

Preston Graham, Jr.

A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel:
Rediscovering the Saving Presence
of God in the Church¹

Introduction

“I’m a very spiritual person, but I don’t get
into the church thing very much.”

—MY IN-SYNC BARBER

My barber’s sentiment perfectly exemplifies the emerging story of American religion these days, where spirituality is *in* and organized religion is *out*, at least in the ordinary sense. The social sciences portray spirituality in North America as being in a state of extreme flux—all of which are reacting to the post-Enlightenment church by a revival of spirituality expressed in both low-church and high-church directions.¹ In other words, the emerging spirituality in North America is not so much secular and post-Christian but rather post-secular and therefore post-*ecclesiastical*.² The crucial question facing missional theology today can be described then as the “church question.” And, please, this is not to revisit the worn-out debates on church polity and styles of worship as related to church growth strategy. Rath-

1. See part two, “A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel Applied.”

2. This includes both modern expressions of “church,” albeit traditional or contemporary.

er, by “church question” it is meant the issue of “church” as related to the very meaning of the Gospel itself. It is to ask the question, Is the church, even the visible church, an essential element of the Gospel? The answer here proposed is a resounding YES in so far as the Gospel is inherently sacramental and with all sorts of implications related to how we do evangelism and discipleship in and through the church.

Now to be clear, the proposed yes to the church question is not in the way that so many evangelicals have proposed it—a yes to the visible church as a subsidiary topic under the Gospel; or even a yes to the visible church as a suitable and even strategically necessary “missions agency,” or “school of discipleship,” or “equipper of the saints,” or even “credentialing board” aimed at promoting or preserving the Gospel. According to this kind of yes, the church is merely a voluntary association of like-minded individuals or perhaps a divinely authorized association, gathered together for a common religious purpose. Nor will we want to propose the kind of yes that will lead us back to Rome or Alexandria. For, perhaps ironically to some, this would be to return to what the Reformers argued was not sacramental enough—a kind of diminished sacramental theology that required the intermediary actions of the sacerdotal priests and corporeal interferences. Rather we will seek to discover a kind of sacramental Gospel acting in and through the ministry of the visible church wherein, as Calvin argued, “no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.”³

3. John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37:4⁸. For works on Calvin’s view of the sacraments, see Joseph N. Tylenda, “Calvin and Christ’s Presence in the Supper—True or Real?” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 27 (1974): 65–75; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953); John Adger, “Calvin Defended against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge,” *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, 27 (1876).

Therefore, our proposed yes to the church question will concern the visible church as she is uniquely and corporately “in Christ”—inextricably joined together with Christ through *real and substantial union* (Calvin’s expression), rendering the church essential to such topics as the Trinity, Christology, atonement theory, participation in the ascended ministry of Christ, and Christ’s advent via the Holy Spirit in the present age. All of this to evoke a new covenant theology of “temple” wherein “God is in the midst of her” by means of a *real and saving presence* being mediated through word, sacrament, and pastoral care.⁴ In so doing, we will be constructing a sacramental theology of the Gospel. More than the church doing sacraments, *a sacramental Gospel* will speak about the Gospel that is by its very nature *sacramental* in relation to the efficacious work of Christ in his ascended state of ministry by the animating power of the Holy Spirit acting in, through, and with the visible church. It was *this* kind of church that inspired Cyprian to pen his now famous dictum in the third century, as was rediscovered again in the seventeenth century by Calvin, and is needing to be rediscovered and expounded today. For according to Cyprian the church was not merely a supporting actor in God’s plan of salvation but, rather, the leading actor through which we are animated even into the life of God.

. . . She is one mother, plentiful in the results of fruitfulness: from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, *by her spirit we are animated* . . . Whoever is separated from the Church . . . is separated from the promises to the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ . . . He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.10.

could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church.⁵

Our first task, then, in part one of this essay, will be to survey the Old and New Testament scriptures in search of a sacramental Gospel. It will be discovered that there was never a time in all of redemptive history that God's salvation was *not* essentially related to His sacramental presence acting in, with, and through a temple context. Secondly, for the sake of stimulating the kind of sacred rhetoric that is so desperately needed in the spirit of *semper reformanda* ("always reforming"), we will, in part two, briefly consider the implications of a sacramental theology of the Gospel today.



Part One

A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel
in Redemptive History

What do we miss if we miss out on the visible church? According to redemptive history, we miss out on nothing less than salvation itself!

More than a successor to redemptive history, the visible church is a participant *within* redemptive history. In the language of Thomas Torrance, the church is nothing less than "Christ's vis-à-vis in history." In the Old Testament, it is the church of God's presence in the temple of Creation, Bethel, and Jerusalem. In the New Testament, it is the church of

5. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Church* (c. A.D. 250), emphasis added; available at www.philthompson.net/pages/library/unity.html (accessed Aug. 2004).

God's presence linked to the ascended ministry of Christ, acting through the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, and the formation of the new covenant temple, even the church of a living God. So then, for instance, Torrance has remarked how "we cannot pay too much attention to the fact that the Holy Spirit was sent upon the church after the crucifixion, resurrection and the ascension of Christ. In that series Pentecost belongs as one of the mighty salvation events, and to that series the parousia will belong as the last."⁶ Applied then to the ministry of the church, Torrance continues:

The spirit operates by creating out of the word a body that St. Paul calls the Body of Christ . . . It is the sphere where through the presence of the Spirit the salvation-events of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension are operative here and now in history, the sphere wherever within the old creation the new creation has broken in with power. (Ibid., p. 23)

We need to concern ourselves, then, with this animating, or *sacramental*, church as pertaining to the transforming power of the Gospel in continuity with the salvation plan of God throughout all redemptive history. And to be sure, God's salvation of a people is first and foremost *not* presented as a logically ordered series of propositions or merely as stories about the existential and personal quests for meaning on the part of individuals. God's salvation of a people is revealed by a unified corporate history, one that is most essentially about God in the midst of His people—a corporate fellowship with God. As such Leslie Newbiggin remarks,

The Bible is not the story of ideas about God, but the story of the people of God . . . the gospel does not come to each

6. Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), p. 23.

of us in isolation. It comes to us through a particular book and through a particular fellowship . . . It is a false spirituality, divorced from the whole teaching of the Bible which regards this visible and continuing church as of subordinate importance for the life of Christ . . . God meets us through his people here and now in the form of an actual invitation into the fellowship of a body of people calling themselves one Church.⁷

In short, to survey salvation history in both the Old and New Testaments is to review nothing short of an unbroken history of temple formation from beginning to end.

Under the Old Covenant context, Psalm 46 proclaimed that the “refuge and strength” of God is “a very *present* help in times of trouble [emphasis added]” when “mountains seem to shake . . . and the waters roar and foam.” We are reminded then of a salvation, in classic poetic prose, that is accomplished by God’s *presence*. And lest we misread the psalmist on this point, the sort of divine presence extolled was not a mere individualized or democratized presence. It was not even a universalized or omnipresent kind of presence of God. Rather, it was the sort of presence mediated in “the holy place of the tabernacle of the most high, where God is *in the midst of her* [emphasis added],” so that “she shall not be moved.”⁸ Indeed, true spirituality in the Old Testament was experienced with such words as “dwelling place” and “tabernacle,” even as covenants were initiated and sealed through rites whereby God manifested his presence to his people.⁹ And all of this was set in motion from

7. Leslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), p. 27, 29.

8. The NRSV reads “holy habitation”; the NASV reads “holy dwelling place.” The Hebrew word is *mishkenei* (מִשְׁכָּנַיִם), the same word for “tabernacle” used in Exod. 24–27, and the word that is almost exclusively used in the Old Testament concerning the visible dwelling place of God.

9. Cf. Gen. 15; 26:24; Exod. 29:42; Deut. 12:5; Lev. 22:3; Ps. 76:2; Num. 35:34.

the very beginning in the Creation story itself as to anticipate the advent of Word and Spirit.¹⁰

Meredith Kline in his *Kingdom Prologue* has meticulously documented how the Creation story in Genesis is told in terms of the formation of a cosmic temple formed by the presence of God in Word and Spirit.¹¹ For instance, the whole account begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit into a place of “chaos,” even as to be given a kingdom order out of the ministry of God’s Word. Such language unequivocally asserts into the Creation account a kind of salvation by means of the advent of divine presence, by Word and Spirit, amidst a holy, royal, and priestly creation-temple.¹² Conse-

10. The following description is largely indebted to Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (privately printed, 1989; reprint, Overland, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2000). See also his *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1999) and *Glory in Our Midst: A Biblical-Theological Reading of Zechariah’s Night Visions* (Overland, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2001). Both *Kingdom Prologue* and *Glory in Our Midst* are available at www.twoagepress.org.

11. That the whole of creation is meant to portray the building of a holy temple of presence can be discerned by the use of such language as the repeated use of “dome” to describe the heavens, the same term associated with God’s sanctuary in Psalm 150. Accordingly, Isaiah described God as a great architect-artist who created the world “not to be empty [of Himself] . . . but as a place to *live*” (Isa. 45:18, emphasis added). And clearly the effortless, fiat character of God’s work of creation prevents any misconception of the Creator’s Sabbath rest in Gen. 2:1–3 being that of a wearied workman. Rather, a better understanding would be to envision God in session, “seated” upon his throne in his royal creation-temple so as to be worshipped. This image fits the language of Isaiah 66:1, where after identifying heaven and earth as God’s “throne-room,” the same word *shabbath* (“rest”) in Gen. 2 is repeated as to be synonymous with worship. And in Psalm 132, God’s “resting place” is described as God’s “dwelling place” and the place where we are to worship him “at his footstool.”

12. That the presence of the Spirit is intended to be a salvific presence is indicated by its descent into a context that was “chaos and void.” This same term is used to describe God’s curse upon the world awaiting salvation in Jer. 4:23ff. In Gen. 1:1–2, if we interpret the context of the “chaotic void” in light of what is to follow in vv. 3ff. together with prophetic application throughout Scripture, the point is that pre-created reality not only lacked in cosmological order but also in *kingdom* order.

quently, human vocation is described using priestly terms identical to those used of the Old Covenant priesthood in the temple.¹³ And the description of the curse of God against fallen humanity is carefully crafted in terms of being excommunicated from the very presence of God mediated through his holy temple.¹⁴ That is to say that creation itself sets into motion a redemptive history, which is nothing less than a temple history. Nowhere is this made clearer than when one notices the trajectory of God’s animating “Spirit” acting in and through regulated and visible contexts of worship. For in the words of Kline,

The Glory-Spirit provided a preview of the finished creation-structure, for this theophonic Spirit-formation was a divine paradigm as well as a divine power for the work of creation. Cosmos and man alike were to be formed after this archetypal temple pattern. (*Kingdom Prologue*, p. 31)

Indeed, the creation of the cosmos is accomplished by the “spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). As shown by Kline, “the Spirit-Glory of Genesis 1:2 represents a coming forth of the Lord of Glory out of an invisible temple into a special earth temple to reveal himself in earth history as the Alpha and Omega.”¹⁵ It is the *identical* language that will again show up relative to the new creation by means of the salvation waters of Noah’s day

13. In Gen. 1:27–28 the divine mandate given to “image of God” is to “fill the earth and subdue it.” This language is clearly priestly, as it is the same language applied to the role given to the cherubim with the flaming swords in Gen. 3:24 in order to guard the entrance back into the Edenic presence of God; and it is repeated again as to guard the entrance back into Holy of Holies in the temple (Exod.26:1).

14. The curse that was enacted against fallen humanity is stated in terms of being excommunicated from out of the temple of God—as from “before the face of God” (Gen. 3:8; cf. Lev. 23:3). And for what other purpose should we attribute to Genesis, when it is carefully noted that humanity was driven from out of the east side of the Garden of Eden, the very same direction facing the entrance to the Mosaic temple.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

(executed by means of an ark whose dimensions are intentionally reminiscent of the Mosaic temple);¹⁶ and then again relative to the new creation by means of the salvation waters of the Red Sea in Moses' day, culminating in the presence of Word and Spirit in the Mosaic temple itself.¹⁷ At the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, we can likewise observe how Pentecost is very explicitly told in terms of a new creation event and again by the advent of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Believers are described in terms of a new creation by means of the efficacious waters of Christian baptism, waters that are in fact explicitly affirmed as having been prefigured in the Noahic and Mosaic waters of old according to Peter.¹⁹

In summary, Creation and subsequent new creation events of the Old Testament anticipate the sacramental Gospel of

16. Gen. 8:1—the “spirit hovering over the water” (Gen. 1:2). Note also how the dimensions of the Ark are given so as to have three levels the same height as the tabernacle and three sections on each deck the same size as the tabernacle courtyard.

17. Used in Deut. 32:11 to indicate the divine activity in leading Israel through the wilderness—even as the “wilderness” is directly compared to the formless/void over which the Spirit hovered at Creation. In Exod. 19:4, God is again described as bearing Israel on “eagles’ wings” and with the imagery of “hovering.” That the “spirit of God” is the “Glory-Cloud” of Israel related to the presence of God by the Holy Spirit is also noted in Neh. 9:19–20; Isa. 63:11–14; Haggai 2:5; and Acts 2. The salvific aspects of Creation and the re-creation aspects of redemption are evidenced in the literary connection between the original creation record and certain redemptive recreation narratives such as the Flood episode (Gen. 8:1), in the Exodus episode (Exod. 14:21), and more poetically as the “spirit” of God blows upon the waters in Exod. 15:8, 10, and eventually at Pentecost.

18. See Acts 4:23ff., where it is proclaimed, “Lord, you are God who made heaven and earth . . .” and then to culminate in “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

19. In reference to the new creation, see 2 Cor. 5:5, 17, c.f. Rom. 6:4ff., 8:9, 20–23; in reference to Christian baptism, see, for instance, the efficacious language attributed to it in 1 Peter 3:21, Titus 3:5, Acts 22:16; and note that the water of baptism (1 Peter 3:18–22, 2 Peter 3:5–7) is a vivid picture likened by Peter unto the waters of the flood and Red Sea, which signifies and affects the salvation of God in Christ as then offered in, by, and through the New Covenant church.

a new creation by a Word- and Spirit-revealed Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit within the visible church. For what Genesis 1:2 identifies as Word and Spirit, Hebrews 1:2–3 identifies as the Son of God experienced in the sacred assembly such as to evoke the exhortation, “Do not forsake the assembling together, as is the habit of some” (Heb. 10:24). Therefore, John’s gospel will introduce Christ as the very “Word” of God incarnate (who we know was conceived by the Holy Spirit), one and the same “Word” through whom “all things came into being” (John 1:1–3). We know as well that the Holy Spirit is related to the inscripturated Word (1 Pet. 1:20ff.), and then again is related to the “power to become children of God” by being “born of water and Spirit” (John 1:12–13; 3:5). The Holy Spirit is likewise related to the advent of Word at Pentecost, whereby Paul can rightly say concerning the church of the living God that “the Word is near you” as by “preaching” and “confession” in the visible church (Rom. 10:8ff.). But then again, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

We can say therefore that Creation set into motion a redemptive history of subsequent new creations—all related to the ministry of Word as initiated by the descent of the Holy Spirit within a temple context. To read the Bible is to read about the advent of God in salvation, albeit mediated through God’s holy temple *presence*. It is one and the same history concerning God’s sacramental presence that will continue through the Patriarchal Era by means of God’s presence mediated at Bethel (the “house of God”). During this context of redemptive history, Jacob will exclaim, “Surely the LORD is in *this place*” and “How awesome is *this place*. This is none other than the house of God, even *the gate of heaven* [emphases added].”²⁰ Perhaps even more astounding

20. Cf. Abraham and Bethel in Gen. 12:8, Jacob and Bethel in Gen. 28:16–18.

is the fact that God condescends to identify himself with his sacramental presence on earth when he proclaims, “I am the God of Bethel” (Gen. 31:13). As a result, God directed his people to Bethel for the purpose of finding salvation by means of covenant execution and renewal according to Genesis 35:1ff.

Transitioning then to the Mosaic covenant, John Durham has noted concerning the book of Exodus how “the centerpiece of its theological unity is the theology of Yahweh present with and in the midst of his people Israel.”²¹ Durham recounts how God’s revelation to Moses was established by God’s presence; how the very basis of Moses’ confidence was predicated upon God’s promise of presence; how God’s presence established the covenantal relationship, and how God’s presence promised guidance, protection, and success in the settlement of the Promised Land. It can be shown how God’s presence solemnized the covenant with Israel, even as the presence of Yahweh was at the center of the elaborate instructions for worship.²² It is therefore no surprise that when the people wanted to sing songs of praise concerning the blessed salvation of God in celebration of the exodus event and their subsequent conquest and settlement of Canaan, they sang over and over again about God’s presence (Exod. 15:1ff.).

We should, at this point, observe a very important Old Testament pattern that is already exposed concerning the theological nature of God’s salvation. The pattern concerns a “once and for all” aspect of salvation history related to God’s presence by the Holy Spirit that is continually applied and experienced by God’s liturgical presence in the Holy

21. John Durham, “Exodus,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1987), 3:xxi.

22. Respectively, Exod. 3:6; 4:5; 3:12; 4:11, 15; 20:1-8; 23:20-33; 24:5-8; 25-31.

Spirit acting through Word and sacrament in the tabernacle. In other words, as illustrated in the Mosaic context, God's saving activity was related to the "Glory-Spirit" (Kline's expression) of God that led Israel through the wilderness, even the same Glory-Spirit that eventually settled upon the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34. Concerning this pattern, Torrance has observed that the "once and for all event" of God's salvation in the Exodus was accomplished through the mediation of Moses directly, but then it was "remembered and participated in by the liturgy of the Old Covenant as mediated through the priesthood in a secondary sense."²³ Even while salvation was an ongoing and dynamic reality by means of the priestly liturgy of the temple, it was a once and for all historical reality as related to the historically grounded word-deed-word pattern of God's special revelation. Or, to state it differently, one can discern between a "revelatory Word" by the Holy Spirit as contained in the "once and for all" historical aspect and a "dynamic Word" by the Holy Spirit acting continually in the temple; for example, the "Word" according to Moses was final and complete under the old covenant even as the "Word" was effectually dynamic within the sacramental liturgy of the Aaronic temple. Accordingly, Torrance explains:

Over against Moses, and in secondary status, Aaron is regarded as the liturgical priest who carries out in continual cultic witness the actual mediation that came through Moses. In this way, the cult was a liturgical extension into the history of Israel and her worship of the once and for all events of Exodus and Sinai . . . That which took place once and for all in the lawgiving and covenantal atonement is enshrined in the liturgy of the Tabernacle. But it is extended cultically into

23. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, p. 4. Looking forward to the new covenant, Torrance will relate this to the once-and-for-all incarnational ministry of Christ on the one hand and the ascended ministry of Christ by the Holy Spirit acting through the church on the other.

the life and history of Israel in such a way as to make clear that the priestly sacrifices and oblations are carried out as liturgical witness to the divine glory and obedience to God's proclamation of his own Name in grace and judgment, in mercy and truth. (*Royal Priesthood*, p. 4)

In other words, God was present to humanity (an incarnational aspect of God's salvation) by the advent of the Holy Spirit acting through the priesthood, both in its Mosaic "once and for all" context and in its Aaronic "continual" contexts; and, yet, at the same time humanity was present to God (an ascended aspect of God's salvation) as was accomplished by Moses (once and for all) and the Aaronic priesthood (continually). The twofold "God humanward" and "human Godward" aspects of the priestly ministry in the old covenant were accomplished (once and for all) by Moses to regulate and order the (continual) participation in the priestly ministry by the Aaronic priesthood of the old covenant temple. Here again, we see how Moses both ascended up unto the holy mountain shrouded in cloud and divine glory, even as he descended in the midst of the people while radiating the spiritual presence of God in their midst—both once and for all. Forever then under the old covenant, the meaning of salvation is contained in what was accomplished by Moses. But then again, the same twofold priestly actions of Moses were observed continually when it is observed that "Aaron's supreme function as high priest, bearing the iniquity of the people (Exod. 28:38; Lev. 10:17; Num. 18:23) was to ascend into the Holy of Holies once a year on the day of atonement," only then to return from behind the veil to the waiting congregation with the blessed "Peace be unto you" to put the name of God upon them in benediction (Num. 6:22ff.). As noted by Torrance, "That which took place once and for all in the lawgiving and covenantal atonement is enshrined in the liturgy of the Tabernacle" (*ibid.*).

The above twofold aspects of incarnation and ascension—both “once and for all” and “continually”—expose how God was both the object and subject of old covenant worship. God was the one being worshipped and was by means of his presence in and through the liturgy the one worshipping vicariously on behalf of fallen humanity. Concerning then the two aspects of the priesthood, we find one related to God’s salvation toward humanity (incarnation), the other related to God’s obedience on behalf of humanity toward God (ascension). All in all, the whole liturgy was regarded by the Old Testament as an ordinance of grace accomplished by God and applied by God. It was God himself who provided the sacrifice, and the whole action is described, therefore, in the form of a divinely appointed response to God’s Word (Exod. 25:22; Num. 7:89).

Transitioning then to the new covenant context, we have seen how God’s saving presence in the old covenant was considered a “refuge and strength” and was directly linked to “the holy place of the tabernacle of the most High, where God is *in the midst of her* [emphasis added],” so that “she shall not be moved.” So, would it surprise the modern reader that Calvin, after commenting on Psalm 46, was led *not* to reflect upon the Mosaic context of law and temple but upon the descent of the Holy Spirit under the new covenant related to the meaning of the Lord’s Supper within the visible church? Indeed, Calvin could preach in the new covenant sense, “God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved” (Ps. 46:5) and then say, “So available is communion with the Church to keep us in the fellowship of God.”²⁴ Calvin therefore read continuity between the old and new covenants regarding a salvation involving a real and efficacious *presence* of God expressed corporately.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5.

Hence it follows, that all who reject the spiritual food of the soul divinely offered to them by the hands of the Church, deserve to perish of hunger and famine . . . With this view, it pleased him in ancient times that sacred meetings should be held in the sanctuary, that consent in faith might be nourished . . . as when the temple is called God's rest, his sanctuary, his habitation, and when he is said to dwell between the cherubims (Pss. 132:13, 14; 80:1). (*Institutes*, 4.1.5)

A brief survey of the New Testament will reveal again how Christ's ministry of incarnation (God-humanward) and ascension (human-Godward) are both related to our salvation predicated upon his past actions forensically understood and His continual actions liturgically understood within a new covenant temple. Again, we will want to see this as it unfolds in new covenant redemptive history.

Richard Gaffin in *Perspectives on Pentecost* observes in John 1 a close integration of John the Baptist's ministry of baptizing Christ by water (v. 31), Jesus' own reception of the Spirit (v. 32), and the promise that Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit (v. 33).²⁵ These historical realities anticipate Christ's teachings in John 14–17 concerning His coming again *in the Holy Spirit*—a clear reference to Pentecost and the ensuing temple formation built upon the foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone.²⁶ We discover as

25. Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979).

26. In John 14–16, Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit as yet "another" counselor and comforter. The point being made in 14:12ff. especially is that the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditioned upon both his going to the Father and at the same time his coming back to them. Very carefully Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned; *I am coming to you*. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (vv. 18–20, emphasis added). Christ further speaks of making his "home with them" (v. 23). And then immediately he says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (vv. 25–26).

well how Christ's teachings culminate with his high priestly prayer in John 17 such that the Trinitarian logic of Christ's unity with the Father and the Spirit is related to the Christological logic of Christ's unity with humanity. And to think that this was the discourse that followed Christ's assertion that "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" in John 6:56—an assertion believed by most throughout church history to be a reference to the Lord's Supper in the church.

The same integration between Christ's bodily advent and his spiritual advent at Pentecost can be discerned in Luke's writings as well. For in comparing Luke 3:22 with Acts 1:5, Gaffin discerns how "the overall structure of Luke–Acts is related then to the connection between John's water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism."²⁷ Gaffin therefore comments,

At the Jordan, the Spirit was given to Jesus, by the Father (Luke 3:22), as endowment for the messianic task before him, in order that he might accomplish the salvation of the church; at Pentecost, the Spirit, received by Jesus from the Father, as reward for the redemptive work finished and behind him, was given by him to the church as the (promised) gift (of the Father). (*Perspectives on Pentecost*, p. 17)

In other words, when Luke records in Acts 1:5, "For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," he in no uncertain terms renders Christ's reception of baptism during his incarnation as somehow incomplete apart from Christ's gift of baptism after his ascension. Therefore, we can say that "all four gospels record the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist as pointing to Christ the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), and then point to 'the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit' (v. 33). Whereas John'

27. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, p. 17.

ministry is preparatory, Jesus' role is fulfillment."²⁸ Regarding Christ's presence, stage one pertains to his ministry of incarnation up to his ascension, which is the subject matter of the four gospels. Stage two corresponds to his ministry of ascension up through the present age prior to Christ's glorified Parousia, which is the subject matter of Acts and the advent of Christ in the Holy Spirit.

It is therefore not surprising that when Peter is asked to explain the meaning of Pentecost, he doesn't preach the "Holy Spirit," rather he preaches "Christ." Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-39 is basically Christ-centered, even as it results in ecclesial formation. For the result of Pentecost was not merely individual conversions but the presence of God in Word, sacraments, and order as noted in Acts 2, where it is said that Christ was proclaimed such that those who "received" the message "were baptized" even as they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:41-42). Indeed, Luke's summary of the apostles' ministry throughout Acts is stated in terms of ecclesial formation. Paul, for instance, made it his business to appoint elders wherever he went, demonstrating that the ultimate object of his labors was new churches (Acts 14:23). And while we clearly see preaching as one of the means used by the apostles in Acts, we come to this striking observation in Acts 9:31: "Then the *churches* throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified [emphasis added]." In other words, as summary to the work of the apostles, what we see is that church planting had been co-extensive with preaching. Again, Gaffin has rightly observed that

Christ and the Spirit are equated in their activity. The two are seen as one, as they have been made one in the eschatological

28. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

work of giving life to the church, that life which has its visible first-fruits in Christ's own resurrection. Accordingly, all who have been incorporated into that Spirit-baptized body and have a place in it share in the gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). (Ibid., pp. 19, 21)

Clearly then, the argument of John and Luke concerning Pentecost is first of all that the advent of the Holy Spirit is the advent of Christ. "The work of the Spirit is *not* some addendum to the work of Christ. It is *not* some more or less independent sphere of activity that goes beyond or supplements what Christ has done. And it is *not* a "bonus" added to the basic salvation secured by Christ. Rather the coming of the Spirit brings to light not only that Christ *has* lived and *has* done certain things but that he, as the source of eschatological life, *now* lives and is at work in the church" (ibid., pp.19–20). Secondly, in so far as Christ in the Holy Spirit is directly related to the presence of God in the sacramental church, then of course the church is rendered essential to Christ making good His promise "And behold, I am with you until the end of the age" (Matt. 28:2). As affirmed as well by Gaffin,

The gift of the Spirit is nothing less than the gift of Christ himself to the church, the Christ who has become what he is by virtue of his sufferings, death, and exaltation. In this sense the gift (baptism, outpouring) of the Spirit is the crowning achievement of Christ's work. It is his coming in exaltation to the church in the power of the Spirit. It completes the once-for-all accomplishment of salvation. It is the apex thus far reached in the unfolding of redemptive history. Without it, the work that climaxes in Christ's death and resurrection would be unfinished, incomplete. (Ibid., p. 20)

That the ministry of the Holy Spirit is *both* individual and corporate in reality can be discerned as well in the very carefully crafted argument of Ephesians 2. For beginning in

Ephesians 2:1, Paul utilizes a “once . . . but now” literary framework to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in personal salvation.²⁹ And, yet, all too often this is where we stop reading. We should therefore be careful to notice how the “once . . . but now” framework is explicitly repeated by Paul beginning in v. 11 and completed in v. 21.³⁰ The repetition speaks volumes—as to say in bold terms, “This is still about the Gospel!” This time, the emphasis is corporate, about a people once estranged from God by means of being alienated from the corporate *presence* of God. In the words of Paul, and stated negatively, to be separated from the “household of God” (v. 19) is *not* to participate in the Gospel according to v. 18, where it is said, “For through Him [Christ] we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father”; that is, no church . . . no access to God. In this second section concerning the Gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit is attributed to our being “in Him [Christ]” related to being in the “holy temple,” that is, “*in the Lord*.” The language is graphic. In v. 22 a kind of “union in Christ” is synonymous with “being built up *together* spiritually into a *dwelling place* of God [emphases added].” One ought not to pass over this word “together,” as it assumes an assembly (*ekklesia*). Nor should we miss the significance of the phrase “dwelling place,” as it is one and the same word used in the Greek Old Testament for “tabernacle,” such as in Psalm 46:4.

According then to Ephesians, Paul makes the case for the Gospel that assumes the church “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” And notice especially that Paul explicitly references a “structure” that is being “*joined together*” such as to grow into “a holy temple in the Lord,” even that which

29. *pote* (vv. 2ff.) . . . *de* (vv. 4ff.).

30. *pote* . . . *nun* (vv. 11ff.) . . . *nuni de* (vv. 13ff.).

is “in Christ,” being “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:20ff); that is, Christ’s advent in the Holy Spirit acting in, through, and with the *visible* church. This is even more clear when it is further observed how this language of being “joined together” is used again in Ephesians 4:16 concerning the descent of Christ in the Holy Spirit related to the institution of the apostolic and then post-apostolic offices. Their purpose was again to *join together* the body of Christ, probably a reference to their role of organizing churches.³¹ As constructed then upon the apostolic foundation, one can at the very least conclude that the construction of an assembly included instructions in doctrine, sacrament, and government, all of which was related to the “building of the temple.”³²

With respect then to Christ’s incarnational ministry, Christ’s life, death, and resurrection are accomplished so

31. *sunarmologoumena*. See also Eph. 4:16. According then to Louw-Nida, this word can be used synonymously with “assemble,” “arrange,” “structure,” or even “organize.” In 1 Cor. 12:20, for instance, God is said to “structure” (*sugkerannumi*) the body of Christ so as to give to some greater honor than to others. And perhaps most significantly, Titus 1:5 applies the verb *epidiorfow* to mean “set in order” or even “organize,” as to establish a church by means of the training and appointment of elders (Louw-Nida, 62.3, 4, 5). Cf. T. David Gordon’s “‘Equipping’ Ministry in Ephesians 4,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 1994).

32. This is perfectly illustrated when Paul speaks about the “pattern of sound words,” related to his instructions to his young protégé Timothy, “in order that” he might “know how *one ought* to conduct oneself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14–15, emphasis added). And would it surprise us that Paul’s “instructions” to Timothy covered such topics as instructions on ordination (1 Tim. 3), worship (1 Tim. 2), and doctrine (1 Tim. 1) as no doubt being worked out in an assembled context? Surely then, the “whole structure” being “joined together” upon the apostolic foundation spoken of in Ephesians included such things. And as such, the “temple” being spoken of in Ephesians is both “spiritual” as to be animated into Christ by the Holy Spirit *and* organized as to take on a definable and even “orthodox” form.

as to vicariously submit to John's baptism concerning repentance on behalf of sinful humanity. By undergoing the baptism of John, Jesus was identified with humanity as our representative sin-bearer—this being Christ's "once and for all" ministry and the subject matter of the gospels. We may therefore rightly speak of an all-sufficient atoning sacrifice of Christ made historically whereby a legal exchange was made concerning Christ's righteousness accredited to us and our sinfulness accredited to him. In this sense, Christ became a Second Adam, and by His life, death, and resurrection "his *one act* of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom. 5:18, emphasis added).

With respect however to Christ's ascended ministry, Christ is related to the baptism in the Holy Spirit in and through the sacramental church continually. In this way, we may now speak more specifically of that aspect of atonement that is related to what Calvin described as our *mystical union* with Christ concerning Christ's presence in Word and sacrament today. In this sense, "The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, *a life-giving spirit*" (1 Cor. 15:45, emphasis added). Notice especially how Christ is now called the "life-giving spirit." What does this reference except Christ's advent in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and continued liturgically today? Peter describes salvation in terms of being made partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

It should be noted as well that this whole ecclesial union with Christ is fundamentally grounded in a classic Trinitarian conception of Christology—so much so that we could rightly say that ecclesiology is Christology applied. Indeed, everything Paul has said in Ephesians 2–4 is meant to support the Trinitarian doxology of chapter 1. Paul's point in Ephesians 1 is that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the salvation of fallen humanity to the "praise

of God’s glorious grace.” And not by accident, this whole doxology culminates with the ascended ministry of Christ inextricably related to being “marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit” and then to conclude with Christ being made head over all things for the church, “which is *his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all*” (Eph. 1:22–23, emphasis added). How is this so, except by means of the union of “God and man” in Christ? Using then the historic language of the church, we see how Paul’s argument in Ephesians is fundamentally predicated upon Christology, wherein it can be said that “Christ is of one substance” (*homoousios*) with the Father and the Spirit, even as He is, and at the same time, “one substance with us as regards His manhood.”³³ According then to Torrance,

Reformed Theology interprets participation in the divine nature as the union and communion we are given to have with Christ in his human nature, as participation in his Incarnate Sonship, and therefore as sharing in Him the divine Life and Love. That is to say, it interprets “deification” precisely in the same way as Athanasius in the *Contra Arianos*. It is only through *real and substantial union* (Calvin’s expression) with him in his human nature that we partake of all his benefits, such as justification and sanctification and regeneration, but because in him human nature is hypostatically united to divine nature so that the Godhead dwells in him ‘bodily’, in him we really are made partakers of the eternal life of God.³⁴

Finally, we should observe how the same “once and for all” and “continual” pattern that was previously observed

33. The Creed of Athanasius.

34. Thomas F. Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace from the Point of View of Reformed Theology,” in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1996), p. 184. Quoted by Andrew Purves in *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p.133.

in the old covenant is expressed in the new covenant as well. This is illustrated in Romans 10, where Paul speaks both of Christ's incarnation (descent) and ascension (ascent) as pertaining to both the "once and for all" and "continual" aspects of the priesthood. Paul's concern is for the transition from the old to the new covenant. According to Paul, the old covenant law and temple context was in itself not able to save. Rather, its power to save was in relation to Christ's fulfillment. Paul asserts therefore, "the person who does these things [the Old Covenant system] will live by them [i.e., he will be judged by them]" (Rom. 10:5).

But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." (Rom. 10:6-8)

Paul is in effect saying, Do not annul the incarnation and ascension of Christ by remaining under the old covenant system that was meant to be typological as fulfilled in Christ. For this reason, Paul argues that justification comes by faith in the "once and for all" work of Christ's incarnation and ascension (v. 10). In that manner, Paul could say that the "word is near you" as related to Christ's historical life, death, and resurrection. Christ's historical life, death, and resurrection are sufficient unto our salvation, at least forensically understood (and there is a forensic aspect to our salvation, to be sure). But notice carefully what else Paul asserts in the remaining of v. 10. He continues, ". . . and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."

To whom, and in what context, are such saving confessions heard? Paul certainly meant that this context was "efficacious" such as to "save" us. Clearly, Paul is referencing the ecclesial context of worship, what he later describes as

the “pillar and bulwark of the truth.” Notice therefore that Paul will go on to describe the “Word of Christ” that is liturgically present through preaching especially.

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? . . . So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (vv. 13–15, 17)

What this passage illustrates is how Christ’s incarnation and ascension ministry are both “once and for all” and “continual” as related to salvation forensically understood and efficaciously understood. In other words, whatever else is true about a continued ministry of incarnation and ascension liturgically present, it is not such as to annul the historical incarnation and ascension—the point the Reformers made over and over again against the Romanist doctrine of the church. However, Calvin clearly links the ongoing work of the Spirit with our justification, even as then related to the work of the Spirit that is inextricably related to the work of the church. Notice then how Calvin describes our “cleansing and purification” as related to the efficacious work of the Spirit.

Paul, speaking of cleansing and purification, says,

“But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, *and* by the Spirit of our God.”
(1 Cor. 6:11, emphasis added)

*The whole comes to this, that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.*³⁵

But then notice also that for Calvin this “cleansing and purification” is clearly not a reference to a merely individualized union with Christ unto salvation. For he will also speak

35. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1

of Christ's efficacious activity in and through the church by means of an infused life of Christ in us—this as specifically related to the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

It is certainly a proof of truly divine and incomprehensible power that however remote He may be from us, He infuses life from the substance of His flesh and blood into our souls, so that no distance of place can impede the union of head and members. (*Corpus Reformatorum*, 37:48)

Clearly then, our union with Christ is effected corporately by means of the Holy Spirit acting in and through the visible means of grace in the church as pertaining to the ascended ministry of Christ "seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places." As the ascended Lord, Christ remains sovereign in his efficacious activity as "head over all things *to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*" A mystery? Of course. For to participate in the church is nothing less than to participate in the dwelling place of God, even as to be granted by God's sovereign grace the life of Christ by his descent to us in the Holy Spirit acting through the Word, sacraments, and discipline.

And to be absolutely clear at this point, the latter "dynamic justification" as predicated upon our mystic union with Christ is the *necessary* consequence of the former once-and-for-all "forensic justification." Or stated differently, dynamic justification is predicated upon an a priori forensic justification, not then to be confused with the Roman Catholic doctrine of forensic justification predicated upon an a priori dynamic justification.³⁶ Having said this, effectual jus-

36. To speak of a continual efficacious aspect of justification is *not* then aimed at challenging the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith *alone*, as significantly undermined by the Roman Catholic Church's doctrines concerning justification predicated upon a necessary and complete "infusion" of divine righteousness. (See, for instance, the RC language concerning justification in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1989, 1993, and then 1995 editions.)

tification is not to be confused with sanctification either, in that it pertains to Christ's continued ministry of sustaining us in God's favor, over against making us more and more holy in actual terms through repentance and faith. We are declared "not guilty," even as in Christ by the Holy Spirit we are treated as righteous to be under the everyday benediction of God—this as predicated upon Christology applied in and through the sacramental church. What else can it mean that we are not only declared "righteous" but that we also become "participants in the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4)?

Conclusion

Even a cursory review of redemptive history affirms, in bold terms, why the church is an essential element of the Gospel—not merely because it supports the Gospel, however conceived, but because apart from the visible church there is, in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, "no ordinary possibility of salvation." This was true under the old covenant and no less so than it remains true under the new covenant, albeit a temple built upon the foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone. In other words, we have seen how apart from the church we do not have full access to Christ by means of his advent in the Holy Spirit. The Gospel according to Paul is not a transition from temple to "no temple," as some would have it. In this regard, Paul's teaching for us under the new covenant—that salvation is described with the promise "I will dwell with them" (2 Cor. 6:16)—is no different than the prophetic teaching under the old covenant. This is also Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 3, even as Richard Hayes has observed,

Paul dares to assert [that] the community is the place where God dwells. "Do you not know," he asks, "that you [plural] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you

[plural]?” (3:16). To read this last sentence as though it spoke of the Spirit dwelling in the body of the individual Christian would be to miss the force of Paul’s audacious metaphor: the apostolically founded community takes the place of the Jerusalem temple as the place where the glory of God resides.³⁷

As such, Torrance contends that “the Christian Church is what it is because of its indissoluble union with Christ through the Spirit, for in him is concentrated the Church and its ministry . . . There is only one ministry, that of Christ in his Body.”³⁸ Likewise, Calvin proclaimed,

Beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for . . . The paternal favor of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal. (*Institutes*, 4.1.4)

The only thing left to do is to contextualize our redemptive-historical survey concerning a sacramental theology of the Gospel into our present post-modern context with all sorts of profound implications on the way we do Christian spirituality and ecclesiology today. Of course, the enormity of such an endeavor warrants a much more sophisticated and voluminous work than is here presented. It will be enough however to merely offer an abbreviated summary in the spirit of *semper reformanda*.

37. Richard B. Hayes, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians*, available at <http://www.northpark.edu/sem/exaudit/papers/hays.html> (accessed Aug. 2004).

38. Thomas F. Torrance, “Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,” in *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 151. Quoted by Purves in *Pastoral Theology*, p. 134.

Part Two

Sacramental Theology of the Gospel Applied

As noted in part one, America is in a state of spiritual flux—spirituality is *in* and “church as usual” is *out*, albeit expressed in some very different ways. Admittedly, the spiritual flux is a subset of an even greater upheaval that is often described as “post-modernity,” measured both in social and philosophical ways.³⁹ For the present purpose, suffice it to say that the religion of the twentieth century was nurtured by the Enlightenment context to be both individualistic (with an emphasis on the *personal* in our relationship with Jesus) and rationalistic (with an emphasis on winning the faith by means of Christian worldview conferences or apologetic debates)—with a kind of new-is-better approach to everything. It produced a religion that stressed “personal faith such that in the late 1970s, Robert Bellah marveled at the Gallup finding suggesting that 80 percent of Americans agreed that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.”⁴⁰ As noted by Thomas Oden,

The goal of modern life [was] to be liberated from restrictions, constraints, traditions, and all social parenting, all of which are self-evidently presumed to be dehumanizing... The social, psychological and political strategies and rhetoric of modernity all focus[ed] on a highly abstract notion of individual freedom . . . sustained covenant accountability [was] misplaced in the interest of subjective self-expression.⁴¹

39. Cf. Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

40. Robert N. Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 228.

41. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* p. 47.

On the rationalistic side of modernism, it was the world of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), where it was argued that "God talk" was nonsense since it was based on neither logic nor empirical evidence. Modernism produced a rationalistic kind of religion that was either liberal or evangelical—both however buying into the *foundationalist* premise of faith being reduced to reason, albeit the latter attempting to refute the liberal conclusions within an "evidentialist" framework. It was the religion of Josh McDowell, where mystery was frowned upon and missional theology focused on "evidence that demands a verdict."

Notwithstanding the individualistic and rationalistic vestiges of modernism still present today, we are now beginning to experience the broader social trend of what Joey Earl Horstman has labeled "the post-modern yawn," where people are increasingly bored with the kind of life and religion that is bred out of modernism's reductionist agenda.⁴² Out of the yawn have arisen all sorts of post-modern trends—all with their spiritual counterparts, it would seem—such as what Samuel Huntington has described as "an eruption of a global identity crisis" leading to a "culture of balkanization."⁴³ Such a spiritual side of this reaction can be detected in Oden's, *Beyond Modernity . . . What?* He asked, "Where did we get the twisted notion that orthodoxy is essentially a set of ideas rather than a living tradition of social experience? Our stereotype of orthodoxy is that of frozen dogma, rather than a warm continuity of human experience."⁴⁴

To be sure, if Enlightenment-bound evangelicalism spoke much of moral and epistemological absolutes in reaction to

42. Joey Earl Horstman, "Channel Too: The Postmodern Yawn," *The Other Side*, vol. 29, no.3 (May–June 1993), p. 35.

43. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

44. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* p. 47.

modernity's relativism, it left believers as spiritual orphans absent a communal "home" and void of the "mystery" related to transcendence coupled with imminence. For many, this has resulted in the search for what Chesterton prophetically referred to as a kind of spiritual romance.⁴⁵ In his words, this romance is "the combination of something that is strange with something that is secure. We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder with an idea of welcome."⁴⁶ Herein lies the allure of a *sacramental theology of the Gospel*—where divine mystery is coupled with communal welcome.

Tragically, however, without biblical definition, the search for the sacramental is too often like the communalism experienced in a popular post-modern pub in New Haven. Upon entering through the once hallowed doors of an ancient looking artifice, one is immediately absorbed into a kind of sacred surrounding. Drinks are served amidst the relics of chancel furnishings, all imported from a sacred European landscape past. Indeed, into the sacramental vacuum of a post-modern yawn, sacred communalism is taking on an altogether different meaning than anything envisioned by redemptive history. But will it satisfy? By faith, we know that it will not. If ever, then, there was a need for a sacred rhetoric concerning a biblically informed, if not rediscovered, sacramental theology of the Gospel, it is now. The world is looking for the kind of transcendent romance that a sacramental Gospel can offer—a kind of Gospel that gives new and fresh meaning to the marriage metaphor as applied to Christ and his church.

45. Consider the best-selling book *Sacred Romance: Drawing Close to the Heart of God* by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge (Nashville: Nelson Books, 1997).

46. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (PLACE: John Lane Company, 1908), p. 5, available at www.ccel.org/c/chesterton/orthodoxy/orthodoxy.html (accessed Aug. 2004).

For we have seen how really and truly, as typologically expressed between a husband and wife, we are in union with Christ—not in an abstract manner but in a manner that includes warm bodies, feasts, and traditions with the apostolic church. Of course, this will radically change the way we do Christian mission and discipleship—being much more communal and liturgical and not merely propositional.

In an abbreviated manner, therefore, we should consider the implications of a sacramental theology of the Gospel in at least four broad ways.

A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel in Relation to the Way We Do Evangelism

Throughout redemptive history, evangelism was less an individualistic and more a corporate undertaking as specifically linked to the sacramental, or priestly, identity of old and new covenant church. In the old covenant, the Great Commission was directed to the people of Israel as a corporate body; Israel as a nation was called a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” whereby God’s law and grace were revealed in mission to the nations (Exod. 19:3–6). The same language is used again in Isaiah 61 pertaining to corporate Israel as “priests of the Lord” and “ministers of God,” resulting with the inclusions of the nations into God’s people. The words of Isaiah 61 will be personally fulfilled by Christ, even then as Christ is embodied in “his body the church.” This explains why, in the new covenant, the church is the new “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16; Rom. 9:5–6). Peter then applies the same priestly language of old in relation to the Great Commission to the corporate church when he states, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9f.).

This emphasis on corporate evangelism demonstrates that a priestly (sacramental) definition of the church is directly related to the mission of God in the world—a mission that was personally embodied in Christ, even as Christ’s presence in the Holy Spirit is now embodied sacramentally in the body of Christ by word, sacraments, and fellowship. In other words, the sacramental church is inherently missional. A sacramental church is not a church that “does missions” or “does outreach,” as if one of many programs. Rather, a sacramental church is one that is both *incarnational* and *ascensional* in a *Gospel centered* way such as to mediate God to humanity and humanity to God. It is the church that is sacramentally “in” the world, “for” the world, and “otherworldly.” Whether in worship or in hospitality, in small groups or large group meetings, *the sacramental church fulfills her life as if her unbelieving neighbors are always present*, knowing that by her very nature the church is a “priest unto God.” And changes everything the church does!

On the one hand, the *incarnational* aspect of the church is related to the God-humanward impulse wherein God’s gracious and true presence is mediated down into its local context in a vernacular-sensitive way. As noted by Keller, the “missional (or sacramental) church avoids ‘tribal’ language, stylized prayer language, unnecessary evangelical pious jargon,” and archaic language that seeks to set a “spiritual tone . . . we–them language.” Rather, the missional (or sacramental) church seeks to “engage the culture with gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony the gospel creates.”⁴⁷ The incarnational church not only knows the stories and concerns of a given culture but also participates in them, so that the church fully applies the Gospel to the culture in word and deed.

47. Timothy Keller, “The Missional Church,” available at www.redeemer.com (accessed Aug. 2004).

On the other hand, the *ascensional* aspect of the church is related to the human-Godward impulse such as to mediate up to God a local context into an otherworldly direction. The word, sacraments, and fellowship of the church will necessarily be counter-intuitive in multiples of ways. For instance where “evangelism” is doxological, “worldview” is theocentric, and “Gospel” is radically gracious, every event and context of the sacramental church demonstrates a genuine invitation into the transcendent culture of God. It is not the church “dumbing down,” but as Marva Dawn has said, it is the church “upside-down” in relation to culture, where worship and fellowship is a graciously subversive activity.⁴⁸ The Nip/Tuck individualism of modern consciousness is subverted with an “in Christ” consciousness by means of a sacramental theology. A works-righteousness way of relating to one another in the world is subverted with a faith-righteousness way of relating to others such as to transform marriages, parenting, work relationships, and on and on it goes. If the incarnational church makes the Gospel relevant to the world, the ascensional church brings the world into the counter-intuitive realities of the Gospel.

Furthermore, not only is evangelism *not* a program, it is *not* an individual matter either. The sacramental Gospel means that evangelism is a corporate affair involving all the gifts of the body as they are to be organically united by faith as priest onto God (Rom. 12:1ff.). As such, through service, mercy, hospitality, witness, leadership, etc., the world is authentically engaged and then brought into the sacramental presence of Christ. No person is an evangelist unto himself/herself but rather a witness and conduit into the evangelical church of Christ’s real and saving presence. It is the same

48. Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

pattern discerned throughout the gospels when the meaning of “witness” was to bring people to the incarnational Christ and is now applied to bringing people to the ascensional Christ, who is present in the sacramental body of Christ today. For instance, we are told in Matthew’s gospel that as Christ’s “fame spread throughout . . . they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted . . . and he cured them” (Matt. 4:24). By Christ’s presence acting in and through the church, this is no less true today, albeit if not in this life, in the life that is to come. This is clearly James’s point when he says, for instance,

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective . . . My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:14ff.)

Therefore, the sacramental church, in so far as it is both incarnational and ascensional, serves as the conduit to holistic restoration and healing, both expressed in this life and ultimately and consummately in the glorified life that will be. This calling requires a collaborative effort on the part of lay people and ordained people alike within the church. The lay person is no less dependent upon the ministry of word and sacrament, liturgically expressed by the ordained minister, as the minister is dependent on the ministry witness, hospitality, services, etc., as expressed through all the non-ordained services of the body of Christ.

We should mention as well that in a sacramental theology

of the Gospel, corporate worship itself is simultaneously a *covenantal renewal* and a *covenantal initiation* activity. Concerning evangelism, Keller has noted the following about corporate worship in both the Old and New Testaments: “Believers are continually told to sing and praise God before the unbelieving nations . . . God is to be praised, before all the nations, and as he is praised by his people, the nations summoned and called to join in song.”⁴⁹ The clear implication is that unbelievers were expected to be present in worship. For this to happen, worship would need to be conducted in a manner that is both upside-down and comprehensible. This is not the same as saying that worship is seeker focused. It is Gospel focused, even as the Gospel is profoundly relevant to both believers and unbelievers alike. Again, in the words of Keller, the Gospel “is not just the ABC’s, it is also the XYZ’s of the Christian life.”⁵⁰ Even the weekly participation in the Lord’s Supper will provide the minister with an opportunity to both encourage believers in their Christian assurance and invite unbelievers to the great feast of heaven by faith in Christ. The “fencing of the table” is the perfect context to encourage both confession and faith as both are related to initiation and renewal.

A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel in Relationship to the Way We Practice Conversion

Modern evangelicals will often reference the conversion of Augustine chronicled in his *Confessions* as illustrative of Christian conversion. Interestingly, however, the reference

49. Timothy Keller, “Evangelistic Worship,” available at [w Keller notes the following passages: Isa. 2:2–4; 56:6–8; Pss. 47:1; 100:1–5; 102:18.](#) This situation is specifically illustrated in Acts 2 and 1 Cor. 14.

50. Timothy Keller, “The Centrality of the Gospel,” available at [www. redeemer.com](#) (accessed Aug. 2004).

is usually Augustine's "garden experience" upon his reading of Romans 13:13–14 as told in book 8. I say "interestingly" because this is the context where Augustine was, shall we say, converted to Christianity as a moral system. This ignores the fact that he was previously converted to Christianity intellectually as a philosophical system—from the dualism of Manicheism to Christian monotheism as told in book 7. But more to the point, it also ignores what Augustine himself described about his conversion as related to being engrafted into Christ by Christian baptism. In Augustine's own words (prior to his sacramental conversion but following his moral conversion): "Thus in that depth I recognized the act for your will and I gave praise to your name rejoicing in faith. But this faith would not let me feel safe about my past sins, since your baptism had not yet come to remit them."⁵¹ The evening before Easter, April 24, 387, Augustine was baptized by Ambrose together with many others. And Augustine later reflected, "We were baptized, and all anxiety as to our past life fled away."⁵²

It is my contention that we need desperately to move away from a "sinner's prayer" paradigm for conversion—suspiciously intellectualistic and individualistic as per modernity's sacred values—and rediscover a more ecclesial and sacramental paradigm for conversion. We need to rediscover the sacramental church in the conversion process, however countercultural this might seem to the post-modern spirituality moving in the low-church direction. For instance, David Barrett, author of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, estimates that there are already 112 million *out-of-church Christians* around the world. He expects this number to double by

51. Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 2001), 9.4.

52. *Ibid.*, 9.6.

2025.⁵³ The Barna Research Group has observed a marked *increase in spirituality* over the past two years as measured in terms of Bible reading, participation in weekly small group Bible studies, and personal prayer; but not surprisingly, church attendance and involvement has remained relatively flat.⁵⁴ All this at a time when the so-called twentysomethings are increasingly “absent from Christian churches,” but 80 percent claim that their religious faith is important in their life.⁵⁵ Whereas the “number of unchurched adults has nearly doubled” since 1991, rising from 39 million to 75 million (a 92 percent increase!), spirituality in America is relatively high: 80 percent of Americans not only believe in God but believe that God still works miracles today.⁵⁶

To be clear, most of the skepticism concerning the visible church as an essential element of the Gospel is informal and unorganized. The term *church* is still used but in a way that speaks comfortably of “Christians throughout history” dismembered of any visible and definable aspect “on earth as it is in heaven.” More recently, however, this skepticism has been popularized in more blatant forms such as to even suggest that it would be unbiblical and sinful to participate in a visible church.⁵⁷

53. See “Growing Numbers of Christians Leaders Leaving Church,” available at www.churchcentral.com (accessed 10 June 2004).

54. Allie and Jenni Parker, “Research Reveals Ambiguous Religious Involvement,” *PCANews*, available at www.christianity.com (accessed Aug. 2004).

55. Only 31 percent of twentysomethings attend church in a typical week compared to 42 percent of those in their 30s and 49 percent of those in their 40s. See “Twentysomethings Struggle to Find Their Place in Christian Churches,” *The Barna Report*, Sept. 24, 2003, available at www.barna.org (accessed Aug. 2004).

56. “Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991,” *The Barna Report*, May 4, 2004, available at www.barna.org (accessed Aug. 2004).

57. Cf. Harold Camping, *The End of the Church... and After*, available at www.familyradio.com/graphical/literature/church/church_contents.html, pp. 259–60 (accessed Aug. 2004).

In response to such skepticism, the sacramental church will need to present itself as an essential element of the Gospel. But more than this, those seeking conversion will need to be directed not only to a passages such as John 1:12 but also Acts 2:38. For when a person once asked Peter “What must we do to be saved,” Peter’s response was “Repent and be baptized.” Notice carefully that this is related to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is throughout the Scripture related to the animating work of the Spirit in being miraculously born again into the life of God.⁵⁸ We should notice carefully the language depicting “mystic union” with Christ,” employed by Paul in Romans 6:3–6 in such terms as “baptized into Christ” and “buried with him” and “united with Him”—all as related to the meaning of Christian baptism. Concerning this passage, Calvin notes:

By these words, he not only exhorts us to imitation of Christ, as if he had said, that we are admonished by baptism, in like manner as Christ died, to die to our lusts, and as he rose, to rise to righteousness; but he traces the matter much higher, that Christ by baptism has made us partakers of his death, in grafting us into it. (*Commentaries on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*)

In other words, baptism transacts us into the reality of being grafted into Christ, into his baptism, a baptism that we ourselves cannot do. It is not the water, not the church, not the minister, not our faith, not our dying and our rising that forgives and heals. It is Christ who has done all this for us *and in us* by the Spirit, even the same Spirit that enlivens us sacramentally into the life of God. According then to chapter 28 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the language of “sacrament” comes the language of “covenant of grace,” wherein grace is “conferred” through baptism

58. See, for instance, Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 12:13; Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3–4.

such as to be an instrument, or “means,” of grace as then to be “effected” through baptism.

Lest there be any confusion about what the WCF is saying and not saying at this point, notice carefully the language that conditions the efficacy of baptism upon God’s perfect and immutable decree of election unto salvation.⁵⁹ In other words, the reformed language of the WCF refutes any notion that the elements themselves confer anything upon the recipient in so far as grace is concerned. To say it bluntly, baptism can do nothing other than get a person wet apart from the efficacious agent (the Holy Spirit) that works through baptism. There is no mystical power imparted to the external symbols enabling them to produce effects that are in any way independent from God’s personal and sovereign benediction. The elements of baptism then are not the agents of grace but, rather, the occasion of grace when accompanied by the effectual calling of God by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if the memorialist doctrine of Christian baptism denies the *means* of grace in baptism, the Roman Catholic doctrine denies the personal *agent* of God himself present directly in baptism and, therefore, his grace according to God’s personal and sovereign application.

It should be noted as well that Christian baptism presupposes a covenantal and communal context as then related to the taking of vows, either by the believing parents in relation to their child’s relation to the church or by adult converts. As then related to the meaning of baptism as a “seal,” the Westminster Confession affirms that baptism is “for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church” as organically united to the one holy catholic and heavenly church. Call it what we will, a baptismal spirituality assumes church membership sealed by vows as practices throughout redemptive history. For, basically, a vow is

59. Cf. WCF 28.5–6

a confession regarding the meaning of one's participation in a given institution. Therefore, vows are ordinarily limited to initiation ceremonies.

As then related to a biblical rationale for taking vows in the church, one can observe how the Psalms speak of vows as part of the corporate worship of God (Pss. 22:25; 61:5; 116:14; et al). According then to Christ, "whoever confesses me before men, him I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). This is an amazing statement, more so because the idea "on earth as it is in heaven" is repeated later pertaining to Christ's instituting the visible church. It is in this context that the "keys" are a reference to the use of government on earth to mediate Christ's government as he is seated in heaven (Matt. 16:15-19). In comparison then to Matthew 18, the language of "binding and loosing" in that passage is clearly related to the exercise of government as pertaining to membership rites and privileges in the temple context of Christ's day. According then to the apostle Paul, a person becomes a Christian when "you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead" (Rom. 10:9), presumably in relation to Paul's teaching in Romans 6 as related to Christian baptism as well.

Therefore, another aspect of a baptismal spirituality is the importance of church membership. It sets people apart into a special relationship with each other, where the terms are clear and where loyalties for the mutual benefit of all are expressed and preserved. Membership is simply a way to say, I confess my faith in solidarity with you as to enjoy the mutual support of one another until for whatever reason either of us are led elsewhere." Along these lines, one could as well speak of the ecclesial ethics implied by a baptismal spirituality. In the language of Richard Hayes, a baptismal spirituality means that

the conception of salvation as an individual matter between man and God is utterly foreign to Paul's preaching. To be in Christ, in the Lord, in the Spirit means to be in the community of Christ, the Lord, and the Spirit. Hence, the will of God is always to be discerned by and for the community, not by individuals in isolation. This communal context of the believer's life is of the greatest importance for Paul's understanding of how the Christian is able to know what he ought to and ought not to do. The believer's life and action are always in, with, and for "the brethren" in Christ. For him, moral action is never a matter of an isolated actor choosing from among a variety of abstract ideas on the basis of how inherently "good" or "evil" each may be. Instead it is always a matter of choosing and doing what is good for the brother and what will build up the whole community of brethren.⁶⁰

A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel in Relation to the Lord's Supper and Christian Spirituality

Many today believe themselves to be saved by grace through faith alone and yet continue to live under the burden of the law. How so? They do this as the Galatians did it. While believing that they are saved from God's ultimate condemnation by grace through faith alone, they seek to maintain God's favor in the present life by works of the law. By way of illustration, consider the popular Purpose Driven Life movement inspired by Rick Warren's book by the same name. In a chapter entitled "What Makes God Smile?" Warren writes that "the smile of God is the goal of your life" and we make God smile by "loving him supremely . . . trusting him completely, obeying him wholeheartedly, praising and thanking him continually," and on it goes. And this is related to God using us and blessing us now. For instance, Noah was

60. Hayes, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians*. See also Victor P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) and [. . . ???].

blessed because “this guy brings me pleasure” (Warren paraphrasing God). In other words, while we are saved eternally by grace, we still must keep ourselves in God’s good will lest life goes bad for us now. The problem may be stated this way: While rightly believing in the historical work of Christ “back then” to deal with our forensic problem with God (justification), we are subject to losing God’s favor in this life except by good works (perseverance). It rightly assumes that Christ’s work for our salvation is finished from a legal perspective but wrongly negates Christ’s work for our salvation now by means of our being engrafted into the life of God, or what some call our “mystic communion” with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit present in, with, and through the sacramental Gospel of the church.

In short, the absence of a sacramental theology of the Gospel reduces spirituality to an *imitatio Dei* (“imitation of God”) *only* approach to the Christian life without then a *participatio Dei* (“participation with God”) spirituality for the Christian life.

Yes, the Bible does teach an *imitatio Dei* aspect to spirituality. Paul, for instance, tells the believers, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:1–2). The most orthodox understanding of this passage wants to emphasize the word “therefore”; that is, a life lived in the imperatives is always predicated upon the person and work of Christ that is presented by the indicatives of the Christian faith. Christian spirituality is a life lived in thankful response to the grace of God revealed in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. The primary focus of the Gospel in this spirituality is that which was transacted “once and for all” (back then) in the death and resurrection of Christ, and this changes everything in terms of our relationship to God now in terms of both our legal status of justification and our adoption.

The focus of this spirituality is rightly “we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). To be sure, it is not a spirituality void of the Holy Spirit, for apart from the Holy Spirit there would be no saving faith or sanctification unto good works. The *imitatio Dei* spirituality has no qualms with the teachings of Christ in John 3, where it is clearly affirmed that in order to be saved we must be “born again”—as then attributed to the sovereign work of the Spirit, who comes and goes as He pleases (cf. Eph. 2:1–11). The *imitatio Dei* spirituality should not then be confused with works-righteousness spirituality necessarily.

That being said, the *imitatio Dei* spirituality is incomplete. The focus is on “remembering” without “participation.” It is a spirituality reduced then to an otherwise “reformed memorialist” (what ought to be an oxymoron) approach to Christian faith and practice such as to lack the complementary emphasis on *participatio Dei* spirituality, which is also revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. It is a spirituality that rightly understands our forensic justification *solī gracia* and *solī fide* as applied to our legal status with God, but it fails to understand our justification ontologically as related to who we are “in Christ” *solī gracia* and *solī fide*. It fails to theologically explain how we really and truly are now serving and worshiping God in Christ as to be perfectly blessed by God, even though we see in our actual living a continued life of sin and rebellion.

Standing on its own, therefore, the emphasis of an *imitatio Dei* only spirituality inevitably results in relating to God *now* by means of the Bible construed as a manual of ethics, moral values, religious ideas, or treaties on doctrine, even if we are legally saved by grace through faith alone. What is missing is the Christian life understood in terms of worship and service “in Christ.” This is a kind of worship and service that is most essentially about Christ’s worship and

service, even as we are mystically united to this service at an ontological level. In the words of James Torrance, what would be missing is “the gift of participating through the Holy Spirit in the Incarnate Son’s communion with the Father and the Son’s mission from the Father to the world.”⁶¹ In the old covenant context, it would be like spirituality devoid of the Aaronic priesthood in the temple. Subsequently, worship would be reduced to our response to a memory, or, in the words of Torrance again, it is the difference between a Unitarian versus a Trinitarian spirituality.

A Unitarian type of spirituality reduces worship and service to something *we* do in response to what Christ has done. This can inevitably lead to the Galatians’ problem, where having begun by faith we try to maintain a good standing with God by our works. As explained by Torrance, “In theological language, this means that the only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions our intercessions.”⁶² Indeed, the classic doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” is reduced to a human priesthood *now*, albeit in response to Christ’s priesthood *then* in the incarnation and therefore devoid of the present priestly service of Christ in his ascended ministry. According to Torrance, our forefathers would have called this “legal worship” and not “evangelical worship,” and the ancient church would have called it Arian or Pelagian and not truly catholic or Trinitarian.⁶³

The Trinitarian view, on the other hand, is a kind of spirituality that understands that our service and worship “is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father. It means participating in union

61. James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 9.

62. *Ibid.*, p.21.

63. *Ibid.*

with Christ, in what he has done for us once and for all, in his self-offering to the Father, in his life and death on the cross. It also means participating in what he is continuing to do for us in the presence of the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world.”⁶⁴ Christ is still descending and ascending vicariously on behalf of humanity—still both God’s word to us and the human response to God. Therefore, it can be said that Christ is the one who descended and continues to descend without ceasing to be God and the one who ascended and continues to ascend without ceasing to be human. There is *still* only one true priest, only one mediator between God and humanity, and therefore only one offering that is truly acceptable to God in order to keep us in God’s benediction—and it is now ours. It is the offering by which Christ continues to sanctify those who come to God *in* Him. As Torrance notes, “Thus, the Reformers, in their critique of certain medieval concepts of priesthood, stressed the sole priesthood of Christ, and reinterpreted the church as a royal priesthood participating in the priesthood of Christ.”⁶⁵ It is fundamentally sacramental, but in a way that enshrines the Gospel of grace. That is,

God our Father, in the gift of his Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit, gives us what he demands—the worship of our hearts and minds. He lifts us up out of ourselves to participate in the very life and communion of the Godhead, that life of communion for which we were created. This is the heart of our theology of the Eucharist, of Holy Communion. So we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, which confesses faith in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and which worships the Father through the son in the Spirit. We are baptized into the life of communion.⁶⁶

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

In summary, by the miracle of Christ's mystic union with the elect, we are engrafted into Christ such that our worship and service is not construed as a burden we must bear in order to remain in God's favor, even if only to impact our life with God now. Rather, our worship and service as "priest unto God" is the "liturgical amen" to the worship and service work being done for and in us as we are engrafted into the service and worship of Christ. However broken and tarnished we are, Christ is not. And by the wonderful exchange represented in the Lord's Supper, Christ makes his prayers our prayers, his service in us our service, his worship our worship. In response then to Rick Warren's "What Makes God Smile?" we can respond, "Christ in, with, and through us" by means of our sacramental union with him.

Practically, this leads to all sorts of implications. We should, for instance, be careful never to fence the table in such a manner as to, in effect, encourage people to excommunicate themselves based on their failings or feelings. Unrepentant sin is not the same as "stop sinning." In terms of our sanctification, we proclaim by virtue of a sacramental theology that it is only a matter of time before the life of God totally replaces the life of sinful flesh. Thus, in response to the frustrated Christian who has tried the myriad of self-help spiritualities in order to stop sinning, the *imitatio Dei* spirituality can only say, "Remember . . . so that you will be more motivated to imitate." The sacramental view says, "Remember *even while we by faith sacramentally participate* by means of Christ in you by the Holy Spirit acting through Word and sacrament." We do this with the same confidence expressed by Paul: "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you, will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). In the meantime, we know that in Christ there is power in the Gospel. Our confidence is that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world"

(1 John 4:4); and we take this to be true ontologically, not just influentially. We will be made holy, and this will happen in God's way and in God's timing, never as to jeopardize our assurance of God's acceptance of us. This position seems to be the very essence of Paul's argument in Romans 8.

A Sacramental Theology of the Gospel
in Relation to a Search for an Ecclesial Home

A recent *New York Times* article described the emergence of Hip New Churches that “pray to a different drummer.” These emerging churches are unlike anything before experienced in recent history—*neither* traditional *nor* contemporary. This emerging church movement is said to be “revived by medieval liturgies and practices borrowed from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox rituals that predate the enlightenment.”⁶⁷ Such trends correspond to Webber's observations that “for them Willow Creek is tradition”; for the so-called millennial generation, “contemporary worship is old hat . . . they want to return to a more stable time, a period of tradition. Not the tradition of the fifties, but of a much earlier time, the traditions of the old, very old times.” It has been said that this emerging church can be summed up as “ancient worship with a contemporary flare.”⁶⁸ These high-church trends are matched by another trend related to evangelical pilgrimages to either Alexandria or Rome. For while at the same time there continues to be a steady conversion of Catholics to Protestantism, there has emerged “a new exodus of Protestants streaming to Rome” and especially among

67. *New York Times*, 18 February 2004.

68. Robert Webber “How Will the Millennials Worship? A Snapshot of the Very Near Future,” available at www.instituteforworshipstudies.org (accessed Aug. 2004). See also, Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

the so called Gen-X and millennial generations.⁶⁹ There is a similar trend toward Eastern Orthodoxy as well.⁷⁰

In response, the Reformed church in America ought first to confess its modernistic and therefore anti-sacramental tendencies throughout much of its history here, not exempting the Reformed tradition.⁷¹ It has been argued elsewhere, for instance, that the demise of sacramental theology in American can be traced to the transition from the use of Calvin's *Institutes* to the use of Francis Turretin's *Institutio Theologicae Elencticae* at Princeton during the nineteenth century. As noted by Nicholson,

Princeton Seminary transplanted Turretin's continental tradition when it adopted his *Institutio* as its theological textbook. Charles Hodge used this text to instruct large numbers of Presbyterian ministers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Robert Lewis Dabney also employed *Institutio* at Union Theological Seminary at Richmond. In time, the Reformed rationalism and sacramental theology of Turretin permeated the ranks of much of American Presbyterianism.⁷²

69. Brad Wilcox, "A River Runs to It: A New Exodus of Protestants Streams to Rome," *Crisis* (May 1999) One thinks of the more celebrated cases of Peter Kreeft, Richard John Neuhaus, Deal Hudson, Scott Hahn, Tom Howard, Steve Wood, Gerry Matatics, the Duchess of Kent, and Bishop Graham Leonard. Consider also Patrick Madrid's series *Surprised by Truth* (Basilica Press), in which converts from Protestant contexts give "biblical and historical reasons for becoming Catholic."

70. A development in recent years has been the interest many evangelicals have shown in Eastern Orthodoxy because of its emphasis on the continuity of the life of the church, its rich and mystical worship, and its doctrinal stability. A fruit of this interest has been an influx of evangelicals into the Orthodox Church, an ongoing story told in part by American author Peter Gillquist in *Becoming Orthodox* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Conciliar Press, 1990) and *Coming Home* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Conciliar Press, 1992) and by British author Michael Harper in *A Faith Fulfilled* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Conciliar Press, 1999).

71. E. Brooks Holifield, "Mercersberg, Princeton, and the South: The Sacramental Controversy in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, 54 (1976), p. 245.

72. Brian Nicholson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Spiritual Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper*, available at www.reformed.org/webfiles/antithesis/v2n2/ant_v2n2_presence.html (accessed Aug. 2004).

Nicholson observes however that “at Columbia Theological Seminary in South Carolina, the Professor of Theology, James Henley Thornwell, and the Professor of Church History and Polity, John B. Adger, employed Calvin’s *Institutes* as the text for theology and ecclesiology with the result that many Southern ministers were more Calvinistic in their sacramental theology.”⁷³

It is of course the premise of this essay that the more sacramental trajectory of Reformed sacramentalism as expressed by Calvin needs to be recovered. But to the present point, it would be then a mistake to, perhaps rightly, reject a relatively unsacramental expression of the Reformed tradition only to return to Rome or Alexander. For it cannot be said strongly enough that to search for an ecclesiastical home in Rome would be, according to Calvin and the Reformers, a transition to a less sacramental view than was held by the early church fathers and, more importantly, by the apostles. Concerning a sacramental theology of the Gospel, it would be to significantly compromise what has here been argued relative to Christ’s immediate and efficacious presence in the Lord’s Supper in the advent of the Holy Spirit. This is perhaps nowhere made clearer than to consider Christ’s own promise concerning his continued participation with us in the Lord’s Supper while, and at the same time, in the kingdom of his Father. In Matthew’s account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, having just noted Christ’s words “This is my body . . . This is my blood,” Christ is reported as saying, “From now on, I will never drink from this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink with you new in the kingdom of my Father.” (Matt. 26:29).

Some have wanted to interpret this passage as a reference to Christ’s short period on earth after His resurrection

73. Ibid.

(e.g., the Baptist view of “memorialism”). But as noted by Calvin, such a meaning was surely “foreign” to Christ. He further noted, “Since that was an intermediate condition between the course of a mortal life and the end of a heavenly life, *the kingdom of God* had not, at that time, been fully revealed; and therefore Christ said to Mary, ‘Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to my Father.’”⁷⁴ Nor would this interpretation do justice to Christ’s clear mandate “Do this in remembrance of me,” according to Mark and Luke’s versions, as then clearly applied to participation in the Lord’s Supper in the present age by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 (“until I come again”).

Others still would want to interpret this passage as pertaining to Christ’s corporeal presence now (e.g., the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation). Again, it needs repeating, contra the present fascination with medieval theology, that the concern of the Reformers was to save thoughts of the early church fathers on presence as to then save a more real and efficacious presence of Christ as tied directly to Christ’s immediate advent by the Holy Spirit by means of the sacraments in the church. Again, Calvin argued, “no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.”⁷⁵ In other words, Calvin argued for a “no space” kind of union with Christ in the sacraments, what he called a “true spiritual presence of Christ” by the direct agency of the Holy Spirit acting in and through the sacraments. He argued that the Romanist view diminished the immediate and true presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit to every believer by adding a barrier of an indirect agent concerning the sacerdotal

74. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 1 (1845); English version (London: 1884).

75. Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37.48.

priest and the set-apart corporal presence yet needing transformation as limited by the consecration act of the human priesthood.

It should be stated that the Reformers believed themselves to be in continuity with the early church fathers on this topic (the presence of Christ in the sacraments as being “spiritual” by the direct agent of the Holy Spirit). To briefly illustrate this point, what else was Ambrose of Milan thinking when he said,

Surely the word of Christ, which could make out of nothing that which did not exist, can change things already in existence into what they were not. For it is no less extraordinary to give things new natures than to change their natures... *thus, Christ is in that Sacrament, because it is the Body of Christ; yet, it is not on that account corporeal food, but spiritual.* Whence also His Apostle says of the type: “For our fathers ate spiritual food and drink spiritual drink” [1 Cor. 10:2–4]. For the body of God is a spiritual body. (*On the Mysteries*, 9, 50–52, 58, [A.D. 391])

Likewise, Milan’s protégé, Augustine of Hippo, explained, “Those elements, brethren, are called Sacraments, because in them one thing is seen, but another is understood. What is seen is the corporeal species, but what is understood is the spiritual fruit.”⁷⁶ Concerning Christ’s words, “Unless he shall have eaten My flesh, he shall not have eternal life” (John 6:54–55), Augustine asserts,

Some understood this foolishly, and thought of it carnally, and supposed that the Lord was going to cut off some parts of His Body to give them . . . But He instructed them, and said to them: “It is the spirit that gives life; but the flesh profits nothing: the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” [John 6:64]. Understand spiritually. You are not to eat this Body which you see, nor to drink that Blood which

76. Augustine, *Sermons*, 272.

will be poured out by those who will crucify Me. I have commended to you a certain Sacrament; spiritually understood, it will give you life. And even if it is necessary that this be celebrated visibly, it must still be understood invisibly. (*Explanations on the Psalms*, 98, 9 [A.D. 392–418])

Perhaps most interestingly was Augustine’s anecdotal argument against the corporeal presence of Christ in favor of the more real and immediate spiritual presence; for Augustine reflected again upon the meaning of Christ’s words, “Unless he shall have eaten My flesh, he shall not have eternal life.”⁷⁷ As has no doubt been asked by many a conscientious reader today, Augustine wondered, “Why then are there some who have not died yet have eaten the bread improperly?” His answer clearly exposes his understanding of the “spiritual” presence of Christ as distinguished from a physical presence.

Why? Because they understood the visible food spiritually, hungered spiritually, tasted spiritually, that they might be filled spiritually. For even we at this day receive visible food: but the sacrament is one thing, the virtue of the sacrament another. “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.” This it is, therefore, for a man to eat that meat and to drink that drink, to dwell in Christ, and to have Christ dwelling in him. Consequently, he that dwelleth not in Christ, and in whom Christ dwelleth not, doubtless neither eateth His flesh [spiritually] nor drinketh His blood, although he may press the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ carnally and visibly with his teeth. (*Homilies in John*, tractice 26, sec. 11)

Thus, the Reformers were clearly in step with the early church. It was believed that the Roman Catholic Church had not only diminished the sacramental presence of Christ

⁷⁷. Cf. John 6:54–55. See also 1 Cor. 11:30 and Paul’s words, “For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.”

in the church but had done so in a way that was considered Pelagian contra Augustinian relative to the early church controversies. It was argued that the church is itself corporately engrafted into Christ directly by the agency of the Holy Spirit as mediated by the divinely appointed instruments of grace, not indirectly by a sacerdotal human priesthood set apart from the believer. In the words of Purves, “It is in fact a long stretch from *presbuterous* to *sacerdos*, from leader of the worshipping congregation to sacrificing priest.”⁷⁸ According then to Torrance, “the reformers, in their critique of certain medieval concepts of priesthood, stressed the *sole* priesthood of Christ.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, Torrance notes,

[the Roman Catholic doctrine] made the moment of *conversio* what takes place in the elements, in the act of consecration—no doubt as the act of God in the action of the Priest. But this obscures, in too Pelagian a fashion, the heart of the gospel of grace, that the real *conversio* of our humanity took place in the substitutionary self-consecration of Jesus. In his life, death and resurrection, in the once and for all action of our one high priest, we participate through the spirit who renews us in the image of God.⁸⁰

My point here is not to denigrate the Roman Catholic and/or Eastern Orthodox churches as “true churches” necessarily. One could certainly make the case for these corporate bodies being within the “one holy catholic church,” notwithstanding some serious concerns being raised against

78. Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in Reconstruction: Christology and Ministry*, pre-publication draft quoted by permission of author (to be published by Westminster Press), p. 174.

79. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, p. 21.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

them from a classically Reformed position.⁸¹ Rather, the concern is simply to demythologize the somewhat naïve fascination with the medieval church as if to necessarily rediscover the apostolic church. What would be more productive, it seems to me, would be to enter into yet another historical period whereby a genuine search of Scripture is undertaken for the sake of rediscovering a sacramental theology of the Gospel and that church that really is an essential element of the Gospel. And of course, in the interest of *semper reformanda*, I send us back to part one of this essay and the attempted biblical theology of the church.

81. Beyond a sacramental concerns relative to the Roman church, it should be stated also the other remaining concerns Protestants held concerning Rome. In short, one could argue that the Roman church has so added to the sufficiency of Christ as to severely *diminish* the power of the Gospel while not altogether mitigating it. So, for instance, the exclusive crown rights of Christ as head and king over his church is significantly undermined by the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility, albeit not contrary to but beside the authority of Christ (see WCF 25.6). Again, the exclusive authority and wisdom of Christ as divine prophet through the Old and New Testaments has been significantly undermined by the Roman church in its later addition of the so-called Apocrypha as also having scriptural authority (see WCF 1.3), together with the Roman doctrine of continuing revelation through the proclamations of the church even if not contrary to the Scriptures but beside the Scriptures in authoritative teaching (see WCF 1.6).

And finally, it is a concern that the Roman church has undermined the sufficiency of Christ's once and for all priestly sacrifice as an atonement for the sins of the elect by its literal teaching of a continued sacrifice in her doctrine of transubstantiation as then under the exercise and control of the church (see WCF 29.2, 5–6).

In sum, the Gospel by faith *alone* is significantly undermined by the Roman church's doctrines concerning justification as to require the necessary and complete "infusion" of divine righteousness (what Protestants consider to be the ongoing process of sanctification after justification). This is in opposition to our Reformed understanding of the imputation of righteousness so as to no longer live in fear of God's condemnation by faith alone that is prior to sanctification.

Ultimately, then, we are concerned that our salvation be fully attributed to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to the praise of God's glorious grace, even as we believe this to be compromised by the Roman doctrine of the church in relation to salvation.