

The Sealing of the Covenant: The Reformed Administration of the Lord' Supper

Quarterly communion was the practice of the church in which I was reared. Like most low-church American Protestants we assumed a memorialist view of the Lord's Supper. We suspected something significant was happening at communion, but that sense only slightly outweighed our annoyance at the extra 20-30 minutes required for its administration. It was for us an add-on, something extra in the life of the church but in no way occupying space in the center of our congregational life.

The 1980's brought some changes in sacramental practices to the evangelical world. The burgeoning mega-churches adopted the strategy of moving communion to a weeknight. The rationale, not surprisingly, was the alleged irrelevance of the Lord's Supper to seekers who would find its administration off-putting and confusing. This pushing of the Lord's Supper even further to the periphery of the life of the church led to a counter-reaction. There was some experimentation with private communion, served in homes without ecclesiastical sanction among prayer and Bible study groups. Perhaps more widespread were the widely publicized moves to Rome, Canterbury, and Antioch by high-profile evangelicals who sensed that they were being deprived of something profound by the diminished role the eucharist was being given in their churches. They left in search for a more hospitable environment for a sacramental piety.

It is a shame that the status of the Lord's Supper should ever have been reduced in the churches of the Reformed tradition. The pendulum need not swing to the extreme of high-church sacramentalism to see a true sacramentalism in the historic Reformed practice. The Reformers,

no less than the Patristic and medieval theologians, held the Lord's Supper in the highest regard. Indeed the Reformers through to the Puritans attempted to stake out their position on the sacraments between the corrupting errors of the Anabaptists to the left, and the Roman Catholics to the right. With apologies to Queen Elizabeth and the Anglican settlement the Reformed saw themselves as the true *via media* between the denegation of the sacraments among the Anabaptists and the idolatry of the Roman Catholics.

There is a proper Reformed sacramental piety which places the sacraments at the center of the Christian life and the life of the church without supplanting the ministry of the word. That is, the sacraments are central but subordinate; they are a means of grace but always and only if accompanied by faith, and never *ex opere operato*. They came to their conclusions through theological reflection and a historical-grammatical reading of the eucharistic texts (Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:17-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25), which, they found, could not sustain the medieval consensus. Both the theology and the administration of the eucharist, they believed, on the basis of their biblical studies, were in desperate need of reform. The central insight to which they came was that the Lord's Supper is a covenantal meal. As such, it seals or confirms the mutual obligations of the covenant. Moreover, they concluded its administration should retain its integrity as a meal.

Background

It is clear enough in the New Testament that the meal in the upper room is a covenantal meal. It stands in line of continuity with Abraham's meal with Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18), his meal with the three heavenly visitors (Genesis 18:1-8), Jacob's meal prepared for his father Isaac

(Genesis 27:19), supremely the Passover (Exodus 12, 13), and the subsequent meal on Sinai (Exodus 24). All three synoptic gospels identify the Passover context and the Apostle Paul joins them in identifying the covenantal language: “This is my blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; cf. Hebrews 9:20). Hughes Old expresses the meaning of covenant meals simply: “partaking of the meal was the act of entering into a covenant with the Lord.”¹ In the New Testament the Last Supper, which becomes the Lord’s Supper, is a simple meal, a supper.

From the *Didache* (ca. 80 – ca. 110 A.D.) we learn that the early church maintained strong continuity with the Passover Seder, filling the Passover form with Christian content. Scholars have found it remarkable that in the *Didache*, the oldest eucharistic liturgy that we possess, Jesus’ words are not repeated in a prayer of consecration setting apart the elements. Many scholars have concluded on that basis that the *Didache* is not describing a celebration of the sacrament, but as Old argues, “surely this opinion is in error.”² The language of sacrifice *is* found in the *Didache* but only in the sense of a “sacrifice of praise” (14:1; cf. Malachi 1:21; Hebrews 13:11).³ “The eucharistic prayers,” admits liturgical scholar, C. C. Richardson, “portray a period when the Lord’s Supper was still a real supper.”⁴

Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* (ca. 155) consolidates the several Passover prayers into a single prayer of thanksgiving for which certain features were customary, but which gave great latitude

¹ Hughes Old, *Worship: That is Reformed According to Scripture* (1984, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 114.

² *Ibid*, 121.

³ *Didache*, Cyril C. Richardson (trans. & ed.), *Early Christian Fathers* in Library of Christian Classics, Vol. I (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 142, 178.

⁴ *Didache*, 166.

to the one presiding, who prayed “according to his ability.”⁵ Justin’s consecration of the bread and wine is a prayer of thanksgiving. The words of institution are included in the liturgy but appear not to be a formula of consecration. As with the *Didache* the eucharist is considered a sacrifice only in the sense of a “sacrifice of praise” (Mal 1:11). According to Old, the “covenantal aspect” is evident in that “those who participate are baptized and keep or intend to keep God’s commandments.”⁶ Tertullian (c. 155–230) first applied the Latin term *sacramentum*, meaning “sacred oath,” to the Lord’s Supper, demonstrating in so doing the insight of the early church into its covenantal nature.

Development

By the time of Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 217), the language of sacrifice has begun to shift from the metaphorical to the actual. The bread and the wine are seen as an offering or oblation.⁷ Though there is still “no formulated canon,” as Old points out, the words of institution have moved from the liturgy into the prayer of consecration.⁸ Hippolytus’ meaning is unclear and his intent has been widely debated. Moreover it is unclear how much weight should be given to Hippolytus, a schismatic Roman bishop, or to what extent he was *reporting* the views and practice of the church and to what extent he was *advocating* for what then may have been a minority position.⁹ Additional questions have been raised about the date of the *Apostolic Tradition*. Maxwell E. Johnson, Professor of Liturgy at Notre Dame University, speaks of an “emerging scholarly view” that the *Apostolic Tradition* is neither Hippolyton, Roman, or early

⁵ Justin Martyr, “First Apology” in *The Ante-Nicene Father: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 1 (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, 1985), 186.

⁶ Old, *Worship*, 122.

⁷ St. Hippolytus, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. The Rev. Gregory Dix (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: the Macmillan Company, 1937), xiii.1, 40.

⁸ Old, *Worship*, 122.

⁹ See Thompson, *Liturgies*, 15.

third century, pushing much of the material, in the form we that we have it, into the fifth century and later.¹⁰ Even so, “From this point on,” says Hughes Old, “the communion services begin to become more and more an act of consecration and sacrifice. The eucharistic prayer begins to occupy greater and greater importance as the act of consecrating or transforming the bread and wine and presenting them as oblation or sacrifice to God.”¹¹

The famous sermons preached by Ambrose between 380 and 390 A.D., entitled *De sacramentis*, “On the Sacraments” reveals a great deal about the evolution of eucharistic practice by the end of the fourth century. Ambrose clearly understands words of Jesus in the eucharistic prayer to be words of consecration by which the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. They are then “offered” as an “oblation.”¹² That is, the consecrated bread and wine are offered as a sacrifice to God. “One notices,” Hughes Old observes, “that with his increased emphasis on consecration and oblation, the aspects of thanksgiving and covenant have receded into the background.”¹³

Diminished participation in the sacraments, often in connection with the delay of baptism, is also evident toward the end of the fourth century. Emphases on the “worthy receiving” of the eucharist led to increased numbers of Christians watching but not receiving the elements. Both John Chrysostom and Augustine denounced this practice yet it persisted and grew.

¹⁰ Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition” in Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (eds), *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 32ff; see also J. Matthew Pinson, *Perspectives on Christian Worship: 5 Views*, 2-3.

¹¹ Old, *Worship*, 122.

¹² St. Ambrose, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments*, trans. T. Thompson and ed. by J. H. Srawley, *Translations of Christian Literature, Series III, Liturgical Texts* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919), 4.21-23.

¹³ Old, *Worship*, 123.

Also negatively impacting the level of lay participation in the sacrament was the increased dramatization of its administration. Cyril of Jerusalem's *Mystagogical Catechisms* (ca. 350 A.D.)¹⁴ as well as Egeria's description of her visit to Jerusalem in her *Pilgrimage Journal* (ca. 410),¹⁵ popularized highly dramatized eucharistic practices that had been refashioned after the pattern of the mystery religions. They describe preparatory rites, washings, anointings, exorcisms, candlelight processions, midnight baptisms, the wearing of white robes, and communion at dawn of Easter Sunday. This coincided with the cultivation of what Hughes Old calls "sacred fear." This can be seen in the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), who saw the eucharist as an event to be celebrated as an "awe-filled mystery."¹⁶

In time the devotional posture of fear and awe led, in the east, to moving the most sacred part of the service to a position behind the iconostasis, the sacred screen, hidden from the people. In the west the words of consecration were spoken in a reverential hush that was inaudible to the congregation, and accompanied by the ringing of bells. With the elevation of the host, the people were to bow reverentially.

Augustine (354–430) reemphasized the biblical and covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper. He stressed the divine initiative and grace in the sacraments and gave to the church its classical definition of a sacrament as an external sign of an inward and spiritual grace, and as a "visible word." Regrettably, Augustine's insights fell on "hard times," as Hughes Old points

¹⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, "Five Catechetical Lectures" in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1983).

¹⁵ *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, (eds.) Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler, trans. George E. Gingras (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1970).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 124.

out.¹⁷ Classical civilization was collapsing before the barbarian onslaught. For many generations to follow he was either neglected or misunderstood.

With the Romanizing of the empire of Charlemagne (742–814), including his church, and the language used within that church, the triumph of the ceremonial was assured. Because the church was ministering to a people who could not understand ecclesiastical Latin, it was considered imperative that the church's message be acted out in the drama of the liturgy. Pictures, symbols, vestments, gestures, rituals, and images became the means by which the church communicated its message. "More and more the faithful understood the liturgy as a sacred drama to be watched with awe ... even though the worshippers might not understand the liturgical language, they could understand the visual ceremonies."¹⁸ In something of an understatement Old continues: "The splendid celebration of the Roman Mass in a Rhineland cathedral in the year 1500 had developed into something quite different from the celebration of the Passover Seder that Jesus observed with His disciples in the upper room."¹⁹

This ceremonialism was part of a larger liturgical movement or development. In the space of 500 years the church moved from word-based apostolic simplicity to Medieval ceremonial ostentation. *Lectio continua* reading of Scripture gave way to *lectio selecta*; expository preaching gave way to festal or lectionary preaching; free prayer gave way to written liturgies; congregational hymnody and psalmody gave way to monastic choirs; the Lord's Supper gave way to the mystery of the mass; the Lord's Day gave way to the church calendar; and baptism got lost in a host of washings, anointings, and exorcisms. The ministry of the church shifted from

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 125.

¹⁹ Ibid, 126.

the pastoral to the priestly, from the ministry of the word to the offering of the eucharistic sacrifice. In the process the word-focused and fed piety of the church gave way to an ascetic detachment from this world and a superstitious attachment to visual ritual and relics. It took 500 years for this transition to occur. It would be 1000 years before these developments would be challenged and the call to reform the church “according to Scripture” would be heard.

Reform

The Reformers sought to reverse all of these trends, none more so than the eucharistic theology and practice of the church. They leaned heavily upon Augustine (354–430), who in his arguments with Donatists and Pelegians, emphasized the biblical and covenantal understanding of the Lord’s Supper, as well as the divine initiative and grace in the sacraments. They embraced his above-mentioned classical definition of a sacrament (“external sign of an inward and spiritual grace” and as a “visible word”), as well as his stress of the necessity of faith in confirming the covenant saying, “Believe, and you have eaten.”²⁰

Theological insights

We may begin with several pertinent theological insights of the Reformation, using the categories designated by the Reformation mottos.²¹

²⁰ Cited by Luther in “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” in James Atkinson (ed.), *Three Treatises*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 133; from Augustine, *Sermo* 112, cap. 5. Migne 38, 645; also by Zwingli in “On the Lord’s Supper” in G. W. Bromiley, *Zwingli & Bullinger* in John Baillie, et. al. (ed.) *The Library of Christian Classics*, Volume XXIV (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 197.

²¹ Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) argues that *sola fides*, *sola Scriptura*, and *solus Deo gloria* are the controlling principles of Calvinistic thought (2-7, 195-233). Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) sees Calvin’s theology as centered on the principles of *solus Deo gloria*, *solus Christus*, and *verbum Dei* (188-194). Eire also cites the German scholar Ernst Saxer who sees Calvin’s opposition to the Roman Catholic worship rooted in *sola fides* and *sola Scriptura* (Eire, 198, note 12).

First, the principle of *sola Scriptura* led to the reduction of the liturgy. The Reformers believed that Scripture's own self testimony is that Scripture alone is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice (e.g. 2 Tim 3:16,17; Mk 7:1ff). The principle of "Scripture alone" meant in the realm of worship that the church's services must be conducted "according to Scripture." "The Bible was at the heart of Zwingli's reformation," argues Zwingli scholar W.P. Stephens.²² Virtually every page in Bucer's *Grund und Ursach* (1524) records an appeal to Scripture in order to justify the reforms of worship in Strasbourg. Bucer insists of their reforms that "everything is based on the Scriptures."²³ Calvin is emphatic that there is "nothing obscure, nothing ambiguous" in the warnings of Deuteronomy 12:32 and Proverbs 30:6 not to "add to" or "take away" anything from God's word, "when the worship of the Lord and precepts of salvation are concerned."²⁴ The church is forbidden "to burden consciences with new observances, or contaminate the worship of God with our own inventions."²⁵ "I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His word," Calvin laments in his 1543 treatise on "The Necessity of Reforming the Church."²⁶ He calls "for the rejection of any mode of worship that is not sanctioned by the command of God."²⁷ This insistence on worship "according to Scripture" has been maintained from Calvin and the Westminster Divines and continues to the present day.²⁸ The church, Reformed Protestantism has agreed, is only to do in worship that which Scripture enjoins. Inherited

²² W.P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 30; quoted in Begbie, 114.

²³ Martin Bucer, *Grund und Ursach*. Text is found in O.F. Cypris, *Basic Principles: Translation & Commentary of Martin Bucer's Grund und Ursach*, 1524 (Dissertation: Union Theological Seminary of New York, 1971), 208; cf. 76, 174, 184, 185, 198, 204, 208, etc.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1 & 2, The Library of Christian Classics, Vols. XX & XXI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.x.17, 1195.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.x.18, 1197.

²⁶ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in Henry Beveridge (ed.) *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, Volume 1, Tracts, Part 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁸ E.g. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.8.17; "On the Necessity of Reforming the Church," 133; WCF XX1.1; Larger Catechism Nos. 108 & 109; the work of modern authors such as John Leith, Hughes Old, and Robert Godfrey, among others.

practices which could be biblically justified were maintained and typically transformed, as in the cases of preaching, prayer, Scripture reading, singing, and the administration of the sacraments. Extra-biblical ceremonies, rituals, signs, images, symbols, decorations, and gestures were removed so as to allow undistracted focus upon the ministry of the word and the God-ordained signs of the Lord's Supper and baptism.

The principle that worship must be "according to Scripture" has sometimes been called the "regulative principle" and has distinguished Reformed Protestantism from the less rigorous approach to the reform of worship pursued by the Lutherans and Anglicans. As the discussion was refined over time, *elements*, which were carefully limited (Scripture reading, sermon, prayer, sung praise, and the administration of the sacraments, creeds) were distinguished from *forms* (types or shapes the elements might take) and *circumstances* (lighting, seating, building, time, etc.) where greater latitude was allowed.²⁹ *Sola Scriptura* meant in practice that the reform of worship in general and of the Lord's Supper in particular would be based on comprehensive biblical exegesis and careful theological formulation. Current eucharistic practices would be subjected to rigorous reevaluation.

Second, the principle of *solus Christus* led to the reform of the eucharist. The doctrine of transubstantiation was first affirmed by the Lateran Council of 1215, developed more fully by Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74) and reaffirmed by the Council of Trent (1545–63). Through the "miracle of the mass," this doctrine teaches, the communion bread becomes the substance of Christ's body and the wine becomes the substance of Christ's blood, though in both cases the

²⁹ See Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship: Worship that Is According to Scripture: Revised & Expanded* (2000; Greenville: Reformed Academic Press, 2003), 30-32.

“accidents,” the external appearances, remain unchanged. The consecrated elements are then offered by an ordained priest upon a consecrated altar as a propitiatory sacrifice, that the Lord may be “appeased by the oblation thereof.”³⁰ Since the Reformers understood that Christ’s atoning work was “finished” (John 19:30); that He died once for all time, and that His sacrifice was final and complete (Hebrews 10:12; 1 Peter 3:19), this medieval *understanding* of the sacrament was transformed as well as the *manner* of its administration, and the *identity* of the administrator. Luther began to work out these principles in his *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in 1520. He termed the “most dangerous of all” of Rome’s errors “the common belief that the mass is a sacrifice which is offered to God.”³¹ Those who deny transubstantiation, the substantial presence of Christ, and the sacrifice of the mass, are anathematized.”³² He denounced transubstantiation as “a monstrous word and a monstrous idea” based on the “pseudo philosophy of Aristotle” unknown to the church for 1200 years.³³ He denied any change in the substance of the bread and the wine. “It is real bread and real wine in which Christ’s real flesh and real blood are present . . .”³⁴ He urged the church to “put aside whatever has been added to its original simple institution by zeal and devotion of men: such things as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things.”³⁵ In his *Formula Missae*, his first reform of the mass (1523), he repudiates “all those things which smack of sacrifice” and retains only “those things which are pure and holy,”³⁶ though he later drew back from some of the implications of the new theology.

³⁰ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol. II* (1889; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 179.

³¹ Martin Luther, ‘On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church’, in James Atkinson (ed.), *Three Treatises*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 171.

³² See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol. II* (1889; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 179.

³³ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁶ Thompson, *Liturgies*, 111; cf. Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” see especially 151-153.

Bucer in *Grund und Ursach* (1524) and the whole Reformed tradition went much further than Luther proved willing to go. Bucer, like Luther, vehemently insists that “it is the most abominable, most poisonous and most harmful insult and slander of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, to believe and to say that the priest in the Mass offers Him as a sacrifice.”³⁷ He cites Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:12, 10:14, Isaiah 53:6-7, and a number of other basic texts, as he repeats eight times in twelve pages (in our translation) that Christ’s sacrifice was “once-for-all.”³⁸ Calvin speaks of the belief in the Mass as a sacrifice as “a most pestilential error” and “an unbearable blasphemy.” Indeed, “the cross of Christ is overthrown as soon as the altar is set up.” Christ’s sacrifice, Calvin says, citing Hebrews 9:12,26; 10:10,14,18 and John 19:30, “was performed only once and all its force remains forever.”³⁹ The finality of Christ’s atonement is central to Reformed eucharistic theology. Thomas Cranmer’s communion prayer of consecration in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1547), underscores with dramatic redundancy the Reformed view:

Almighty God our heavenly Father, which of Thy tender mercy did give thine only son Jesus Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, who made there (by his *one oblation of Himself once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world* (my emphasis)).⁴⁰

³⁷ Bucer, *Grund und Ursach*, 69.

³⁸ Ibid, 80-92.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xviii.1-3, 1429-1431.

⁴⁰ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 280.

Bucer explains at length that the language of sacrifice, as well as gestures, clerical clothing, sanctuary furnishings, and rituals that implied sacrifice, had to be removed from the administration of the Lord's Supper lest the external trappings of the eucharist contradict the Reformed (i.e. biblical) theology of the eucharist. The sacrifices that Christians offer, the Reformers argued, are sacrifices of praise offered on a spiritual altar in a spiritual house by a royal priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5; cf. Hebrews 13:15; Psalm 50:12-15, 23; 116:17). Whatever implied or suggested sacrifice had to be eliminated from the liturgy. The clergy would not turn their backs to the congregation for the words of consecration. The elements would not be elevated for the adoration of the congregation. Altars were replaced by tables, priestly vestments were replaced by simple robes, and the term "priest" was replaced by the term "pastor" or "minister." These alterations were more than mere changes in terminology. The whole job description of the clergy changed as the implications of *solus Christus* began to be grasped. Calvin said, "The Lord has given us a table at which we may feast, not an altar on which a victim may be offered; He has not consecrated priests to sacrifice, but ministers to distribute a sacred 'feast.'"⁴¹ That is to say, the eucharist, Reformed Protestantism has understood, is *communal* not mystical, a *meal* not a mass, a *supper* not a sacrifice, administered by a *pastor*, not a priest, on a *table* not an altar, and served to those who are *seated* (for a meal) not kneeling.

Third, the Protestant principle of *sola fide* also had an extensive impact on the manner in which the Lord's Supper was administered. Since the faith of the participant is a critical factor in a profitable participation in the eucharist, and since faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Rom 10:17), the Reformed church could not be content to conduct the service in Latin, with the

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.12, 1440.

priest muttering in hushed tones the unintelligible words of consecration, *hoc est corpus meum* (from which the popular misconception of *hocus pocus* was derived) from in front of the altar with his back to the congregation, or worse, from behind a screen, called the iconostasis, as in the Orthodox church. Calvin complained that, “Their consecration is nothing but a piece of sorcery, seeing that, by murmuring and gesticulating in the manner of sorcerers, they think to constrain Jesus Christ to descend into their hands.”⁴² Their “obscure muttering and breathing,” their “whispering and blowing,” are nothing but a “magical incantation,” he insisted, which “wickedly profane(s)” the sacrament.⁴³

Consequently the Reformers required that the sacraments be administered in the context of the word read and preached. Calvin maintained “the right administering of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the word.”⁴⁴ Not only must the words of institution be read but they must be accompanied by “living preaching.”⁴⁵ Why? Because faith comes by hearing the “word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The sacrament benefits only those who receive it with faith. Those who partake blindly, without knowledge, without understanding, and without trust receive the sacrament in vain.⁴⁶ As Calvin said, apart from the word, the sacrament has no efficacy but remains “a lifeless and bare phantom.”⁴⁷ Calvin’s view, says Fuller Seminary theologian and

⁴² John Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Lord & Only Savior Jesus Christ” (1540) and “The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper” (1561) in, J.K.S. Reid (ed.) *Calvin: Theological Treatises, The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXII, Gen. Ed. John Ballie, et. al. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 161.

⁴³ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Vol. III, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. A.W. Morrison, eds. Davies and T. F. Torrance (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, 1972), 134.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.39, 1416.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ On the impact of the theology of the Reformation on the manner of the administration of the sacraments see Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴⁷ Cited in Thompson, *Liturgies*, 192.

historian G.W. Bromiley (1915–), is that “the sacrament as a visible word needs the audible word to declare its meaning and to make explicit its summons.”⁴⁸ This means both that the words of institution should be read loudly and clearly but also there should be scriptural exhortation and preaching.

“For Reformed theology the sacraments always take place in the context of preaching and teaching,” explains John Leith (1919–2002), “and their ultimate validity,” he continues, “depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁹ Leith notes that whereas Calvin agreed to a service of preaching without the sacraments, “he would never have agreed to the sacraments without the word in preaching and teaching.”⁵⁰ This has been the norm in the Reformed tradition. Similarly, Donald MacLeod (1914–2008), former Professor of Homiletics & Liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary, identifies as “one of the major principles of Reformed worship” the conviction that “the sacrament without the Word is empty.”⁵¹ He quotes with approval German theologian and Calvin scholar Wilhelm Niesel: “In themselves and apart from the divine promise of grace these signs mean nothing.”⁵² He cites Calvin’s argument that, “If the visible symbols are offered without the Word, they are not only powerless and dead, but even harmful jugglery.”⁵³ Again, says Calvin, “without the Word the Sacrament is but a dumb show; the Word must go before.”⁵⁴ When Reformed Protestants administer the sacraments, their baptismal and communion services are filled with Scripture reading, explanation, and exhortation.

⁴⁸ G.W. Bromiley, *Sacramental Teaching and Practice in the Reformation Churches* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 77.

⁴⁹ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Revised Edition (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1981), 187.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Donald MacLeod, *Presbyterian Worship: Its Meaning and Method* (Richmond: John Knox, 1967), 62.

⁵² Ibid, citing Niesel’s *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 212.

⁵³ Ibid, 62, Citing *Corpus Reformatorum*, Vol. IX.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 62, Citing *Institutes*, IV.xvii.39. See also Howard G. Hageman, *Pulpit & Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1962), 112; Robert Letham,

Exegetical insights

Concurrent with the new theological insights were a number of exegetical discoveries that furthered the case for reform.

Covenant

First, the Reformers recovered the biblical concept of “covenant.” Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Corinthians 11:25 NASV; cf. Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:20; Mark 14:24). Communion, the Reformers argued, must be understood as a covenantal ordinance.

The biblical covenants were given careful study in the original languages by Luther, Zwingli, Capito, Bucer, Calvin, and Bullinger, often in relation to sacramental theology. A covenantal understanding of the Lord’s Supper is present in Martin Bucer’s *Grund und Ursach* (1524), and increasingly clear in the successive revisions of the *Strasbourg Psalter* (1526, 1532, 1533, 1537, 1539). Similarly, Zwingli’s “Communion Invocation” reflected a covenantal perspective of the Lord’s Supper, as did Calvin’s theological writings and communion sermons.⁵⁵ They came to understand that the Lord’s Supper and baptism were signs and seals of the covenant, as the Apostle Paul calls circumcision in Romans 4:11. The sacraments, says Calvin in his comments on this passage, “are seals by which the promises of God are in a manner imprinted on our

The Lord’s Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2001), 50; Hughes Old, *Worship*, 128.

⁵⁵ See Hughes O. Old, “The Covenantal Dimension of Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology,” unpublished paper presented at the Calvin Colloquium, January 2006, 1-28; also, Hughes O. Old, “Calvin as Evangelist: A Study of the Reformer’s Sermons in Preparation for the Christian Celebration of Passover,” in John Leith (ed), *Calvin Studies VII, Colloquium on Calvin Studies*, January 28-29, 1994, 51-60. Old claims that in Calvin’s Easter week sermons we have “the beginning of the Reformed communion season, the prototype of the Reformed preparatory service,” 52.

hearts, *and the certainty of grace confirmed*” (my emphasis).⁵⁶ He attributes to them “the office of sealing,” that is, of “ratifying the righteousness of faith.”⁵⁷ Similar language is used in the *Institutes*. A sacrament, he says, is “a sort of appendix, with a purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it.”⁵⁸

Second, Scripture presents the Lord’s Supper as a meal. It is a covenantal meal. It is a symbolic meal. But it is a meal. They noted that the two biblical terms for the Eucharist, the “Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor 11:20) and the “Lord’s Table” (1 Cor. 10:21) point to the apostolic understanding of sacrament as a meal.⁵⁹ The event of the Upper Room, the “Last Supper” occurs in the context of an ordinary Passover Seder, served on a table (Mt 28:17-25; Mk 14:12-16; Lk 22:7-13). It was this simple feast, and no other, that Jesus commanded we repeat in remembrance of His death. “Do this,” that is, repeat this simple ceremony, “in remembrance of Me” (Lk 22:29; 1 Cor 11:24,25). “What resemblance has the mass to the institution of Christ?” Calvin asks of the medieval pageant that the Lord’s Supper had become.⁶⁰ His question assumes that our administration of the Lord’s Supper should resemble that which Christ instituted. “Nothing is more obvious than that their mass is poles apart from the Holy Supper of our Lord.”⁶¹ Yet, Jesus said, “Do this.” Communion should be understood not as a highly ritualized sacrifice offered upon an altar by a priest, but a supper offered to the covenant community upon a table by a pastor. In addition, as we have seen, the principle of *solus Christus*, elaborated in terms of the

⁵⁶ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Ross Mackenzie (trans), Calvin’s Commentaries, David W. and Thomas F. Torrance (eds.) (1540, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 89.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.3, 1278.

⁵⁹ See *Patristic Roots*, 27.

⁶⁰ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, John W. Fraser (trans.), Calvin’s Commentaries, David W. and Thomas T. Torrance (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 257.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

unique, complete, and unrepeatable nature of Christ's atonement, prohibited a sacrificial understanding of the sacrament.

Third, the Lord's Supper, as a covenantal meal, seals the covenant agreement. The Lord's Supper, they argued, is the Christian passover in which, as with the many covenantal meals before it, agreement between the two participating parties is ratified or confirmed (Exodus 12:1ff; 24:1ff; cf. Genesis 14:17-20; 18:1-13; 26:26-32; 27:1ff; 31:44-46; Proverbs 9:1-6). Hence when Jesus announced, "This is the new covenant in my blood," He was signaling that by participating in the meal His covenant with His disciples and, in turn, the disciples' covenant with Him, was being ratified and confirmed. In discussing the application of the term *sacramentum*, its background as a solemn oath that soldiers took binding them to their commanders, Calvin says "by our signs we do profess Christ our commander and testify that we serve under his ensign."⁶² Sacraments have a two-fold function, he says. "They should serve our faith before God; after this . . . they should attest our confession before man."⁶³ That is, through the sacrament God confirms His promise to redeem those who come to Him through the cross of Christ, and communicants in turn promise to be faithful servants of the Christ whom they trust. This understanding of the two-way action of the sacraments will prove crucial in Reformed ministry and pastoral practice. According to Peter A. Lillback, President of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, "the binding between men and God, Calvin believes, is the foundational significance of the sacraments." For Calvin, says Lillback, "The sacraments

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.13, 1288.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1289.

illustrate vividly the mutual nature of the covenant between God and His people.”⁶⁴ As the sacraments “are testimonies of grace and salvation from the Lord,” says Calvin,

so from us in turn they are marks of profession, *by which we openly swear allegiance to God, binding ourselves in fealty to him.* In one place Chrysostom therefore has appropriately called them “covenants,” by which God leagues himself with us, *and we pledge ourselves to purity and holiness of life, since there is interposed here a mutual agreement between God and ourselves.* For as in them the Lord promises to cancel and blot out any guilt and penalty contracted by us through our transgression, and reconciles us to himself in his only-begotten Son, so do we, in turn, bind ourselves to him by this profession, to pursue piety and innocence. Hence you can rightfully say that such sacraments are ceremonies by which God wills to exercise his people, first to foster, arouse, and confirm faith within; then to attest religion before men” (my emphasis).⁶⁵

“Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments is saturated with the covenant,” says Lillback.⁶⁶ Specifically Calvin “understood quite well how often in the Scriptures the sharing of a meal was the way an agreement was sealed,” says Old.⁶⁷ In the Supper, says Calvin, God, “in some measure renews, or rather continues, the covenant which he once for all ratified with his blood (as far as it pertains

⁶⁴ Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 246.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.19, 1295.

⁶⁶ Lillback, *Binding of God*, 263.

⁶⁷“It was quite natural that the full Semitic color of Scripture should become evident to them in a way it had not been evident to Christian theologians for over a thousand years. Moreover the Hebrew concept of covenant gave the early Reformed theologians an alternate to scholastic theology and its attempt to explain the sacraments in terms of the Aristotelian philosophy” (Old, *Worship*, 131).

to the strengthening of our faith) whenever he proffers that sacred blood for us to taste.”⁶⁸ The “chief function” of the Lord’s Supper, he says, “is to seal and confirm that promise by which he testifies that his flesh is food indeed and his blood is drink (Jn 6:56), which feed us unto eternal life” (Jn 6:55).⁶⁹ Moreover, the meal, properly understood, is not only individual, but communal. It is not merely a private ordinance, but a church ordinance in which the whole Christian community participates. It is a Christian Passover which not only strengthens the faithful for life’s pilgrimage, but also reminds participants of their obligations and responsibilities: diaconal (mutual love), moral (holy living), missional (outreach and evangelism), and doxological (thanksgiving and praise).

Body & blood

Fourth, Reformed Protestants recovered the natural meaning of Jesus’ references to His “body” and “blood.” They argued that His words were not meant literally or physically, as though His body and blood were spatially located in the bread and wine. Rather the words of institution were meant to be understood metaphorically, symbolically, and spiritually. The bread and wine *represent* His body and blood. “He is speaking figuratively,” says Calvin in his commentary on 1 Corinthians. “The name body (is) given to the bread because it is a sign or symbol of the body.”⁷⁰ Zwingli insisted that this was the “simple or natural sense” of Jesus’ words,⁷¹ Calvin, their “simple and literal sense.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xvii.1, 1361.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, IV.xvii.4, 1363.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Commentary* (on 1 Corinthians), 245.

⁷¹ Huldrych Zwingli, “On the Lord’s Supper,” 192,193.

⁷² John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Vol. III, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. A.W. Morrison, eds. Davies and T.F. Torrance (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, 1972), 134.

Regarding John 6, the text to which Roman Catholic apologists so often turned, both Luther and Zwingli insist that John 6, in Luther's words, "must be entirely excluded from this discussion, since it does not refer to the sacrament in a single syllable." Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves" (Jo 6:53; cf. 6:48-58). But Jesus qualified His meaning by saying, "The flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (Jo 6:63). These words, Luther explains, "shows that he was speaking of a spiritual eating . . . no eating can give life except that which is by faith, for that is truly a spiritual and living eating." He then cites Augustine who said, "'Why do you make ready your teeth and your stomach? Believe, and you eaten.'"⁷³

The Reformation era discussion was extensive and complex and the subsequent literature is vast.⁷⁴ But essentially upon the basis of careful exegesis of Scripture, study of the church fathers, and a fresh appreciation of the finality and sufficiency of Christ's atonement, Reformed Protestants urged a spiritual understanding of the Supper, one which took seriously the meaning of Jesus' words while continuing to affirm the sacrament as a means of grace. The "real presence" of Christ, His physical, corporeal, spatial presence, was denied whether as expressed through the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation or the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. However, Christ's "true presence" was affirmed. The continental Reformed

⁷³ Luther, "Babylonian Captivity" in *Three Treatises*, 133, cf. 162-163; also Zwingli, "On the Lord's Supper," in *Zwingli & Bullinger*: Zwingli says Jesus "is not speaking of the sacrament, but preaching the gospel" (199). Again, "with his own words Christ teaches us that everything which he says concerning the eating of flesh or bread has to be understood in terms of believing" (207).

⁷⁴ While Calvin and Zwingli disagreed their differences can be exaggerated. Zwingli did not hold a memorialist view. He too believed in a true or spiritual presence of Christ's divinity. Calvin went on to argue for the spiritual presence of Christ's humanity as well. There is no evidence that Zwingli disagreed, though he did not develop this thought. See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv-xix, 1276-1484. "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Lord & Only Savior Jesus Christ" (1540) and "The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper" (1561) in, J.K.S. Reid (ed.) *Calvin: Theological Treatises, The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXII, Gen. Ed. John Ballie, et. al. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 1954, 140-166; 257-324.

mostly avoided the use of the term “real” when describing the nature of Christ’s presence. Even in the much conflicted Anglican church of the sixteenth century this reluctance was considerable. Article 29 of the Forty-Two Articles (1552) of the Church of England denied “the real and bodily presence (as they term it) of Christ’s flesh and blood, in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.”⁷⁵ Similarly the 1552 version of the *Book of Common Prayer* included a clarification on kneeling, the so-called “black rubric,” which explained that receiving the sacrament on one’s knees did not imply “any real and essential presence.”⁷⁶ However, Christ’s “true presence,” His spiritual, personal, and actual presence, in the fullness of His humanity and divinity, was affirmed by all the Reformed.⁷⁷

Much more could be said about the Reformer’s fresh exegetical insights drawn from Jesus’ eucharistic words. The Lord’s Supper came to be understood as a “memorial,” as a “remembrance,” that is as a recollection of God’s mighty acts of redemption in Christ, for which communicants give thanks (eucharist). The Lord’s Supper as “kerygma,” as that which “proclaims the Lord’s death” also received emphasis. The Lord’s Supper displays, even proclaims the basic truths of the gospel. Whether considered as covenant, spiritual meal, memorial or kerygma, the Lord’s Supper is rich in meaning, but, the Reformed tradition insists, it is not a sacrifice.

⁷⁵ Article 28 of the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) replaced this statement with the affirmation that “the body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper only after a heavenly and spiritual manner.”

⁷⁶ Thompson, *Liturgies*, 284. This language was removed in 1563 and restored, with changes, in 1662.

⁷⁷ See Joseph N. Tylenda, “Calvin and Christ’s Presence in the Supper—True or Real,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1974): 65-75. Tylenda has demonstrated that Calvin deliberately avoided the language of “real presence” (*praesentia realis*) in all of his eucharistic writings. He identified real presence with Roman Catholic and Lutheran views of Christ’s substantial and carnal presence. Calvin preferred to speak of a “true presence” (*veram praesentiam*) distinguishing his view of Christ’s actual presence from theirs. See also J. Ligon Duncan, “True Communion with the Lord’s Supper: Calvin, Westminster, and the Nature of Christ’s Sacramental Presence,” in J. Ligon Duncan (ed.), *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, Vol. 2 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 429-475.

Reformed Administration

The practical implications of a covenantal and spiritual understanding of the eucharist were profound: the communion service was to look like a meal. “From the very beginning of their existence, the Reformed churches had insisted that the Supper is a meal and is to be administered at a table,” says B. B. Warfield, in his typically insightful essay, “The Posture of Recipients at the Lord’s Supper.”⁷⁸ The language of sacrifice, as well as gestures, clerical clothing, titles, and furnishings that implied sacrifice, were removed from the service. As noted, the Lord’s Supper would be served on a table by a pastor. “The fundamental fact, determinative of all such questions for the Reformed,” says Warfield, again, “is that the Supper is a feast and is to be administered at a table.”⁷⁹ Kneeling, though indifferent in itself, was not only unsuitable to “the festival symbolism of the rite,” as Warfield puts it, but “imminently improper” and even “very compromising” because of “its association with the idolatry of the mass.”⁸⁰ Communicants continued to come forward to receive communion in Geneva, and in the Swiss, German, and French Reformed churches. John à Lasco’s Stranger’s Church in London seems to have influenced John Knox and the Scottish churches as well as the Dutch churches to serve communicants seated, even seated at tables.⁸¹ The customary posture for eating a meal is sitting. That posture which best reinforces the eucharist’s nature as a covenant meal is seated communicants. Over time this would become customary. Further, communicants would no longer be denied the cup but would receive the eucharist in both kinds. The manner of

⁷⁸ B. B. Warfield, “The Posture of the Recipients at the Lord’s Supper,” in John E. Meeter, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield – II* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), 352.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁸¹ See Thompson, *Liturgies*, 293.

administration, the Reformed tradition insisted, must reinforce the nature of the eucharist as a covenantal meal, and the elements as spiritual food.

Pastoral Application

The *pastoral* implications of Reformed sacramental theology were enormous as well. The convenantal and spiritual understanding of the eucharist restored the table to its central role in the life of the people of God while avoiding sacerdotal and sacramentalist distortions. The Lord's Supper provides necessary spiritual food for redeemed souls. The means of grace in the English-speaking Reformed tradition are a three-legged stool, of the word, sacraments, and prayer. The life of the church cannot maintain its biblical balance if one or more of the means are reduced in status.

Beginning with the Reformers, the communion table became in the Reformed churches the place at which the commitment to Christ was sealed, that is, reaffirmed, or refused. Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Holy Fairs* traces this development among the Presbyterians in Scotland, whose elaborate communion seasons have become well-known.⁸² The theme of the mutual sealing of the covenant can be seen among the English Puritans, for example, in Edward Reynold's (1599–1676) *Meditation on the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Last Supper*, published in 1639, in Jeremiah Burroughs' *Gospel Worship*, first preached in 1646, and in John Owen's (1616–83) "Sacramental Discourses," in particular Discourse 10, delivered in May of 1674.⁸³ The Larger Catechism (1647) speaks of the Lord's Supper as that place at which believers "have the union

⁸² The story on this may be found in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Record* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁸³ See Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 33ff, 169-175; Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship: or the Right Manner of Sanctifying the Name of God in General* (1648; Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 282ff.

and communion with (Christ) confirmed” (Q. 168). They are engaged in the “renewing of their covenant with God, and love to all the saints” (Q 174). This theme of sealing or confirming the covenant continues among New England’s Puritans and America’s Presbyterians through the nineteenth century, but more about that in a moment. Whether communion was administered annually, as among some of the Scots, quarterly as with others, or monthly as with the New England Puritans, Reformed people came to understand that if they were to do business with God it would be at the table. If one were an unbeliever, reconciliation with God would be consummated at His table. The meal, for its part, whether administered annually, quarterly, or monthly, was a poignant reminder that one was outside of God’s covenant family, and excluded from His saving provisions. If one were a baptized but non-communing child of the church, confirmation of one’s faith would take place at the table. The table for such was an ongoing reminder that though a covenant child, one had unfinished business with God. If one were a back-slidden Christian, rededication would take place at the table. The fenced table, excluding the unrepentant, was like a divine cannon-shot over the bow, warning one to get right with God. If one were a faithful believer, reaffirmation of the covenant with Christ would take place at the table. The table for such was a blessed spiritual meal, a reminder of the gifts of grace, and communion with the risen Christ Himself. The table was the Reformed altar-call. There one was to deal with Christ, for there He was present, there He was most clearly seen, and there He issued His invitation to “take, eat,” “drink from it,” and enjoy His benefits.

The classic pastoral treatment of covenantal communion is Matthew Henry’s *The Communicant’s Companion*, first published in 1704.⁸⁴ He provides a standard Augustinian

⁸⁴ Matthew, Henry, *The Communicant’s Companion*, in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry*, Vol. 1 (1855; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 284-428.

definition of a sacrament: “It is a sign, an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” It is “a parable to the eye.”⁸⁵ Not only is a sacrament a sign, but it is also an oath, “by which we bind our souls with a bond unto the Lord.”⁸⁶ By partaking of the Lord’s Supper the “bargain” made with God in His gospel is ratified and perfected.⁸⁷ God, for His part, promises to be our God. Henry explains:

“What God is in himself, he will be to them for their good. His wisdom is theirs, to counsel and direct them; his power is theirs, to protect and support them; his justice is theirs, to justify them; his holiness is theirs, to sanctify them; his goodness is theirs, to love and supply them: his truth is the inviolable security of the promise; and his eternity the perpetuity of their happiness. He will be to them a Father, and they shall be his sons and daughters, dignified by the privileges of adoption, and distinguished by the Spirit of adoption.”⁸⁸

We, for our part, “by this ordinance seal to him, to be to him a people.”⁸⁹ Henry elaborates:

“We accept the relation by our voluntary choice and consent, and bind our souls with a bond, that we will approve ourselves to him in the relation. We hereby resign, surrender, and give up our whole selves, body, soul, and spirit, to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, covenanting and

⁸⁵ Ibid, 285.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 296.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 297.

promising that we will by his strength serve him faithfully, and walk closely with him in all manner of gospel obedience all our days. Claiming the blessings of the covenant, we put ourselves under the bonds of the covenant. O Lord, truly I am thy servant, I am thy servant; wholly, and only, and for ever thine. And this is the meaning of this service.”⁹⁰

Henry summarizes, “A covenant is to be ratified between God and our souls in the Lord’s Supper.”⁹¹

This is the core of Henry’s understanding, and he would have it shape our pastoral application of the sacrament. The unbelieving are to be urged to enter the covenant. Lapsed believers are to be urged to renew the covenant. Baptized youths are to be urged to come and “seal” the covenant, or “ratify your baptism,” or “stand to the bargain,” or “be Christians complete” by coming to the table.⁹² “Come then,” he says, “and seal your covenant with God.”⁹³ He urges not only negatively, by pointing out the sin of negligence, but positively, by highlighting the benefits to be gained:

“While we are often in temptation, we have need to be often renewing our covenants with God, and fetching strength from heaven for our spiritual conflicts.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 311.

⁹² Ibid, 300-301.

⁹³ Ibid, 305.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 306.

Again he says,

“Thou wilt find time, as busy as thou art, to eat and drink, and sleep, and converse with thy friends; and is not the nourishment of thy soul, is not repose in God, and communion with him, much more necessary?”⁹⁵

“Fetching strength” and gaining “nourishment” for the soul are benefits not to be neglected.

In Henry’s hands, the ratification of the covenant in the Lord’s Supper becomes the means by which the whole spectrum of potential communicants are to be addressed. Self-examination, confession of sin, and particular “pious resolutions” and “penitent reflections” are to be urged for all.⁹⁶ Henry urges “frequent” communion (as did the Westminster Divines), which to him means at least once a month (“I know not why we should neglect it any month”⁹⁷). The “sad experience” of seeing pious affections grow cold teaches that,

“We have therefore need to be often celebrating the memorial of Christ’s death and sufferings, *than which nothing can be more affecting* to a Christian, nor more proper to raise and refine the thoughts.”⁹⁸ (my emphasis)

⁹⁵ Ibid, 307.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 319.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 306.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

The communion table, then, in classic Reformed Protestantism, becomes the focal point of the spiritual life of the congregation, as each occasion those in attendance are urged to prepare to ratify or renew the covenant through self-examination, confession of sin, and reconsecration. After participation, they are to look back to the last communion service: “we must consider what our ways have been since we were last renewing our covenants with God at his table.”⁹⁹ Each occasion of its administration the process is to be repeated. Because of the intensive process of preparation for the Lord’s Table, because of the covenant that is ratified there, because of the spiritual nourishment that is received there, and the fellowship with Christ enjoyed there, the table occupies a central role in the life of a Reformed church as Henry envisions it.

Henry presents Reformed sacramental piety at its best. This piety emphasizes God’s blessed covenant with His people in Christ and all the benefits that it represents and conveys. It also emphasizes the people’s response in covenanting with Him: preparation, renewal, thanksgiving, and dedication. A generation later the same themes can be seen in North America in the preaching of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), Gilbert (1706–1764) and William Tennent, Jr. (1733–1777), David Brainerd (1718–1747), Samuel Davies (1723–61), and Samuel Blair (1741–1818), among others. Nearly all of Edward’s communion sermons emphasize the Lord’s Supper as a seal both on God’s part and on our part. In an undated sermon, “The Communion of the Christians,” he says, “God sets His own seal to the covenant of grace and we also set our seal. We seal our own engagements.”¹⁰⁰ At the table the covenant is “owned” and renewed.¹⁰¹ In a second sermon entitled “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a Very Sacred Ordinance,” preached in January of 1732, Edwards refers to the table as a place of “mutual covenanting”

⁹⁹ Ibid, 314.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons on the Lord’s Supper* (Orlando, Florida: The Northampton Press, 2007), 15.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 18, 30.

where the covenant is “renewed and sealed.”¹⁰² “Their eating and drinking,” says Edwards in “The Lord’s Supper is a Solemn Representation,” preached January of 1750 or 1751, “declares that they accept Christ as their food. Here they openly profess their union of heart, their faith and love.”¹⁰³ Edwards makes frequent reference to Old Testament covenant feasts as establishing the pattern for understanding the Lord’s Supper as “seals of peace and friendship.”¹⁰⁴

Brainerd’s diary entries reveal the same emphasis on the covenantal sealing function of the Lord’s Supper. Preparatory services for what he calls “sacramental solemnities” began with several meetings on Friday and Saturday, April 25 and 26 of 1746, and concluded with afternoon services on Monday, April 28. During these services he endeavored to instruct his Native American congregation respecting the covenant of grace and “the nature of this ordinance as a seal of that covenant.” From 2 Chronicles 31 he “proposed to them that they should renewedly enter into covenant before God.”¹⁰⁵ The continuation of this tradition can be seen in the communion sermons of the Scotsman John Willison (1680–1750), the American J. W. Alexander (1804–1859), the Englishman C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), and on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁰⁶

We repeat ourselves: the central place occupied by a covenantal eucharist in the Reformed church reminds us that *frequency* of administration is not to be confused with *importance* of

¹⁰² Ibid. 44, 45; cf. 46, 53.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 75, 76.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 76; cf. 17, 84, 94, 119, 122 (especially Gen 26:30 and 31:44-46).

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1985), 388, 389.

¹⁰⁶ John Willison, *A Sacramental Catechism* (1720, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000); Samuel Davies, *The Sermons of Samuel Davies*, Vol. 2 (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000); J.W. Alexander, *God is Love*, (1860; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985); C.H. Spurgeon, *Till He Come: A Collection of Communion Addresses* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, n.d.).

observance. Reformed Protestants may not have always observed the Lord's Table with great frequency. But traditionally this did not indicate a deficient grasp of its importance. What was lost in frequency was made up in intensity, as the Lord's Supper, in connection with extensive preparatory seasons of preaching and prayer, for generations occupied a central place in the practice of Reformed Protestantism. The Lord's Supper, rightly administered, places the word read and preached at the center of its observance. D. M. Baillie (1887–1954), progressive Scottish theologian from the mid-twentieth century, repudiated much of his strict Calvinistic upbringing. Yet he made our point when he lamented the diminished importance of the sacraments in his day as compared to that of his grandfather's. "The Communion Season' in Scotland used to be a great and solemn occasion," he said. "It might be only twice a year," he acknowledged, "but it had a dominating importance."¹⁰⁷ The Lord's Supper, rightly understood, takes the place of honor at the center of the life of the Reformed church. It has a "dominating importance." It is, as John Willison said, "the Epitome of the whole Christian Religion, both as to Doctrine and Practice."¹⁰⁸

Conclusions

How then, in light of Reformation exegesis and theology, is the Lord's Supper to be administered?

1. *Administer the Lord's Supper regularly.* The sacraments are one of three primary means of grace, along with prayer and the ministry of the word. They should not be relegated to the wee hours of the morning or to a week night. They should play a central role in the life of the

¹⁰⁷ D. M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments: and Other Papers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 40; see also 91-92.

¹⁰⁸ Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 116, from his *Sacramental Directory* (1716).

Reformed church. The Lord's Supper should be administered "frequently," says the Westminster Assembly's *Directory*.

The counsel of frequent administration is a direct result of a Reformed theology of the eucharist. The typical church member in the Middle Ages communed annually. Calvin urged weekly communion though he settled for quarterly communion on a rotating basis each month in Geneva's four churches.¹⁰⁹ The Scots practiced quarterly communion, and New England's Puritans administered the Lord's Supper monthly. The question of frequency can be and has been extensively debated. How frequent is frequent? The Reformers and their heirs saw this as a worthwhile question because they believed that at the Table the people of God enjoy communion with the risen Christ (1 Cor 10:16). There they partake of true spiritual food and drink which nourishes the soul (1 Cor 10:3,4). Whatever the frequency, the Supper is a necessary and vital means of grace for the people of God and may not be neglected.

Frequent administration provides regular occasions to present the gospel with God-ordained visual props – the bread and the cup – proclaiming as we do the sacrificial meaning of Christ's death and the promise of "the forgiveness of sins" through His blood "poured out for many."

There are a number of voices calling for weekly communion. Some are insisting that this is biblically required, even claiming that anything less exposes a defective sacramentalism.¹¹⁰

Weekly communion, while advocated by Calvin, has, in fact, not been the practice of the

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.43, 1421.

¹¹⁰ e.g. Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: the Grace of Covenant Worship* (Moscow Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), 213ff; Clark, *Reformed Confession*, 283-284, n. 206; "The Evangelical Fall from the Means of Grace," in *The Compromised Church*, John Armstrong (ed.) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 133-47; Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging & Traditional* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 139-40.

Reformed tradition as a whole, not in Europe, not in Great Britain, not in North America, not anywhere else that the Reformed faith has gone.¹¹¹ Reformed Protestantism has demonstrated a decided preference for *intensity* of observance over *frequency*. Personal preparation, self-examination, and contemplation have been encouraged with the utmost seriousness going back to the Reformers and continuing through the centuries. *Shorter Catechism* Q97 and *Larger Catechism* Q's 171, 174, and 175 are exemplary of Reformed sacramental piety:

LC Q 171: How are they that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to prepare themselves before they come unto it?

Answer: They that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience; and by renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer.

Examination by sessions, use of communion tokens, the “fencing of the table” all underscore the Reformed emphasis on intensity, that is, on careful, in depth, observance of the Lord’s Supper. Reformed churches in both Britain and North America developed the preparatory services, and even communion seasons mentioned above, to encourage proper preparation for the Table.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Other important advocates of weekly communion include John Owen and Jonathan Edwards.

¹¹² See Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*.

These services would typically begin on Thursday and continue each evening, culminating in the Sunday morning service. Both Sunday evening and Monday evening were then devoted to thanksgiving. Extended preparation and careful participation was thought to be required both by the importance of the eucharist and the severity of the biblical warnings respecting “unworthy” participation (1 Cor 11:27-32).

A preference for monthly or quarterly communion should not be interpreted as indicating diminished importance any more than should weekly observance of necessity indicates heightened importance. We would urge that the Reformed tradition’s reluctance to practice weekly communion be taken seriously, even if it is not to be followed slavishly.

Frequency, we would argue, is a wisdom issue. Church life on the Lord’s Day typically includes an instructional hour before or after morning worship. Normally one will not want to compromise the sermon by reducing it to less than 30 minutes. Also one will not wish to rush through the administration of the sacraments or partake without careful preparation. Word and sacrament together, uncompromised and unrushed, will probably require an hour and a half or more. Most churches will probably find such a commitment difficult to sustain. An hour of Sunday School plus an hour and a half of public worship on Sunday morning is too much on a regular basis. Reports gathered from various sources, as well as our own experience in Reformed churches practicing weekly communion and yet maintaining a commitment to serious preaching, confirm our fears: communion is rushed and often irreverent. Our recommendation is *monthly* communion, once a quarter in the morning, the other eight months in the evening. This honors

the Lord's Supper as a vital means of grace without short-changing the sermon, while also recognizing the realities of church and family life.¹¹³

2. *Administer the Lord's Supper covenantally* – Administer the Lord's Supper as a meal which seals the covenant. Not only is it a time when the gifts of God in Christ are enjoyed, when redeemed hearts are gladdened and tender consciences reassured. It should also be a time of covenant renewal. The invitation to the table may function as the Reformed altar call, calling sinners to repentance, calling covenant children to commitment, calling the backslidden to renewal, and welcoming the faithful to table fellowship and spiritual nourishment with the risen Christ. As we have seen, Matthew Henry's *Communicant's Companion* is particularly insightful in this regard. Covenantal communion is a powerful monthly reminder of the need of those in contact with the covenant to “do business with God,” as we have put it.

3. *Administer the Lord's Supper simply*. The sacraments are to be administered with ceremonial simplicity. The words of institution are to be read as gospel promises rather than as a formula of consecration with accompanying gestures, furnishings, costumes, and rituals. The eucharist is to be administered as a covenantal meal, following the pattern of the Last Supper. Because the sacraments are essentially simple in their form, they do not stand in need of ritual enhancement. They should include only as much ceremony as is necessary to distribute the elements in an orderly manner. They have no need of additional visual props in order to make the truths they announce or portray more palatable. The Reformed tradition eschews extrabiblical

¹¹³Those who argue that the Lord's Supper must be observed each week fail to convince. If every week, why not every service, morning and evening on Sunday, midweek, and whenever? Among some advocates of weekly communion there is a suspicious failure to recognize the supremacy of the word over the sacrament. Yes the sacraments are vital. But they are dependent on the word in ways that the word does not depend on them.

rituals and images as “lifeless and theatric trifles, which serve no other purpose than to deceive the sense of a people stupefied.”¹¹⁴ Extraneous gestures, postures, and ceremonies obscure the God-given signs and are distracting. The word simply read and preached and the sacraments simply administered and received stand on their own, without visual or ceremonial enhancement. Remember, the sacraments themselves are the sign. They should not be cluttered with other activities whether they be relatives around the baptismal font, a walk with the infant up and down the aisles of the church, or pastoral counsel at the table. Do not obstruct, obscure, or confuse the signs. Do not elevate the host. Do not kneel. Do not use wafers. It is of doubtful wisdom to have communicants come forward as if to an altar rail. Communicants should be seated, ideally, though not necessarily, at a table. But they should be seated. Warfield, in his previously cited essay on the subject of posture at the Lord’s Supper, cites the seventeenth century Scottish theologian and commissioner at the Westminster Assembly, George Gillespie (1613–48), who said, “we ought to come to the table of the Lord to receive the mystical food in the sacrament, as well as we come to our ordinary table for our ordinary food.”¹¹⁵ This is the historic Reformed view. We sit when we eat, we do not kneel and normally we do not stand. By saying this we are not imposing a law. Rather we are reminding ourselves that the Lord’s Supper should look like a meal. “*The Form of Prayer* set forth a ‘simple’ service: radically simplified rhythm and texts,” notes L. P. Wandel of Calvin’s order. “Reformed Churches,” she continues, “sought . . . self-consciously to approximate (the supper as it was described in Gospels in) its ‘simplicity’ in table, in vessels, in dress, and in movement.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.43., 1421.

¹¹⁵ Warfield, “Recipient Posture at the Lord’s Supper,” 365. For more on Gillespie’s opposition to kneeling and insistence on sitting, see George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the Church of Scotland* (1642; Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 1993), 74, 75, 128, 170-180, 205-241, 248, 430-445.

¹¹⁶ Wandel, *Eucharist in the Reformation*, 169, 260.

4. *Administer the Lord's Supper according to Scripture.* Jesus modeled two distinct sacramental actions involving first the bread, and then the cup. Each is accompanied by the command, "Do this" (1 Cor 11:24,25). These should not be confused. Regarding intinction (the practice of dipping the bread into the cup), it is hard to justify reducing the two sacramental movements ("take, eat," "drink from it") to one (Mt 27:26,27). A generation ago Joachim Jeremias, in his brilliant study, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, demonstrated that the separation of the symbols of Jesus' body and blood was a significant part of the sacrificial imagery that Jesus was invoking.¹¹⁷ The blood and flesh were separated in Old Testament sacrifices. The former was sprinkled or poured on the altar, the latter consumed as a burnt offering. Their separation is an important element in a sacrificial, atoning understanding of Jesus' death. This sacrificial symbolism should not be obscured by an unwarranted conflation. Our observance of the Lord's Supper should be "according to Scripture," consequently as close to the scriptural account as is practical. Intinction, a practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church that was not introduced into the Western church until the eleventh century, and then condemned by the Council of Clement in 1095, and again by the Council of London in 1175, ordinarily should not be practiced.¹¹⁸

5. *Administer the Lord's Supper in the context of counsel & instruction.* All first communions should be preceded with counsel or instruction. Non-communing children making their public profession of faith as well as adult converts should be thoroughly examined to determine the credibility of their profession of faith prior to admission to the Lord's Supper. Instruction is necessary, though one need not repeat the errors of the fourth century, where

¹¹⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 222.

¹¹⁸ Davies, *Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*, 286.

catechumens were required to demonstrate their “worthiness” to receive baptism and be admitted to the eucharist. Instruction is not a matter of worthiness. Rather the aim should be to ensure that converts grasp the nature of the covenant into which they are entering, the covenantal meaning of the meal, and the level of commitment required.

6. *Finally, administer the Lord’s Supper with the word.* Word and sacrament in Reformed practice always belong together. The Lord’s Supper should be accompanied by preaching as well as explanation of the nature of the Lord’s Supper, distinguishing correct from defective views, as well as the qualifications of those who partake. The table should always be “fenced,” that the unconverted, uninstructed, unprepared, or unrepentant not partake in an “unworthy manner,” lest they eat and drink judgment to themselves (1 Cor 11:27-29).