

# *The Ground of Christian Community: Baptism and the Lord's Supper*

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Matthew 28:16-20; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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Today we're in week 3 of our Lenten sermon series on the Christian Community: Life and Ministry Together. We are talking about the distinctive nature of the Christian community of the church, which is to say we are talking about how the Christian community is, by the very nature of who it is, an alternative community in the world. Where that alternative character comes from, and what that means for those of us who belong to the Christian community. The church embodies an alternative practice – in the words of 1 Corinthians 12, a more excellent way – in the world, a way of love and humility, instead of competitive violence and shame. Today, we are looking at how that alternative community grows out of the ground of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Now, describing Baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Communion, as the *ground* of Christian community is a rather strong statement to make for a Presbyterian, because Presbyterians have not always been known for our vigorously robust practices of the sacraments. We have always had a strong *theology* of the sacraments, and many of us can point to profoundly moving and important experiences of Baptism and of Communion. But in terms of our regular and routine practice, we have been somewhat less robust about the sacraments. In terms of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, we have tended to lean more heavily towards the Word. My own experience may be different from yours, but two examples may suffice to explain why I would say such a thing.

Growing up, I had friends in the Baptist church in my hometown who would talk about their experiences of total immersion baptism. I was always fascinated by their descriptions of going under the water to represent the ways that they were dying to sin and rising with Christ, but I remember being puzzled, too, because it seemed so messy. I was puzzled because in the Presbyterian church of my childhood, when a person was baptized, the pastor would dip his hands into the baptismal font, shake off the excess water, and then dab the top of the person's head. The baptism held all of the power of the sacrament, but your imagination had to work a little harder to grab the symbolism of dying with Christ.

When it came to communion, my church followed the Book of Order prescription to celebrate communion at least quarterly, which meant 4 times a year. Because the worship service on those Sundays would be about 10 minutes longer than the rest of the year, I remember church attendance being a bit lower on those Sundays. If

someone stayed home on communion Sundays, there was not a tremendous sense that they were missing out on anything that might be considered the 'ground of their Christian community.'

Inasmuch as my childhood memories of the church being organized more around the Word than the Sacrament are accurate, some of this Presbyterian practice may have derived from defining ourselves over against the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian churches, which were seen as more sacramental. One of the fascinating developments in the recent decades has been the simultaneous recovery of the importance of the sacraments in Presbyterian churches and the recovery of the importance of preaching in Roman Catholic churches. Both are still very much in development, but both are happening, which is a fascinating, and very important, development.

God uses baptism and communion to form us into the church.

Baptism is the *initiation* into the Christian community. That means that baptism has to do with our *identity*. We are talking about our identity as those who have died with Christ to the power of sin and evil in the world, and have been raised with Christ to newness of life, those whose lives of sin have been washed away and in whom one should be able to see evidence of a different way of life in the world. We no longer belong to the powers, the empires, and the structures of the world; we belong to God. The old life has gone, as Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 5, and the new life has already begun.

When talking about these things, we must immediately talk about the dual aspect of our newness of life. On the one hand, the transformation into newness of life, the death of our old lives of sin and fear, has already begun. On the other hand, our transformation is not yet complete. This is why we must say that the Christian community as a whole, and the Christian disciple as an individual, is always a work in progress.

We have already died to the life of fear, greed, prejudice, resentment, violence, hatred, and idolatry. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, those things no longer have control over us, they no longer threaten us, we have been liberated from them, so that we can walk – right now – in the newness of life that is characterized throughout the New Testament by mercy, compassion, neighborliness, self-control, gentleness, kindness, humility, justice, attentiveness to the poor, joy, and resilient hopefulness. That new life has already begun, and those fruits should be evident in those who have been baptized. In their baptisms, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they have already been given the power to live in those ways.

At the same time, that transformation is not yet complete. We remain influenced by sin. Sin's grip on us is still an experiential reality and must not be underestimated. Our baptisms are not complete, in the language of the funeral liturgy, until our deaths.

The old Adam, in the language of Romans and 1 Corinthians, is still being healed. Our transformation has already begun and should begin to be evident, but we are not yet fully transformed and should not be surprised when we continue to engage in sinful behavior.

Baptism has to do with our identity as Christ's crucified and risen people.

Communion has to do with Christ's presence with us as his people.

When we talk about the Lord's Supper or Communion, we are talking about Christ's enduring presence with us and our ongoing connection with him in life. We are not on our own; we are connected with Christ and with all of the members of Christ's family. Those of us in the Reformed stream of the Christian church have characteristically sought to avoid claiming too much certitude about just *how* Christ is present in the meal - recognizing that the presence of Christ is a mystery, and in the presence of a mystery, one always does well to practice some restraint about how much you can explain - but we have always recognized that, however it happens, Jesus is very much present in the communion meal, in the tangible, visible elements of the bread and the cup. We don't know exactly how Christ is present, and we don't need to know exactly how Christ is present. What we know is that as we receive the bread and the wine or juice into our bodies - whether we do that by receiving the bread and the cup in the pews, or by coming forward in the sanctuary for intinction, or - as we have been doing for the last year - by eating and drinking in our own homes - Christ's life becomes part of our bodies and part of our lives. Christ's presence, which extends throughout space and time, is received and experienced here and now, in the eating of ordinary bread and ordinary juice or wine. Christ's presence is not confined to any particular place or time, but you are connected with Christ in every place and time.

Baptism and communion: Christ's claim on our identity and Christ's presence with us.

In Matthew 28, Christ makes this claim on his disciples when he sends them forth in mission to make disciples, baptize, and teach. And in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul chastises the Corinthian Christians for distorting Christ's presence in the way that some in the church eat and drink to excess while others in the church are going hungry. The presence of Christ is not just for some, but for all.

The Christian community of the church is called to make disciples of Jesus Christ, which means forming a distinctive community of alternative practice in the world, a community that embodies mercy, truthfulness, tenderness and solidarity with the poor, compassion and forgiveness for the enemy, and joyful thanksgiving in all circumstances. That kind of alternative community grows out of the fertile ground of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. To God and to God alone, be all praise, honor, and glory, now and forever. Amen.

