

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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Keith D. Stanglin  
Editor

Michael R. Weed  
Founding Editor

M. Todd Hall  
Managing Editor

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Email: [christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu](mailto:christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu).

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Consistent with Protestant churches, Churches of Christ have rejected the five so-called false sacraments and accepted baptism and the Lord's Supper as the proper sacraments of the church. Last year's issue of *Christian Studies* was focused on the theme of baptism. As a follow-up to those reflections, this issue is devoted to the "Eucharist," the early church's favorite word for holy communion. To distinguish it from the self-centered meal that the Corinthian Christians were celebrating, Paul called this meal the Lord's Supper, reminding the church who should be at the center of this practice.

Again, like other Protestant churches, churches of the American Restoration Movement rejected important aspects of the Roman Catholic Church's sacramental theology. As good Protestants, they have taken for granted that communion is to be given in both kinds (bread and cup). Furthermore, with other Protestants, Churches of Christ have rejected transubstantiation.

Where Restorationist churches have generally differed with other Protestants, especially those of Reformed and evangelical backgrounds, is in the frequency of the meal. Traditionally, Restorationist churches have insisted on participating in communion every Lord's Day and only on the Lord's Day. Because this practice has been distinctive among most of their American Protestant neighbors, Restorationist churches have concentrated much of their Eucharistic theology on the question of frequency—specifically, on defending weekly communion against its many detractors. It should be noted that the opponents of weekly communion are now fewer and farther between, since more frequent communion has become the ecumenical consensus. At any rate, as a result of the focus on frequency, other significant questions about the Lord's Supper have often been neglected or pushed aside in Churches of Christ.

Although the question of frequency is certainly important in its own right, this issue of *Christian Studies* intends to address other important issues related to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What is it? How should we think about it? How should we practice it? How can our theology and practice of the Lord's Supper be improved? The result is a collection of articles that are biblical, historical, theological, and practical. Collectively, they examine a variety of

matters connected to the Eucharist, including related biblical themes, the presence of Christ, historical insights, and the proper communicants.

It is my hope that these articles will be beneficial to you in your own study and reflection on this central rite of the church's life. May the considerations in the following pages help us all be more faithful and thoughtful as we seek to practice and pass on the most holy faith.

Keith D. Stanglin  
Editor  
stanglin@austingrad.edu

# Christ's Presence and the Thing Signified in the Lord's Supper

Keith D. Stanglin

## **I. Introduction**

The doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper in Churches of Christ may be summarized in three words, corresponding roughly to points about frequency and purpose or efficacy: The Lord's Supper is a "weekly, Zwinglian ordinance." The strict connection between Lord's Supper and (each and every) Lord's Day has for two centuries distinguished Churches of Christ from most of our Protestant evangelical neighbors who commune less frequently, but has put us in harmony with Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and (much of) Lutheranism. The idea that the Lord's Supper is primarily and almost exclusively a memorial, and that it is simply an ordinance to be obeyed without the conveying of special grace, unites Churches of Christ with most Reformed and evangelical churches, but puts us at odds with the others. Thus, in sum, in contrast to their high, sacramental view of believers' baptism, Churches of Christ generally maintain and a low, Zwinglian view of weekly Lord's Supper.

My specific aim in this essay is to articulate a view of the Lord's Supper that raises the bar for the typical "low church." This practice of the church is more than simply an ordinance, a command to be obeyed in the sense of positive law. Rather, my thesis is that divine grace is conveyed in the sacrament by the presence of Christ mediated through the Spirit. This view will challenge the typical evangelical and Restorationist understanding of the Eucharist. To get a hearing among these churches, the perspective should be faithful to Scripture, which is of prime importance to evangelicals. Therefore, my first concern in this discussion is biblical faithfulness. I am concerned, second, to hear the

voice of the great tradition of the church (a concern that distinguishes me from some Restorationists, though not all). The greatest minds of church history are the common property of all Christians. A third concern of mine, in line with the early American Restoration Movement, is greater ecumenical understanding, especially in areas of agreement. The view that I articulate should bring “low church” fellowships into closer conversation with “high church” communions, which have often been scandalized by the evangelical marginalization of the sacraments.

## II. Sacramental efficacy *in genere*

### A. Sacraments as Signs of Grace

Peter Lombard, channeling Augustine, writes, “What is a sacrament? ‘A sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing.’... Also, a sacrament is a visible form of an invisible grace.”... “A sacrament bears a likeness of the thing whose sign it is.”... “[T]he sacraments were not instituted only for the sake of signifying, but also to sanctify.”<sup>1</sup> As Martin Luther observes, a sacrament must have a physical, visible sign; an internal, spiritual significance; and an intentional faith that makes it effective.<sup>2</sup> For Luther, a sacrament is the promise of forgiveness of sins conjoined with a sign, in which case there are properly two sacraments, baptism and Eucharist.<sup>3</sup> In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin opens his discussion of the sacraments with a definition consistent with all of the above. As did the Lombard, Calvin also quotes Augustine and, incorporating the same three elements of Luther’s definition, Calvin writes that a sacrament is “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.”<sup>4</sup> As the form of the promise of God, the sacrament is a “visible word,”<sup>5</sup> accompanied by the promise itself, which is communicated through preaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, 4 vols., trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007–10), IV.i.1 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods,” in *Luther’s Works*, American edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–86), vol. 35:45.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *LW* 36:124.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xiv.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Inst.* IV.xiv.6, quoting Augustine on the Gospel of John.



With regard to the sacraments, there had always been a distinction between the sign (*signum*) and the thing or reality signified (*res significata*), that is, between the visible matter and form, on the one hand, and the grace to which they pointed, on the other. This common distinction, however, became a separation in the thought of Ulrich Zwingli. I will not speculate now on why this is the case. Besides exegetical reasons and a reaction to the late medieval situation that I have described, some have posited Zwingli's openness to Platonic philosophy, which in some forms results in a de-emphasis on the material world. Whatever the reason, Zwingli, more than anyone before him, separated the sacramental sign from the thing signified. We can call this the "Zwinglian separation." What Zwingli separated the Enlightenment, for reasons of its own, attempted to divorce entirely: "symbol and reality have been broken apart."<sup>6</sup>

Although this separation was not persuasive to Martin Luther or ultimately to Lutheran orthodoxy, it does reflect well the anti-institutional impulse of the Protestant Reformations as a whole, including the Lutheran branch. The Protestant critique of the Roman Church's sacraments, begun in earnest in 1520 with Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, led to the reduction from seven sacraments to two, as well as to the further demotion of the two that remained. Just as Scripture alone is sufficient without the teaching magisterium of the church, so also justification and absolution are available by personal faith alone without the need for grace dispensed through the church's sacraments. The emphasis on faith, Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers ended up marginalizing the institutional church. Relationship with God became predominantly personal and individual, not something experienced primarily in the gathered church or mediated through its sacraments.

As a result, the Sunday service was no longer centered around a Mass, mumbled by a priest in a language that the people, and perhaps even the priest himself, could not understand. The clergy, whose primary task had been to administer seven sacraments, was now given the principal task of preaching. With Reformed and radical Protestants, for the first time in the history of the church, there could be a Lord's Day service without the Lord's Supper. In the absence of holy communion, preaching became the new sacrament, the *conditio*

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald P. Byars, *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 11.

*sine qua non* and central component of the worship assembly, in the words of the Westminster divines, “effectual to salvation.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, preaching was neither intended nor did it have to supplant sacraments; the word simply could have been joined more deliberately to the sacraments. But supplant it did, at least for many Protestants, who began to focus on internals and preaching to the exclusion of externals and the sacraments. The baptistery and table (or altar) were no longer front and center, but the pulpit would soon, literally, take center stage.

Evangelicalism has been the proper heir to Zwinglianism, perpetuating the separation between the sign and the thing signified. In some fellowships—namely, Quakers and the Salvation Army—the unnecessary role of the sacraments has been taken to the logical conclusion, and so they are not practiced at all. Friends rejected “outward” sacraments, claiming that true communion is an “inward” communion with God and true baptism is baptism with the Spirit. After all, if the inward reality of grace is conveyed ordinarily apart from the outward sign, then the outward sign retains symbolic import, at best, and, at worst, it can be distracting and divisive. Most of these churches, though, continue to practice the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. When I say “low church,” I affectionately mean the type of evangelicalism that practices the sacraments but has a very low or non-sacramental view of them, as opposed to an ecclesiology that views the church as the means of grace. Such “low” churches, which I take to be the majority of self-described evangelicals, generally insist that baptism has nothing whatsoever to do with the conversion process and that the Eucharist, infrequently practiced, is a mere symbol of Christ’s body and blood. As Ronald Byars characterizes this way of looking at the sacraments, they are, in the minds of many Christians, “justasymbol.”<sup>8</sup> This low-church mindset tends to promote what John Webster has called “sacramental minimalism.” Webster notes that such sacramental minimalism “has attached itself to some bits of the evangelical tradition.”<sup>9</sup> At least as regards North American evangelicalism and its various exports, the suggestion that “some

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<sup>7</sup> See “Westminster Larger Catechism (1647),” Q&A 154–55, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translation: Volume 4, 1600–1693* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 340.

<sup>8</sup> Byars, *Sacraments*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> John Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 187.



hand, that the consecrated elements become the literal body and blood of Jesus, or, on the other hand, that they are only figuratively so. And, sadly, along the way, it also became more customary for churches to choose one side and then condemn the other.

It is well known that, although both Luther and Zwingli rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation and its later medieval interpretation, nevertheless they could not agree on what to put in its place. It is the primary dispute, chronologically and otherwise, that divided the communions later known as Lutheran and Reformed. Based on the words, "This is my body, . . . this is my blood," Luther insisted on the literal, bodily presence of Christ, whereas Zwingli insisted that the statements are metaphorical. It depends on what the meaning of "is" is. For Zwingli, "This is my body" means, "This represents my body." Thus, Zwinglians emphasized that there is no bodily presence of Christ in holy communion, and that the benefit that comes from partaking of the meal is primarily, or perhaps exclusively, one of remembrance. As this polemical concept has developed in evangelicalism, it has tended to emphasize what the Lord's Supper is not—namely, the literal bodily presence of Christ. When the negative point against "real presence" becomes the focus, it resembles what evangelical theologian Millard Erickson calls the "doctrine of the real absence."<sup>12</sup>

John Calvin spent much time and energy trying to articulate a Eucharistic doctrine of presence that both Lutheran and Reformed believers could affirm. Although Lutherans finally would not subscribe to Calvin's views, Calvin inclined to stronger language than the Zwinglians with regard to the "spiritual presence" of Christ.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, the language used by modern evangelicals Erickson and Wayne Grudem sounds more Calvinian than Zwinglian. They both affirm the presence of Christ, that we meet him in holy communion. Erickson mentions that the Spirit makes Christ "real in our experience," and Grudem is pleased to advocate the "spiritual presence" of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1123.

<sup>13</sup> The entire issue of *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 18/1 (2016) includes helpful essays and primary sources related to Calvin's role in the so-called *Consensus Tigurinus*, including the events before and after it.

<sup>14</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1122–23; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 995–96.

If the mode of Christ's presence is ambiguous in the church fathers, the efficacy of the Lord's Supper is a little clearer. The early and medieval church commonly thought about the Eucharist in terms of conveying grace. Because the Lord's Supper grants "communion and union" with the divine nature, drawing God's people into "uniform theosis," (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite passes on the tradition of calling the Eucharist the "sacrament of sacraments" (*teletōn teletē*).<sup>15</sup>

Evangelical theologians are a little more guarded than the Areopagite. Erickson speaks much about the Lord's Supper being beneficial and effective, but he never quite defines what that efficacy is. The Supper does remind us of the death of Christ and symbolize the unity of believers.<sup>16</sup> For Grudem, he speaks of the "spiritual blessing," "spiritual nourishment," and "spiritual participation in the benefits of the redemption that he [Christ] earns."<sup>17</sup> Both writers stop short of emphasizing the idea of grace being conveyed.

In Churches of Christ, although some have stressed the presence of Jesus at the Table and the meal as a means of grace,<sup>18</sup> language about the Lord's Supper is usually Zwinglian. As in many Reformed churches, it is a commemorative feast.

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<sup>15</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* III.i, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne Migne, 161 vols. (Paris, 1857–66), vol. 3:424C-D; ET, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 209. *Teletē* means "perfector" or can refer to mystic rites. That he means it in the former sense is clear from the later discussion at *ibid.* IV.iii.12; ET, 232.

<sup>16</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1123–24.

<sup>17</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 990, 996.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., in line with Alexander Campbell, note E. G. Sewell: "Proper attendance upon the Lord's Supper is a wonderful means of grace to strengthen the hearts and lives of Christians in all things connected with the service of God." E. A. Elam: "Every time the Supper is observed, Jesus is present." For these quotations, both of which come from the 1915 *Gospel Advocate*, and for further discussion of sacramental theology in Churches of Christ, see John Mark Hicks, "Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology," *Restoration Quarterly* 50/1 (2008): 35–48, here 42 n. 34.

## 2. From Frequent to Infrequent

As for frequency, the New Testament provides implicit evidence that holy communion was taken when the church gathered on the first day of every week (see Luke 24:1, 13, 30–35; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:20, 33; 16:2; Heb 10:24–25).

The earliest Christian worship manual, the *Didache* (ca. AD 70), prescribes meeting every first day of the week for the Lord's Supper.<sup>19</sup> The earliest Christian description of a worship assembly, Justin Martyr's first *Apology* (ca. AD 155), describes meeting on Sunday for the Lord's Supper, a practice so central to the assembly and Christian life that the elements were taken by the deacons and distributed to those who were absent.<sup>20</sup> By the third century, there is some evidence of the Lord's Supper also on other days in addition to Sunday. It came to be offered daily in some places. But weekly Lord's Supper on Sunday remained the norm and continued throughout the early and medieval periods of church history. However, the laity in the West partook less and less frequently, and expectations for participation became very low. By 1215 (Lateran IV), it was mandated that Christians should come to church to confess sins and take the Eucharist at least once a year at Easter.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Didache* 14:1: "But every Lord's Day of the Lord gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving (*Eucharistēsate*) after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure."

<sup>20</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67: "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons."

<sup>21</sup> Lateran IV (1215), Canon 21, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 1:245: "All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter unless they think, for a good reason and on the advice of their own priest, that they should abstain in receiving it for a time. Otherwise they shall be barred from entering a church during their lifetime and they shall be denied a christian burial at death."

Thus, by the thirteenth century, many Christians were partaking of the frequently offered Mass only once a year. By the early fifteenth century, the laity was allowed to take communion only in one kind, justified by the doctrine of concomitance; only the clergy could have the cup, too.<sup>22</sup> So, on the eve of the Reformation, even though the church celebrated Mass weekly (and even daily), most people did not partake frequently, and if they did, it was only the bread. But, the “Mass” or “divine liturgy” was still being celebrated every Sunday, even if only the clergy were partaking.

In addition to their insistence that the laity be given communion in both kinds, another obvious change introduced by Protestant reformers had to do with frequency. Recall that the sacramental nature of the Lord’s Supper had been questioned by many Protestants, so they did not want people to think superstitiously about the bread and cup or to offer divine worship to the elements, and they didn’t want the ceremony of the sacrament to overshadow or trump the preaching of the word. In addition, former Roman Catholics were not accustomed to their own weekly participation. So the Lord’s Supper was offered in the church less frequently. Yet Protestant believers generally celebrated the Lord’s Supper more frequently than most Roman Catholic laity actually did—every quarter or month. But this is the first time in the history of the church that a congregation’s Sunday service would go by without celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Some reformers wanted it more frequently. Calvin preferred weekly Lord’s Supper: “The Lord’s table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually.”<sup>23</sup> One point that Calvin made was that partaking only once a year reflected and encouraged spiritual laziness, the “torpor of the sluggish.”<sup>24</sup> His assumption is that the Lord’s Supper is a time for covenant renewal, confession of sin, and getting our lives right with God. One should not approach the Table with unrepented sin. But the magistrates in Geneva wouldn’t have weekly communion. Indeed, for most Protestants, quarterly or every other month became the normal frequency for the Lord’s Supper; at

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<sup>22</sup> Communion in one kind was decreed at the Council of Constance, session 13 (15 June 1415), in *Decrees*, 1:418–19. According to the doctrine of concomitance, only the bread was necessary, for the blood was also contained in the body.

<sup>23</sup> *Inst.* IV.xvii.46.

<sup>24</sup> *Inst.* IV.xvii.46. This is the language of Henry Beveridge’s translation, to be preferred over the McNeill/Battles edition’s “inertia of indolent people.”

most, monthly. This move to displace the Eucharist ensured that preaching would become the new sacrament and center of the Lord's Day assembly, without which no Sunday service would be complete. In one generation, much of Europe went from celebrating the sacrament without an intelligible proclamation of the Word to the proclamation of the Word without the sacrament.

Some evangelical theologians today seem fairly open to weekly Lord's Supper. Grudem notes that, if it is planned and executed well, the Lord's Supper could be done once a week.<sup>25</sup> Erickson does not specify how often the Lord's Supper should be taken, but he is concerned with the Eucharist becoming "routinized" by observing it "so frequently as to make it seem trivial or so commonplace that we go through the motions without really thinking about the meaning."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps actual evangelical practice is more telling than the opinions of professional theologians. Monthly or quarterly Lord's Supper is probably still the most common practice among evangelicals. The Lord's Supper, accompanied by the Word and once the center of the Lord's Day assembly, has been, in most Protestant churches, replaced by preaching, and, most weeks, without sacrament. And now, with the decline of preaching, many evangelical assemblies have, on most Lord's Days, no Eucharist and very little preaching. It is now the music or concert, often reductionistically referred to as "worship" and juxtaposed to the preaching, that functions as the new center and, in effect, the new sacrament of evangelicalism. Thus, much of Western Christianity has gone from sacrament without word to word without sacrament to, now, concert without word or sacrament.

## B. Eucharist, the Sacrament of Sanctifying Grace

### 1. Real, Spiritual presence.

I would like to advocate for consideration—among Churches of Christ and evangelicals at large—of the real, Spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist. A brief glance at a couple of biblical passages will help to clarify my position.

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<sup>25</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 999.

<sup>26</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1126.



As noted, over the centuries, Christians have argued about what it means to say that Christ is present at the Table. The truth is located somewhere between the two extremes. The elements are not literal flesh and blood, and so 1) participation is not cannibalism. When the Word became flesh, he took on a real human body subject to all the same physical limitations of space, and so 2) his *body* in its human nature, to this day, is not omnipresent, not on thousands of tables at once consumed by millions. 3) When the Bible says Jesus is the Lamb, this doesn't mean he is a literal baby sheep with wool and a tail, any more than saying that this is his body, especially while he was at the Table with the Twelve, means that it is a piece of his literal, physical human body. On these points, Zwingli was correct.

At the same time, the elements are neither meaningless nor for mere remembrance. In this meal, God sends his Spirit to mediate the presence of Christ to those who partake, and so it's not just ordinary bread and cup anymore. It is similar to baptism. The gracious, efficacious presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper says no more or less than the salvific efficacy of baptism. There is nothing inherently special about the water, but God chooses to convey grace at an objective moment, through the application of the physical element. And so the water, by God's grace, becomes for us the means of salvation, a channel of justifying grace, the blood that washes away sins. There is no chemical change to the water; it's still just two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. It is not that the water can have no ordinary use before or after baptism, or that it cannot be drained into the same system as other waste water. Likewise, since the meal is communion with Christ, and since he said we must eat his flesh and drink his blood, then the bread and cup become for us the body and blood of Christ. There is no chemical, substantial, or literal change in the elements themselves. But as our communion with God is real, God chooses, through his Spirit, to mediate to us the real, Spiritual presence of Christ, conveying grace that sanctifies us as we eat. And so we say, with Scripture, that this is body and blood. The elements of bread and cup are holy things for the holy people of God. They are the body and blood of Christ, but not in a literal way that enables *latreia* of the elements or forbids any type of ordinary use after the Eucharist.

Based on these biblical passages, we can ask, "If Christ is not present in this meal, then what, after all, is the point?" The main point is that, as this is

communion with Christ, Christ is present—for our redemption and our sanctification. As long as this main point is affirmed, we should not condemn those groups who believe in the literal bodily presence, but we should grieve that those same groups have condemned the rest, and that, as in Corinth, the Lord's Supper has become a means of Christian division.

## 2. Sanctifying grace.

The point about whether grace is conveyed in the Lord's Supper is rather simple: If and when God is present with his people for their redemption, then grace follows. The grace that accompanies God's special presence in a liturgical context is clearly seen in Isaiah 6. The prophet, since he is "a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5), is certain that he deserves to die, and he is certainly correct. Rather than perishing, though, he is spared, his sinful lips cleansed with a burning coal, and he is given a task in God's kingdom. This is sanctifying grace. Such grace can also be seen in meals eaten in God's presence. In Exodus 24:9–11, the leaders of Israel ascend the mountain with Moses to eat in the presence of God. They see God, but God does not "raise his hand against" them (Exod 24:11). This is grace. In John 6, the immediate context is not Eucharistic, but the language clearly is. Following on the heels of the pre-Eucharistic feeding of the 5,000, Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). If Christ is present in the Eucharist, as already established, then grace follows.

The sanctifying "grace" that Christ bestows on those who come to the Table in faith is a direct result of Christ's special presence. The invitation to come to God's Table is an act of divine grace. The sign—the physical eating and the nourishment that it provides—coincides with the grace signified—the spiritual nourishment that makes God's people partakers of the divine nature. Because holy communion draws God's people into closer union with him, it is, as the Areopagite recognized, the sacrament of divinization.

## 3. Frequency.

As we have observed, most Protestants do not take holy communion every Lord's Day. The early American Restoration Movement emphasized the Lord's Supper as a weekly Table, the center of the Lord's Day assembly. Thus,

frequent communion became a hallmark of the Restoration Movement and, if not a scandal, at least a puzzle to evangelicals. And this rhythm is still the case in Churches of Christ today. The Lord's Supper is taken every Sunday and only on Sunday. At its worst, it can become *ex opere operato*; it is how you "punch your card" or "make it count." At best, however, the practice accompanies the recognition that the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, has theological significance for the church, that there is something truly special and indispensable about the Lord's Day Eucharist.

Here is a thesis that should be tested: The same reason that the church gathers every first day of the week is the same reason the church eats the Lord's Supper every first day of the week. To put the point more clearly: Whatever reason one would like to give for not taking the Lord's Supper every Sunday should be as good a reason for not meeting for worship every Sunday. Whatever reason one would provide for meeting for worship every Sunday should be as good a reason for taking the Lord's Supper every Sunday. For example, if "x" is no good reason for one, it is also no good reason for the other. Therefore, why would one gather to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, on resurrection day, and omit the very meal that he gave us for its celebration?

The most common reason given by evangelicals against the weekly Eucharist is the danger of frequent communion leading to an empty ritual done by rote. This concern is mentioned by Erickson, cited above. This concern would make for a very weak argument against the regular practice of anything important. In fact, almost every Christian I talk to about this, regardless of their denominational affiliation, agrees that there is no good reason for not having the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Thus, many Protestants are coming around to more frequent, and even weekly, Eucharist. Many evangelical churches that have no denominational ties are taking the Lord's Supper weekly. Moreover, many churches that are tied to denominations that historically have not practiced weekly Eucharist are now reconsidering. There is no real theological point at stake in support of holy communion less than every Sunday.

Weekly Lord's Supper is, in fact, the emerging ecumenical consensus, confirmed in the World Council of Churches' *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*: "As the Eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday. As it is the new sacramental meal of the people of God, every Christian should be encouraged to receive

communion frequently.”<sup>27</sup> If we are concerned to elevate our thinking and language about holy communion, then perhaps the best way to begin to do this is through weekly Lord’s Supper. Contrary to the old idea that frequent communion somehow cheapens it, weekly Eucharist rather emphasizes the importance and centrality of this practice and opens the door to thinking about the presence of Christ and the grace conveyed in the sacrament.

#### IV. Sacraments as God’s work

One of the chief evangelical concerns with a high view of the sacraments is the concern that they would be thought of in terms of *ex opere operato*, that they are simply a work and, even worse, a work done regardless of faith. It should be clear that I am not advocating participation or efficacy of the sacraments apart from personal faith. But are the sacraments works, in the sense that Paul opposed them to faith? Is grace to be conveyed as a result of human work? Consider whether the Eucharist is a work. God gave us this meal as a means of grace, to unite us with Christ’s death and resurrection. It is God who takes something ordinary and works something extraordinary through it. We are even served it. Is eating, chewing, drinking, and swallowing a work?

Evangelicals and Protestants need to recover the biblical vision of a sacramental cosmos and of a God who works in, with, and through material substance. Think, for example, of the tree of life. God chose a particular tree whose fruit would impart life. The tree itself was not magic and presumably was not even a unique species, but chosen by God to convey life in the eating of it. God, not the human eater, is the worker.

The Holy Spirit, as the bond of charity within the Trinity, is the gift of God’s love to his people, through whom God’s love has been poured out into our hearts (Rom 5:5). Perhaps what is needed is a more robust pneumatology in evangelical ecclesiology, one that allows and expects the Spirit to work in the church and to convey grace through the sacraments, as promised in Scripture. If, in the gathered assembly of God’s people in worship, the Holy Spirit can work directly on, and Christ can be present to, the human heart through the means of a drum set and an electric guitar (as many evangelicals assume), then surely the Spirit can mediate Christ’s direct presence for salvation and

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<sup>27</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), Eucharist, III.31.

sanctification through the biblical means of water, bread, and cup, joined with the Word of gospel and grace.

As our hearts are restless until they find rest in God, the sacraments reflect the yearning of God to be present with his people. God is the one who invites us to the laver and to the Table. God, through the Spirit, tabernacles with us so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. As is the Holy Spirit himself, the sacraments also are a down payment and seal of God's promises and Christ's presence for our redemption. Perhaps they are not strictly necessary means, but the sacraments are ordinary means of God's justifying and sanctifying grace.

Finally, a practical-ecumenical suggestion: The criticism that comes from traditional Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches is that Christ is not present in the sacraments or ordinances of Protestant churches. If Protestants do not accept this criticism (as I do not), then it doesn't help for evangelicals positively to insist that Christ is not present in the Lord's Supper. Instead, for Orthodox and Roman Catholics who are willing to grant that the Spirit can work outside of their episcopal succession, biblical language would go a long way.<sup>28</sup> For those who are open to Protestant churches as being more than simply "ecclesial communities," a higher view of sacraments can be a small step toward greater unity of thought and worship.<sup>29</sup> Just as evangelicals should be able to say, with the New Testament, that baptism is "for remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), without immediately having to qualify it as not for remission of sins, so, when speaking the words of institution, we all ought to say, with the New Testament, that this "is" for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ (Matt 26:26–28), without immediately having to add the non-biblical word "represents." Simply using biblical language, without being scandalized by it, would help get evangelicals within earshot of the historic Christian tradition's and Scripture's doctrine of the efficacy of the sacraments. It also may enable

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<sup>28</sup> This, sadly, does not include all Orthodox and Roman Catholic believers. I grant that, for Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics who insist that the true sacramental presence of Christ does not obtain outside of their bishops' administration, this point may be a non-starter. In this case, a conversation about ministry is necessary first.

<sup>29</sup> "Ecclesial communities" is the language of Vatican II's *Unitatis redintegratio*, which also recognizes the importance of dialogue on the sacraments. *Unitatis redintegratio* 22, in *Decrees*, 2:920: "For these reasons dialogue should include among its subjects the Lord's supper and other sacraments, worship and the church's ministry."

us all to gaze more clearly into the divine beauty to which these physical signs ultimately point.

## **Technology as Messiah**

...[T]he question, “What will a new technology do?” is no more important than the question, “What will a new technology undo?” Indeed, the latter question is more important, precisely because it is asked so infrequently. One might say, then, that a sophisticated perspective on technological change includes one's being skeptical of Utopian and Messianic visions drawn by those who have no sense of history or of the precarious balances on which culture depends. In fact, if it were up to me, I would forbid anyone from talking about the new information technologies unless the person can demonstrate that he or she knows something about the social and psychic effects of the alphabet, the mechanical clock, the printing press, and telegraphy—in other words, knows something about the costs of great technologies....

Our unspoken slogan has been “technology über alles,” and we have been willing to shape our lives to fit the requirements of technology, not the requirements of culture. This is a form of stupidity, especially in an age of vast technological change. We need to proceed with our eyes wide open so that we many use technology rather than be used by it.

Neil Postman, “Five Things We Need to Know about Technological Change”

## **Didache on the Eucharist**

Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks as follows. First, concerning the cup: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever.” And concerning the broken bread: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge that you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever. Just as this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and then was gathered together and

became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.” But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord, for the Lord has also spoken concerning this: “Do not give what is holy to dogs.”

*Didache* (ca. 70)

### **Justin on the Eucharist**

...[B]read and a chalice containing wine mixed with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of all, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and he recites lengthy prayers of thanksgiving to God in the name of those to whom He granted such favors.

We call this food the Eucharist, of which only he can partake who has acknowledged the truth of our teachings, who has been cleansed by baptism for the remission of his sins and for his regeneration, and who regulates his life upon the principles laid down by Christ. Not as ordinary bread or as ordinary drink do we partake of them, but just as, through the word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ became Incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* (ca. 150)

### **Peter Lombard on the Eucharist**

We are cleansed by baptism; we are perfected in the good by the Eucharist. Baptism extinguishes the ardour of the vices; the Eucharist restores us spiritually. And so it is excellently called ‘Eucharist,’ that is, good grace, because in this sacrament not only is there an increase of virtue and grace, but he who is the fount and origin of all grace is wholly received.

Peter Lombard, *Sentences* (ca. 1150)

## **Robert Milligan on the Eucharist**

We must, therefore, simultaneously eat of the commemoration loaf and of the bread of life; and while we literally drink of the symbolic cup, we must also, at the same time, drink spiritually of that blood, which alone can supply the wants of the thirsty soul. *Unless we do this, the bread that we eat, can in no sense be to us the body of the Son of God; nor can the wine that we drink be in any sense the blood of the New Covenant, which was shed for the remission of the sins of many.*

Robert Milligan, *Millennial Harbinger* (1859)

## **Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry**

The Eucharist, which always includes both word and sacrament, is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God. It is the great thanksgiving to the Father for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, for everything accomplished by God now in the Church and in the world in spite of the sins of human beings, for everything that God will accomplish in bringing the Kingdom to fulfilment....

Christ himself with all that he has accomplished for us and for all creation (in his incarnation, servant-hood, ministry, teaching, suffering, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit) is present in this *anamnesis*, granting us communion with himself. The Eucharist is also the foretaste of his *parousia* and of the final kingdom....

As the Eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday. As it is the new sacramental meal of the people of God, every Christian should be encouraged to receive communion frequently.

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982)

## *Contributors*

Ted A. Campbell is Professor of Church History at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

Jason Fikes is Director of Abilene Christian University Press.

M. Todd Hall is Director of the Library and Assistant Professor at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Mark E. Powell is Professor of Theology at Harding School of Theology

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Keith D. Stanglin is Professor of Historical Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology