about the abundant hospitality of God.³⁰ These twelve, representing a “vanguard of... restored Israel,” were not in the least a “natural or homogenous gathering of friends.”³¹ Quite the contrary, they were, in Parker Palmer’s phrase, a “company of strangers;” but it was these twelve whom Jesus chose to represent God’s invitation to the Kingdom.³²

In the book of Acts, early Christians shared abundantly, welcoming others into their membership, expanding the circle of belonging (see Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-34), and discovering that Jesus’ table fellowship expands beyond their imagination (see Acts 10, Peter’s encounter with Cornelius).³³ The Holy Spirit empowered them to reverse the

²⁹ Pauw, 13-14.

³⁰ Koenig, 29.

³¹ Ibid., 29, 31.

³² See Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*.

³³ In Peter’s vision, “By saying that the food associated with Gentiles is clean, God is also instructing Peter to be hospitable to Cornelius and welcome him in. If all foods are permissible, then

host/guest roles appropriately in order to advance the mission of God. Out of the superabundance of God's reign,³⁴ the gratitude of the first church in Jerusalem overflowed into their generosity with one another and their hospitality to those "daily being added to their number" (Acts 2:47). These early followers, willing to share all things with one another, realized they need not live with a spirit of fear, for

God has built a secret abundance into the scheme of things, an abundance that can more than fill our needs when we seek to form partnerships for the kingdom. This thesis has a corollary, namely, that hospitality, as understood in the New Testament writings, presumes a reciprocity between God's abundance and human acts of sacrifice. Both prove fundamental for the establishment of community life with those who are different from (and therefore "unequal" to) ourselves.³⁵

It was the very act of learning to eat together with a disparate collection that allowed these early followers the freedom to risk living prophetically, by feeding, clothing, and welcoming others.³⁶ This risk-taking is essential to note, as it was a "common belief in Jesus as Messiah [that]...brought together around a common table people who for social or religious reasons would never otherwise eat together."³⁷ In Ephesians 2:3-14, Paul reminds the church in Ephesus that though they were Gentiles, strangers and aliens to God's household, Christ broke down the dividing wall of hostility.

hospitality extends to everyone. This is an exceedingly difficult message for Peter to appreciate, suggesting how deeply eating practices are tied to personal and ethnic identity." Wirzba, 171, emphasis in original.

³⁴ See Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a theology of the People of God*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 144-146.

³⁵ Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 130-131.

³⁶ Wirzba, 168. cf. John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 17.

³⁷ Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 240.

Those who were strangers, outsiders, have moved from alienation to belonging in Christ, eating together as one people.³⁸

Throughout scripture, boundaries are regularly broken and hospitality offered at meals; what is presented here is merely a sample of the abundance of feasts and shared meals and welcome from God and God's people. This next section turns to select theological and sociological foundations of commensality, or shared meals.

Commensality: Shared Meals

While a meal is not requisite in the practice of hospitality, scripturally and historically³⁹ and in contemporary communities, meals have been a common component of welcoming the other. This section investigates the value of eating together, exploring how we eat, who is at the table, how guests are selected, and certain other functions of the table.

How we eat matters. Eating food and eating a meal are different. Food can be, and often is, eaten alone.⁴⁰ The increase in family members who eat alone, or churches who do not regularly share meals, points to problematic individualism, “where personal tastes

³⁸ cf. Gal. 2:12 shows the difficulty this transition caused for Jewish believers.

³⁹ See, for instance, Commodianus's instructions (c. 250 CE) to bring food and drink to the sick, not merely good words; and the desert fathers and mothers who, when visited by a stranger, “prepared a table and invited him [sic] with love to partake of whatever they had.” Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 151 and 172, respectively.

⁴⁰ In 2001, Robert Putnam noted “the practice of entertaining friends has not simply moved outside the home, but seems to be vanishing entirely” and only 34 percent of married Americans say their whole family usually eats dinner together. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 2001), 100. Those numbers have improved slightly since 2001: A Gallup poll in 2013 noted that more than half (53 percent) of families eat dinner together six or more nights a week. Gallup, “Most U.S. Families Still Routinely Dine Together at Home,” Gallup.Com, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/166628/families-routinely-dine-together-home.aspx>.

and priorities trump the value of communities.”⁴¹ Meals, on the other hand, become community events which bring people together, whether friends, family, or strangers. Ordinary shared meals require both giving and receiving, ideally with gratitude. In this chapter, “meals” is understood as food eaten with others, also known as commensality.

The Episcopal priest/cook/writer Robert Farrar Capon distinguishes between ordinary (ferial) and festal meals:

Let us *eat*. Festally, first of all, for life without occasions is not worth living. But ferally, too, for life is so much more than occasions, and its grand ordinariness must never go unsavored. But both ways let us eat with a glad good will.... [T]he ferial cuisine must once more be exalted among us. Between the dietmongers and the prepared-food hawkers, we are in danger of losing the greater part of our heritage.⁴²

Capon also celebrates festal abundance as much as common meals:

The old descriptions of heaven as the celestial banquet, the supper of eternal life,... hit close to the truth. Nowhere more than in good and formal company do we catch... the foretaste of what is in store for us....[T]he dinner party is a true proclamation of the abundance of being—a rebuke to the thrifty little idolatries by which we lose sight of the lavish hand that made us. It is precisely because no one needs soup, fish, meat, salad, cheese, and dessert at one meal that we so badly need to sit down to them from time to time. It was *largesse* that made us all; we were not created to fast forever. The unnecessary is the taproot of our being and the last key to the door of delight. Enter here, therefore, as a sovereign remedy for the narrowness of our minds and the stinginess of our souls, the formal dinner for... chosen guests... —the long Session that brings us nearly home.⁴³

We need opportunities to eat both feasts and ordinary meals together with those we know and love, as well as with those we have yet to know.

⁴¹ Rubio, 86.

⁴² Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, Reprint ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 27.

⁴³ Capon, 170-171.

Who is at the table matters, as well. By asking someone to share a meal, friendship is extended, “proclaim[ing] in love” that what is wanted is not simply what a person brings to a relationship, but that person herself.⁴⁴ Alice Julier, a professor of food studies, observes that because “eating together implies selectivity, cooking or sharing a meal with people is one way to mark them as special.”⁴⁵ Continuing with Capon’s preparation of a festal formal meal, his intention is for guests to

sit in real and estimable places marked with the most precious and intimate device we have: our names.... I always take it as a compliment when a good man [sic] tells me where he wants me to sit. He has, you see, been willing to take me on as God takes me—as a risk. He pays me the supreme tribute of putting himself in my power.... [W]hen he sits me down at this table, he declares himself willing to let me into his own life.⁴⁶

Jesus’ model—and other scriptural examples—are reminders that who is invited to sit at a table is important. People generally prefer to eat with those who are similar to them—family, friends, coworkers. But significantly, “inviting a non-family member to eat with the family is the highest expression of friendship.”⁴⁷ Indeed, boundaries are widened and, over time, meals eaten together “cultivate a moral relationship of solidarity” with those around the table.⁴⁸

Meals function as an essential practice in the thread of hospitality in scripture, and in the lives of churches and followers of Jesus. What is it about a necessary act, when

⁴⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁵ Alice P. Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship and Inequality* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 194.

⁴⁶ Capon, 170.

⁴⁷ Tan Chee-Beng, “Commensality and the Organization of Social Relations,” in Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou, and Morten Warmind, eds., *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

practiced collectively, with ordinary objects that makes it so extraordinary? There are five key reasons that explain this phenomenon.

First, meals “slow things down... force [us] to be people oriented instead of task oriented,” allow us *to build relationships*.⁴⁹ Michael Pollan, a food journalist who does not identify as a Christian, explores the ancient Greek ritual of eating from a sacrificed animal: “Eating from the same animal, prepared according to the agreed-upon rules of the group, strengthens the ties binding the group together. Sharing is at the very heart of ritual sacrifice, as indeed it is in most forms of cooking.”⁵⁰ Meals “combined the ordinary with the sacred and challenged conventional relationships with heavenly expectation,” partially because they allow the outsider a place of belonging, but also because “meal-time, when people sit down together, is the clearest time of being with others, rather than doing for others. It is the time when hospitality looks least like social services.”⁵¹

Second, shared meals provide opportunities for participants to experience the *presence and work of God*. Semiotician Leonard Sweet suggests that “At the table, sitting together, facing each other, talking to each other—good food, good conversation, good laughs, good stories—we learn the good news of the God who eats good food with bad people.”⁵² A woman interviewed by Pohl explains that, “Everyone wants to be at supper because if you miss that, you’ve missed everything. It is here that we recognize Jesus in

⁴⁹ Chester, 47. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Michael Pollan, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 97. In a footnote to this quote, Pollan, adds, “Much the same can be said of the Christian Eucharist, in which all communicants symbolically eat from the body and blood of Christ.”

⁵¹ Pohl, 56, 74.

⁵² Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 18-19.

the breaking of the bread.”⁵³ Jesus is present when his people gather for meals, and welcome outsiders, the forgotten and the marginalized to the table. Jim Tune, a pastor in the Restoration movement, imagines it this way:

Though the results cannot be planned, the practice of meeting with others around a table can open us to some powerful, spontaneous spiritual experiences. When God wants to bring people together, he often sends them to a table. Could it be that the table is not just a place of meeting, but also a place of mission? Maybe we need to develop a new “potluck” theology—one that welcomes strangers to us—and introduces us to unfamiliar foods and unfamiliar people. Jesus sits at the head of the table and offers grace to all.⁵⁴

A third function of shared meals is to *convey social status*—who is invited, who is not; what is served, where one sits. By choosing particular guests, meals can alter current reality. Julier observes that welcoming strangers or “others of any sort... into the domestic environs is a highly political and personal act, one that connects to citizenship, rights, individualism, and subjecthood.”⁵⁵ As observed with Jesus and his early believers, the choice of table companions carries social weight and has potential to disrupt the status quo: “This is what Jesus is doing in eating with the marginalized. The marginalized cease to be marginal when they’re included around a meal table. The lonely cease to be lonely. The alien ceases to be an alien. Strangers become friends.”⁵⁶

Fourth, shared meals, whether ritual or ordinary, become important avenues to *resisting the tendency towards dualism*, especially in light of Christ’s incarnation. Jesus’

⁵³ Pohl, 30.

⁵⁴ JimTune, “Tables of Grace,” *Christian Standard* (May 13, 2015).

⁵⁵ Julier, 186.

⁵⁶ Chester, 49.

own ministry included being “a healer and feeder of bodies.”⁵⁷ Jesus physically touched people, ate real food with them (see Col. 1:22) and invited his followers to be healed and reconciled with each other in tangible ways as well.⁵⁸ Wirzba believes that “from an ecological and theological standpoint we can see that flourishing requires the well-being of bodies together.”⁵⁹ When food is eaten with others, it is real food, not metaphorical food. Eating real food together (and especially Eucharistic bread) points to the fact that “it’s prepared bread, not plain wheat, [which] suggests that cultural, social, and technological structures required for its production will also be renewed.”⁶⁰

Finally, shared meals provide a social setting for the invisible work of *creating membership*. Julier notes that producing meals generally has been a gendered form of “kin-keeping”:

Invisible labor includes everything— from the physical work of provisioning, planning, and cooking, but also the emotion work of coordinating family members, fostering interactions over meals, and creating a sense of the family as a group characterized by affection. Whether the shared meal is for a family or non-kin, it depends on creating a balance of uniqueness and connectedness for all participants.⁶¹

Meals and the choice of participants foster identity, belonging, and membership, setting boundaries for who is an insider and who is not.⁶² Sweet suggests that meals also inform

⁵⁷ Wirzba, 175.

⁵⁸ Cf. Chester, 48.

⁵⁹ Wirzba, 175.

⁶⁰ Chester, 115.

⁶¹ Julier, 7.

⁶² Nowhere is this more evident in our current landscape than a recent blasphemy case in Pakistan, where a Christian woman was accused by her Muslim coworkers of contaminating a shared drinking bucket because of her religion. She was clearly not considered a member of the correct circle. “Pakistan Christian Cleared of Blasphemy,” *BBC*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46040515>.

“who we are, where we come from, what we can be, to whom we belong, and to what we are called.”⁶³ Stories are shared around food, they are reminders of the past, and they shape the future. This helps form “tribal identity,” identity as both individual persons, and as a people.⁶⁴ But meals are also places of belonging and welcoming the outsider into that tribal identity. In many contexts, sharing food implies belonging to the same family and table fellowship serves as the beginning of inclusion into a group.

Setting the boundaries of membership is essential in establishing identity and meaning for a community. Membership, belonging in a relationship, is a primary function of shared meals. Julier describes the act of preparing and sharing meals:

The design, presentation, and work of the meal express ideas about the relationships being enacted. In particular, the process centers on how much intimacy and distance can be established within formal and informal modes of sociability. These set boundaries for the enactment of such relationships, but *in the process are also shifting and creating such boundaries*.⁶⁵

Hospitality suggests a shifting of the boundaries for membership. As an invitation of relationship to outsiders, hospitality “should be considered a key place to understand both membership and rights, especially the right to partake of food with a group. This is because hospitality acts as an ideal instance where rights are created for nonmembers of a group.”⁶⁶ This purpose of meals serve as reminders that the choice of guests at the table is powerful, shaping current reality into the possible future that God desires and has demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus.

⁶³ Sweet, 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁵ Julier, 193. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 186.

Praxis and theology must be in dialogue: neither dominates the other. Theologian Amos Yong says they are “dialectically related.”⁶⁷ Jung agrees, suggesting that the “acted meanings” of a community “embody certain beliefs about the world;” they “form and inform community.”⁶⁸ Bishop and martyr Saint Oscar Romero’s communion table in El Salvador evocatively portrays this correlation between belief and practice:

Around the table, a new world was called for, rehearsed, and organized. Through gathering at the altar, the ground of God’s holy, just and communal food was to be spread around the country to transform structures of injustice, unchain the ties of misery, and turn lives and land into a holy, just, and communal ground. There, around bread and wine, the life and death of a people were at stake.... Around bread and wine came an unwavering call issued by God for all to live together in solidarity and love. Through the Bible reading, homilies, prayers, and singing, there was a staunch affirmation that the common good was indeed for all and not just for a few.⁶⁹

In this spirit then, I turn to examine God’s own hospitality at the Lord’s Table. The goal of this next section is to express the overflow of God’s superabundant giving to participants of the Table, who in turn embody that hospitality around common kitchen and potluck tables.

Eucharist as God’s Hospitality: At the Lord’s Table

Hospitality, even good, authentic welcoming of strangers, can occur with or without a relationship with God in Christ. However, followers of Jesus can more fully understand and receive the hospitality of God in the Eucharist: “God’s Trinitarian gesture

⁶⁷ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), xiv.

⁶⁸ Jung, 3.

⁶⁹ Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 1.

of hospitality and kenotic sharing in the Eucharist nourish the...agapeic community that is the church.”⁷⁰ The very practice of the Eucharist reflects the nature of God. It is in that shared table, remembering and anticipating, connecting and being nourished, that participants are most embedded in the reality of the Kingdom of God. This chapter section delves into the importance of Jesus as the host of the Eucharist Table and the relationship implications of engagement with Jesus the host, including the way the physicality of the meal counters Gnostic tendencies. It also recognizes the effects the divine reversal of Jesus as both host *and* guest has on the relationships with others. Finally, I will consider the significant cost the centuries-old shift from meal to ritual has had on inclusive hospitality.

In the midst of this discussion, it is vital to remember, however, that the Eucharistic practice “is not a thing in itself, a self-enclosed ritual that has nothing to do with the world ‘outside’ of the borders of the ritual and the church itself.”⁷¹ Rather, what is done around the Eucharistic table, and who participates, including the host, crosses boundaries that affect daily decisions, structural policies, and paradigms. As Carvalhaes observes, “The Eucharistic table gives us a framework that guides our decision-making as we constantly share in re-creating this world with God,”⁷² which is why I believe the *way* it is practiced is so critical.

⁷⁰ Méndez-Montoya, 109.

⁷¹ Carvalhaes, 3.

⁷² Ibid.

The Divine Host

The Psalmist declares that the Shepherd God “prepare[s] a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Ps. 23:5). During a moment of Jesus’ ministry when his disciples were debating about who was the greatest, Jesus rebuked them with the reminder that the one who is greater serves others. Jesus then promised that those who remained with him will “eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22:30). Throughout scripture, God prepares feasting tables (Isa. 25:6), wedding suppers (Matt. 22:2, Rev. 19:9), and reunion meals (Luke 15:23-24), inviting all kinds of people to the table. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinth church, by calling the event the Lord’s meal (1 Cor. 11:20), he grounds his listeners into the story of Jesus as host, the one who provides the meal, and *is* the meal, and serves it to his guests. In the words of theologian and ethicist Elizabeth Newman,

In the Eucharist, as in worship more broadly understood, the Spirit gathers us and enables us to participate in the communion the Son has with the Father. Thus the Eucharist does not simply motivate Christians to practice hospitality; rather, it is *our participation in God’s hospitality*, as through this celebration [of the Eucharist] we are enabled to become eucharistic, extending God’s offering and gift to the world.⁷³

The ritual meal becomes the opportunity for meal participants to emulate Jesus’ own table practices with others. Just as Jesus chose to eat and drink with “sinners” and the marginalized as well as the rich and powerful, so too his followers are to follow the

⁷³ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 149. Emphasis added.

lead of their host. As the divine host at the Eucharist table, Jesus binds both host and guests together into Jesus' own mission and message.⁷⁴

New Patterns of Relationship

After Jesus fed the multitude on the hillside, his followers struggled to understand what Jesus meant by saying he gave his flesh to eat. Jesus responded, “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:56). As Jesus' followers participate in Eucharistic eating, “new patterns of relationships” emerge as the participants receive the hospitality, mission, and message of their divine host at the table.⁷⁵ Abiding in Jesus challenges a “self-enrichment” mindset and instead sets participants on a path of emulating the one who gives them nourishment. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, reconciliation and rebuilt relationships occur in these new patterns of abiding in Jesus.⁷⁶ Following the model of Jesus, forgiveness is offered around the table and membership is repaired through eating the Eucharist together.⁷⁷

Besides healing relationships within members who sit at the Lord's Table together, the Eucharist imagines and inaugurates the promise of justice: “The breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine promise a new time, now and always, a new earth and a new heaven, where justice will roll down like a river, as we rest assured by the promises of God that our tears will be wiped away and we will all be freely welcomed at

⁷⁴ Rubio, 80; cf. Jipp 58, 60-61.

⁷⁵ Wirzba, 159.

⁷⁶ cf. Richard J. Bruen, “Akipeyos Nachamunet: A Model for Contextualizing the Lord's Supper among the Turkana?” (M. Div., Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, TN, 2002), as an example of the practice of reconciliation through the Eucharist in a particular non-Western context.

⁷⁷ Wirzba, xvii.

the...feast of Christ.”⁷⁸ Concrete ways of transformation of communities and social realities occur when eating at the communion table: “This is no mere theoretical act. It is an economic and political act because it entails that all our relationships be inspired by attention and care. Jesus shows us that the best and most appropriate response to the gifts of God, the way we become worthy of the nurture of another, is for us to turn ourselves into a source of nurture for the world.”⁷⁹ It becomes a conspicuous cycle of life, then, for Jesus to nourish with his body, and for believers in turn to abundantly give that nourishment to the world.

Even the elements themselves, the bread and cup, reveal the social boundaries that are broken in the practice of the Eucharist. In the words of Shane Claiborne, the Eucharist includes “bread, the staple food of the poor, and wine, a luxury of the rich, which are brought together at the table. They both have in them things that are crushed: grain and grapes to become a new substance.”⁸⁰ Like the *Didache*’s recognition of the scattered people of God becoming the one Body of Christ like grain scattered on hills becoming bread,⁸¹ Claiborne observes that economic disparity becomes symbolically leveled in the elements shared together. Considering the physicality of elements and their containers also reflects the intersection of God (the presence and action of Christ), God’s creation (grain and grapes), and human creativity (bread, wine, dishes). Recognizing the “active meanings” of the elements which “form and inform” the worshiping community enables

⁷⁸ Carvalhaes, 2. cf. Yoder, 21.

⁷⁹ Wirzba, 178.

⁸⁰ Shane Claiborne, “Interview with Shane Claiborne: Embracing the Margins,” *Wineskins.Org*, November 17, 2015, <http://wineskins.org/2015/11/17/interview-with-shane-claiborne-embracing-the-margins/>.

⁸¹ *Didache* 9.4.

participants to readily resist the gnostic tendency of reducing faith to an interior spirituality.⁸²

Christ as Guest and Host

As observed earlier in this chapter, throughout Jesus' life and ministry he frequently played the role of both host and guest at meals. Abiding in Christ means that Christ's followers take on the posture that Christ himself took, allowing himself for instance, to be both a guest, when asking the Samaritan woman for water, and a host, offering her Living Water (John 4:7, 10). This circular identity becomes delightfully ironic for those who welcome strangers to their table because

The guest is actually more than just a guest, but is Christ... [and] there is another surprise as well. Christ becomes the host and the host becomes the guest. When we attend to the guest, we are not left unchanged. We become the guest of God, who, acting as host, receives us into God's life.... Only when we recognize the guest as Christ can we, in turn, be received.⁸³

In other words, followers of Jesus are called to both see Christ in their guests (Christ as guest) and *be* Christ for their neighbor (Christ as host).⁸⁴ One way to initiate this posture of reciprocal roles at the Eucharist is to recognize the transition that has occurred over the centuries which divorced the Eucharist ritual from a shared meal.

⁸² Jung, 3.

⁸³ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 51.

⁸⁴ "The supper sends us away to be the body of Christ for our neighbor, to be for our neighbor what we have received in the supper." Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 18.

From Meal to Ritual

In New Testament churches, the followers of Jesus remembered him every time they broke bread together (Acts 2:46). On the night of Jesus' Last Supper, in the context of a ritual Passover meal, Jesus took, blessed, broke bread and said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 24:19). According to Yoder, Jesus' disciples did not understand that instruction to mean "remember me whenever you celebrate the Passover," because the Passover was (and is) an annual event; instead, the disciples' response to Jesus' words was (and is) a more frequent observance.⁸⁵ It appears that Jesus' disciples understood those words to mean, "remember me whenever you have your common meal." While the origins of the Eucharist took place in the ritual celebration of the Passover, thus amplifying the sacrificial meaning of Jesus' words, "the meal Jesus blessed that evening and claimed as his memorial was their *ordinary* partaking together of food for the body."⁸⁶ The majority of the meals Jesus participated in "were inclusive, signifying fellowship in the present and acceptance at a future messianic banquet." In contrast, early churches shaped the Eucharistic ritual around a "perceived need to define the community" based on the virtue and membership of participants.⁸⁷ In the early decades after Pentecost, the full remembrance meal diversified and transformed into the meaningfully symbolic ritual explored in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. In the midst of that transformation however, churches limited who could receive the Eucharist and lost

⁸⁵ This follows the Restoration Movement tradition of observing a weekly Communion.

⁸⁶ Yoder, 15-16. Yoder's is certainly not a solo voice on the limited contribution of the Passover in the Eucharistic ritual, in contrast to the disciples' ordinary (or even "agape" feasts). See also Méndez-Montoya, 151; Koenig, 93-94; Jung, 60; and Witherington, 61.

⁸⁷ Rubio, 84-85.

the connection between the meal of belonging (Eucharist) and meals of hospitality (welcome). Belonging superseded hospitality rather than the two postures enhancing one another.

Perhaps one unintended consequence of this transition from common meal to institutional ritual was the loss of an important role for women in the life of the church. In many cultures past and present, “cooking and serving the food are tasks that are normally the responsibility of the women, they decide not only what they cook but also what exactly [is eaten] and how much everybody eats. Commensality is thus guided by women.”⁸⁸ Most likely women were the cooks and hosts of the common meals shared by early believers. When the early church of the Roman Empire lost the connection between belonging and hospitality, “‘women’s work’ of preparing food and showing hospitality in the household morph[ed] by the fourth century into a ritual with the bare symbols of bread and wine given only by authorized male priests in a public building.”⁸⁹ This is not to say that belonging and hospitality fall solely under the auspices of women’s roles, but that the effects of this separation of meal and ritual extend even to those within congregations who were—and are—marginalized from central serving roles.

Mendez-Montoya writes, “God becomes the cook, the host, and food itself in this eucharistic banquet.”⁹⁰ First and foremost the Eucharistic ritual is participation with Jesus, the host and guest at the table. While the Communion table is a marker of identity,

⁸⁸ Cornelia A. Nell, “Commensality and Sharing in an Andean Community in Bolivia,” in Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou, and Morten Warmind, eds., *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 169.

⁸⁹ Finger, 6.

⁹⁰ Méndez-Montoya, 74. A Protestant perspective can understand all three roles of God symbolically.

naming those who belong together as the people of God, it also serves as a place of creative action to point people of God to others whom they do not recognize as belonging (yet) within that boundary. How can congregations become a place where the stranger is welcome? Parker Palmer suggests it is not “by first seeking closeness and warmth with each other but by letting God stand in its midst as the one who offers hospitality, the one who mediates conflict, the one in whom we find the truth which unites.”⁹¹ In that vein then, this next section transitions to hospitality as communion—or how to be a place of welcome to others—in the name of Christ.

Hospitality as Communion: Around the Potluck Table

Both potluck dinners and communion tables strengthen the identity of a community. Identity and belonging are not sufficient concepts alone for the purpose of these meals, however. Followers of Jesus are called to *expand* the boundaries of those who “belong.” These two tables can serve as signposts “of the new world in the ruins of the old.”⁹² The Eucharist is one such sign, “but so is feeding the hungry. One is not more ‘real presence’ than the other.”⁹³ The final section of this chapter explores how *ordinary shared meals* serve as both signs and reality of the presence of “God with us” through expanding the boundaries of hospitality. This section begins with an exploration of Jesus’ model of table fellowship for his followers, then moves to the concept of iconography; how ordinary shared tables become sacred places. Finally, some challenges of table

⁹¹ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 132.

⁹² Yoder, 27.

⁹³ Ibid.

fellowship will be identified. One goal to which I hope to challenge churches is to elevate the way members engage one another and, especially their neighbors, in the sharing of meals.

Jesus' model

As observed throughout this chapter, how—and with whom— Jesus himself ate meals serves as a standard for his followers. Pohl writes, “In the Eucharist, Jesus’ sacrificial welcome is continually reenacted” while the ordinary daily meal provides the opportunity to “remember and recognize God’s generous and gracious provision, as they enjoy one another’s company and feed one another’s bodies.”⁹⁴ Abiding with Jesus changed “social reality” and ushers in “a new form of life.”⁹⁵ Christ’s kenotic offering of himself grounds his followers and allows shared meals to transform them into people who offer themselves to others as gifts because God offered Godself as a gift to them.

Ordinary made holy

An icon, in the creative words of Madeline L’Engle, is “more than a simile; it is a metaphor, containing within itself something of the indescribable, so that the need for description vanishes. It is not just *like*. *It is*.”⁹⁶ Icons, therefore, carry a powerful message.

⁹⁴ Christine D. Pohl, “A Community’s Practice of Hospitality,” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 135.

⁹⁵ Wirzba, 165.

⁹⁶ Madeleine L’Engle, *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons and Idols in Antarctica and Other Unexpected Places* (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Books, 2003), 16.

Sharing meals beyond a circle of belonging facilitates recognition of the iconography of ordinary kitchen tables; that is,

No table is ever just a table once the table is called the place where Jesus... [is] recognized by us in the breaking of the bread. That is not to say every meal *is* the Eucharist or every table *the* place where Jesus is present in bread and wine, but it is to radically affirm the words of Jesus when he says, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”... As temples of the Holy Spirit, we are being ever-refined into his likeness, which is perhaps most apparent when we recognize the likeness of Jesus in one another as we... break bread.... Our tables point us back to the Table.⁹⁷

It is the ordinary table that becomes holy when meals are infused with hospitality, as the outsider is welcomed to sit at the table. Similarly, eating around the communion table is itself an iconic act, “manifesting God’s heavenly kingdom because it *participates* in what it manifests. By eating at the Lord’s Table, people are given here and now a glimpse of heaven as the sort of *life God desires* for the whole creation.”⁹⁸ When outsiders are welcomed to a meal, they are invited to belong to a community in God’s kingdom and they challenge the community to—and even glimpse—the *shalom* God desires for all creation.

Jesus himself challenged the religious status quo and dared his followers to remove the distinctions between sacred and common, recognizing that all of life and creation is holy and blurring the boundaries between Eucharist and table fellowship. With Jesus’ model in mind, it is then possible to understand that “*every* meal eaten with others has religious and social significance. An ordinary meal eaten with people of different

⁹⁷ Preston Yancey, *Out of the House of Bread: Satisfying Your Hunger for God with the Spiritual Disciplines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 145.

⁹⁸ Wirzba, 153. Italics in original.

social positions is in reality *not* an ordinary meal.”⁹⁹ Christians follow and are filled with a superabundant God. When they trust that reality, they are able to recognize that “every meal we eat is related to the Eucharist, to the eschatological banquet—that promise by which we live that there is enough for everybody.”¹⁰⁰

Womanist theologian, Lynne Westfield, considers how ordinary spaces become sacred when shared with others, specifically in the context of African American “sisters” gathering together. These gatherings are what she terms “concealed gatherings” because African American women come together to cook, eat, and visit without men or white people present.¹⁰¹ Westfield likens these informal events to ritual sacraments because they involve

certain meaningful signs, [and] we cooperate in a shared process. We look backward to past events, we celebrate the present moment of life, we look forward to the future. This process is enabled by commonly accepted language, bodily gestures, and behaviors. Women bring their bodies to [this] sacramental experience.... The storytelling and banter, the laughter, the prayer before the meal, and the shared meal are commonly accepted in the concealed gatherings.¹⁰²

For Westfield and the women she writes about, the space and time in which they gather become sacred through their participation with one another in particular ways. What makes the place and moment in time holy is what occurs there. Westfield writes,

In sharing hospitality with one another, African American women create space where wonder can be revealed from within each other, for each other, by Jesus the Christ... Concealed gatherings create thresholds for the God within African

⁹⁹ Finger, 229. cf. Pohl, *Making Room*, 74-75.

¹⁰⁰ Pohl, “A Community’s Practice of Hospitality,” 135.

¹⁰¹ N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 33.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 85-86.

American women to be revealed. The revealing of God in concealed gatherings is a hallowing of kitchens, an immersion in Holy Communion.¹⁰³

Like others mentioned throughout this dissertation¹⁰⁴ Westfield identifies this gathering, like the Eucharist, as a liminal experience through participants stepping out of everyday routines to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit within one another as they eat and talk together.

The elements of the Eucharist are themselves ordinary food, prepared by ordinary people. This reminder allows participants to recognize that worship through the Eucharistic ritual “embraces a permeability in which the bread we consume at our kitchen table... and the bread that is consecrated and consumed during Holy Communion are related.”¹⁰⁵ The extraordinary “can be invoked from within the ordinary” elements like bread and wine, or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.¹⁰⁶ Material matters like bread and wine, and activities such as eating and drinking are essential to countering Gnostic tendencies; these actions and elements become “vehicles that make transparent the Holy One who gives birth to the Eucharistic life.”¹⁰⁷

Challenges to Hospitality

Hospitality, familial love of the stranger, is *risky*. It is easier and safer to maintain solid boundaries, knowing who belongs—and who does not, and sticking with and

¹⁰³ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰⁴ See Mendez-Montoya, 141; William Robinson, “The Meaning of *Anamnēsis*”, 24; Bynum, 32. cf. Starkloff, 662.

¹⁰⁵ Bieler and Schottroff, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Westfield, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Bieler and Schottroff, 5.

trusting people who are “like us” rather than allow in strangers. Unfortunately for churches, “the irony is that every community which rejects the stranger and anxiously protects ‘its own kind’ gives witness, not to the strength of its identity, but to its deep-rooted insecurity....[A] community which is uncertain about its true name will be unable to accept the challenge which the stranger represents.”¹⁰⁸ When fear drives actions, it limits the witness of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people of God. What are churches afraid of; what is at the root of that insecurity? I suggest that one cause may be the consumerist nature of churches. Perhaps when Christians perceive that strangers might change the composition of their current congregation they are fearfully motivated to seek a different community that better reflects their identity. When each congregation is structured to offer niche church options, anything that makes someone uncomfortable becomes grounds for an attendee relocating to a new church. Offering hospitality with the mindset of disciples like Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-2) is often driven by personal advantage, fear, or selfish ambition, extending welcome only to those from whom benefit or repayment can be expected.¹⁰⁹ A model of scarcity rather than recognition of the superabundance of God drives this mentality.

Another cause driving the insecurity to welcome others is the recognition of what often shapes community formation—“acts of exclusion;” who is “in” (us) and who is “out” (them).¹¹⁰ In order to have a sense of identity and understanding of what it is to belong, a boundary is drawn, separating those inside the circle from those in the

¹⁰⁸ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 130.

¹⁰⁹ Wirzba, 169.

¹¹⁰ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 130.

surrounding environment. A stranger challenges this, “threaten[ing] the foundations of such a community by blurring the boundary; the stranger must either be kept out or made to become like us.”¹¹¹ Neither of those options—marginalizing or uniformity—expresses the hospitality that resonates with true belonging, which is seen in Christ. In the words of theologian Letty Russell, “Hospitality is an expression of unity without uniformity. Through hospitality community is built out of difference, not sameness... Hospitality in community is a sharing in the openness of Christ to all as he welcomed them into God’s kin-dom.”¹¹²

Palmer suggests an alternative that allows for those distinctions, based on identity in Christ:

When a community’s identity is rooted in the truth that we are all members of one another—that our deepest identity is in our commonality in God—then it can embrace the stranger with grace and ease.... We can be receptive to all manner and condition of women and men only by knowing that our common name is in the God who made us all and made us one.¹¹³

Coming full circle, this identity of a people fused together through identification with Christ, is symbolized, hoped-for, and expressed through sharing in the Eucharist table with Christ as the host. The table is the place where fear is replaced with confident generosity in remembrance of the one who generously welcomed all people to his table.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 65.

¹¹³ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 131.

“To remember Jesus is to join in a *re-membering* of a world *dis-membered* by sin,” encourages Wirzba.¹¹⁴ The early believers in Jerusalem met and broke bread daily (Acts 2:42-47); this practice was both an act of worship and a way new believers were added to the church. Following the thesis that what is practiced—and by whom—is what makes an event holy, the question of whether or not these meals were early forms of the Eucharist is moot; participants were remembering Jesus in their breaking bread and welcoming others to their meals.¹¹⁵ For Christian communities today then, both the ritual practice of the Eucharist and the ordinary practice of welcoming others to meals allow for participants—unified into a community of belonging in Jesus’ name—to re-member Jesus, and thus enact the hospitality of God and share in the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the role of both the Eucharist and shared meals in offering God’s hospitality to others. It began with understanding what is meant by “hospitality” in a Christian context. The multi-directional nature of hospitality was explored, with the roles of host and guest often interchanging. This mutual exchange was highlighted in the role Jesus plays in this drama, as well as other biblical scenes of shared meals. After reviewing the value of shared meals, commensality, the hospitality of God at the Communion table was examined. This included recognizing Jesus as the divine host, yet paradoxically alternating between guest and host identities. New patterns of relationship built through receiving hospitality from God at the Eucharist table were discussed, as was

¹¹⁴ Wirzba, 150. Italics in original.

¹¹⁵ See Yong, 136.

the transition from fellowship meal to Eucharistic institutional ritual in the early churches.

Finally, I considered ways common meals around kitchen tables or potluck meals serve as opportunities to welcome strangers into a church community. The sacredness of ordinary meals, when shared in light of God's generosity, can be places of welcome for others, with boundaries blurred between "ordinary meals" and meals at Christ's Eucharistic table. I recognize that hospitality presents challenges: a fear-based mentality that seeks to preserve the identity of a community either prohibits outsiders from joining or requires them to set aside their own uniqueness to assimilate into a community of belonging. This recognition now moves into the final chapter to explore permeable belonging as a solution to the tension between belonging and hospitality, and to offer some concrete ideas for ways congregations can reimagine both the Lord's Supper and shared meals as places for both belonging and hospitality.

CHAPTER 6

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

If love is present
A piece of bread and a sip
Of wine is a feast.
-- Eric Perry¹

Introduction

This final chapter considers the positive implications that a robust and thoughtful practice of Communion can have on the need to belong to something bigger than ourselves. A re-imagined practice of sharing Communion reduces the negative impact of individualism by bringing people together into the Body of Christ. The chapter begins with a review of the problem of fragmented individualism, including its effects on Communion. It then proceeds through a short review of the case I made for a community-oriented practice of Communion in light of scripture, historical traditions, and the way hospitality is practiced. I then review the claim that Communion fosters belonging. This is followed by a brief but essential detour on the concept of permeable belonging, in light of potential tension between hospitality and belonging. The final two sections of this chapter suggest some specific elements churches might consider when re-imagining how they practice Communion and shared meals. I close both this chapter and this dissertation

¹ Eric Perry, email correspondence with the author, December 19, 2018.

by re-imagining how the protagonist from Chapter 1, Jennifer, might experience a worship service that incorporates these proposals.

Review of Problem

Broadly speaking, white evangelical Christians in the United States today, and specifically the Independent Christian Churches, have mirrored the dominant American trait of fragmented individualism. As discussed in Chapter 1, Christians have bought into the concept that each person must exist and respond to God primarily as individuals, rather than as part of a community. The isolating nature of individualism encourages interior spirituality, a form of dualistic neo-Gnosticism; this is in contrast to an embodied, fleshy faith lived out through tangible, material engagement with the world. The individual has become more significant than the Body of Christ.

Many worship services confirm the priority of individuals over the community of worshippers. Rather than churches serving as public witnesses to the good news of the reconciling work of Jesus, they are now organized as options for individuals' consumerist expressions. This inability of churches to identify as a community has led to failure to engage justly and mercifully with systemic injustices and the ability to speak and live prophetically as a people who belong to one another in Christ and welcome others into their midst. While a hopeful response to this breakdown of community might be for the ritual of the Eucharist to provide an alternative to this narrative, unfortunately, the deficient theological understanding and trivializing of the Lord's Supper within the Independent Christian Churches has contributed to a lack of ecclesial identity and authentic openness to others.

Review of Evidence

A survey of scripture recognizes that God often relates to people through meals. God offers hope to and receives hospitality from Abraham and Sarah, envisioning a future of blessing and belonging for all people. God asks for sacrifice and offers freedom to the Israelites, serving the Passover meal as a prologue to their identity as a people, God's people. God abundantly provides manna to the Israelite wanderers, daily nourishing them and building their trust in God's super-abundant nature. Likewise, Jesus feeds the hillside multitude, offering hospitality to the hungry and gathering the fragments of abundance. Throughout his ministry, Jesus modeled abundant table excess—eating with strangers and marginalized, challenging the status quo as both host and guest, and exhibiting vulnerability in sharing meals with both those who denied and betrayed him. After Jesus' resurrection, the Emmaus travelers identified Jesus in his action of breaking bread, and when Jesus roasted and ate fish, his disciples understood that he embodied the material world as well as the spiritual. Throughout scripture, God identifies shared meals as places for belonging, becoming a people, and expanding that identity to welcome others to the shared table.

This understanding gleaned from scripture is reinforced in early writings of Christian leaders. Early Christians understood the new ritual of the Lord's Supper to actively commemorate Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, mirrored most specifically through their own sacrifice and martyrdom. These early writers recognized the intersection of time in the Eucharist; they called participants to actively remember Jesus' life (including his words and actions at the Last Supper) and engage with an eschatological hope for the future in order to impact how to live in the present moment.

Early Christians wrote and understood that the shared meal of the Eucharist was a sign that both bears witness to and creates the reality of the unity of the Body of Christ with God through Christ himself.

While early Christian writers built an ecclesiology around the Eucharist, historic leaders within the Independent Christian Churches understood the Lord's Supper in more of a sentimental and utilitarian fashion. In spite of claims to be a unity movement that welcomes everyone who identifies as a follower of Jesus, most early leaders of the Restoration Movement wrestled with *adiaphora* such as how often to observe the Lord's Supper and whether or not unimmersed believers were welcome at the Lord's Table. An abundance of worship service manuals and guides focused on the order of service and flowery language about obeying Jesus' command ("do this in remembrance of me"). These, coupled with an absence of Communion bread recipes in church cookbooks show evidence of disconnection between the worship of the church and the life of the church, the sacred and common, holy and ordinary.

In the exploration of hospitality from a Christian context, the role of both the Eucharist and shared meals in offering hospitality to others was recognized. The super-abundant hospitality of God, modeled specifically in Jesus' life and ministry, motivates the multi-directional nature of hospitality, blurring boundaries between guests and hosts. These blurred boundaries extend to community identity and openness to strangers, as well as reducing the differentiation between the Eucharistic ritual and ordinary shared meals.

Review of Claim: Communion Facilitates Community

I believe that when a congregation prioritizes and collectively practices Communion, it strengthens their identity, mission, and connection to one another and with the mission of God. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued, with scriptural and historical support, that Communion facilitates belonging. In fact, a thoughtfully crafted “ritual has the capacity to organize otherwise atomized individuals into a cohesive group.”² A collective practice of Communion, prioritized in word and action in a worship service reminds participants that they are a part of something bigger than themselves; they *belong* to God and one another as part of the Body of Christ. In the material, substantive elements of bread and cup as whole food and not pieces, participants receive a sign of reality that they are united together in Christ. In the actions of breaking, pouring, sharing, and eating, participants actively defy an exclusively interior spirituality by embodying the sacrifice and hospitality of Jesus. Most importantly, participants actively assert together that abundance of grace, of hope, of mercy, of forgiveness, of nourishment, of justice, and other bounties overflow from an abundant God. Therefore, participants have no need to fear for themselves, one another, or outsiders. Considerate and collective Communion helps create belonging.

In light of God’s superabundance expressed particularly in Communion, participants are emboldened to follow the mission and witness of Jesus and welcome outsiders to their tables. Communion is a place of hospitality, as well as belonging. Through robust communal Eucharistic practices, Jesus has removed the barrier between

² Stephenson, 102.

ordinary and holy, between sacred and quotidian practices, opening the door for all people to eat at his table. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church (Eph. 2:11-19):

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

Hospitality around God’s tables, whether it be the Communion table or ordinary shared meals, resists a fear-based mentality of those who don’t “belong” in a circle of belonging, particular congregations, and the Body of Christ. Hospitality around God’s tables learns to lean towards trust and welcome, rather than with keeping outsiders at arm’s-length. Trust and openness allow outsiders to bring their own uniqueness and identity to the table and to the community, without expecting everyone to conform. Unity without requiring uniformity fosters rich creativity and variety within a sphere of belonging — beneficial attributes of individualism.

Digression: Permeable Belonging

There is potential dissonance, however, in asserting that a robust communal practice of Communion can foster both belonging and hospitality. True belonging occurs when people know and trust one another, rely on one another, give and receive from one

another. In contrast, hospitality requires an openness to someone not known, who may not be able to be trusted, who may not be reliable, who may only be a “taker” and not a “giver.” Are these two concepts incompatible? Julie Hanlon Rubio asks that question this way:

On the one hand, exclusionary behavior seems to violate something at the core of Christian faith. On the other hand, some boundaries seem necessary in order to sustain community. But how is a [church] to discern when a... potential guest has moved beyond those boundaries in such a way that the very identity of the community would be threatened by welcome?³

Parker Palmer notes the tension between a sense of community belonging and a posture of welcoming outsiders as well. He argues, “If a community is to open itself to the stranger, it must come to terms with its own need to be different, to be set apart. It is a basic impulse in human life, this need to distinguish ourselves from others.”⁴ For both individuals and communities, a healthy self-identity gives birth to integrity, which “avoid[s] being shaped by whatever powers happen to be playing upon us at the time.”⁵ But an extreme centripetal pull into “the need to be different,” a hardening of boundaries for both individuals and churches, becomes a “source of racism and sexism and ethnocentrism.”⁶

It might be argued that belonging and hospitality are fundamentally connected. To belong is to suggest clear identity—to *what*, or to *whom*, do we belong? Boundaries are important for both belonging *and* hospitality:

³ Rubio, 90. I have substituted “church” for Rubio’s use of “family” in this quote, as she argues that families are “domestic churches.” Without assessing that argument, I am confident that the context of her thesis would agree with my substitution.

⁴ Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 130.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Unless we draw a line—a boundary—and say that something lies outside its domain, then we can speak about nothing that lies inside with real meaning... Without boundaries, there will be no system into which anyone could be invited; without hospitality, the system will dry up, will turn in on itself and die.⁷

Both belonging and hospitality need an understood boundary. However, if a church's concern for unity and belonging outweighs welcoming in outsiders, rather than balancing the two postures, rigidity will ultimately diminish the very community they hope to enhance.

Miroslav Volf identifies these necessary distinctions in this way:

The Spirit does not erase bodily inscribed differences, but allows access into the one body of Christ to the people with such differences on the same terms. What the Spirit does erase (or at least loosen) is a stable and socially constructed correlation between differences and social roles.⁸

He follows with this:

Both distance and belonging are essential. Belonging without distance destroys: I affirm my exclusive identity as Croatian and want either to shape everyone in my own image or eliminate them from my world. But distance without belonging isolates: I deny my identity as a Croatian and draw back from my own culture. But more often than not, I become trapped in the snares of counter-dependence.... And so an isolationist "distance without belonging" slips into a destructive "belonging without distance." Distance from a culture must never denigrate into flight from that culture but must be a way of living in a culture.⁹

Volf distinguishes between theoretical belonging to a group and openness to identities apart from that group, rather than the particular sense I am advocating—that is, a particular church being open to receiving particular people into itself. I include these

⁷ Caroline Westerhoff, *Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), xi-xii.

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 48.

⁹ Volf, 50.

extensive comments from Volf to note that a willingness to be open rather than bounded is both common and challenging.

I would like to introduce here the concept of *permeable belonging*, the idea that there is a clear understanding of the community to which members belong, but that entry points are intentionally porous. When considering what it means to belong to the Body of Christ, those who approach the Lord's Table are affirmed in their unity to one another through Christ; the Lordship of Jesus himself is the core to which all belonging is centered. Christ must be the center, the essence of ultimate belonging within a community of believers who call themselves Christians.



Figure 2, Solid Boundary

When it comes to understanding the identity of a community, the periphery, or boundary, is less critical than the core. If Christ is at the heart of identity within a community, the boundaries become less significant; but they do not disappear. Rather than considering



Figure 3, Woven Boundary

those boundaries as solid and rigid, like a metal ball however (Fig. 2), I propose to think of them more like a woven basket, clearly identifiable, but able to be easily penetrated (Fig. 3).

I imagine a solid boundary of belonging to be one of assurance—assurance of who is “inside” and “outside” of that boundary. Those who belong learn to trust one another, know one another well, rely on one another, and ideally, express the love of Christ sacrificially for one another. All of that is possible because members clearly know who belongs and who does not. But like the exoskeleton of an insect, or the cell wall of a plant, solid boundaries leave no space for growth, expansion, or opportunity to change based on the

environment. Ultimately, if an insect does not break its exterior structure and grow a new one, it dies. Likewise, I believe that congregations who excessively value the unity of belonging, who assert that membership is not ambiguous, will have no opportunity to grow or expand, or survive in the long term.

On the other hand, oftentimes when a congregation shifts its primary identity to being “seeker-sensitive” or welcoming outsiders and is focused on drawing in new people, boundaries are completely removed, with no distinction between “guests” and “members.” This posture diminishes the ability to trust one another, know one another well, and love and mutually care for one another. Belonging becomes diffused into what I can only describe as gaseous vapor, with participants fluttering from one appealing mist of a church to another. It becomes challenging—or impossible—to recognize the identity of a community whose central core is Christ. Identification of any type of actual community to which one might belong becomes vague.

These, of course, are hyperbolic extremes, with most expressions of the church somewhere closer to one or the other form. The challenge is for congregations to practice ways of selective permeability, deliberate ambiguity around the borders of membership, but with a firm identity revolving around (and moving towards) the core, which is Jesus. This posture requires that all identity of membership be based around Jesus: Not simply “we gather,” but “we gather *in Jesus’ name*,” not only “let us break bread together,” but “let us break bread together *in Jesus’ name*.” A congregation’s actions of gathering,

belonging, and welcoming must be consistently understood in light of the reality that they bear the name of Jesus in their essence.¹⁰

Scriptural examples of Permeable Belonging

When observing the stories of Jesus in scripture, a model emerges for how to understand permeable belonging in churches. Like Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), Jesus regularly touched and ate with those considered impure in his community; those who did not "belong." Like the Pharisees who called for reform of Judaism, Jesus, too, called his community to alter their standards. However, Jesus' call was substantially superior to the Pharisees' because he "redefined holiness as mercy rather than separation."¹¹

Jesus' participation in meals with others connects his teaching and social concern. His choice of meal companions—from religious and financial leaders, to the marginalized and those labeled "sinners," to close companions and friends—does not "promote an elite model of Christian community," but rather an inclusive and expanding table.¹² This very practice of permeable belonging, what Rubio calls being "mercifully

¹⁰ A comment must be made here to recognize the role of baptism in the process of belonging. While this dissertation is deliberately limited to the Eucharistic ritual and not baptism *per se*, I recognize that baptism is the traditional and essential initiation rite into the Body of Christ (amongst its other functions). Churches rightly understand the relationship between these two rituals. I would argue that a posture of permeable belonging is helpful when understanding even the initiation role of the baptism ritual. A willingness to embrace initiation with ambiguity recognizes the multitude of ways people enter the Body of Christ (see Acts 2:41, 8:35-39, 10:44-48, and 19:1-6 for scriptural examples). It also allows for both the priority of a preferred process (for the Independent Christian Churches, that process is believers' immersion) as well as flexibility based on particular circumstances.

¹¹ Rubio, 83.

¹² Ibid., 85.

inclusive,” is a better identity than solid, exclusionary walls. In fact, merciful inclusion “can be a means of furthering [a church’s] identity rather than compromising it.”¹³

The willingness to be mercifully inclusive, to practice permeable belonging, is rooted in allegiance to the very nature of God in Christ. It is

Precisely because of the ultimate allegiance to God of *all* cultures and to Christ who offers his “body” as a home for all people [that] Christian children of Abraham can “depart” from their culture without having to leave it (in contrast to Abraham himself who had to leave his “country” and “kindred”). Departure is no longer a spatial category; it can take place *within the cultural space one inhabits*.¹⁴

My understanding of permeable belonging is confirmed by Volf’s description of “departure” from one’s culture, and allegiance to God in Christ, as taking place within one’s own cultural space. The very nature and example of Christ, who “departed” from the right hand of God in order to welcome “enemies” of God into God’s Kingdom, allows churches the ability to loosen the boundaries of “us” and embrace “them” into the porous boundary of the Body of Christ.

Churches need not sacrifice welcoming others into their midst in order to maintain an identity of purity; clear, definable and solid boundaries do exactly that. On the other hand, churches need not sacrifice trust, community and belonging in order to open up the floodgates to new faces; unclear, vague or absent boundaries do just that. *Permeable belonging* welcomes others into a space where Christ is at the center and the periphery faces inward towards Christ. Churches can find creative ways to practice permeable belonging in how they eat together and how they practice the Eucharist together.

¹³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴ Volf, 49. Emphasis in original.

The final two sections of this chapter explore some thoughtful ways churches can practice *permeable belonging* in the ritual of the Lord's Supper and in other meals they share together. These sections suggest ideas for re-imagining how churches can practice the Eucharist and shared meals to foster both belonging and hospitality. While I make recommendations for churches to consider, they must also keep in mind the particular context of each congregation, which suggests that expressions of Communion will be somewhat unique; this posture affirms the congregational nature of the Independent Christian Churches. However, I challenge churches to think creatively, and to bravely imagine ways to thoughtfully practice ritual eating of the Lord's Supper that leads to both belonging to one another in Christ, and welcoming others into their midst in Jesus' name.

Re-Imagining Communion Practices

Re-Imagine Purpose

In surveying members of Independent Christian Churches, I discovered that the majority of those surveyed believe that the purpose of Communion is to cultivate an individual's relationship with God in Christ. They do not focus on belonging to a community, the Body of Christ, or to connecting to God *with* others.¹⁵ In other words, members of Independent Christian Churches believe that Communion is primarily

¹⁵ Lines, "Communion Practices Survey." Around 80% of survey participants understood Communion as a time of "introspection on my sins and the forgiveness I receive through the Cross" or "personal time to reflect on my relationship with God." These individual-oriented responses contrast with community-centric responses. Only 42% recognize Communion as "Eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood with Jesus' Body (the Church)." This response tied (42%) with "In breaking the bread and pouring the cup, we participate in God's redemptive work." Finally, the lowest response (28.6%) acknowledged Communion as a "Ritual to connect to God with others."

between themselves and God, a one-on-one relationship, rather than an opportunity to respond to God—and receive from God—as part of a larger body of believers. I recommend that churches look for ways to re-imagine and communicate the purposes of the Eucharistic ritual. As noted throughout this dissertation, historically the purpose of Communion is multi-faceted, but the primary orientation has been a connection between God and the people of God. I challenge church leaders to reconsider the very purpose of the ritual. Only then can they enrich the way they practice the Eucharist in order to foster belonging and hospitality.

In re-imagining the purpose for shared meals, which will be discussed more in the following section, I also challenge churches to use shared meals as intersections between ordinary and holy practices. Can churches look for innovative ways to bring the Lord's Supper into a potluck meal? Like Jesus' table gatherings, and like the meal practice of the early church, occasionally incorporating the Lord's Supper ritual into a common meal reminds participants of the sacredness of the ordinary and grounds the ritual into material particularity. For churches within the Restoration Movement, this seems quite consistent with their ideal of restoring New Testament practices.

Re-Imagine Priority

During my research for this dissertation, I noted that the amount of time spent on Communion is quite minimal when compared to other elements of a worship service. I personally observed Communion lasting only 4-8 minutes within a worship service, in

contrast to an average of 25 minutes of singing and 30 minutes for sermons.¹⁶ As noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, most participants of my research surveys believe that church leaders prioritize singing and sermons, in contrast to the time spent on Communion.

If a congregation agrees that a robust practice of Communion can encourage belonging to the Body of Christ, congregational leaders will need to consider what changes need to be made to worship services in order to unequivocally highlight the priority of the Lord's Supper. These decisions should include the amount of time set aside for the ritual, as well as where Communion fits within the trajectory of a service. Does the service move like an arc, with Communion as the climax in the middle of the service? Does the service flow more like an upward slope, culminating with Communion as the concluding pinnacle? Does the sermon inform any type of Communion meditation, or vice versa? A creative worship team can thoughtfully imagine and communicate ways that highlight the significance of Communion within the broader worship service.

Within Roman Catholic worship, the Mass is generally shaped around the consecration and distribution of the Eucharist.¹⁷ As part of the Protestant tradition, Independent Christian Churches have historically prioritized sermons in the worship service, while maintaining the obligation for weekly observance of Communion. Re-

¹⁶ Personal research observations of Anaheim First Christian Church, Anaheim, CA, (October 2 and 16, 2016); Eastside Christian Church, Anaheim, CA, (December 10, 2016), and East View Christian Church, Normal, IL, (December 2, 2017).

¹⁷ "General Instruction of the Roman Missal," accessed December 4, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20030317_ordinamento-messale_en.html. Paragraph 78 lists the Eucharistic Prayer as "the center and summit of the entire celebration."

thinking the priority and value of the Eucharist will require a paradigm shift for many leaders. In the words of Restoration historian Bryan Lambert,

We are the prisoners of our own customs. My own experience in trying to encourage change in one or two minor arrangements at the service of the Supper in a local congregation makes me skeptical whether anything can be done at all except through lengthy teaching. Certainly one of the greatest challenges we face from the very start is making the Lord's Supper the truly central act of worship in our churches instead of one of the *two*, or the *lesser* of the two features of worship, the other and more dominant being the sermon, which for generations of Protestants has been the reason they come to church.¹⁸

As mentioned in Chapter 1, many Independent Christian Churches are considered “mega churches” that is, churches with at least 2000 weekly participants.¹⁹ Churches with large attendance may be challenged by the logistics of prioritizing the Lord's Supper in a way that participants regularly and actively understand its significance.²⁰ I imagine the tendency would default towards a utilitarian and efficient approach to nourishing several thousand participants.²¹ In that vein, I want to encourage the leaders of these churches to seriously imagine ways to highlight the formative value of the Lord's Supper. William Willimon suggests that

The bigger and more widespread a church's membership, the more often it needs to eat together. After all, we know what happens to people who eat together.... Larger churches sometimes claim that Communion is difficult for them because they have so many people to serve or it takes too long. If a church is too big to

¹⁸ Lambert, 26.

¹⁹ Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, *Recent Shifts in America's Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Report* (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2015), <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/all/themes/factzen4/files/denom/icc.pdf>.

²⁰ “[Megachurches'] large size makes aspects of their religious work that much more difficult, such as creating commitment, community, and member engagement.” Ibid.

²¹ Although if Jesus creatively found a way to nourish thousands on a hillside—with leftovers even!—can churches not also find thoughtful ways to do the same?

serve people, too big for people to fellowship with one another and with Christ on a regular basis, a church is too big to be a church!²²

I would like to give these large churches within the Restoration Movement the opportunity and challenge to prove Willimon wrong. Can they creatively find ways to highlight the rich practice of Communion without diminishing it to the point of an individualized, self-contained and efficient snack?

Re-Imagine Presiders

When highlighting the communal nature of the ritual, it is important and helpful to thoughtfully consider who presides and leads Communion. Guiding a community to approach the Table is not a position of authority, but one of function and service, a reminder that Christ is the Table host and participants come together to receive the elements from fellow members of and servants to the Body of Christ. With that in mind, I offer a few challenges, as well as disclaimers.

First, historically the Independent Christian Churches have practiced what they understand to be the “priesthood of all believers,” a recognition that the Holy Spirit dwells within all believers. While some leaders have studied and are paid and often are ordained to lead a church, leaders are not priests who are set apart to intercede for laity; rather, everyone is capable of interceding on behalf of one another. In that spirit, traditionally in the Independent Christian Churches a non-staff member has presided over

²² William H. Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord’s Supper and the Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1981), 107.

Communion while a staff member presents the sermon. In recent years however, I have often observed that those presiding at Communion are the ministers, preachers, or staff.²³

In seeking ways to encourage belonging and hospitality through the practice of Communion, opening the opportunity for more members of a congregation to guide their fellow members through the giving and receiving of Christ's meal is an optimal way to enrich the experience for everyone. Like the challenge of making Communion a priority within a large assembly, I imagine that inviting congregational members to lead the Communion ritual will pose utilitarian challenges; it is much simpler for those who are trained and paid to smoothly transition into and through the ritual, to keep to the allotted time, and make sure everything said is "appropriate." Allowing a congregational member to guide this time, rather than a trained staff member is much riskier. However, if there is hesitancy about the choice of presiders because control of the service might be lost, I challenge church leaders to trust and be open to the wisdom and work of the Holy Spirit in church members.

When a church member presides at the Table, it allows them to engage more fully with the elements, the scriptures, the actions, and all of the facets of meaning in Communion. When sitting in pews or rows week after week, I daresay worshippers might have the tendency to become detached from the meanings and actions of the ritual. By stepping into the role of presider, a person is obliged to consider the value of the ritual

²³ Lines, "Communion Practices Survey." Among those surveyed for my research, 70% of respondents' reported that a staff person led Communion. In my observations of specific worship services, a staff member presided over every Communion time. See footnote 16 for specific congregations observed who follow this trend.

they are leading others through; the experience can become more meaningful for the guides themselves when they prepare to lead others.²⁴

Re-Imagine Provisions and Preparation

I challenge Independent Christian Church leaders to re-imagine the choice of elements used in Communion, and the way they are prepared. Most Christian Churches utilize individual cups of juice and small wafers of bread.²⁵ Pragmatic decisions in order to functionally serve thousands of people quickly can easily become the motivating factor in choosing the type of Communion elements a congregation uses. Should efficiency be a motivating factor? Regarding all-in-one mini-communion elements, Phil Kenneson argues that

If efficiency involves accomplishing a desired task with the least amount of resources expended... then we might be forced to agree that this is brilliantly efficient. But it might also be wise to ask: efficient at *doing what* exactly? If all we care about is that each person present has distributed to them some bit of bread and juice in the least amount of time with the least amount of effort, then yes, this is... efficiency at its best. *But what if we care about other things more?*²⁶

Hygienic arguments might be made in favor of individual elements. While I have not found evidence that individual Communion elements reduce exposure to germs, I will continue to maintain that if a church values actions that express the hoped-for reality of

²⁴ A brief disclaimer here: this dissertation does not engage the argument for or against presiding at the table being limited to elders, deacons, or a single gender. It can be inferred from my own gender and from what I have argued, that I see formative value in all committed followers of Jesus being eligible to guide this ritual, notwithstanding their title or gender, though that is not a case I want to examine here. My point is to challenge churches to recognize the value of lay members rather than pastoral staff leading the Lord's Supper.

²⁵ Lines, "Communion Practices Survey." Only 19% of survey responders reported using a single loaf and single cup for Communion.

²⁶ Philip Kenneson, *Practicing Ecclesial Patience: Patient Practice Makes Perfect*, Renewing Radical Discipleship (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 20. Emphasis added.

the unity of the Body of Christ, they will be vulnerably open to the greater work of God, which is affirmed in shared elements.

I would like to see Independent Christian Churches return to the historic and symbolically rich use of commonly shared elements, a single loaf and a common cup. These communal elements highlight the communal aspect of Communion: together as part of the Body of Christ, participants share in the body of Christ. If there was a single recommendation I would offer churches who rise to the challenge of allowing the Lord's Supper to be an opportunity to nourish belonging and hospitality, it would be to find a way to use a single loaf and shared cup for Communion. As Ignatius argued, the Eucharist is "a sacrament of unity," for "there is only one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup to unite us in his blood."²⁷ The choice of single loaves and cups powerfully speaks to the hoped-for reality of the unity of the Body of Christ.

What kind of loaves should churches use? I have two suggestions. First, I believe there is much value in providing loaves that are gluten-free. In today's context where many Americans find themselves not only intolerant of gluten, but allergic to it,²⁸ churches that desire to offer Communion as a place of hospitality should consider ways to welcome those with dietary needs. Second, churches might choose to offer bread made by members of their congregation. Kenneson suggests that members who make bread for Communion "take exquisite care" in preparing the loaves. "There's nothing particularly efficient about this," he writes; "rather it's an act of devotion. It's a small way of giving

²⁷ *Phil.* 4.

²⁸ Eimear Gallagher, *Gluten-Free Food Science and Technology* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), xii, notes that "reactions/intolerances to gluten is rising."

yourself to others.”²⁹ Personally, making bread for my church’s Communion allows me to connect deeper with my brothers and sisters. I pray for them as I knead the dough. I think about my place in the Body of Christ. I find the disciplined time of making bread to be an opportunity for introspection and meditation. In a minuscule way, I connect to the suffering of Christ and others who suffer when my arms ache, sore from kneading. When I receive bread during Communion that was made by another member of my church, I think about the connection I share with them, as well. Similar to encouraging a variety of church members to preside at Communion, the opportunity for members to make Communion bread engages the participants more deeply in the experience and with one another.

Should a church serve wine or grape juice? Over the past century, Independent Christian Churches have almost exclusively used grape juice rather than wine during Communion. I do not have a strong formation case to make with either juice or wine, as I believe the more important decision is that of using a single cup instead of tiny individual cups. Throughout scripture, wine is understood as a generous gift from God.³⁰ While the case can be argued that, like wine, juice from grapes is also a gift, wine shared in social settings can “open up a community to conviviality and communal bonding” and foster a joyful atmosphere.”³¹ My personal preference is to use wine, for the reason that Frederick Buechner suggests:

²⁹ Kenneson, 20.

³⁰ For instance, see Ps. 104:14-15, Joel 2:24. cf. Gisela H. Kreglinger, *The Spirituality of Wine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 5.

³¹ Kreglinger, 98. cf. Ibid., 37.

Unfermented grape juice is a bland and pleasant drink, especially on a warm afternoon mixed half-and-half with ginger ale. It is a ghastly symbol of the life blood of Jesus Christ, especially when served in individual antiseptic, thimble-sized glasses. Wine is booze, which means it is dangerous and drunk-making. It makes the timid brave and the reserved amorous. It loosens the tongue and breaks the ice especially when served in a loving cup. It kills germs. As symbols go, it is a rather splendid one.³²

However, again, I encourage churches to consider the contexts in which they worship, and the way they communicate choices made about the elements of Communion.

Re-Imagine Performance and Participation

There is a great deal of meaning and value in how Communion is enacted in a worship service. How do congregation members participate in the actions of Communion? Do they remain seated and merely open a little container of bread and juice they picked up when they entered the worship space? How do presiders present the elements? Do they offer some words and a prayer, with no connected actions? Perhaps there are visual, symbolic elements sitting on a table for the congregation to view without any interaction, like stale display case food. All of these scenarios are common within Independent Christian Churches; and all of them reflect what Charles Taylor identifies as the “excarnation” of this age, the “transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice so that [religion] comes more and more to reside ‘in the head.’”³³

If churches desire to connect and unite participants in Communion, the actions themselves are just as crucial as the choice of elements and words: “People need to be

³² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95-96.

³³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 613.

affirmed in their beliefs by *enacting them*.”³⁴ Breaking the loaves of bread and pouring juice or wine into the cup are vital to connecting participants to one another and Christ. The actions of breaking and pouring recall the host of the Eucharist, Jesus. Just as the disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus when he *broke* the bread, when a presider breaks and pours, participants in Communion are reminded of the One who created the new ritual at the Last Supper. Breaking and pouring portray the connection of participants together in Christ, the one who sacrificially gave his wounded body and poured blood to make a new people of God, breaking down “dividing walls of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). Breaking the bread and pouring the cup connect participants with those suffering around the world as well. The actions “promise a new time” where those who have been broken and those who have been poured out like Christ, will be “assured by the promises of God that our tears will be wiped away and...all will be freely welcomed at the... feast of Christ.”³⁵

Performance of Communion need not be theatrical. In fact, in theater performances, “an audience-performer boundary is demarcated and maintained through the performance” but when a “spectator becomes [a] participant,” an event becomes a ritual performance.³⁶ Therefore, I encourage churches to shape ways for those worshipping together to physically interact with one another and the worship space in a “ritual performance.” When participants stand and move together towards a location to receive the elements, they are required to engage their body and their true selves more fully in the

³⁴ Stephenson, 47. Emphasis mine.

³⁵ Carvalhaes, 3.

³⁶ Stephenson, 113. cf. 42, “there is no ritual if it is not performed... a rite requires performance.”

ritual than what passive passing of the elements enables. When participants stand in a line together to receive elements, they find themselves sharing the experience with those around them—eye contact is made, smiles shared, maybe even handshakes or hugs offered as people proceed towards the table. Kenneson expresses his experiences of processing forward for the Eucharist as “some of the most consistently and profoundly moving times of gathered worship.” He describes the people he joins in processing in “this pilgrim way,” including teachers, “wise old saints of the church,” students, infants carried by tired parents, cancer patients, and others. Kenneson suggests that

There is, of course, nothing particularly efficient about this procession, but best I can tell, no one seems to mind. Indeed, we seem happy to take our time, slowly, patiently moving toward the front, and then, once we have returned to our seats, taking in the faces and bodies and lives of those who are processing after us.³⁷

Besides physically moving towards a Communion table, receiving the bread and cup from fellow members of the Body of Christ is also valuable. I have participated in Communion rituals where participants move to a Communion table and *serve themselves*. This appears contrary to the purpose of connecting to God with one another. When someone offers the bread and cup to someone else, giving and receiving the symbolic body and blood of Christ with one another, connections deepen within the Body of Christ. Sharing the elements together reminds participants of their shared connections in Christ. When strangers are offered the elements, an opportunity for belonging occurs. I have found it meaningful to share thoughtful words (such as “the body and blood of Christ” or “peace of Christ” or “the Lord’s blessing” etc.) when giving elements to others; even more connection is built when a person’s name is added—“peace of Christ,

³⁷ Kenneson, 21.

Jennifer”—or if unknown—“the Lord’s blessing, my friend.” When the bread and cup are given and received, participants are reminded that, like Christ, they can be both guest and host of one another.

Re-Imagining Potluck Practices

I also challenge churches to re-imagine the purpose for their shared meals, “fellowship meals” or potluck suppers. These already take many forms—in church basements and fellowship halls, in small groups meeting in members’ homes, and in restaurants following worship services. While the practice of them need not change necessarily, I encourage members to reconsider the *purpose* for these meals. “Eating together is often a beautiful act of abiding, devotion and attention,” reminds Kenneson.³⁸ These meals can also serve as a venue for times of healing when people are in disagreement with each other. Can churches find opportunities and spaces to creatively invite others to these tables? Are visitors invited to join a group of friends who head to a local restaurant after Sunday worship? Do those around the church building know there is a place for them in the potluck line? Are neighbors invited to small group suppers and genuinely welcomed? Rethinking the purpose of eating common meals together reminds participants that breaking bread builds unity.

Churches can also practice shared meals as occasions for the intersection of sacred and ordinary events. As I alluded to in the previous section, I challenge churches to occasionally integrate the Lord’s Supper into their shared meals. This might mean that Communion elements are set out on tables during potluck meals, passed and shared at a

³⁸ Kenneson, 19.

specific time of the meal. It might mean that bread and wine are parts of a small group's regular meal and casually shared with thoughtful remarks to one another on the presence of Christ as host, guest, and nourishment. It might mean that churches use elements that are already prepared for a shared meal, such as passing around tortillas during a taco night and, in the midst of table conversation, tell stories of Jesus' welcome of everyone to his table. I believe it is best for churches to use their imaginations, and not just innovation for innovation's sake, to allow a celebration to emerge naturally out of the context in which it will be practiced.

Throughout the shaping of this experience however, churches would do well to keep in mind the foundations for re-imagining the Communion ritual and mirror those substances in informal practices as well. That is, if the purpose, priority, participants, provisions, and performance of the experience are not thoughtfully considered, then even an informal ritual has potential to diminish and fragment participants instead of fostering belonging and hospitality.

Conclusion

The Christian Churches have a long history of looking to the New Testament and the early church as authoritative sources for theology and practice. I believe churches have the ability and resourcefulness to model the practice of Communion after the way of Jesus and the ways of early believers, in order to facilitate belonging in the community that is the Body of Christ.

The Restoration Movement emerged with the ideal of being a unity movement, refusing to allow denominational differences to separate one believer from another and encouraging distinctions within congregations. While this value of being a unity

movement has unfortunately remained more of an ideal rather than reality, churches have the ability and ingenuity to return to that principle in ways that foster hospitality. The welcome of others to shared tables and to Christ's Communion Table will focus the goal of being a community who, like a crazy quilt, is filled with bright and contrasting colors and shapes, tied together in trust of a super-abundant God, in Jesus as guest and host.

I envision an Independent Christian Church congregation seamlessly connected to God and one another through both the formal Communion and informal potluck tables; these places of belonging and hospitality then become bases for the congregation's engagement with the world around them. Individuals find community—welcome and belonging—by participating together with others at these tables. No longer selves that “hang in the void, slowly twisting in the wind,”³⁹ individuals discover themselves to be part of the Body of Christ, “many grains brought together, ground, and mixed so as to form a single loaf.”⁴⁰

Postlude

Jennifer enters First Christian Church's auditorium, along with a few hundred others from her neighborhood. She is ready to greet and be greeted by those she has seen throughout the week around her community. Jennifer is worn out from a long week of balancing work and her two young children, but thankful for the help she received from her church while her husband, John, has been away on a 3-day business trip. Her children

³⁹ Bellah, 84.

⁴⁰ Cyprian, *Letter 63*, 13.

join her in hugging Mrs. Archer, an older widow who missed worship last week because she was sick. John will be glad to hear Mrs. Archer is feeling better.

As the worship service begins, Jennifer and her children slip into an aisle to sit between Mrs. Archer and the kids' dentist, Dr. Martin. They join the congregation together to sing "We are a sea of voices/Gathered under one name/O for a thousand tongues to sing/The glories of our Lord God Almighty" with the rest of the congregation. The kids grow fidgety when a young man steps up to read scripture, but quickly comply when he asks everyone to stand for verses read from Matthew. Jennifer's mind wanders briefly as she realizes she cannot remember that young man's name, and makes a mental note to greet him after the service in order to jog her memory.

They sit again as a woman moves to the front of the room to share. As the woman pulls out her notes, Jennifer thinks back to the time when the woman, Cindy, first came to First Christian. Recently divorced, Cindy visited First Christian one Sunday and was invited by Jennifer and John and their good friends, the Thompsons, to join them at a Thai restaurant after the worship service. Jennifer laughed at the memory of Cindy's shock to be eating with strangers she just met! But that was the beginning of Cindy's welcome and healing in the church. Cindy clears her throat and begins:

We've been talking about Abraham and Sarah in our services recently. One of my favorite stories about them is when three visitors show up at their tent by the oaks of Mamre. It's a hot afternoon and Abraham is sitting under the oak trying not to doze off, when three visitors arrive. He greets them and asks them to stay for a meal. Then he rushes off to ask Sarah to make some bread while he prepares a lamb. After washing their guest's feet, Abraham and Sarah offer them the bread and meat. Over the meal the three visitors, whom the text calls the Lord, inform the couple they'll have a son by this time next year.

Traditionally, these three visitors are understood to be a manifestation of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Can you imagine rolling out and cooking bread that will be eaten by God? I wonder if Sarah knew that's what she was doing when she served her guests.

The tables are turned a bit this morning, for as we stepped over the threshold into the sanctuary, we are now all guests at God's table. We're not sitting on the ground under an oak tree, but around God's table. But like Sarah did, I have the privilege of preparing the bread that will be served to the guests—that's you, by our Host, Jesus. I kneaded and rolled and cooked the bread we eat for communion—even burnt my finger on the stove! When I knead, I prayed for you, my church family and those I don't yet know, everyone who will receive the bread. As we break bits of bread this morning, remember our Host, who has invited us to sit around his table, as His Body, receiving his body.

The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed, sat around a table eating a meal with his followers. During that meal, he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

The congregation sings "Bread of the World, in Mercy Broken" while Cindy breaks the bread and pours the cup then hands the elements to two servers; meanwhile, people line up to receive Communion. Jennifer grabs her children's hands and, along with others in her aisle, walks towards the front of the auditorium. She watches the back of Dr. Martin moving in front of her and wonders how his knees are holding up. As she walks closer to the table, she sees that Michael and Stephanie are holding the bread and cup. Stephanie recently got married and Michael just came out to his parents that he is gay, news which they had a hard time receiving. Jennifer thinks about how thankful she is to be part of a community that celebrates weddings and walks through hard times with one another. She is glad to receive Communion from them both. Stephanie offers her the loaf of bread and whispers, "Jennifer, Jesus' Body is for you," as Jennifer tears off a small chunk. She dips the bread into the cup Michael holds, as he whispers, "the cup of the Christ" to her. She smiles at them both and moves with her children back to their seats.

Once everyone has had the opportunity to receive Communion, the executive Pastor dismisses children from the auditorium for KidzMin Junior Church down the hall. The senior pastor then steps up to share a short message on how the birth of Isaac fulfilled God's promise to Abraham and Sarah and became the path God used to bring the blessing of Christ to all people. Finally, the congregation closes with one more song, "Build Your Kingdom Here."

Thinking about ways God's love has overflowed in First Christian's care for one another, Jennifer looks for members of her small group as she exits the service. She wants to remind them that a refugee family from Burma is joining their Wednesday gathering and everyone needs to bring a bit more food to share. She heads down to KidzMin to find her kids and is grateful that she and John are part of a loving and welcoming church community.

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