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CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Volume 30

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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.

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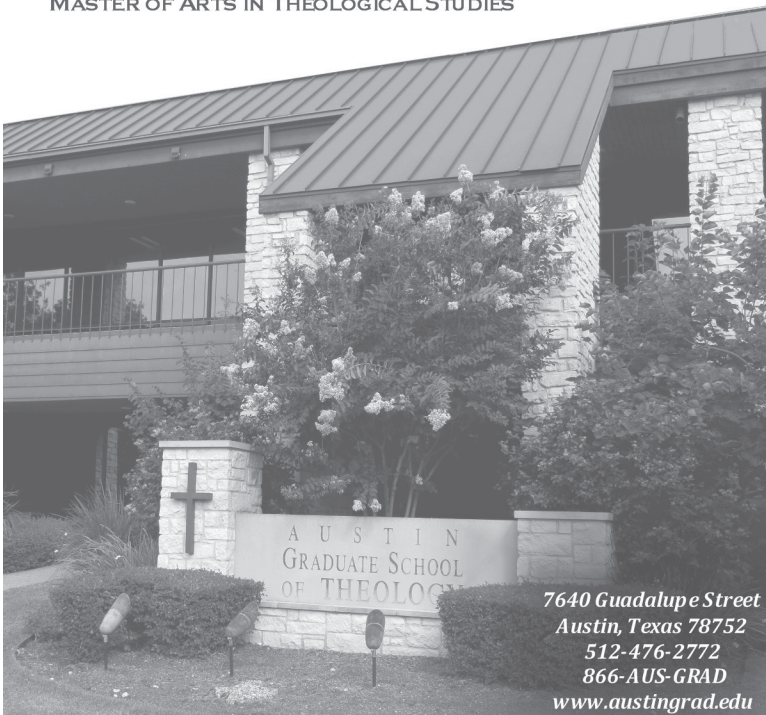


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Consecrated to the Lord: Two Cheers for Closed Communion

M. Todd Hall

A few years ago, the leadership at a congregation I attended was presented with a situation that raised the uncomfortable question of whether or not unbaptized visitors should be allowed to receive the Lord's Supper. The church had been blessed by the presence of several seekers and new Christians. One Sunday morning, as the bread was passed, one of the seekers present in the service received the plate in passing and took a piece of the bread. As he did so, the person seated next to him (a relatively new and very zealous Christian) took hold of the seeker's wrist and said, audibly, "You can't take that, you're not baptized!" In shock, the seeker replaced the bread and passed the plate. Despite the inadvisable pastoral strategy, the incident illustrates why the question of whether or not a person who has not been baptized should be invited to partake in the Supper remains relevant for churches today.¹ Some have suggested that, insofar as Jesus' table practice was thoroughly inclusive—indeed, the open table was definitive of Jesus' ministry—the church should also maintain an open table.²

What should the church do regarding this question, especially in this age in which inclusiveness seems to be central to the ethic of the contemporary

¹ In happier news, the seeker was actually baptized two weeks later, and the communion-protector was advised toward more effective pastoral strategies.

² See, for example, John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2002), 169–71. Hicks argues that only those who are in open rebellion against the Lord should be excluded from the table.

church (and culture)? I will argue that the Table should be reserved for those who have, through belief, repentance and confession, been baptized into Christ.³ My argument for this practice will be twofold. First, I will examine the biblical evidence and the practice of the early church regarding the partaking of the Supper by those who have not been baptized. While the evidence on either side of the question is thin, I believe that precedent favors reserving the Supper for the baptized. Second, in keeping with the methodology of my previous *Christian Studies* piece on baptism, I will argue that the Lord's Supper plays a vital role sociologically in the life of faith of a believer and a community, and that to receive non-baptized persons to the Table lessens the (trans)formative force of the ritual.⁴

The Biblical Witness

The nearest analog to the Lord's Supper in the Old Testament is the Passover meal.⁵ It was, of course, in the context of the Passover meal that Jesus applied the elements to himself and his mission (and that of his covenant community) in the Lord's Supper. While not completely identified with the Lord's Supper in the New Testament, the Passover does provide insight, I believe, into the question asked in this essay. Let us examine the relevant texts here.

Exodus 12:43–49. At the institution of the Passover, we find the following text:

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come

³ To be clear, I do not argue for withholding communion from Christians of other traditions; instead I argue that churches should withhold the Lord's Supper from non-Christian “seekers” who attend their services.

⁴ The argument for maintaining the Table for Christians alone is compelling, but perhaps not ultimately convincing (hence the subtitle of this piece). Still, it is an important question that deserves due consideration.

⁵ See R. Mark Shipp, “‘This Is the Covenant in My Blood’: The Lord's Supper, Passover, and Christian Community,” *Christian Studies* 18 (2000/2001), 5–13.

near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.” (ESV)

At its inception, it is clear that the Passover is to be reserved for Israelites or those who sojourn with them *who have been consecrated* through circumcision.

Numbers 9:9–14. In response to a question raised by “certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body,” (v. 6), the Lord replies,

Speak to the people of Israel, saying, “If any one of you or of your descendants is unclean through touching a dead body, or is on a long journey, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. In the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight they shall keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They shall leave none of it until the morning, nor break any of its bones; according to all the statute for the Passover they shall keep it. But if anyone who is clean and is not on a journey fails to keep the Passover, that person shall be cut off from his people because he did not bring the Lord's offering at its appointed time; that man shall bear his sin. And if a stranger sojourns among you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its rule, so shall he do. You shall have one statute, both for the sojourner and for the native.” (ESV)

The instruction here suggests that, again, those who sojourn with Israel must maintain covenant commitment in order to partake of the Passover. If we grant, then, that the Passover serves as an analog to the Lord's Supper, we must recognize that, at this point, the Passover has been reserved solely for those who have been consecrated to the Lord. And it is important to remember that the God of the Old Testament is not a xenophobe or a God who is only interested in caring for the covenant community. Indeed, in commanding Israel to preserve the overflow of their fields and vineyards for the care of the poor and the alien, for example, God extended his gracious bounty to both the Israelite and the alien.⁶ In a real sense, while Passover was closed to those outside the community, God's gracious hospitality was open through the fields and vineyards of Israel.

Similarly, Jesus' open table invitation in the Gospels is more reflective of God's requirement for open fields than it is of his invitation to participate in

⁶ See, for example, Deut 24:19–21.

covenant rituals. Jesus' table practice is thus an extension of God's merciful invitation into community, while the Lord's Supper remained exclusively for members of his covenant community.⁷ The argument that Jesus' open invitation in the stories of the feedings suggests that the Lord's Table should be open to those outside the community of faith draws a false equivalence between Jesus' invitation into the life of faith and Jesus' invitation to the covenant meal. In doing so, it also places tension between Paul and Jesus in terms of table practice, for, as I shall argue below, evidence suggests that Paul also reserved the Lord's Supper for members of the covenant community.

1 Corinthians 10. Paul's discussion of idolatry and the Lord's Supper is especially instructive. Paul is speaking to the covenant community of Christ about the covenant community of Israel⁸ who are meant to serve as an example (negatively) in the life of faith. Paul calls for the Corinthians to avoid sexual immorality and idolatry and explains that those who partake of the bread and cup are, *by virtue of their participation in the meal*, the one body of Christ. They must therefore avoid the feasts of the idols insofar as they are the "table of demons," and "you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons."⁹ Paul would have the Corinthians exclude from the Lord's Table those who are under the discipline of the church.¹⁰ It seems clear, as well, that those who are actively participating in the cults of the ancient world—which would have included almost universally those who had not been baptized into Christ apart from the Jews—would be barred from participating in the table as well, unless we suggest that only those who recognize they are dining with demons may not dine at Jesus' table.¹¹

1 Corinthians 11. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 14:23 that non-baptized persons were invited to be present for the Corinthians' corporate worship. This is

⁷ Cf. Luke 22:14—who was present at the institution of the Supper?

⁸ Who had been "baptized into Moses" in passing through the sea, vv. 1–2.

⁹ 1 Cor 10:20–21, ESV.

¹⁰ Hicks, *Come to the Table*, 170.

¹¹ See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 103, who argues that "Paul interpreted the 'communion' with Christ represented in the eating of bread and drinking of wine in a way that precluded Christian participation in any recognizable cultic meal in a pagan setting." I see no reason that this injunction would not be extended to non-Christians, unless Paul did not *actually* believe participation in the temple was dining with demons and was thus speaking metaphorically.

sometimes used as an argument for the inclusion of those who are not baptized in receiving the Lord's Supper. This argument is unsustainable in light of the purpose of the Supper as Paul expresses it in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. Paul argues that the taking of the Supper is the proclamation of the Lord's death until his return, and that the meal is to be observed toward "discerning the body," (11:29) which, in context, refers to the body of Christ, the church. Throughout chapter eleven Paul argues that the Supper is a unifying ritual which binds the body of Christ together, and this is why the Corinthians risk so much in abusing it in their divisiveness.

Thus, the church which partakes of the bread is the body of Christ and, for Paul, this is an ontological reality with consequences that are more than "spiritual." This view of the church as the actual, literal (and not merely metaphorical) body of Christ is reflected in 1 Corinthians 6. Paul engages the same libertine attitude among the Corinthians which is found in chapter 10—"everything is permissible"—with a discussion of "body" and "bodies," suggesting that a Christian who engages in sexual congress with a prostitute brings some sort of actual union with the body of Christ (1 Cor 6:15).¹² The union of the body of Christ which is created and maintained through the Lord's Supper is real, for Paul, and thus, though Paul does not explicitly argue the point, the Supper should be taken solely by those who are part of the body of Christ.

The Patristic Witness

Didache. The *Didache* offers witness to the practice of the earliest church related to offering the Eucharist to those who are not in the body of Christ. It offers what is perhaps the first argument as to why non-believers should be excluded from the Table. *Didache* 9:5 explicitly says, "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

¹² This interpretation is based upon Paul's use of *soma* rather than *sarx* in this discussion. See Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 176f. Martin suggests that Paul's assumption is that in Christ "the individual body has no independent ontological status.... The man's body and Christ's body share the same pneuma; the man's body is therefore an appendage of Christ's body, totally dependent on the pneumatic life-force of the larger body for its existence. The man who has sex with a prostitute is, in Paul's construction, Christ's 'member' entering the body of the prostitute."

holy to dogs.”” In grounding this teaching in the teaching of the Lord, the Didache suggests that the church understood that the practice of closed communion had been instituted by Jesus himself, and had been thus practiced from the inception of the Supper.

Justin. Writing around AD 150, Justin (Martyr) records that

[of the Eucharist] no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things which we teach are true, and has received the washing that is for the remission of sins and for rebirth, and who so lives as Christ handed down.¹³

By the mid-second century, then, Justin can describe as a matter-of-fact—without expecting contradiction—the exclusive Table practice of the church, in which those who have not been baptized into Christ (as well as those who are not living according to the teachings of Christ) are not allowed to participate in the Eucharist.

The Discipline of Secrecy. Daniel Napier has written previously on the third-century catechetical practice of the church, through which a “seeker” moved toward complete conversion and acceptance into the church.¹⁴ In discussing the worship of the church, Napier explained that catechumens gathered each Lord’s Day with the church, attending the first phase of the service known as “the liturgy of the catechumens.” After this, the catechumens would be dismissed from the remainder of the service, including the Eucharist, the Lord’s prayer, the creed, and baptisms.¹⁵

The Universal Practice of the Church. As far as I know, the church has always practiced closed communion until the last century or two. In the church of the fourth century, for instance, Christians visiting congregations in other regions carried with them certifications from their home bishops which allowed them admittance to the Eucharist in the parish of another bishop.¹⁶ This practice remained in effect almost universally even through the Reformation, and,

¹³ Justin Martyr, “The First Apology,” 66 In *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard, Ancient Christian Writers vol. 56 (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 70.

¹⁴ Daniel Austin Napier, “A Sound Conversion: Retrieving an Ancient Model of Christian Conversion,” *Christian Studies* 26 (2013/2014), 47–63.

¹⁵ Napier, “A Sound Conversion,” 55.

¹⁶ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), 132–33.

according to Hicks, Alexander Campbell himself excluded from the Lord's Table those who had not been baptized.¹⁷

The Sociological Importance of Closed Communion

Many scholars in many different fields have documented the loss of community and belonging in North America.¹⁸ This loss is disturbing especially in the current climate of inclusiveness. In an age in which membership requirements are anathema, and boundaries defining members of groups are loosening considerably, one would expect a growing sense of community and a declining sense of alienation. But, in fact, the reverse is increasingly evident. Why is this so?

Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that “liquid” is the proper metaphor for understanding our current sociological and philosophical reality.¹⁹ All of the institutions and especially traditions that have held society together—the sociological “solids”—have melted (or are melting) under the relentless pressure of modernity. This lack of solidity leads to disconnectedness, so that even with (and perhaps because of) social media and virtual “friends” people find themselves despairing of true communion.²⁰ Working concomitantly with the relentless drive toward inclusivity and emancipation found in popular postmodernism, modernity empties of any real meaning (and thus formative power) many of the rituals and ceremonies that have bound

¹⁷ Hicks, *Come to the Table*, 169. John Mark Hicks, “Alexander Campbell on Christians Among the Sects,” in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, ed. David Fletcher (Joplin: College Press, 1990), especially 189–92.

¹⁸ Several phenomena are explored as causes for this loss of community. See especially Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); John McKnight & Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

¹⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012).

²⁰ Cf. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 11–12: “Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection. And they report feelings of closeness when they are paying little attention. In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters, of any kind?”

communities together and given shape and meaning to the lives of members of these communities (e.g., St. Patrick's Day).

Human beings, however, have an intense need for both identity and belonging, as is made manifest in much of our society's constant search for various causes to take up—often mistaking political activism for community and identity. The irony of much of this activism is that it is often built toward tearing down traditional norms which are seen as exclusive and thus destructive of community. However, one cannot “belong” to a group without boundaries, insofar as the boundaries are the very defining characteristic of the group. Certainly, boundaries are exclusive—but exclusivity is a necessary condition of belonging. Boundaries define the privileges and responsibilities of individual members to the group of which they are a part.

Social scientists since Emile Durkheim have argued that rituals—exclusive to particular communities—are central to the creation and communication of culture.²¹ Rituals pass on the stories that form the basis for human community, and they do so not merely in word, but also in action and deed. They are concrete expressions of the unifying narrative of a specific community, and they are thus often insensible to and exclusionary of those outside the community.²² Rituals, ceremonies, and symbols that are exclusive to members of a community serve as strong bonds which provide both identity and belonging to those within the community.²³ In this way they are also formative for members of the community—shaping them into persons “of the story” of that particular community. They further serve something of an “evangelistic” function

²¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1947).

²² Though not necessarily *intentionally* exclusive, rituals are in their very formulation and social/cultural context by nature exclusive. E.g., the pledge of allegiance to the United States flag may be said by anyone, but only makes sense (and thus has meaning) in the context of U.S. citizenship. As a further example, one may certainly dress in sackcloth and ashes should one choose to do so, but one should not expect to be well received doing so without experiencing grief or engaging in deep repentance in a culture that identifies this ritual with those actions.

²³ I am collapsing, somewhat, the categories of rituals and ceremonies. For a more detailed discussion of the differences, cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), especially chapters 12–13. While the ritual and ceremony serve different functions within a community (from transition to maintenance), both serve to strengthen the bond of the community in question through providing both exclusion and inclusion.

in their exclusivity, insofar as they invite outsiders to become insiders by passing through the rituals of transitions observed by the community.

These are precisely the roles that the Lord's Supper plays in the Christian community. At the Supper, Christians observe the ceremony that rehearses the story into which they have been born again—into which they have transitioned through baptism. Observance of the Supper—the Supper that is exclusively for the followers of Jesus—thus provides a rich symbolism and embodiment of a place for both belonging and identity. It also provides, in its exclusivity, a strong unity among the followers of Jesus.²⁴ Thus if communion is withheld from those who are not followers of Jesus, perhaps ironically, it maintains its ability to create a truly formed and transformed community.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this essay that the Lord's Supper is meant to be reserved for the community of faith, and that when this is so it serves its purpose of forming a faithful community more effectively than if the Table is opened to those who come from outside of Christ's church. Many objections and questions remain, of course, but it is my hope that churches will consider the practice of closing the Lord's Supper to those who have not identified with Christ as Lord, as has been practiced by the church since at least the second century. As the communities and social structures of the modern world continue to disintegrate, it is vitally important that the church maintain traditions and practices that will continue to offer a place of community and identity. Ironically, in order to do so, it is vital that boundaries be established and that some practices be withheld from those who have not identified with the community. The Lord's Supper stands as one of the central ceremonies for the church that is meant to be reserved for the community and is thus fully empowered toward its transformative function when it is practiced exclusively.

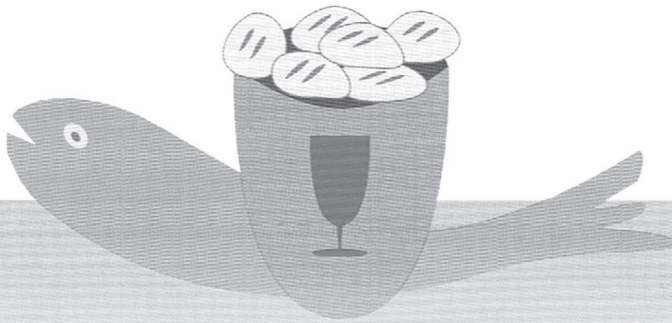
²⁴ Or at least it is meant to. As Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 159, explains, "For Paul and his co-workers, the corollary of unity in the body of Christ is strict exclusion from all other religious connections. That is, group solidarity entails strong boundaries."

Allan J. McNicol

What does one expect to take
place at the Lord's Table?

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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)

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