

An Evangelical Doctrine of the Eucharist:

Sacrament, Gospel, and Witness.

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“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”

- John Calvin¹

In this way, John Calvin set forth the criteria whereby one might recognize a church that continues faithfully as part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Within Christianity in the current age, it is the second of Calvin’s marks, “the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution,” that arouses the most controversy. Nearly all Christian churches celebrate the Eucharist. However, there is very little agreement on what they think about it. In some branches of the Church, theological reflection upon the Eucharist rarely ever occurs, although the Eucharist itself is regularly practiced. A fine example of this is to be found in evangelicalism.

Pietism and orthodox belief have always been focal points of evangelicalism. They are the foundation from which evangelicals order their lives.² However, evangelicalism has not taken seriously how their theology should shape Calvin’s second mark of the Church, nor has it taken seriously exactly what it means for the sacraments to be administered according to Christ’s institution. A properly evangelical view of the Eucharist is one that seeks to be properly evangelical in its concern for the entirety of the Gospel. To be properly evangelical means to be concerned with the εὐαγγέλιον, “the good news” or the “gospel”. However, it is not enough to think of these things as abstract concepts or even as specific facts from history that dramatically affect our standing before God. More accurately, the εὐαγγέλιον is Jesus Christ himself. It is

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Ed. John McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) Vol. 2, 1023: 4.1.9.

² James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 15 & 19.

Jesus Christ who embodies the gospel, and *is* the Gospel. In him, the whole of God's redemptive plan merges and is fulfilled. Because of this, it is necessary to celebrate and reflect upon the Eucharist in a way that bears a properly evangelical witness to the fullness of the Gospel, namely, the person of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, eucharistic witness to the Gospel must not be defined by any single facet of Jesus Christ's existence. Often, the temptation is to focus on one event in Christ's life as epitomizing his work. Rather, each event in his life comprises the Gospel. It is not merely the cross of Christ that constitutes the Gospel, nor is it merely his resurrection, nor is it merely his life. The Gospel is the whole of Christ Jesus' existence from the incarnation, to his ascension, and finally culminating in his eschatological promise. A properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist considers all of these things because it must be concerned about witnessing to the full expression of the Gospel.

This witness to the Gospel falls into two categories. First, a properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist must witness to Christ's death. This means that it must communicate the story of the cross as a salvific act. Without witness to this facet, the Eucharist cannot hold forth the assurance of reconciliation to God. Secondly, it must witness to the life of the risen Christ. Through his life, Christ demonstrates what living as one who has been reconciled to God might look like. In his resurrection, Christ provides assurance of his continued, daily provision for the life of faith. The Eucharist must challenge the Church to take its call to a new kind of life seriously. There is an ethic involved in Christianity that stems from the Gospel himself and which is transmitted to the Church of every age through his actions and teachings witnessed to in the biblical text. This ethic must be present in a properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist.

Without witness to this facet of the Gospel, the Eucharist may indeed become an abstract or bare ritual that bears little on the lives of those participating in it.

The evangelical church must formulate a eucharistic expression that takes into account these unique insights about the nature of the Gospel that it has inherited from the Reformation. Toward this goal, it must critically interact with its own limited scholarship, broader ecumenical scholarship, and with the scholarship of the Reformation. In the end, a properly evangelical account of the Eucharist would be one that bears true witness to the Gospel, Jesus Christ. The following reflection is offered as a contribution to the task of enabling evangelicalism to recover the Reformation.

Two Accounts of the Eucharist:

Richard Cross of Oriel College, Oxford, is an ecumenically minded theologian who has written recently on the topic of the Eucharist. His latest contribution concerns Christ's presence in the Eucharist. This has been a central point in the ecumenical discussion. It is thought that if common language can be agreed to on this point, then the Church would be able to move toward greater unity of practice and, in the end, achieve a shared communion expressed through the Eucharist. Within this discussion, Luther's concept of definitive presence has been offered as helpful. It is argued that, by careful reading of St. Thomas and interaction with Calvin, a particular construal of definitive presence could satisfy all concerned. This is the end to which Richard Cross writes.

Cross proposes that something is definitively present³ if it is not spatially present and yet is “directly or immediately causing some particular effect at that place.”⁴ He moves on to define substantial presence as consisting of immediate causal presence. Drawing on St. Thomas, he argues that a body acting immediately from a distance can be considered to be substantially present to the place that it acts upon. For Cross, this entails that the body exists in at least two places while being spatially present in only one. He concludes that, “Christ’s body is substantially present in the Eucharist – even though this substantial presence amounts to no more than (immediate) causal presence.”⁵ For him, this sort of presence can be considered ‘bodily’ in some sense.

This kind of formulation is very close to that of Calvin’s except that, as Cross notes, Calvin does not rush to infer substantial presence from Christ’s causal presence. He admits that Calvin’s reluctance here stems from his fear of being unable to prevent the argument from bodily to spatial presence. This is no problem for Cross since he does not accept that correlation. To round out his formulation, Cross proposes that Christ’s body has been given the ability to cause an effect on earth automatically when extrinsic circumstances are met.⁶ He asserts that this is true from the moment of consecration and that the elements are the place at which Christ’s body has the power to cause an effect. This also means that Christ’s body can be definitively present without actually causing the effect because it is potentially able to cause the effect.⁷ Cross summarizes the argument by saying that “the body is present where the eucharistic elements

³ In his writings, Luther defined definitive presence as that which is the case when something is present in an uncircumscribed way, that is, when something is present in, and yet not bound within, another object. Arguably, such is the case when demons possess human beings.

⁴ Richard Cross, “Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran Doctrines of Eucharistic Presence: A Brief Note towards a Rapprochement.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Volume 4, Number 3, 2002: 303.

⁵ Cross, 307.

⁶ Ibid, 312.

⁷ Ibid, 314.

are,”⁸ yet he is quick to distinguish between what happens to the elements during the Eucharist and what happens to Christ’s body. Luther’s defense of this view rested upon his doctrinal affirmation of the *communicatio idiomatum*.⁹ However, Cross is quick to reject this and refers to Calvin’s own objections to the same.¹⁰ He maintains that Christ’s body is only spatially present at one place even though it can be definitively, and thus substantively, present at multiple locations.

Notwithstanding his ecumenical objective, there are three distinct problems with Cross’s argument. The first is that he locates Christ’s presence in the elements specifically in relation to the consecration of the same. While this view has traditionally been the position of at least the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, it has multiple problems. These include the tendency toward the adoration of the elements that can still be found in the Roman Catholic church. This arises from the use of the term ‘bodily’ in construing how Christ is present in the Eucharist. It is easy to see why elemental adoration would develop as a pietistic expression where the technical distinction is not understood. Cross goes so far as to entertain this idea.¹¹ However, the more damaging result is that receiving the Eucharist becomes mechanical in a way reminiscent of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The idea of *communicatio idiomatum* is a Christological one. It asserts that the attributes of Christ’s divine person are interchangeable with the attributes of his human person. This enables him to be physically omnipresent. Luther used this as the basis for his assertion of Christ’s physical presence in the eucharistic elements even though Christ is to be also conceived of as in heaven, in the believer’s heart, and at multiple celebrations of the Eucharist at the same time. However, Calvin noted that the idea of *communicatio idiomatum*, especially in Luther’s employment of it, only serves to blur the line between the human and the divine in the person of Christ. Ultimately, it is unable to fully hold to either and thus compromises the Chalcedonian Definition. Because of his rejection of *communicatio idiomatum*, Calvin looked to the agency of the Spirit to flesh out his account of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, thus maintaining a more complete Christological account, as well as a more profoundly Trinitarian one. It must further be noted that this Christological difference between Luther and Calvin arose because the two descended from different theological schools of thought. Luther was influenced by the Alexandrian school, which emphasized Christ’s divinity. Conversely, Calvin was influenced by the Antiochene school, which was concerned with affirming Christ’s humanity.

¹⁰ Cross, 317.

¹¹ Ibid, 314, 318.

medieval sacerdotalism.¹² In his model, the receiving of eucharistic virtue becomes as basic as eating the elements in the physical sense. Faith ceases to be central to the reception of the eucharistic virtue. Instead, by virtue of the element being within you, Christ is able to cause the effect that he desires within you. For Cross, to take the element into your body is to ensure the causing of the effect by satisfying the necessary extrinsic circumstances. In this, Cross makes no reference to the necessity of faith in receiving the virtue of Eucharist as communicated by the elements. Further, he argues that the actual causing of the effect, as opposed to the possible causing of the effect, is left to divine will. By this argument, all that the believer can do is to mechanically take the elements into his body and hope that it be God's will to cause the effect.

The second problem with Cross' formulation has to do with his use of ontology. The usefulness of Aristotelian ontology in answering these kinds of questions has been, we suggest, largely outlived. Postmodern thought rightly refuses to accept as true the classical, Hellenistic philosophical presuppositions that are basic to such foundationalism. Further, these foundationalist presuppositions are not particularly helpful when reading the biblical text. Problems abound within such modes of thought. In his formulation, Cross encounters one such problem: that of the apparent inability to distinguish between substantive presence and spatial presence. It appears to be a contradiction to assert that something is present to a location in a substantial, and yet not a spatial, way. Cross recognizes that there is something wrong with this, but he goes astray in thinking that the most productive way to deal with the problem is to further define Christ's presence within the same ontological system, even though it was the overworking of that system which created the problem in the first place. This system must be permanently left

¹² Sacerdotalism is the term given to the Roman Catholic sacramental system in the Middle Ages. It was believed that the sacraments communicated grace by virtue of their being received. Thus, a complicated system was conceived in order to make sure that one received the proper grace for the purpose of salvation. In this way, salvation was *intrinsically* connected to the reception of the sacraments.

behind. It is especially important for the Church to find a new and more profitable way of dealing with the concept of ‘being’ in order to provide sound expression of the Gospel.

Finally, the third problem with Cross’ formulation is that he purports the notion of Christomonism. That is, he is in no way Trinitarian in his formulation of the Eucharist. In his view, Christ is the only person of the Trinity engaged in any action. The Spirit does not appear at all, and the Father is only referenced in his giving to Christ the power to immediately cause an effect from a distance. The early Church used the Latin phrase “*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*” to describe the workings of the trinity.¹³ This phrase contends that where one member of the Trinity is present and acting, the other two are also present and active. The Church throughout the ages has upheld this Trinitarian insight. However, this joint action cannot be seen in Cross’ formulation. By failing to take the Trinity into account, Cross overworks orthodox Christology. Further, in his failure to recognize the immense work of the Spirit in the Eucharist, Cross sharply parts company with Calvin.

These three issues render Cross’ formulation problematic as far as a properly evangelical view of the Eucharist is concerned. However, they also serve to identify the important points of consideration when examining Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Chief among these is the role that the Spirit plays in the Eucharist. This recognition of the Spirit’s role in the Eucharist is of utmost importance. As has already been observed, it is important to formulate an expression of the Eucharist that is firmly Trinitarian. Calvin made great strides toward this in his own Eucharistic formulation. Within his work, it is obvious that the function that the Spirit performs in the Eucharist is the same function that it forms in the everyday life of a Christian. In this, he applies the virtues and benefits of Christ to the Church for the purpose of strengthening and

¹³ Mark Husbands, *Christian Thought: Course Notes*, (unpublished) Summer 2003. (Wheaton Illinois: Wheaton College) Triune God.

spurring the Church on in her witness to Christ. Yet, how does the Spirit factor into Christ's presence in the Eucharist?

Calvin's conception of Christ's presence in the Eucharist is centered on the idea of that presence being appropriated by the Spirit. Yet, if it is through the Spirit that Christ is present to the Church in the Eucharist, can he still be considered to be present in any meaningful sense? In the Spirit's function of appropriating¹⁴ Christ's presence in the Eucharist, he does not bring Christ to those celebrating the Eucharist so that they might feed on him. Rather, he lifts them up to Christ.¹⁵ Further, it is important to note that in this formulation, Christ's presence is not directly tied to the elements. Rather, his presence is tied to the work of the Spirit, which is to lift the assembled body of believers up to Christ, so that they might, in a unique and special way, experience his presence through the sacred act that they gather to participate in. It is important to recognize that it is the Spirit that performs this work of affecting the presence of Christ within the community gathered around the sacred act of the Eucharist. If the Spirit's performance of this function is denied, then either too much emphasis is placed on priestly function, e.g. St. Thomas, or problems develop in the area of Christology, e.g. Martin Luther.¹⁶

Still, speech of the Spirit "lifting up" the gathered community to the presence of Christ is very vague. It is all too easy to argue that this can be conceived of as the Spirit lifting the 'souls' of those in the community up to Christ's presence. However, this maintains precisely the

¹⁴ The Spirit's appropriation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist is profoundly eschatological. Such appropriation is the application of Christ's eschatological *παρουσία* to believers in a unique way through the Eucharist, as will shortly be seen.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, 1379.

¹⁶ In the Roman Catholic tradition following after St. Thomas, the priest was considered to have the ability to consecrate the elements and initiate the transubstantiation that would change the elements into the physical body and blood of Christ. However, in time and by lack of care, this change was seen to be accomplished by the work of the priest alone. Thus, the neglect of the Spirit led to an inflation of clerical power. Martin Luther avoided this error by affirming the sovereignty of God in the action of the Word. However, his neglect of the Spirit led him to embrace the *communicatio idiomatum* in order to describe how Christ could be present. As has already been discussed, this leads to serious Christological problems.

anthropological dualism found in foundationalistic ontology. It is ultimately unhelpful to affirm that human beings are both ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical’ beings, as if the former were a heightened state of existence despite the recognition that God created humanity as physical. Within these modes of thought, it is easy to degrade one aspect of humanity’s being in favor of the other, thus disconnecting humanity from a proper understanding of itself to an even greater degree. Further, to focus on a supposed ‘spiritual’ aspect of humanity’s being is to forget that Christians are to cultivate a concrete, physical imitation of Christ in their lives. Because of these problems, new categories must be sought.

Eschatology furnishes the Church with concepts with which to think along these lines. In the person of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God was initiated on earth. Since that time, the Church has been living in a somewhat awkward and undefined time between the initiation of the Kingdom in the advent of Christ, and the fruition of his Kingdom in his own return. Christ’s gift of the Eucharist to the Church should be seen as the giving of a temporary provision for the duration of the Church’s sojourn in this “now and not yet” stage. To this effect, it must be recognized that all individuals have not only a holistic temporal being, but also that, in the case of Christians, this is augmented by participation in the eschaton. This participation in the eschaton, which, like the Gospel, is recognized to be the person of Christ,¹⁷ is accomplished by the Spirit’s action. This is begun through the initiation of baptism, and it continues with participation in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, the Spirit interrupts time by thrusting the future into the present.¹⁸ Within the enactment of the Eucharist, the Spirit does away with present temporal distinctions and makes present the Kingdom of God, that is, the παρουσία of Christ.

¹⁷ While the Greek *εσχατον* means ‘the last thing’, this is properly understood as Christ. It is Christ who will usher in the ultimate fulfillment of the Kingdom of God in the last days. Furthermore, the Kingdom of God is to be understood as all things being brought together under Christ as explained in Ephesians.

¹⁸ William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 224.

It is through this foretaste of eschatological fulfillment that Christ, through the appropriating function of the Spirit, is present in the Eucharist.

Stanley J. Grenz approaches the eucharistic discussion from a common evangelical position. His account of the Eucharist follows in the tradition of the Swiss Radical Reformer Ulrich Zwingli. The majority of evangelicals conceive of the Eucharist in a way that is broadly derived from this¹⁹ even though this tradition has given little scholarly or dogmatic reflection to the subject. This demonstrates that, while virtually all evangelicals celebrate the Eucharist, or as they prefer, “The Lord’s Supper,” in some form, it is of little importance to them theologically. However, Grenz does offer a good expression of this view.

The term ‘ordinance’ is used in Zwingli’s tradition in lieu of the term ‘sacrament.’ While Grenz does attempt to incorporate some facets of a sacramental understanding of the eucharist into his own position, he nevertheless affirms that his primary understanding of the Church’s sacred acts stems from the conceptual definition of an ordinance.²⁰ He conceives of the ordinances as practices that Christ ordained for the Church to obediently carry out. Therefore, they are signs of obedience.²¹ In affirming this, Grenz asserts that these actions are basically human actions. God does not impart grace through these actions, but those participating in them bear testimony to their commitment to Christ. They are a means of expressing “loyalty” or declaring “fidelity” to the Lord.²²

¹⁹ The eucharistic practice of evangelicals is characterized by memorialism. In this view, the Eucharist is seen as an opportunity for the church to gather and remember Christ’s death. Generally, it is a somber occasion that focuses on the assessment of one’s worthiness to participate, although in recent years, a trend toward a more celebratory practice has begun to emerge.

²⁰ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 515.

²¹ Ibid, 514.

²² Ibid, 517.

Grenz recognizes that there are symbols involved in these ordinances and he asserts that these symbols become visual sermons that proclaim the Word of God in a symbolic manner.²³ Because of this, Grenz feels confident in saying that those partaking in an ordinance participate in the event symbolized.²⁴ Yet, this is grounded in the idea of testifying to the events symbolized as affirmations of commitment, declaration of obedience, affirmation of loyalty to the Church's commanding officer,²⁵ and so on.

There is some articulation of the role of the Spirit present in Grenz's account. He understands the role of the Spirit as reminding those practicing the Eucharist that Christ's power is available to them, and as encouraging them to appropriate that divine resource.²⁶ For Grenz, the primary function of the Spirit, in connection to the ordinances, is that of encouragement. The Spirit is there to affirm, confirm, encourage, remind, and motivate. However, Grenz does allow for speech about the Spirit empowering and refreshing those participating in the ordinances as well, though these assertions are few and undefined.

In his formulation, Grenz attempts to be faithful to the Zwinglian tradition while also trying to incorporate some of the strengths of Calvin's eucharistic expression. This can be seen in Grenz's speech about the Spirit and his tendency to allow for the Spirit's ability to refresh and empower. These are very positive steps in the right direction. However, there are four problems with his eucharistic account that must be considered.

First, Grenz grounds his account on the primacy of human agency. This is demonstrated by his focus on the Church's practicing of the ordinances. The only action that God seems to accomplish in the matter is that of ordaining these actions during Christ's earthly ministry.

²³ Ibid, 516.

²⁴ Ibid, 518.

²⁵ Ibid, 540.

²⁶ Ibid.

Beyond that, it is the work of believing humans to carry them out and make them efficacious if they are to be so in any sense. In addition, they are efficacious only in the sense that the humans participating declare their intent to serve and follow Christ. For Grenz, ordinances are merely opportunities to demonstrate human faithfulness to God at both the individual and corporate levels. It must be wondered what value is ultimately to be found in this. Christ's death assumed that human beings were unable to follow God and that they needed to be worked upon by God himself in order that they might serve him. The Eucharist is fundamentally about God's profound faithfulness to humanity, not humanity's faithfulness to God. The proper asymmetry between divine and human agency must be maintained. Instead of rightly recognizing the bulk of the agency in the Eucharist to be God's, Grenz goes the other way and considers human practitioners to be responsible for virtually all of the action done in connection to the ordinances.

As a result of his misconstrued asymmetry of agency, the second problem in Grenz's formulation emerges. That is, Grenz only speaks of past reception of grace. For Grenz, all the exchange of grace happens at a past point, presumably at the point of conversion. The ordinances serve to remind practitioners of the grace that they have received. They do not communicate any new or continuing grace. This serves to reinforce the notion that Grenz conceives of the ordinances as a way for humans to actively remind themselves, and be reminded, of what has happened, instead of a way for them to receive strength and grace for the continuance of their salvation. Rather than a continuing experience of being united with Christ through the work of the Spirit, it is assumed that Christians have previously received the fullness of their salvation.²⁷

²⁷ When all the action is thought of as in the past, a problem arises with how to explain why Christians still sin if they already have all the grace that is required to live the Christian life. Generally, this is dealt with by making a distinction between what is true ontologically and what is true phenomenologically. In this formula, the former is considered to be what a Christian is in Christ, and the latter is considered to be how that works out while still here

In conceiving of grace as an exclusively past experience, Grenz severely limits the role of the Spirit. His restriction of the Spirit's activity to the role of reminder and encourager is the third problem with Grenz's eucharistic account. This restriction is perfectly logical if there is no new grace communicated through the ordinances. Since ordinances are practiced by humans, in obedience to Christ's instructions for the purpose of reminding themselves of their past reception of grace, and in order to offer an opportunity for them to declare their loyalty to God, then the Spirit can only act in a way that enhances their ability to actively remember these things. It must be wondered whether this actually gives the Spirit a place in the observance of the ordinances at all. If all the Spirit does is remind, which the symbols do and the participants do themselves by virtue of their practice, then does the Spirit actually do anything? This raises the same kinds of Trinitarian issues present in Richard Cross' formulation. As an afterthought, it seems, Grenz makes the occasional comment about the Spirit functioning in a role of confirming, renewing, or empowering, but this is a very small part of his understanding of the Spirit's role.

The fourth and most comprehensive problem with Grenz's account is that he has no internal doctrinal coherence. While he takes the Zwinglian tradition to be his starting point, it is obvious that he is moving away from it to some degree. His occasional references to the Spirit's work of confirming, renewing, and empowering, indicates that he is on the way to recognizing the profound function of the Spirit in the Church's sacred acts. Grenz also pushes to see symbolic acts as, in some sense, facilitating participation in the events witnessed to. However, these true insights do not fit within his larger doctrinal system. His focus on human action, epitomized by his conceiving of ordinances as declarations made by human practitioners, is incompatible with these occasional assertions. While Grenz is moving in the right direction and

on earth. The problem with this is that it is hard to make a distinction between what one is (ontologically) and what one appears to be (phenomenologically). In fact, this account provides very little incentive for progressing 'phenomenologically' because the totality of one's salvation is already taken care of 'ontologically.'

beginning to recognize the proper asymmetry of agency that focuses on the work of the divine, this movement serves only to contradict the larger framework of his theology of ordinances.

It has become clear that the question of the relationship between divine and human agency quickly arises within eucharistic discussion. A clear understanding of this asymmetry is necessary in developing a responsible account of the Eucharist. The breadth of eucharistic tradition can be arranged by the answers that have been given to this question. For instance, Augustine affirmed divine and human agency in the Eucharist. Yet, he so emphasized divine action that the Eucharist almost became a power unto itself. On the other hand, St. Thomas maintained divine agency, but he functionally subordinated it to human agency, thus making way for the Eucharist to be used as a tool for clerical control of the laity in the Roman Catholic Church. Obviously, how this question is answered has immense ramifications.

The most important thing to affirm about this relationship between divine and human agency, as it relates to the Eucharist or otherwise, is its fundamental asymmetry. In this formulation, neither does one party do all action, nor are the parties equal in their actions. One of the parties acts so that the other can also act. This asymmetry is apparent between God and humanity. The Triune God created so that humans could live their lives. Christ was incarnated and crucified so that humanity could become part of the new creation and once again move toward its fulfillment. The witness of the Spirit disruptively breaks into people's lives in order to free them from death and make them part of the new creation. In all of these things, God acts and human beings respond to that action. This is the fundamental asymmetry of divine and human agency. This asymmetry holds true in the Eucharist as well. God has instituted the Eucharist through Christ so that the Spirit may enact it and the Church may participate in it. Christ makes himself available to the Church through the Spirit's appropriation in that

enactment, so that the community might receive the experience of, and be shaped by, that presence. God has given the Eucharist to the Church so that the Church might experience and respond to him in certain unique ways that are otherwise unavailable.

However, this raises the question of how Christ is experienced in the Eucharist. Are there any ‘spiritual’ virtues to be gained from the Eucharist? Throughout Church history down until the present era, it has been almost unanimously held that the Eucharist communicates spiritual benefit, even though the definition of these benefits has been greatly varied. Still, the Eucharist has been given as a concrete action, “by which Christians may be marked, fed and touched by the Holy Spirit so that the reality of God and the work of Christ become embedded in the body and the psyche.”²⁸

When he instituted the Eucharist, Christ identified the bread and wine as his body and his blood. One thing that is profoundly interesting about these elements is discovering precisely what they represent. In giving the bread of his body, Christ gave the Church his external earthly vitality, and in giving the wine of his blood, he provided his internal vital power. These are the things that fueled his life on earth.²⁹ In the Eucharist, Christ has provided a tangible way for the Church to receive the very same work of the Spirit that empowered his earthly ministry, as well as the works of the Spirit that have stemmed from his earthly ministry. When she participates in the Eucharist, the Church comes face to face with the vitality of the ministry of Christ.

The purpose of this confrontation with Christ’s ministry is profoundly eschatological. As has been seen, in the enactment of the Eucharist, the Spirit breaks down temporal distinctions and affects the eschatological presence of Christ. With this presence comes humanity’s *τελος*. Those who participate in the Eucharist are given a taste what they will experience when

²⁸ Ellen T. Charry, *Sacraments for the Christian Life*, “Sacraments for the Christian Life.” *The Christian Century*. November 15. (1995): 1076-1079.

²⁹ Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 87.

humanity has been remade in the true *imago Dei*, that is, Jesus Christ. Through this ‘taste’, the Spirit shapes and forms them into the image of Christ. This is the virtue of the Eucharist: that those participating are drawn forward by God’s grace in Christ, through the Spirit’s agency, toward the promise of the eschatological consummation of God’s work in and for us.³⁰ Thus, the Eucharist is a profound breaking in of the eschaton that shreds the distinctions of time and space for the purpose of transforming Christ’s followers into faithful witnesses to the Gospel.

Still, what is the origin of this eucharistic virtue? It is now apparent that eucharistic virtue arises from the life and work of Christ. It is by virtue of his life and death that the Kingdom of God was instituted. The Church anticipates the eschatological form of the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Further, it is through the agency of the Spirit that this virtue is applied to the community participating in the enactment of the Eucharist. Yet, if this were the only thing that is true of the Eucharist, it would seem that participating in the Eucharist is a necessity for salvation. If this virtue, which is actually a profound experience of being shaped by salvation himself, is only available in the Eucharist, then this conclusion is perfectly logical. However, this argument neglects an important intermediate step. It is of fundamental importance to affirm that it is only through union with Christ that one can experience the virtue of the Eucharist.

When a person is converted, that is, when the overwhelming inward call of the Father to reconciliation in the Son breaks into one’s existence through the agency of the Spirit, that person is established in union with Christ. This union with Christ is the basis for the reconciliation to God that all members of the Church experience. Without the establishment of this union, the Eucharist is profitless, for it is in the Eucharist that the Spirit works in a unique way to further the completion of that union. This union is the basis for correct participation in the Church’s

³⁰ Husbands, Church - 3.

participation in the Eucharist. It is important to realize that this union is the very basis for the salvation that believers have in Christ. Salvation is precisely the process of the Spirit applying all of the benefits of union with Christ to the believer. Salvation is not participation in the Eucharist, although all those who are saved should participate in it. The Eucharist is an instrument that God has given the Church to communicate the benefits of union with Christ through the agency of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit in the Eucharist is to form and shape the community progressively into this union with Christ.³¹ Indeed, this describes the work of the Spirit in the life of the Church in general. Thus, because the Eucharist is a continuation of the Spirit's work in the Church, it stands to reason that those participating in it must belong to the Church. This means that salvation occurs outside of the Eucharist, while at the same time, it is furthered in a unique way through the ministry of the Spirit in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist serves to carry on the work of the Spirit and does not perform any special work of its own. However, it is a one-of-a-kind instrument for that work. It is of fundamental importance in that it provides a very tangible and exceedingly comprehensive display of the Church's union with Christ.³² The Eucharist proclaims the Gospel and witnesses to the Church's union with Christ in such a profound way that it is by far the best communal expression of the Gospel that the Church has at her disposal. Because of this amazing clarity of expression, the Eucharist provides the perfect opportunity for the Spirit to feed and shape the community so that it might grow in its union with Christ. In this way, the community that participates in the Eucharist, as is true of the individual, is confronted with its own eschatological reality and pulled forward by the Spirit so that it increasingly embodies that eschatological reality in the here and now.

³¹ *Institutes*, 1370.

³² *Ibid.* 1361.

Recognizing this, it is readily apparent that the act of the Eucharist is organized around the eucharistic elements, that is, the bread and the wine. These elements are the material objects that Christ has identified himself with. Thus, they serve as objects that communicate his presence to us through the agency of the Spirit and in the ways previously discussed. In the Eucharist, the bread and wine are considered to be something that they previously were not. Before participation in the Eucharist, the elements were merely bread and wine. However, they are now set aside to uncommon use and are precisely the things that communicate Christ to those participating in the Eucharist. At the beginning of the Eucharist, the epiclesis is prayed in petition for the presence of the Spirit to descend upon the people of God and set apart the bread and wine for service as the eucharistic elements. These elements begin as mere bread and wine. Yet, they become the special instruments that communicate Christ's presence. There is a change here and it must be wondered when this change occurs.³³

It has always been a temptation to assert that the member of clergy presiding at the Eucharist somehow blesses, consecrates, or otherwise calls down divine action upon those elements. Generally, this is seen as effective by virtue of the fact that it is done by a member of the clergy, and not because it is a petition of the community in any way. However, within the asymmetrical model of the relationship between divine and human agency, the member of the clergy must be considered to be the one responding to God's action. The assembled community then responds to him. The problem with this is that it regulates the community to a peripheral role. Within this paradigm, it is arguable that the member of clergy could enact the Eucharist

³³ One's concept of when this change occurs factors greatly into Eucharistic expression. If this change occurs when the member of clergy consecrates the elements, then there is a tendency to conceive of the virtue of the Eucharist as resident within the consecrated elements themselves. If the change occurs as the community recognizes the elements to be set aside for this uncommon use, then the tendency is to conceive of the eucharistic virtue as resident within the community's interaction with the elements. Finally, if the change occurs when the individual receives the elements and partakes of them with the proper faith, then the tendency is to conceive of the Eucharist's virtue as resident within the individual's interaction with the elements.

without the assembled community. This is problematic because it does not fully consider how the Eucharist is fundamentally a community meal.³⁴ Christ instituted the Eucharist within the context of the Last Supper and in the tradition of his own practice of table fellowship.³⁵ Because it is fundamentally a community meal, the act of consecration must be reinterpreted.

Consecration of the elements takes place precisely because the community is gathered and recognizes those elements to be the instruments that the Spirit is desirous to use in order to strengthen them in their Christian witness and shape them in their union with Christ. It is the actions of a member of clergy that serve to organize these things and give them expression before the community. These are actions that the community identifies with in much the same way that Christ has identified himself with the eucharistic elements. Through these actions, the community recognizes that they will now receive the work of the Spirit in the Eucharist. Authority is given to a member of the clergy to perform these actions on behalf of the community by the community itself. Thus, the community identifies with the member of the clergy and vicariously, as a whole, performs the consecration. Exactly how all this is finally parsed is fundamentally an issue of order and ordination.³⁶

³⁴ Welker, 41.

³⁵ Husbands, Church – 3.

³⁶ The issue of order and ordination is important to any discussion of the Eucharist because the Eucharist must be, in some sense, performed by a member of the clergy, on behalf of the community, so that the community can recognize and interpret the actions that they will participate in. Yet, what determines who is a proper minister? In some traditions, this is determined by ordination received by a bishop. Other traditions grant this status to its clergy by an act of a committee, which is then appropriated by the recognition of the same by a local church body. In non-denominational and independent churches, this authority is given much less formally by virtue of the local body's acceptance of the minister, although this is often tied up with the institution where the minister received his training. Yet, regardless of how it is done, a person who is accepted as a minister of the Church must be the one to direct the eucharistic celebration.

A Properly Evangelical View of the Eucharist:

With all the preceding issues explored, a properly evangelical account of the Eucharist must be further sought out. A properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist is one that has applied its unique theological insights to the question at hand. It must be profoundly influenced by and committed to witnessing to the Gospel, whom is Jesus Christ. Witness to the Gospel is what the Eucharist is all about. However, it is not merely a one-sided witness that is found in the Eucharist, but the most complete and holistic account of the Gospel available to the Church. Often in eucharistic expression, accounts tend toward an emphasis on the function and significance of either Christ's substitutionary death or his life as a moral exemplar. Both of these things are necessary, but they are dangerous when isolated from each other. The former leads to a church that cares deeply about the eternal destinations of the unsaved while failing to consider how it is responsible to its material context. Conversely, the latter leads to a church that is preoccupied with moral progress and ethical activism, and that stresses the need to imitate Christ without witnessing to the provision and resources that Christ has made available for the development and sustaining of holiness. A properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist is deeply committed to witnessing to both the eschatological hope of the work Christ performed in his death and resurrection, as well as witnessing to the ethical imperative of his life.

Witness to Christ's Death

The Eucharist focuses its witness on Christ's death. This is the hub around which all other eucharistic witness is arranged. Because of this focus, suffering is central to the Eucharist.

Christ's death on the cross was a death saturated with wrongful guilt, intense suffering, and extreme alienation. This is because, on the cross, God was rejected by the very humanity that he had come to save. The broken relationships, which Christ had entered into the world to repair, were shown in all of their repugnance on the cross where the divine being subjected himself to the violence and suffering that fallen humanity produces.³⁷ At that moment, humanity spitefully turned its back on God. Yet, at the very same time, God reconciled that hateful humanity to himself through Christ.

Further, the cross is also an example of humanity rejecting itself in many respects. Jesus Christ was not only God, but also a man, a human being. More than that, he was a sinless human being. He did not deserve, in any sense of the term, to be subjected to the kind of horrific, violent death that he was subjected to. Yet, religion, law, politics, morality, and public opinion all came together in the crucifixion of Christ. These systemic influences are revealed on the cross to be nothing more than the propagation of relationships that are destructive to life as God intended it to be.³⁸ These systems, spurred on by the sinful nature of humanity, serve to further alienate humanity from God and from itself. Still, in the midst of the horror of humanity's complete alienation from God and from itself, and in the shadow of the divine being's suffering, this violent inheritance of alienation was revealed as ultimately overcome. As the divine agent of salvation, Jesus Christ took upon himself the violence and alienation of humanity. By taking this violence and alienation into the divine being, he removed it from the equation. God himself absorbed the sin of the world into himself and thereby satisfied its penalty within himself. His self-sacrifice stood in direct opposition to the fallen cycle of alienation and violence and, through that sacrifice, he eschatologically ended its propagation. The cycle of sin is broken and the

³⁷ Husbands, *Christology* – 3.

³⁸ Welker, 105.

Eucharist stands as witness to God's peace against human violence.³⁹ Indeed, it is precisely because this cycle of sin has been broken that humanity can be reconciled to God and to each other. Those who are brought under Christ are now eschatologically freed from the cycle of sin and brought into correct relationship with God, each other, themselves, and all of creation. It is important to remember that this takes place eschatologically and that in the 'now' it is still being worked out. No one is ever fully reconciled to God or to other human beings in this life, but the cycle is broken and the trajectory of the Christian life is toward its eschatological τέλος, where life will finally become all that God intended it to be.

The drama of the cross is the crown jewel of the Eucharist. This is the story that is being participated in by, and that is acting upon, those participating in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist not only communicates this in a cognitive sense, but, more importantly, it also involves the participants in the drama. They are drawn into the story and made to live it. They taste the body and blood of Christ that was broken for them on the cross and they are brought face to face with the Gospel, the person of Jesus Christ. Those who participate in the Eucharist become part of a unique experience that enacts and witnesses to their reconciliation to God through Christ's death. As has been noted, this reconciliation is by virtue of being united to Christ by the agency of the Spirit. This union is witnessed to and developed in the Eucharist through the concrete actions of eating and drinking the elements that have been identified with Christ.⁴⁰ Yet, in so far as the Eucharist witnesses to Christ's death, what does this mean for those who participate in the Eucharist?

³⁹ Ibid, 171.

⁴⁰ In modern modes of thought, symbols are seen to be devoid of any reality and thought of as mere representations of a thing at a purely cognitive level. Thus, words are conceived of as being mere containers or packages for ideas and concepts. However, postmodern thought has moved away from this formulation and back toward more of a pre-modern understanding. This position recognizes that human experience is very closely connected with the symbols that describe it. Thus, words and language shape one's ability to communicate and even shape one's ability to think.

In this area, the Eucharist bears stark witness to the recognition that a Christian is one who has died as Christ did. Further, every Christian has died with Christ on the cross by virtue of their union with him. Christians no longer have a locus of identity within themselves at all. There is no Christian ‘self’. One profound aspect of sin is that it atomizes those whom it influences. It breaks down the relationships that provide identity and divide humanity up into an aggregate of individuals. Humanity, under sin, is preoccupied with the individual “self” even though it must be wondered whether an individual has any intrinsic sense of identity defined apart from the community. Yet, on the cross, Christ acted to reverse this atomization and bring reconciliation to the broken relationships between God and humanity and between humanity and itself. When one is unified to Christ through the agency of the Spirit, that concept of self is rendered irrevocably false because the entity that existed in broken relationship with God and humanity is subjected to the death of the cross. This entity is now so unified with Christ that the two cannot be distinguished. For this reason, the center of identity for the Christian is not within the ‘self’ in any sense, but within Christ.

The Eucharist both enacts and witnesses to this union. Because of the awkward ‘time between the times’ that the Church finds itself in, this union must be recognized to be complete and unequivocal only eschatologically. In the Eucharist, this full eschatological unity is witnessed to. Still, more than that, it is also enacted by the agency of the Spirit. In the performance of the Eucharist, the Spirit disrupts the temporal with eschatological reality by providing a taste of the unity that will be enjoyed in the final, complete expression of the Kingdom of God. Those participating in the Eucharist are shaped in such a way as to make this

In the same way, sacramental symbols shape the reality of those who participate in the sacred acts. They do not merely stand in the place of something that is not there, but they also ‘are’ that thing in a very real sense.

union more complete in the present time. The Spirit breaks through time and space to bring a taste of how complete this union will be when fulfilled in the eschaton.

Christ's death on the cross is the focal point of the Eucharist. This event epitomizes the person and work of Christ and, thus, the Gospel itself. The Eucharist witnesses to the reconciling work that Christ accomplished on the cross as well as to what it means for Christians to be unified with him in that death. Furthermore, in the Eucharist, the Spirit provides a foretaste of the unity that will be enjoyed in the eschaton. Yet, Christ's death is not all that a properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist must witness to. It must also bear faithful witness to the life of the risen Jesus Christ.

Witness to the Life of the Risen Christ

Jesus Christ did more in his life than simply die on the cross. The event of the cross was the culmination of the overarching mission of his life. Christ's mission was that of providing a way for humanity's reconciliation to God in the face of human sin. His life was one lived in confrontation with the prevailing influences of sinful culture and society. It is this life of disruptive and confrontational mission that the Eucharist witnesses to as well. Christ's life, culminating in the cross, has called a community of people out of the world to bear witness to it. The Church is the community of those who have been reconciled to God through the disruptive agency of the Spirit. This creative work is a body called into being for the purpose of carrying on Christ's mission of reconciliation. The center of identity for this body is Christ himself.

Thus, the corporate identity of the Church is none other than Christ, and the Church's mission is to bear witness to the reconciliation that can be found in him.⁴¹

However, the Eucharist bears insufficient witness to Christ's death if it neglects his resurrection. These are two sides of the same coin and cannot be separated, for it is Christ's resurrection that is the foundation of the Church's hope. Paul argues that if Christ is not raised, then the faith of the Church has been in vain.⁴² This is especially true of the Eucharist. If Christ had not been raised, then he would not be able to nourish and strengthen his followers through the Eucharist. But, Christ has been raised, and the Church is able to be confident in his provision in the Eucharist.

Furthermore, Christ's resurrection is the foundation of eucharistic celebration. The enactment of the Eucharist is a joyous occasion because it does not witness to a God who died merely to procure reconciliation. It witnesses to a living God who works constantly on behalf of his followers and has, through this meal, provided for their spiritual nourishment. Indeed, this risen God has given this meal as a foretaste of the eschatological hope to which the resurrection speaks. Thus, the Eucharist is enacted in the context of joyful anticipation of the fulfillment of every promise given to those who follow Christ, and with complete confidence in his ability to meet their every need. In this, the resurrection is the basis for the Church's life. Thus, when the Eucharist is enacted, by witnessing to a risen Christ, the Church witnesses to itself as risen and reconciled.⁴³ The resurrection is the basis by which the Church can proclaim that it is forgiven

⁴¹ Often, the mission of the Church is expressed in an incarnational sense. However, incarnational ministry is something that can only be accomplished by the only being ever to be incarnated, namely, Jesus Christ. The Church cannot in any way 'incarnate' Christ. It is not possible for the Church to 'be' Christ to the world, nor is it possible for members of the Church to 'be' Christ to their neighbors. Incarnational categories do nothing but place responsibility on the Church that it was not meant to bear. The mission of the Church is to witness to Christ, not become Christ.

⁴² 1st Corinthians 15:14

⁴³ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982) 115.

and that others are forgivable.⁴⁴ This is a fundamental aspect of Eucharistic witness that is grounded in Christ's life, and yet, all witness to Christ is grounded in his resurrection, as Paul so clearly attested.

Christ's life and resurrection is the foundation of the Church's mission, and it is through the Eucharist that this body is molded into its proper missional shape. This is accomplished through eucharistic remembrance. Remembrance, in the eucharistic sense, is very profound. It has close ties to the Old Testament as well. The Israelites were a people whom were constantly looking over their shoulders. At times, it seems as though they walk backwards into the future because they are so focused on remembering what God had done for them. This is because their corporate identity was defined by being the people that God had created to witness to him. In order to maintain their identity, it was necessary for them to constantly remember what God had done for them. Through the Eucharist, the Church remembers the creative act of the Spirit that unified it to Christ and designated it as the unique instrument of Christ's mission. Yet, this act of remembrance is no mere recollection that can be achieved by human agency. It includes living memories of the living Christ, experiences, and expectations of the saving presence of Christ.⁴⁵ This kind of remembrance completely reorients categories of thought and existence. It restructures the metanarrative of the Church's life and centers it squarely upon Christ. Through the agency of the Spirit, the Church is shaped and formed by these categories.

By the agency of the Spirit changing the categories through which the Church thinks, participation in the Eucharist is participation in what is truly real. That is, in the Eucharist, the Church participates in God's 'imagination' of the world as brought together under Christ.⁴⁶ The Church begins and progresses to see reality as God sees it. Through the Eucharist, the agency of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Welker, 126.

⁴⁶ Cavanaugh, 279.

the Spirit shows the Church what the world looks like through eschatological glasses, as it were. Because of this formative remembrance, the Church is established within categories that provide for its living development.⁴⁷ The Spirit's work in the Eucharist gives the Church room to grow into an understanding of its corporate missional identity because it provides the proper framework for the interpretation of reality. Still, the Spirit's work in the Eucharist does not only give the Church room to grow to understand its corporate missional identity, but also provides room for the concrete enactment of that identity. As the Eucharist shapes the Church's corporate identity and provides categories to understand that identity, it also provides moral space for that identity to be lived out.

It is harmful to think of morality as something that is independent of context.⁴⁸ The truth is that human beings, left to themselves, would quickly descend into complete immorality. It is only the presence of a community – whether it be a nation, a city, or a village – that restrains humanity's wickedness. Communities of any kind are organized around a code of conduct. The community punishes those who do not abide by that code. Thus, a morality is accepted and enforced in order to better the lives of all those involved. Problems arise when morality is thought of as the free actions of an autonomous individual. This mindset is a byproduct of modernity and its individualistic focus.⁴⁹ Within this modern frame of reference, morality is defined from within each individual without any kind of external qualification. While government may still enforce laws to protect its citizenry from itself, this cannot be thought of as morality in any real sense. Morality can only be the product of a community that is committed to a creedal order to restrain, motivate, obligate, and even compel its members to certain actions.

⁴⁷ Welker, 128.

⁴⁸ Husbands, *Gospel & Ethics*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

In this paradigm where morality is a social construct, there is no room for an account of the moral person as known in Christ. Christians are compelled by the very Gospel that saved them to live a certain morality, that is, to enact a concrete social order by being a body committed to reconciliation.⁵⁰ The Eucharist shapes the Church to know its identity, and the Church shapes its members to live that identity. Yet, the Church cannot be conceived of as merely an abstract concept, but as the concrete community of those called into being by the Spirit. The Church is a concrete entity that occupies both time and space. Recognizing this, it is not an abstract concept shaping individual members, but a concrete community of persons. When the community participates in the Eucharist, the Eucharist instructs and shapes that community in its own identity. As this identity is shaped, the members of the community are provided with a moral space within which to enact that identity by living its morality. Stated plainly, the community trains its members to live a certain way. In the Church, members are taught to imitate Christ.⁵¹ Thus, through the Eucharist, the Church is continually formed into its identity as a reconciling community.

How then does eucharistic witness help the Church in thinking about what it means to be a reconciling community? Union with Christ is the category that the Eucharist provides the Church for the task of dealing with what it means to be that community. This is accomplished through the witness of the Eucharist to Christ's life. Christ's life was one that showed what reconciliation might look like when given expression in time and space. The Spirit's work is

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The concept of the imitation of Christ has been offered as a way around the unhelpful concept of incarnational ministry. However, this is only a slight modification. It must be recognized that, just as no one can presume to *be* Christ, in the same way can no one presume to imitate him in all that he was and did. This, for the concept of imitation to be useful, it must be understood as a respectful imitation from a distance that gives full recognition to the unique nature and work of Jesus Christ.

focused upon shaping the Church in such a way that it imitates Christ. It is this work that the Spirit accomplishes in a unique way through the Eucharist.

The Eucharist deals extensively with the idea of the body of Christ as a way in to thinking about what it means to be shaped to imitate Christ. Through the consuming of the elements, the participants of the Eucharist are witnessed to as being unified with Christ's body. As in the biblical text, the body of Christ is conceived of as the Church. When a person is reconciled to God through the disruptive agency of the Spirit, union with Christ is established. However, this is not merely union with the single person of Christ, but also with his body, that is, with the Church. Christians have an inextricable link between them by virtue of being united to each other through the person of Christ. In the Eucharist, this is witnessed to because all those participating demonstrate this unity through partaking of the elements. Through the reception of the elements, members of the Church bear witness to the unity that connects them and binds them together as a reconciling community.

It is the testimony of Scripture that in the consummation of the Kingdom of God, namely the eschaton, all things will be brought together and unified under Christ.⁵² This witnesses to the understanding that this unity is fundamentally an eschatological thing. In truth, the Church is a primarily eschatological entity. Yet, the Spirit tirelessly works to enact the eschaton now by shaping the Church toward its eschatological fulfillment. When the Eucharist is enacted, this union of Christ's body is witnessed to. Those participating in the Eucharist affirm this eschatological union by their participation. More importantly, the Spirit works to bring the eschatological reality of this union into being now. In this way, the Eucharist actually enacts this eschatological union. The Eucharist provides an optimal and profoundly unique context for the Spirit to shape the Church in its concrete imitation Christ.

⁵² Ephesians 1:10

By witnessing to the union of the Church as the body of Christ, the Eucharist also witnesses to what is the central principle of imitating Christ's life of reconciliation. That is, living *extra nos* – outside of oneself. Through union with Christ, the Christian 'self' is annihilated. Yet, at the same time, it is reborn not in the 'I' of the individual, but in the 'We' of the Church. The Christian's center of identity is in Christ. Furthermore, it is in Christ's body, the Church, that this center is enacted. This means that Christians should find their identity in their participation in the Church community, and not in anything intrinsic to their individual persons.

An individual does not define the community, but the community shapes the individual. The Church is more than an aggregate of individuals. It possesses an identity as a whole that is beyond anything that any individual can aspire to reach. When those participating in the Eucharist consume the elements, they are bearing witness to the Spirit's work toward enacting the unity of the body of Christ. They are all being absorbed into one entity that is greater than all the parts put together. They are taking everyone else present into themselves and recognizing that they are not complete without each other. Because of this, two things should be true of the Church as it imitates Christ.

First, there should be a sharing of resources. The Eucharist witnesses to the union of the body of Christ. If the members of the community are living this out in concrete communal expression, then they will do everything in their power to provide for each other. Fundamentally, this is because in providing for each other, they provide for themselves. More profoundly, this is because in providing for each other, they imitate Christ's life of self-giving lived as an agent of reconciliation. Second, there should be a sharing of suffering and sin. If indeed the community is unified in the body of Christ through the agency of the Spirit, as the

Eucharist witnesses to, then when one member sins, it affects the entire community. The community is in place to bear with one another in opposition to sin and evil. Through eucharistic unity, misery and sin are taken off of the individual and placed upon the community.⁵³ Because the community aids in bearing sin, individual members are not left to struggle against sin and evil all alone. Living *extra nos* means recognizing the united front of the Church against sin and evil and recognizing that an individual is of no value in this kind of cosmic battle. In the Eucharist, the Christian identity is placed squarely within the community, the Church, as the individual Christian ‘self’ is recognized for the myth that it is. The self-giving life of Christ is witnessed to in the self-giving life of his body.

Yet, a life of self-giving is not without danger. The Eucharist witnesses to three dangers that are intrinsic to leading a life of self-giving in the imitation of Christ. These dangers are seen clearly in the life of Christ, especially in the time of his life that served as the immediate context for the institution of the Eucharist. The Church, if it is to live a life of witness to the reconciliation that Christ has established by being a reconciling community, must willingly sacrifice itself and accept these dangers. To not do so, would be to deny its calling to be the body of Christ.

Christ instituted the Eucharist mere hours before his arrest. Days earlier, crowds had welcomed him with cheers. Yet, now his very life was in imminent danger. This demonstrates the first danger: danger from without.⁵⁴ Indeed, it was not only Christ who was in danger, but the whole community of his disciples. The powers and authorities of the world were marshaled against them for their destruction in the perpetuation of humanity’s broken relationship with God. It is profoundly true that the message of reconciliation Christ brought, and that the Church

⁵³ Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods”, par. 7. in *Luther’s Works*, Ed. Helmut Lehmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959)

⁵⁴ Welker, 46.

witnesses to, is diametrically opposed to the sinful nature of humanity and the societal structures of power that it has built. Sin will not tolerate this message and will react violently against it. Because of this, the Gospel is incredibly disruptive. When the Church bears faithful witness to the Gospel, it will be disruptive as well and can expect to face danger. The entire life of the Church is laced with danger in this way. It is constantly in danger of the retaliation of sin. This danger is exposed in the Eucharist and, by participating in the Eucharist, the Church affirms its acceptance of this danger that comes from outside of itself.

Another danger witnessed to by the Eucharist is danger from within. This is seen in the presence of Judas Iscariot when the Eucharist was instituted. Judas was part of the community gathered by Christ to witness to the Gospel that he embodied. When Christ instituted the means by which the Church would be nourished and molded to that end, the man who would betray him was present and participating. The truth in this is that the Church is always in danger of self-destruction.⁵⁵ Sin is a problem that assaults the Church from within as much as, and likely more so than, it does from without. This is because the Church will never reach its eschatological completion in this awkward ‘time between the times.’ While sin is being overcome in the community, it still exerts large amounts of influence over the various members of the community. This sin constantly threatens to destroy the Church from the inside out. When the Eucharist is enacted, this danger is recognized for what it is and the community offers forgiveness and reconciliation to all its members. The community accepts that this danger is real and yet overcomes it by the reconciliation that is found in the Gospel.

This has very close correlation to the third danger of imitating Christ as witnessed to in the Eucharist. Jesus knew that Judas would betray him and he still included him when the Eucharist was instituted. He could have done numerous things to circumvent the ultimate act of

⁵⁵ Welker, 52.

self-sacrifice that he was about to undertake. Instead, he accepted Judas and the danger that his presence represented. The danger that Christ experienced, and that the Church should experience, is self-imposed danger.⁵⁶ Central to living a life of self-sacrifice is bringing a life of danger upon oneself. To live *extra nos* is to serve others with no thought to one's own well-being, desires, or ambitions. The Church is called to be a community that puts itself into danger from without and within by being a reconciling community. In the Eucharist, the Church accepts these dangers and takes them upon itself. Where it could shirk responsibility, it imposes danger upon itself for the sake of being a reconciling community that bears witness to the Gospel. In this way, the Church imitates Christ by absorbing within itself the danger and hurt of sin, and thereby works to stop the cycle of sin by witnessing to the reconciliation found in the Gospel.

Within all of this, there is a clear ethical imperative witnessed to by the Eucharist. This imperative is tied up closely with the person of Christ. By very definition, the Church is called to exist for the purpose of witnessing to Christ. To do that, it must be a reconciling community. However, it is important to remember that the Church does not cause reconciliation. Jesus Christ provided reconciliation through his sacrificial death. The Church responds to that provision by witnessing to that reconciliation by its words and actions. The Eucharist is a very powerful tool for the Spirit to aid the Church in realizing and communicating this ethical imperative.

Many books have been written concerning whether there is a sacrifice taking place in the Eucharist. Strong people of faith fall on either side of the question. However, it is right to affirm that a sacrifice does take place when the Eucharist is enacted. By participating in the Spirit's enactment of the Eucharist, the community acknowledges its union with each other and with Christ. It recognizes that it has no identity in itself but only in Christ. Because its identity is in Christ, it sacrifices itself for the purpose of bearing witness to the reconciliation of the Gospel.

⁵⁶ Welker, 51.

“In order for the church at the Eucharist table to offer what Christ offered, the church must offer its own self in sacrifice.”⁵⁷ The Eucharist demands this kind of sacrifice whenever it is celebrated. It reveals God’s unconditional acceptance of humanity and gives the Church a profound opportunity to imitate Christ by participating in that acceptance.⁵⁸ By participating in the Eucharist, the Church is identified as a body that seeks reconciliation. The Eucharist heralds the Church’s acceptance of weak sinners, both within and outside of the community. Furthermore, it demonstrates the Church’s profound desire for justice and the end of oppressive, broken relationships.⁵⁹ In this way, the self-sacrifice of the Church in the Eucharist is the most profound witness to the Gospel imaginable.

However, the Eucharist does not merely witness to a future, eschatological reconciliation and unity. It demands that reconciliation in the here and now.⁶⁰ In the Eucharist, the Spirit works to enact that eschatological reality within time and space. The Spirit works to shape the Church into that reconciliation and, thus, demands that reconciliation and unity be increasingly experienced now. Because of this, the Church must actively seek ways to sacrifice itself in order to witness to the reconciliation achieved in Christ. The Church must be concerned with concretely acting out this sacrifice at all levels of society. This means cultivating a concern for those who suffer under the oppressive weight of broken relationships. This self-sacrifice is wholly against the prevailing structure of sin in human nature and society. The sin resident within the Church fights unendingly, and with extreme viciousness, to prevent this self-sacrifice from taking place. Yet, the Gospel is disruptive for exactly the same reasons. How can something disruptive be witnessed to without that witness also being disruptive? When it gets

⁵⁷ Cavanaugh, 230.

⁵⁸ Welker, 71.

⁵⁹ Welker, 72.

⁶⁰ Cavanaugh, 247.

down to it, the fundamental truth is that fallen humanity needs to be disrupted. Sinful humanity needs to be stopped dead in its tracks by the disruption of the Gospel so that it might be impacted by the message of reconciliation that Christ has provided.

Sin and violence are constantly perpetuated as well as self-perpetuating. Humanity and the world are in sin's grip to such an extent that it will continue to perpetuate itself into eternal destruction unless it is stopped. However, the Gospel of self-sacrificing reconciliation is present to do this very thing. The Church must witness to this reconciliation and sacrifice itself in order to stop the vicious cycle of sin. Because it is only by the Spirit that the Church can witness to this reconciliation, it is only by the Spirit that it is able to break through and stop the cycle in even small ways. However, the witness of the Spirit through the Church will never be able to completely stop the cycle. Christ will only achieve that complete and final victory in the eschaton. Yet, the Church is called to this witness in the strength of the Spirit. In the Eucharist, all of this is made very clear. The Eucharist witnesses to the Church's profound eschatological union with Christ and with each other. It witnesses to Christ's self-sacrifice of reconciliation. Further, it recognizes the Spirit's work of witness to that reconciliation. Finally, it forms the Church into a reconciling community that imitates Christ in his self-sacrifice. This existence, centered in Christ and focused on self-sacrifice, is the ethical imperative of the Eucharist.

Conclusion:

Evangelicalism desperately needs to examine its ecclesial practice in light of its theological tradition. This tradition is replete with profound insights that must be marshaled and applied to the life and witness of the Church. Central to these insights is that the Gospel is

nothing less than the person of Jesus Christ himself. Christ must be at the center of all properly evangelical theology because it is in him that God has revealed himself and acted to reconcile himself to sinful humanity. A properly evangelical expression of the Eucharist keeps Christ at the center of its witness. It bears witness to the person of Christ in such a way as to shape the Church into a community that pursues unity and reconciliation. The call of the Gospel is for the Church to witness to this reconciliation found in Christ, and the Eucharist deeply informs the Church to that end. The Eucharist, when celebrated in a properly evangelical sense, becomes the most complete and profound witness to the Gospel available to the Church today.

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