

The Feast of Easter

Practicing the Eucharist weekly during the Great Fifty Days: An apologetic

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In June 2006, the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) extended a robust invitation to all its congregations to embark on a spiritual journey of renewal together. The Assembly summoned the church to explore and rediscover practices that may both deepen its understanding of its baptismal identity and reignite its joy in participating in its Eucharistic vocation as the body of Jesus Christ, in whose life the church is called and privileged to participate. The invitation to the churches was to engage in five simple sacramental practices along with subsequent congregational study and reflection on how those practices might shape and equip the church for its life and work.¹¹ The hope was that such a rediscovery of Christ's gifts of the sacraments for the church could possibly become a means used by the Holy Spirit to bring about a certain transformation for the church's ministry as it leaned headlong into the 21st century.

To be sure, some of these practices were not new for some congregations. Conversely, there may still be congregations for whom these suggestions remain unaddressed. It is wise to acknowledge that transformation—which our church confesses is God's dream for the world and the church in it—is slow, patient, thoughtful, and oftentimes arduous work. Neither the Assembly nor its designated "Sacraments Study Group" imagined that all congregations of all 173 presbyteries would adopt wholesale, or even find helpful, the report that resulted from the work of that group. However, at least one congregation in

one presbytery prayed earnestly and took seriously the Assembly's call to strengthen and rediscover its own baptismal identity, its eucharistic vocation, and its sacramental practices, and it did so in such a way that that church's life and ministry have been irrevocably changed.

This article intends to tell that church's story; to encourage congregations to commit to deeper practices, including more frequent celebrations of the Eucharist, and to exhort one another to do so beginning with the season of the Great Fifty Days of Easter. It also intends to describe a process by which a congregation might be moved in the direction of weekly Eucharist during the Great Fifty Days.

One Congregation's Response to the Invitation

By the time the Sacraments Study Group's 67-page report, *Invitation to Christ: A Guide to Sacramental Practices*, was published in 2006, the First Presbyterian Church, Owensboro, Kentucky (FPCO), had already begun praying about and discussing faithful ways to approach the whole of our congregation's ministry with more sacramental emphasis. After a series of Church School classes on Spiritual Formation and Practice in the Reformed Tradition, the church began implementing liturgical practices demonstrative of its commitment to a richer experience of and a deeper delving into the mysteries of our sacramental tradition.

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of the nave, was opened prior to each Lord's Day worship, and was filled with water which was poured from a pitcher during the confessional sequence in the liturgy. The font was and is never without water, even throughout the week; it is refreshed each day by a member of the church's staff as a constant, visible reminder of our having been claimed into the family of God. Additionally, fresh bread and grapes adorned the table on patens placed next to a flagon and a chalice as a visible reminder of the feast which nourishes and unites God's people, even when the Eucharist was not being administered. The Prayers of the People were already being offered from behind the table as an embodiment of our hope to be joined with the community of saints in the feast that is now and that is to come. Gestures to font and table were offered in the ministry of proclamation; language of adoption, claiming, equipping, and sending filled the liturgy. Moreover, references to our sacramental identity and vocation were encouraged during committee meetings, fellowship events, youth fundraisers, and home and hospital visits.

Soon some in the congregation made observations about this renewed emphasis and about their appreciation for it. Many parishioners have reported a deepening awareness of the role that the sacraments play both in the congregation's corporate worshiping life, as well as in their personal lives. They have begun, they say, to make bolder connections between what goes on in corporate Lord's Day worship and what goes on in their workaday lives. They have delighted to share that the gap is narrowing between how they practice the presence of God on Sundays and how they are able to see and experience that same transformative presence in other areas of their lives. They have begun to see God's story unfolding in their own, which has brought new meaning and depth to the mundane routines of their everyday lives.

For instance, one parishioner has observed the thoughtless morning ritual of bathing become an occasion to remember her baptism, and to remember that though she may have woken feeling distanced or estranged, she has been claimed and

named as a child of God whose place in the family of God can never be diminished, undermined, or eradicated by any of the pressures she experiences in work and family life.

Another parishioner has taken to setting the dinner table early in the morning so that as the family passes by the table on their way in and out and in again for school and work, they are reminded that they will soon gather as a family for a common meal together with one another and with Christ. They have now even taken to placing a candle in the center of the table to symbolize Christ's presence.

Many parishioners have expressed a desire to assist in the design of the liturgy by the shaping and sharing of prayers and the selection of hymns. Since these forms of expression are shared by the entire church, offering their input allows them to incorporate their own experiences of sacramental life within and beyond the congregational context. As a result, some parishioners are experiencing renewed personal interest in the sacraments because of increased churchwide communication, education, and homiletical emphasis on the role that the sacraments play in the church.

But the experience of renewal as reported by parishioners is not limited to the personal or familial; congregational renewal is happening as well. The weekly celebration of the Eucharist—with its oft-repeated, generous Invitation—has led the congregation into risky conversations about hospitality and inclusivity. The Words of Institution now heard regularly have encouraged a consideration of how we—the Body of Christ—are, just like the bread, taken, blessed, broken, and given to the world in loving service to the Christ in our neighbors. The corporate movement to the table has inspired thoughtfulness about complacency in matters of faith, and the movement away reminds us of the call to rise up, nourished and ready, to enter God's mission in our community. Added to this is the Prayer After Communion, an important practice of congregational renewal, which symbolically directs us to follow the trail of crumbs that leads to those who are most in need again and again.

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The weekly acceptance of the Eucharist has also given rise to renewal—personal, familial, and congregational—and is a practice that has continued to shape and form the way we experience both the Eucharist and the liturgy that surrounds it. While finding the Prayers of Great Thanksgiving printed in the *Book of Common Worship* (BCW) to be helpful models for faithful table prayer, the congregation’s transformational experiences of the Eucharist have inspired this minister to be diligent in architecting prayers that are faithful to scripture, our Reformed tradition, our Eucharistic theology, and the experiences of the people. Such an effort is only the beginning of the solution to an age-old dilemma: how to reintegrate the Word *and* the sacraments rather than pretend that each stands alone?

Reintegrating Word and Sacrament

The Directory for Worship declares that the Word written (Scripture), the Word proclaimed (preaching), and the Word enacted and sealed (the sacraments) bear testimony to Jesus Christ, the Word living.² John Calvin made it clear that it was a “settled principle” that the sacraments have the “same office” as the Word of God.³ That is, the sacraments “offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”⁴ A reasonable conclusion would be that we should move toward more frequent celebration.

However, the *Book of Order* only circumspectly promotes weekly celebration, saying, “It is appropriate to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as often as each Lord’s Day.” The usage of “appropriate” here suggests the validity of weekly participation while not directly encouraging the churches to engage in such a practice. Though not exactly a swing in the opposite direction from Calvin’s hard-line requirement of weekly practice, the *Book of Order* does little to stimulate further conversation about the wisdom, goodness, or faithfulness of increased participation. Perhaps, then, a bridge might be built between Calvin’s rigid insistence and our polity’s rather passive exhortation.

Such a bridge may be found in the BCW, which is informed by Calvin’s theology as well as that same permissive and hopeful tone of the *Book of Order*. However, the BCW argues with authority that “From New Testament times, the celebration of the Eucharist on each Lord’s Day has been the norm of Christian worship . . . From the church’s institution, the Lord’s Day and the Lord’s Supper

were joined.”⁵ Thus, the BCW makes a strong case for weekly Eucharist as a generally accepted practice among Presbyterians, and it does so by observing the movement of the Service of the Lord’s Day as being “from hearing to doing, from proclamation to thanksgiving, and from Word to table.”⁶ Perhaps, then, there is in those congregations that celebrate less frequently a kind of disconnect relative to the unity of our sacramental life. If we profess (which we do!) that our baptism and its claim on us penetrates every aspect of our lives such that our very identity is shaped and formed by the new identity we share in Christ, then why (or better, how?) could we *not* include in every Lord’s Day worship strong references, gestures, and allusions to the font, to water, and reaffirmations of the new life we have in Christ? And what happens to our understanding of our baptismal identity in the absence of such an emphasis? Though baptisms are not often administered weekly, the gift that baptism always is can easily be lifted up by the liturgy itself—its language, rubrics, and movement—and by the placement of the font, its usage in worship, and by the preacher’s gesture and allusion. To be sure, this renewed emphasis requires thoughtfulness and intentionality. However, they are at the same time relatively simple to implement and have the potential for deep transformation.

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Similarly, if we profess (which, again, we do!) that the entirety of our Christian vocation, mission, and ethic flow from the table around which we are raised to meet the Risen Christ and are nourished by his life in which we participate, then why and how should we

not increase our celebration of it, thereby reintegrating worship by joining the Word together again with the Sacrament(s) in order to more fully express the crucial convergence of both the Word *and* the sacraments, and to highlight the centrality of the font and, in this case, the table in Reformed worship?

Inviting congregations to consider a movement toward more frequent participation was one accent of the Sacraments Study Group's Report, *An Invitation to Christ*. The Report made mention of forthcoming resources that would supplement existing ones and assist congregations that desire to increase the frequency of the Supper. To be sure, such resources are needed, for much consideration should be given to making such a major decision as moving toward weekly Eucharist. Indeed, it is among the most life-giving of the practices that we share as Reformed people, but it is a movement that must be entered into with great care and concern for the education of the whole church, including its leadership, in order to avoid any unnecessary flare-up of congregational anxiety based on an experience of having such a crucial decision forced upon them.

A consideration of some of the larger concerns and questions that will likely arise within the context of a congregation's discernment about such a liturgical shift will appear later in this article. First, however, is a reflection on timing; that is, when is the best time move to weekly Eucharist?

The Great Fifty Days of Easter: The Season to Begin Weekly Eucharist

When to begin the move toward weekly celebrations of the Eucharist is a lively question that will inspire lively conversation. In every case, it is a question that should be posed and processed with patience and with an intentional attentiveness to the overall shape of the life of the church—its calendar, its history, its liturgy, its texts. Certain seasons are more fitting than others. For instance, Advent and Lent, with their special textual and liturgical emphases on preparation, expectation, and hope, are appropriate seasons to gather more frequently around the table. But the Great Fifty Days of Easter, or Eastertide, is perhaps the best season to begin, and the reasons for that are many.

First, the Great Fifty Days (from Easter to Pentecost Sunday) have been observed longer than any other season of the Christian year. It was seen as an “unbroken Sunday,” a-week-of-weeks plus the eighth day of the new creation. By reconnecting with a practice that was firmly rooted in the ancient church, 21st century Presbyterian congregations that wish to rediscover this practice will find themselves “joining with all the faithful in every time and place” in ways that transcend any particular community in any given moment. Rather, we place ourselves squarely within that “great cloud of witnesses” who are reported in Scripture to have placed tremendous significance in the breaking of the bread as a means of the grace of Christ, and with them we are brought into his presence.

Secondly, because those baptized at Easter were only then allowed to be present and to participate in the Eucharist, the Great Fifty Days were historically devoted to teaching on the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Thus, by engaging a more thoroughgoing understanding of and engagement in the mystery of the Eucharist during Eastertide, we can once again fall in behind our ancestors-in-faith—the community of saints by investing a similar energy, intelligence, imagination, and love in this sacrament.

Third, the lectionary texts assigned to Easter's Sunday recount the risen Christ revealing himself to the disciples at table. In breaking the bread and sharing the cup by the invitation of Christ, we are promised to experience, by the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Risen Christ. In our Lord's Day assemblies, throughout our presbyteries and synods and beyond, reaching around and including the entire world, that same risen Christ is present.

Fourth, beginning increased participation during the Great Fifty Days is also a way for congregations to sustain the immense joy of the resurrection beyond Easter Sunday, which is but Day One of an entire season that too often loses focus long before the Day of Pentecost. This long and lovely season affords the opportunity for people to bring a variety of life experiences and needs over the course of the seven weeks, such that Sunday after Sunday, scripture is read and proclaimed, bread is broken, cup is lifted, and stones are rolled away again and

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again in the lives of those who bring to the Table the entirety of who they are—their losses, failures, guilt, grief, and shame. And by the light of the empty tomb revealing our new life in Jesus' resurrection, God's people can recognize again the presence of the Risen Lord, who is made known to us in the breaking of the bread.⁷

While a case can be made for beginning more frequent celebration during other seasons in the church year, there are substantial theological and pastoral reasons why Eastertide offers what is perhaps the best opportunity for beginning the increased frequency of Eucharistic participation. It is for these reasons that FPCO moved toward increased frequency of table fellowship during the Great Fifty Days.⁸

Questions & Concerns

In spite of the confessional heritage of Reformed churches and the emphasis on improved sacramental practice by the Reformers themselves, who undoubtedly encourage frequent celebration of the Eucharist as often as each Lord's Day, any number of historical and cultural influences have shaped congregational life in North America and has contributed to the custom of monthly or quarterly participation in the Supper. Arguably, most Presbyterian congregations celebrate at table once each month. Such customs can be tenacious, and pastors and parishioners often find the move to more frequency met with resistance. A pastoral awareness of a congregation's cultural context will provide an understanding of questions that might be raised and the education that might be needed.

Increased Frequency Equals Less Preparation or Thoughtfulness

One concern is that some worshippers coming to the sacrament more frequently might do so with less thought or preparation. Martin Luther, in the *Large Catechism*, addressed this concern and spoke both of frequent reception and regular preparation:

Now that we have the right interpretation and doctrine of the sacrament, there is great need also of an admonition and entreaty that so great a treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians, may not be heedlessly passed by. What

I mean is that those who claim to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently.⁹

Preparation for communion can become a part of the weekly habit of a life of faith, and the joy and responsibility of leading people to the table with thorough preparation falls both on the Session and pastor as well as the participant herself. An increase in celebration will not cause a lackadaisical approach to the Holy Supper when care is taken both to prepare one's heart for participation and to practice the Eucharistic life in the quotidian routines between Sundays.

Increased Frequency Equals a Reduction of the "Specialness" of the Meal

Another concern is that weekly celebrations of Holy Communion will make the sacrament less 'special.' In fact, many at FPCO report that just the opposite is the case. The sacrament has become *more* meaningful and conducive to spiritual transformation and growth. With infrequent celebrations of Holy Communion, preparation may focus more on repentance and the forgiveness of sin. However, with frequent celebration, the Good Friday/Death of Jesus component of the Eucharist that so often becomes the focus is met with the joy of the Easter/Resurrection of Jesus part of the meal. Christ has died, yes, but Christ is risen! What's more, Christ will come again. Remembrance, thanksgiving, and hope renewed! With greater frequency comes the possibility of finding the whole of the Eucharistic event more pertinent to the whole of life lived in the world. With frequent celebrations, many find the Body of Christ sustains them through a variety of experiences. Joy, grief, hope, repentance, thanksgiving, anxiety, and other aspects of life are all met with the grace of God in Jesus Christ as made present in bread and wine.

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Every meal is significant, as is every drink, every bit of sleep, every breath. Frequency and regularity of eating, drinking, and breathing, for instance, do not themselves diminish these necessary facets of human living. It is, once again, the level of preparation (or lack thereof) that can render the meal to be “sacrament plus” rather than “ritual minus.”

Increased Frequency May Be Misinterpreted as Being “Too Catholic”

Sadly, anti-Roman Catholic sentiments continue to gasp for breath in many parts of North America, and FPCO, situated along the Ohio River, a historically Catholic-rich environment, struggles even still with this unhelpful, stereotypical misunderstanding. Little need be articulated to this readership about the inherent error of this “concern.” However, some congregations have much to remember about the universality of the Church, the real issues that have so divided it (of which Eucharistic frequency was and is not one), and the ecumenical hope for unity. Frequent participation in the Eucharist may be “catholic” only in that it was envisioned to be a universal practice in the churches. Perhaps moving to weekly Eucharist would provide opportunities for education through conversations between pastors and priests, sessions and councils, and congregations of diverse traditions within the household of faith.

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Increased Frequency Will Take “Too Long”

Perhaps the most commonly heard concern amid congregational movement toward more frequent practice pertains to the length of the service. While there are no guidelines in scripture or the *Book of Order* regarding the required length of worship, there are cultural expectations and norms that will inevitably feed this concern. Understanding

and being sensitive to such norms, while not catering to them, will go a long way toward helping parishioners appreciate what is important about worshiping without time constraints that may impede good worship. Ultimately, the timing of the service is a Session matter and should be treated long before the movement to weekly Eucharist is discussed churchwide.

The Ever-Extending Invitation Amid Continuing Confession and Conversion

The 217th General Assembly and its Sacraments Study Group called the church to to rediscover their baptismal identity and to live ever deeply into that identity by engaging in sacramental practices that deepen baptismal life and discipleship. That invitation continues to extend to the churches, and thanks be to God for it. To be sure, moving toward the practice of five simple sacramental disciplines will not be easy work for pastors, Sessions, or congregations. Change is difficult, brings conflict and crisis, and raises anxiety at the very least. But, when a congregation pauses patiently to study, reflect, examine, and risk, beautiful and transformative things can happen. It is a conversion of sorts, and like most conversions, it is not a once-and-for-all, but a process, a journey. The invitation to deepen sacramental practice is a call to a continuing conversion which, like most conversions, requires confession.

Perhaps we need to confess that we have been inattentive to the baptismal identity into which are claimed by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we need to confess that we have sometimes lived as if baptism and the life of discipleship are unrelated. Perhaps we need to confess that we have not actively prepared our hearts and minds to be raised into the presence of Christ, nourished by his body to participate in his life around the table. Perhaps we need to confess our relentless protection of the way we do things to the detriment of all the other unimagined possibilities that could serve us as well—or better!—than our existing practices and disciplines and customs. Perhaps.

The invitation that continues is just that: an invitation. Not a requirement. Not a mandate. Not a Word from the Lord from Louisville. Rather, it is a summons by faithful and hopeful Presbyterians who wish to remind us that we are not being invited just to water or just to wheat and wine, but to Christ himself who is represented in these visible signs and who makes his presence known to us in the pouring, the breaking, the lifting, and the sharing. In baptism

and in the Lord's Supper, just as in the Word of God written and proclaimed, we are promised to be met by the presence of the Risen Lord and by the power of the Holy Spirit. What an extraordinary promise! That in word and water, in wine and wheat, in washing and eating in community, we encounter the Christ who is alive and on the move in, with, and among us, transforming the church and ourselves in it.

So may we risk responding to the gracious invitation of Christ to come, to taste, and to see, and may we remember who we are and whose we are as God's claimed children gathered together around the family table where we will find bread enough for the journey as often as we can.

Notes

1. The five practices suggested by the Sacraments Study Group of the PC (U.S.A.) are: a) Setting the font in full view of the congregation; b) Opening the font and filling it with water on every Lord's Day; 3) Setting cup and plate on the Lord's table on every Lord's Day; 4) Leading appropriate parts of weekly worship from the font and from the table, and; 5) Increasing the number of Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

2. *The Book of Order*, W-1.1004
3. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1993). 4, 14, 17.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *The Book of Common Worship*, 41.
6. *Ibid.*, 33.
7. Luke 24
8. At this writing, it is Ordinary Time 2010, two years later, and FPCO continues to celebrate weekly Eucharist (plus offering the meal at other appropriate times: i.e., Services of Healing, Wholeness, and Reconciliation; Maundy Thursday; at Session retreats and occasionally at Session meetings; at certain youth functions, and in the homes and care facilities of parishioners who cannot attend Lord's Day worship. The entire congregation is always invited, of course, to every administration of the sacrament, and it is always duly and faithfully administered by a Minister of Word and Sacrament).
9. *The Large Catechism in The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.*

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