

# FURIOUS PARADOXES

## EXPLORING THE GREAT MYSTERIES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

All Saints Austin  
Craig R. Higgins, Easter 2024

### Water, Bread, & Wine: The Mystery of the Holy Sacraments

*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

— Titus 3:3-7 [NRSV]

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

— 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 [NRSV]

### Martin Luther on Baptism

What do you say to yourself when you are discouraged? “Things will get better someday.” “This too shall pass.” Martin Luther—who knew discouragement—said, “I have been *baptized*.” Does that strike you as odd? Luther understood the mystery of Holy Baptism. We need to understand it better ourselves.

### In Baptism We See Our Sin & God’s Mercy

- Baptism shows us that we need to be *washed* (v. 3).
  - While we are uncomfortable talking about Sin, there’s simply no getting around it. There’s no denying that our world is a mess, and no denying that this is ultimately because of the mess that is in every human heart.
  - But, in a sense, this is *good* news. Steve Brown often says, “It’s easier to hug a dirty kid than a stiff kid.” God loves to wash us and make us clean! It’s not our need of a bath that keeps us from God; it’s our unwillingness to take one.

- Baptism shows us that God is our *Savior* (vv. 4-5a)
  - God’s goodness & loving kindness have appeared, and the location of that appearance has a name—Jesus! In Jesus, God has acted to save us.
  - God doesn’t hate us even though we need to be washed; he loves us, and has sent his Son to wash away our sins.
  - The Christian faith *is not about being "good enough"*; it’s about the mercy of God. We don’t have to “clean ourselves up” first; in fact, we can’t. But God will wash away the sins of all who come to him through Jesus.

### In Baptism We See *How* God Saves Us

- What is the “washing of regeneration” of which St. Paul speaks? Is this a reference to the rite of baptism or to the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit? The answer is “Yes!”
- The rite of baptism functions as a sign, a symbol pointing us beyond the outward rite. What is signified in baptism?
  - *Our sins are washed away*. Baptism tells us why Jesus came; it tells us that, through faith in him, we are *justified*—pronounced to be right with God, one of the people of God.
  - *We have been given the Holy Spirit*. Water-baptism points to our Spirit-baptism—a reminder that the Christian life is profoundly supernatural.
  - *We belong to God*. God has written his Name—Father, Son, & Holy Spirit—on us. We are a part of the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.
- In the Scriptures, however, baptism is more than *merely* a symbol.
  - This is where the mystery comes in. It appears that God works through baptism to make what it symbolizes a reality.
  - We find this in many, many places throughout the New Testament. See Acts 2:37-39; 22:16; Galatians 3:26-29; 1 Peter 3:21-22.

### Avoiding the Ditches on Baptism

- One extreme says that baptism is some *guarantee* of eternal salvation.
  - No branch of the church actually teaches this, although Protestants have at times (falsely) accused the Roman Catholic Church of this view. However, *popular* conceptions of Roman Catholic views often sound this way. And other groups (such as the more radical Campbellites) have leaned in this direction.
- The other extreme says that baptism is *only* a symbol that has nothing to do with our relationship with God.
  - This view is, sadly, quite common among some of our fellow evangelicals.

- Various groups have tried to come up with ways of holding both sides together. For example, Lutherans and some Anglicans—and some in the Reformed tradition—have taught a view of “baptismal regeneration” that says that, in baptism, God brings new life into the heart but that this can be lost if not combined with a vibrant faith.
- Most of the Reformed tradition, however, has tried to avoid the ditches by holding to a position that nowadays is called *symbolic instrumentalism*.<sup>1</sup>
  - On the one hand, baptism is a symbol.
  - Yet on the other hand, God uses baptism as an instrument through which he gives what is symbolized.
- One of the difficult questions is this: “What does baptism *do*?”
  - It does not automatically confer a state of eternal salvation. The whole church agrees that there will be persons who, though baptized, will not inherit God’s kingdom.
  - And yes, there will be those who will be in heaven without baptism (the thief on the cross).
  - But baptism is the *ordinary* means through which God works to bring us into his covenant community.
  - So, is baptism necessary for salvation? *Ordinarily*, yes, but there are *extraordinary* cases.
- In Holy Baptism, we are incorporated into the church—the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And remember: The church is not the Garden Club, but the people of God sent on a mission!<sup>2</sup>

*But as Baptism is a solemn recognition by which God introduces his children into the possession life, a true and effectual sealing of the promise, a pledge of sacred union with Christ, it is justly said to be the entrance and reception into the Church. And as the instruments of the Holy Spirit are not dead, God truly performs and effects by Baptism what he figures.*

— John Calvin  
*Second Defense against Westphal*

*Q. What is a sacrament?*  
*A. A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.*

— *Shorter Catechism*

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<sup>1</sup> Some in the Reformed tradition have been wary of talk of “instrumentalism.” Still, symbolic instrumentalism (a term coined by Brian Gerrish) is the view found both in Calvin and in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*.

<sup>2</sup> In this talk, I’m not dealing with the perplexing question of the biblical propriety of infant baptism. I do believe paedobaptism (to use the technical term) is right and proper, and if you’d like to investigate it further I can point you to some good resources.

## Holy Communion: Misunderstandings All Around

- Throughout history those outside the church have misunderstood the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the early church, when the Christian faith was illegal, followers of Jesus were accused of cannibalism, for people would overhear them speaking of eating the body and drinking the blood of someone! A friend of mine told me of a coworker who told her, "I went to church and, at the end, they passed around snacks—crackers and grape juice."
- Yet one thing the church has done through all of history is celebrate communion; here is one *practice* in which we are united! We may celebrate it somewhat differently, more or less frequently, with more or less ceremonial—but pretty much everyone (the Salvation Army and some Quakers are the exception) takes bread and wine and says, "This is my body," "This is my blood."
- This sacrament has been called by various names:
  - The most common is *Communion*, taken from the 1 Corinthians passage above. The word translated "sharing" in the NRSV is the Greek *koinonia*, which can be translated as "participation" (NIV) or "communion" (KJV).
  - The simplest name is the *Lord's Supper*. As with "communion," this is very common in Protestant circles.
  - The term used in theological, liturgical, and ecumenical circles is *Eucharist*, from the Greek word for "thanksgiving." Since the Eucharist begins with a prayer of thanksgiving (called "the Great Thanksgiving"), this is an appropriate name.
  - In Roman Catholic (and some Lutheran & Anglican circles), the more common term is the *Mass*, taken from a phrase of dismissal at the end of the liturgy. Because of theological differences, most Protestants do not use the term, though there is nothing inherently wrong with it. In Eastern Orthodox circles one is likely to hear the *Divine Liturgy*.

## The Many-Faceted Meaning of the Eucharist

- Jesus gives us *redemption*.
  - The context of the Last Supper was the Passover. Jesus makes the focus of the Seder all about him! He is the fulfillment of the Passover; his death & resurrection are the true Exodus that sets his people free. No mention of the main course, for the lamb is not on the table but the true Lamb of God is *at* the table.
  - John Calvin asked the key question: What good does the death & resurrection of Jesus do us if Jesus remains outside of us? In the New Testament, the essence of what it means to be a Christian is *union with Christ*.
  - How better to signify this union than with a meal? We are what we eat!
- Jesus gives us *refreshment*.
  - A key biblical picture of life is that of a journey or *pilgrimage*. And the way is not easy, especially for those who seek to follow Christ in a broken world.

- But in this meal Jesus gives us strength for the journey. That’s a good reason to celebrate communion each week: *We need all the Jesus we can get!*
- The Eucharist reminds us that for which we most deeply hunger is a *relationship* with God through Jesus Christ. And Jesus gives us just that—he invites us to eat at his Table.
- Jesus gives us *redirection*.
  - Normally the father of the family leads the Seder, but here Jesus leads it with his disciples. That means that a new community—a new family—is being formed. And this community is to break down the barriers of a fallen world!
  - God—who is a communion of love, three Persons in one Being—created us to share as creatures in that communion of love. In Christ he has acted to restore us to communion with him and with one another.
  - We are called to share this love with the whole world. And while the Eucharist is the family meal of Christians, we are called to go into the highways and hedges (see Luke 14) and invite everyone to the feast!

*Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart.*

— Abba Poemen  
one of the Desert Fathers

*If we try to fill our hearts with anything besides the God of the universe, we find that we are overfed but undernourished, and that day by day, week by week, year after year, we are thinning down to a mere outline of a human being.*

— Cornelius Plantinga  
*Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*

### Avoiding the Ditches

- One extreme is shallow superstition. (Do you know the medieval story of the bee that flew off with a piece of communion bread? Or the origin of the phrase *hocus-pocus*?)
- The other extreme is a one-dimensional rationalism that sees the Eucharist as merely an empty symbol. (That doesn’t seem to be what St. Paul had in mind. And what about Jesus in John 6?)
- Again, the Reformed tradition has sought to avoid the ditches with its sacramental theology—*symbolic instrumentalism*.

*So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."*

— John 6:53-58 [NRSV]

- On the one hand, the Eucharist is symbolic. The bread represents the body of Christ, the wine the blood of Christ, and together they represent the death of Jesus, the separation of his body and blood on the cross.
- Yet on the other hand, God uses the Eucharist as an instrument through which he gives what is symbolized, the life-giving body and blood of Christ. All those who are trusting in Jesus receive more and more of the life of Jesus, we grow deeper in our union with him who is flesh or our flesh and bone of our bone.
- John Calvin argued that this is what makes the opening line of the Great Thanksgiving so important. It begins with the *sursum corda* ("Lift up your hearts"). By the power of the Spirit, we ascend to heaven, where Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, and, with all the saints, we have dinner with him.

*We do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs that are under your table. But you are the same Lord, who delights in showing mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

— Thomas Cranmer

- The Reformed position—which became the majority position of the Protestant churches—differs from at least three other alternatives:
  - The traditional (though not universal) Roman Catholic position is called *transubstantiation*. In this view, the *substance* ("essence" or "being") of the bread and wine is replaced by the body and blood of Christ, with only the outward appearance (look, smell, taste, etc.) of the bread and wine remaining. The Reformed tradition has always seen this as tending toward superstition.
  - The classic Lutheran view is often called (though not by Lutherans!) *consubstantiation*. In this view, the true body and blood of Christ are joined "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. While this view is close to the Reformed position, still it emphasizes a more *corporeal* understanding of the body and blood of Christ, received by all who take communion, whether believing or not.
  - The view held by many "low church" Protestants is often called *memorialism* or *Zwinglianism* (named after Ulrich Zwingli, one of the early Reformers). In this view the Supper is a reminder to us—calling for our meditation and devotion—of the death of Jesus. It is *merely* a symbol.

*If anyone should ask me how this [communion with Christ in the Eucharist] takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.*

— John Calvin

*Institutes of the Christian Religion*

## Going Deeper into Mystery: Living *Sacramentally*

- Remember—and celebrate—your baptism!
  - Baptism is once for all, not to be repeated, but it lasts your whole life. (Just like a wedding only happens once, but you're married for a lifetime.)
  - Practical idea: Celebrate "baptism birthdays" in your family.
- Live out your baptism day by day.
  - When you are discouraged, follow Luther's practice: "I have been baptized—which shows me how much I am loved and valued and accepted by the Father."
  - When you are tempted: "I have been baptized—which shows me who I am in Christ, dead to sin, alive to God."
- Remember that in baptism you were incorporated into the *missional* church.
  - In baptism, you were commissioned as a missionary!
  - Remember that in the Eucharist you are given strength for your pilgrimage—and that it is a *missionary* pilgrimage!
- When in trouble, doubt, or despair, run to the Holy Table!
  - Jesus promises to strengthen us with his own Real Presence when we receive the Eucharist by faith.
- Live *eucharistically* day-by-day.
  - The Eucharist is a model for how we live: We remember the love of God, shown to us in Christ, and we respond in the only appropriate way—thanksgiving!
- Live in love & *unity* all Christians.
  - All who are looking in faith to Jesus for their salvation belong together as one family at one Table. Justification by grace through faith is the great ecumenical doctrine! The Eucharist reminds us that we have one Father and therefore are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

*To be baptized is to be incorporated into the dying of Jesus so as to become a participant in his risen life, and so to share his ongoing mission to the world. It is to be baptized into his mission.*

— Lesslie Newbigin  
*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*

*"I am a baptized Christian. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel."*

— words that Bp Samuel Azariah of India had repeated by those he baptized or confirmed