

# LEADING FROM FONT, TABLE, AND PULPIT

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**I**n June 2006, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called all its congregations to “renewal, through Word and Sacrament, of our life together in Jesus Christ, by engaging in practices that deepen baptismal life and discipleship.” Specifically, the Assembly invited the churches to engage together in five simple sacramental practices, along with common reflection on how those practices are impacting the life and ministry of the church. The five practices are:

1. Setting the font in full view of the congregation;
2. Opening the font and filling it with water on every Lord’s Day;
3. Setting cup and plate on the Lord’s table on every Lord’s Day;
4. Leading appropriate parts of weekly worship from the font and from the table;
5. Increasing the number of Sundays on which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.

For some congregations, these will be things you are already doing. For others, they will be altogether unfamiliar. A few may even find it difficult to imagine why a church might want to do these things. Why put water in the font, for instance, when there is no one to baptize? It is my intent, in this article, to address some of these basic questions, and to show how these practices, broadly adopted and widely reflected on in the churches, might just help “renew our life together in Jesus Christ,” deepening how we live the baptized life and how we shape our discipleship in the world. In particular, I aim to speak to the fourth practice, with some practical

suggestions for just which “parts of weekly worship” might be appropriately led from the font and from the table and why, and then, how a church and its liturgical leaders might go about doing so.

## BACK TO BASICS

When Lutheran scholar Gordon Lathrop wrote *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* in 1993, he helped the contemporary church reclaim a very simple idea from our early Christian ancestors that we seem to have all but lost sight of. One of the treasures of our inheritance from the first half-dozen centuries of the church, the understanding Lathrop retrieves, is that Christian worship is ordered around three essential things: the word, the bath, and the meal.

These essentials are, quite simply, a community gathered around word and sacrament. Or, to say it more fully, they are a participating community together with its ministers gathered on the Lord’s Day in song and prayer *around the scriptures*, read and preached; *around the baptismal washing*, enacted or remembered; and *around the holy supper*.<sup>1</sup>

We can affirm each of these three essential things. The church is a holy people who come together in Sunday worship to hear the Scriptures proclaimed, to receive a life-giving word from God, to encounter the living Christ spoken into our midst. We know this well;

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we do it every Sunday. In Sunday's worship, we gather as a community around a table, Christ's table, to break bread and share wine, to give God grateful thanks, to eat and drink in common fellowship, to bring gifts and pray prayers, and to be sent out with bread and good news for hungry neighbors. We know this too, although most of us do it less often than weekly. And in Sunday's worship, we wash in water those who have come new to our gathering, who are being taught the ways of discipleship and faith; or we remember prior washings, our own and those of others, the baptisms that have given us to one another as the church of Jesus Christ. We also know this, although we experience it least often, baptism being an occasional, and in many congregations, infrequent, event. In Sunday's worship, we do all of these central things with singing and with prayer, confident that Christ comes among us in them.

The word, the bath, and the meal, celebrated in a participating community, in the context of prayer and song—these, Lathrop reminds us, are what Christian worship is all about. And in a time when there is much experimentation with both the content and the form of worship, these help the church clarify what is central and what is peripheral. Some of the peripheral things may be helpful embellishment, enhancing our engagement with the central actions; others may be harmful distractions, pulling us away, or worse, contradicting the very gospel we gather to proclaim. But without a strong and clear articulation of the core things of Jesus Christ at the center of our Sunday gathering, our worship cannot point clearly to the risen Lord we seek to serve.

Lathrop is bold in insisting that the centrality of word, bath, and meal is not simply an in-house matter for the church, an issue of ecclesial correctness. His aim is not so much to help the church "do worship" right, or even "do church" right, but much more deeply to help us get the gospel and the Christian life right. The central practices around word, bath, and meal are given to the church, he argues, for no lesser purpose than to "speak and show Jesus Christ, so that the nations may live."<sup>2</sup> While it is in the church, and as the church, that we gather Sunday after Sunday, the Christian assembly does not worship for its own sake, but for the praise of our Lord Jesus Christ and

therefore, always, for the sake of the world he came to save. Word, bath, and meal not only gather us in, together, around the central identifying things of Jesus; they also push us out again into the world for ministry and mission, sacrifice and service.

Word, table and bath occur at the heart of a participating community so that all people may freely encounter God's mercy in Christ, that they may come to faith again and again, that they may be formed into a community of faith, that they may be brought to the possibility of love for God's world.<sup>3</sup>

Going even a step further, Lathrop warns us against worship that is unhinged from these central things of Christ:

"... Christian communities and their leaders have a responsibility to let these things always *be* and *be seen* to be at the center of our gatherings. The word *worship* itself may mislead us into thinking that when we gather we may do anything which seems appropriate to us as "worship"—any sort of singing, any sort of "God-talk", any sort of exercise. But *if our gathering is about the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we cannot do without word and sacrament*. To pretend that "Christian freedom" includes freedom from these central things of Christ may be only to choose the bondage of our own opinions, our own religion, our own selves masquerading as God."<sup>4</sup>

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We cannot do without Word and sacrament, Word and meal and bath, if we are aiming for worship that is grounded in, and gives full witness to, the crucified and risen Christ of Scripture. The Word, the meal, and the bath are the central actions of this worship. Alongside them, the book of our Scriptures, the bread and wine, and the water are the "holy things," the sacramental elements we use in those actions. And the pulpit, the font, and the table are the pieces of liturgical furniture that bear those elements in our midst, and at that we perform the central actions of speaking and listening, washing and welcoming, eating and drinking, and giving thanks.

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## PULPIT, TABLE, AND FONT

I have dwelt at some length on Lathrop's understanding of worship, because I believe he not only reminds us where the bottom line is, but he also helps us understand *why* it might be important to lead portions of worship from pulpit, font, and table. If we need both Word and sacrament to point clearly to Christ, if we need to be grounded in our Christian identity and mission through the tangible signs of the bread and wine and water, as well as through the spoken word, then clearly all three pieces of sanctuary furniture corresponding to those signs will help us. Obviously, we celebrate the Lord's Supper at his table and we perform baptisms at the font, for the practical reason that we need to use the sacramental wine and bread, and the water, that are located there. But could we take a step further?

There is an even more basic reason we need those elements, *on every Sunday* when we gather: we need to be reminded of who and whose we are, and of how we are called to live. Just as the Bible in worship reminds us that we are a people of the Book, a people who belong not to just any god, but to the God whose story is told in our sacred Scriptures, so also the water in worship reminds us, visibly, audibly, that we are children of God, adopted, loved, baptized, and joined to Christ and his church. Likewise, the bread and wine speak to us incarnationally, the message that we are forgiven sinners, friends of Christ, for whom God graciously and generously provides. All three are signs of our identity as those who belong to Christ.

At the same time, all three are signs that point us toward our mission as his disciples. The font sends us out to live our baptism in daily life, the table compels us to feed others as we have been fed—just as surely as the gospel proclaimed from the pulpit

equips us with good news to tell the world. In Word and sacraments, we discover both our identity and our calling. The Lord we belong to, and the mission we are sent on, are spoken in the Word read and preached, and made visible in water, wine, and bread. We need these central things, because they are potent and irreplaceable reminders, given by God, of who we are and how we are called to live as followers of the risen Christ.

When the church gathers for worship on Sunday, a sanctuary in which the pulpit, the font, and the table are all clearly visible, central, and interrelated can help a worshipping congregation understand itself as a people gathered in Christ around his Word, his bath, and his meal. How these spaces are used will also communicate their purpose and their value. A communion table that is always set for a meal—and free of other things unrelated to that meal (like the Bible, hymnals, the flowers, the offering plates, even the candles)—tells us we are a family gathered at our Lord's supper table, and our ministry has something fundamental to do with being fed and feeding others. On Sundays when there is no celebration of the sacrament, even the empty cup and plate call to mind our hunger and thirst for God. A font open and ready with water and a towel (rather than closed so it can double as a music stand for the choir director, or a place to set the pastor's coffee!) lets us know that this is a place for washing, and our baptism matters—even if "it's been a long time since anyone was baptized here in this church!" A pulpit or lectern with an open Bible visible to the congregation—a Bible from which the Scriptures are read in worship—tells us that our pastor's preaching and our own living have their proper source in this book of biblical words, which always point us back to the living Word, Jesus Christ. While we affirm, with Paul, that "faith comes from what is heard" (Romans 10:17),

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what a congregation sees, Sunday after Sunday, in the sanctuary's central actions and spaces and furnishings, also shapes that people's understanding of who and whose they are, and how they are challenged by the gospel to live for Christ in the world.

## LEADING FROM THE FONT

When we look at the order for Sunday morning's worship, and start to imagine a service that is led not just from the pulpit, but from pulpit, font, and table, we find some obvious places to begin. Baptisms happen at the font, the Lord's Supper at the communion table. The reading and preaching of Scripture surely belong, both theologically and practically, to the pulpit, or to the pulpit and lectern together (even when, in some contexts, preaching from the midst of the congregation may work). But beyond that, what other decisions might be "appropriate" to make about who leads what and from where?

If Word and sacrament in general, and baptism in particular, give to the church both its identity and its mission, then there are two clear places in the Service for the Lord's Day with an inherent connection to baptism, places where our identity before God is confirmed and we are challenged to do Christ's work in the world. The first is the confession of sin and declaration of forgiveness, which tell us who we are as forgiven sinners, beloved of God. The second is the charge and benediction, which send us out into ministry. Imagine Sunday morning this way.

After the call to worship and the opening hymn of praise, the pastor steps from the pulpit over to the font, which is uncovered. If it does not already have water in it, he or she picks up a clear glass pitcher of water,

which has been filled for this purpose and set on a small table nearby, and pours water generously and audibly into the font. The pastor invites the congregation to confession, with well-known words from Romans 5:8:

The proof of God's amazing love is this:  
While we were sinners Christ died for us.  
Because we have faith in him, we dare to approach  
God with confidence.

In faith and penitence, let us confess our sin  
before God and one another.

—*Book of Common Worship*, p. 52

Or using the even more explicitly baptismal language from Hebrews 10:22, the pastor says:

Let us draw near to God with sincerity of heart  
and full assurance of faith,  
our guilty hearts sprinkled clean,  
our bodies washed with pure water.  
Let us confess our sins before God and one another.

—*Book of Common Worship*, p. 473

The congregation then joins in a unison confession of sin, after which the pastor announces the forgiveness we know in Christ while dipping one or both hands into the font and lifting up water so that it may be seen and heard by the congregation. Hands dripping, the pastor says these powerful words from Colossians 2:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:17:

Hear the good news!  
In baptism you were buried with Christ.  
In baptism also you were raised to life with him,  
through faith in the power of God

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who raised Christ from the dead.  
Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.  
The old life has gone; a new life has begun.  
I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, you  
are forgiven.

—Book of Common Worship, p. 476

Or adapting the imagery of Roman 8:21, the pastor says:

In the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,  
God has poured out Holy Spirit upon us.  
God has freed us from all that holds us captive.  
We are released from the destructive powers of sin,  
and given the glorious liberty of the children of God.  
Hear the good news:  
In Jesus Christ, we are set free!

Suddenly these familiar verses, which we are used to hearing in relation to our experience of sin and grace, come alive in a different way because we are hearing them spoken from the font. Alongside the language of cleansing and forgiveness, we hear echoes of death and resurrection, of Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit, of Exodus and the journey to freedom—and because we are hearing all these words next to the water, we “get” the baptismal connections. We are seeing the water as we are hearing the words, and the juxtaposition of the two allows new meanings to surface. The weekly act of confession and pardon is unmistakably linked both backward to baptism, and forward into the life of discipleship that proceeds from it—and we are able to sense, in some new way, that this act of confession, which we engage in week after week in worship, is much larger, and more grace-filled, than we suspected. It’s not just about dredging up the week’s sins and presenting them to God for forgiveness. It’s about being washed clean, given a fresh start, rescued from drowning, set free from bondage. It’s about living into a new life, living out our baptism, remembering the grace that has claimed us and the life to which it calls us.

Later in the service, after we have heard the Word and gathered around the table, we can imagine the sending happening in similar fashion. As the final hymn

is ending, the pastor moves to the font once again to give the charge and benediction. Alternately, it may be appropriate for a lay leader to give the charge, and the pastor the benediction. It is particularly fitting to the ministry of compassion into which deacons are ordained, for a deacon to charge the congregation, sending them out into the world to serve; but an elder or other leader might also perform this role. The one giving the charge may touch the water and lift it up again for the congregation to see and hear. The content of that charge might be the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, or the two Great Commandments, or encouraging words from Paul’s letters—“lead a life worthy of your calling,” “strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, and help the suffering,” “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” But whatever the particular words of the charge may be, speaking them from the font makes it viscerally clear that we are being sent to live our baptism

in the world, dying to self, trusting day by day that we will be raised in Christ to new and abundant life. Reminded of the water of our baptism, we are sent out by the charge to “live wet”! And the benediction assures us of God’s blessing and sustaining presence, as we embark once more on this unknown, risky, glorious, difficult, scary, joyful, magnificent adventure, as disciples of the crucified and risen Savior.

Certainly there are variations on *how* exactly one might lead the confession and pardon or the charge

and benediction from the font. Some leaders will choose less formal language to speak the words; some will stick with words taken from Scripture, while others will not; all leaders should take care in these acts to be “proclaiming a message,” rather than merely “reading a text.” From a strictly practical standpoint, it doesn’t work too well to be holding a bulletin when your hands are dripping wet! In some congregations, there will be sound system issues; if the only microphone is on the pulpit, it will be important to make sure that a person speaking at the font can be heard. There is a need for more texts to be written that draw on explicitly baptismal language for these components of worship to supplement our existing liturgical resources.

Variations around the water are also possible. In some churches, the font may have water in it all the time; in others, it will be filled for each Sunday’s

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service. If the latter, decisions will need to be made as to when the font will be filled and by whom. Will it be before worship begins—an usher’s job?—or as a part of worship? Will it be during the prelude? at the beginning as leaders take their places? at the call to confession? Will the pitcher be carried in? Where will it be placed? Who will pour the water? the pastor? an elder? a child? On some occasions, when the declaration of forgiveness is spoken, it may be desirable for the pastor to splash water on the congregation (an ancient practice called *asperging*, meaning sprinkling, based on Psalm 51:9). Or worshipers may be invited to come to the font and touch the water for themselves, as a sign of their forgiveness and to remember their roots in baptism.

Arguments could be made for leading other parts of worship from the baptismal font. However, I believe that the acts at the gathering and at the sending can convey most clearly the baptismal nature of our identity as children of God, and our calling as followers of Jesus. And whatever decisions we make about who, what, when, and how we will engage the water, the simple juxtaposition of the word and the sign most powerfully can “speak” new self-understandings into the life of the church. Words of forgiveness heard alongside the splashing of the waters that washed us, words of challenge to faithful living spoken by the font of our new birth—in such leading from the font, we can catch a vision of discipleship that has “its roots by the stream” (Jeremiah 17:8).

## LAYERS OF DISCIPLESHIP

When the 1993 *Book of Common Worship* was published, my pastoral colleague at that time searched for a service for the reception of new members. Convinced it was not there, he went back to the 1970 *Worshipbook* liturgy, and later complained about a new worship resource omitting something so basic as a welcome for new members. When I opened the new *BCW* and showed him

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where the service is, in the section on Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, he was surprised. A seminary graduate of the 1960s, he had not considered the possibility that transferring church membership into a new congregation was an act recalling and reclaiming one’s baptism.

I suspect it is because the church has become so accustomed to thinking of Christian baptism as a rite for infants and children that we often miss the connections between baptism and discipleship, between the sacrament and the life into which it leads. In the course of a lifetime in the church, people celebrate a series of commitments that are all about deepening, or as the Reformers would have said, “improving,” our baptism. Not only joining a church, but also making

public profession of our faith (confirmation), commissioning to a ministry in the congregation or community, ordaining and installing to office—all these are acts of commitment that grow out of our initial entry into discipleship at baptism. When a Sunday school teacher promises to give her Sunday mornings to the congregation’s four-year-olds, when a couple commit to being sent by the church on a mission trip, when a teenager stands before the congregation to say *yes* to Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, when an elder kneels under the weight of many hands laid on in prayer, when a pastor is installed to begin a new ministry in a new congregation—each of these persons is taking one more step on a lifelong path of discipleship. Each of them is living into the commitments and gifts of baptism in a larger way. Each of them is laying claim to a new direction in which they believe God is leading them. Each of them is living out the covenant God has made with them by embracing a new ministry. And church members, who witness and participate in these acts with one another, are reaffirming their own discipleship commitments, along with the church’s very identity as a baptized and baptizing community.

Confirmation and commissioning, ordination and installation, transfer of membership and profession or reaffirmation of faith are all fundamentally baptismal

commitments, undertaken in response to the grace we were given in baptism, and marking God's recurring call to discipleship and baptismal living. For that reason, it makes sense to conduct all these covenantal acts at the font; it also makes sense for the services that include them to culminate in the sacramental meal of the new covenant at the Lord's table. Throughout the *Book of Common Worship* (1993) and the *Book of Occasional Services* (1999), these services all direct participants to *gather around the font*. They also echo the form and content of the service of baptism, make explicit use of baptismal imagery and language, and suggest to leaders appropriate times to touch or lift up the water. There is never a hint of "rebaptism" here, as water is never applied directly to the candidate by the one presiding. Rather, the water is seen and heard by all, recalling our common baptism; and individuals may be invited to touch the water for themselves, embodying a personal response to God's grace and call in the present occasion. At the same time, when members newly received or confirmed or ordained are led from the reaffirmation of their baptism at the font, to partake of the bread and wine at the Lord's table with the church, they and we are powerfully reminded of just where it is we may find nourishment for living the baptized life.

Additionally, there are sacramental dimensions to other significant life events. Marriage is a covenant made between two people before God; it is a covenant to love one another, based on the covenant of mutual love God makes with us, and seals in our baptism. Water in the font at a wedding becomes a silent but visible sign of this prior covenant. The Lord's Supper, shared after marriage vows have been exchanged, blesses this human covenant, even as it seals God's covenant with us; it is especially appropriate when the wedding is celebrated with the whole congregation on a Sunday morning. (See the service for "Christian Marriage: Rite II," pp. 853–82, in the *Book of Common Worship*.) And at such a service, wouldn't it be fitting for the declarations of intent and the vows to be spoken at the font, recalling God's covenant faithfulness? At the time of death, prayers in the funeral service offer thanks for the life of the deceased, "whose baptism is now complete in death" (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 921). Wouldn't this link between baptism and death and resurrection life come more fully alive for worshiping congregations if the font had water in it for a funeral service? or if the Lord's Supper were celebrated as a foretaste of the Great Banquet and a

vital link with the communion of saints? When the font is at the entrance to the sanctuary, the placing of a pall, itself an echo of the white garments of baptism, might be completed beside the water.

In both our service to the church and the significant events of our personal lives, the church's worship can help us stay grounded not only in the forthright teaching of the Word of God, but also in the embodied practices of a life of discipleship, in the sacramental signposts that attune us to God's everyday calling and claiming.

## LEADING FROM THE TABLE

At its simplest, the shape of the service for the Lord's Day is a two-part service of Word and table, with gathering acts at the beginning and sending acts at the end. This has been the basic structure of Christian worship from its earliest days. While the content of the service varies from one Sunday to the next, the underlying pattern remains constant. After we gather, we *hear* what God has to say to us, and then in obedience, even before we are sent out of worship, we begin to *do* what God commands, we begin to live the way the gospel challenges us to live, we begin to practice the discipleship we have just heard preached.

Several acts of worship are a part of this *response*. We begin to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, by giving grateful thanks in prayer, by giving a tithe of our income. We begin to love our neighbors as ourselves by reaching out to others through offerings and intercessions. We begin to tell the world the good news of Jesus Christ by rehearsing what we believe in the words of the creed. We begin to love one another as Christ has loved us, when we break bread together and share a common meal. These are all ways we respond to the Word of God we have heard read and preached. And it is in these acts of response that we find a way to understand which parts of weekly worship might best be led from the Lord's table.

Coming to the table for the Lord's Supper is the primary and most important way disciples respond in worship to the Word we have heard from God. Even when we do not celebrate this meal every Sunday, it is still the quintessential response of faith, embodying both our open receiving of the gifts of grace which God desires to give us in abundance and our willing "Yes!" to God's call to discipleship, service, and sacrifice in Christ's name. This meal is not just something we say; it's something we

do. Two other acts are similar: the prayers of the people and the offering with its thanksgiving are likewise not just words we say, but actions we take, in order to reach out in love toward God and neighbors. These two components of worship, like the Lord's Supper itself, embody an active response to the claims of the gospel upon our living. In this sense, we might say that the prayers and offering "belong" to the liturgy of the table.

Imagine that the sermon has been preached, a creed has been said, and a hymn sung. Now it's time for the prayers (Prayers of the People, the Intercessions, the Pastoral Prayer). The pastor or another leader walks out into the congregation to hear the people's joys and concerns—who's sick this week, who's died, who's gotten married, where is there famine or flood, war or strife. Together we build the list of what is on the church's heart this day. Then before inviting the people to pray, the pastor goes to stand behind the Lord's table, giving the congregation the visual sense that we are gathered around it. The table is bare except for a white cloth, a communion chalice, and paten. Some Sundays, there is bread on the plate and wine in a pitcher. Even when there is not, the table setting is a reminder of the meal we often share, a visible sign that we are gathered like a family at the supper table. And because we are "at the table," it's easy to remember we are "family" here, we belong to each other. The pastor invites the congregation to pray and then leads us, with words and silence, in praying together. We pray for the nation and the world. We pray for the sick, the poor, and all who are in need. We pray for one another and for the church. Intercession is the community's work—it makes sense to do it gathered around the community table. It is sacramental work, embodying in loving acts the love and grace we know in Jesus Christ—it belongs at the sacramental table. Intercession is unifying work, drawing us together to become the one body we are in Christ; here, when "one member suffers, all suffer together with

it; if one member is honored, all rejoice" (1 Corinthians 12:26). And it is humbling work: the plate and cup, visible on the table, remind us who gather around them that we have all been hungry, we all have needs, each of us is entirely dependent upon the grace of Christ.

The offering and thanksgiving may be led from the Lord's table for similar reasons. The giving of ourselves and our substance is a sacramental, incarnational way we embody love of God and love of neighbor. Imagine the pastor giving the offering invitation, not on the chancel steps, in front of the table, but standing behind it. Those familiar words of Psalm 24:1 take on a new layer of meaning, because they are spoken across the Lord's supper table:

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The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it.

With gladness, let us present the offering of our  
life and labor to the Lord.

—*Book of Common Worship*, p. 79

Or Psalm 104:27–28, heard through the visual "screen" of table, plate, and chalice, would make a strong and fitting invitation:

All creatures look to the Lord to give them their  
food in due season.

You give it to them, they gather it.

You open your hand and they are filled with  
good things.

With glad hearts, let us return to God the  
offerings of our life and the gifts of the earth.

—*Book of Common Worship*, pp. 729 and 67

Likewise, the prayer that follows the offering may be led from behind the table. In fact this prayer, which in many churches is the "offertory prayer" or the "prayer of dedication," would benefit from some

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reshaping into what the Service for the Lord’s Day calls the thanksgiving. Too often we shortchange the weekly congregational act of giving thanks by turning it into a petitionary prayer over the money. Surely, our response to the gospel should include grateful and generous thanksgiving to God—not just for the gifts we are able to give, but for all the gifts of God we have been blessed to receive. The prayer that we pray as we receive the offering needs to be a big and bold offering of thanks—a prayer that on noncommunion Sundays is comparable to the Great Thanksgiving at the Lord’s Supper. Imagine the pastor, standing at the table, offering a weekly prayer in which God is praised for creating the world and keeping faithful covenant with a people; God is thanked for the gift of Jesus Christ, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection; the Spirit’s blessing is sought upon the gifts that have been offered and the people who are gathered; and the Lord’s Prayer is prayed by all in one voice. Even on the Sundays when there is no bread and wine on the table, this is “making Eucharist”; this is doxology, Calvin’s “sacrifice of praise.” This is giving verbal thanks to God, in full measure, for all that God is and does!

And like the community’s intercessions, thanksgiving is preeminently “table prayer.” That’s how we know it at the Lord’s Supper, where breaking bread and giving thanks are one act, called Eucharist. And that’s how we know it at the family supper table. Though we pray at other times and in other places, saying grace at meals is probably the most common practice of prayer in all of the church. It’s where most of us learned how to give thanks to God. To make these

connections—between the gifts we offer to God, and the gifts God offers to us, and the cultivation of a grateful heart in God’s people—is to build on the solid theological foundation that disciples of Christ are stewards, who respond to the gifts of grace with lives of gratitude and generosity. It is at the same time to make sense out of extending the offering invitation and praying the thanksgiving at the Lord’s table, where we ourselves are richly fed.

## WORD AND SACRAMENT

I believe a strong argument can be made for conceiving of the intercessions and the thanksgiving as the table prayer of the body of Christ, and for delivering the words of forgiveness and charge as baptismal reminders of our roots and our commission as disciples of Jesus. But we are turning over new ground here, and there are certainly alternatives and variations worth the church’s exploring. The offering invitation might be spoken at the font, reminder that our giving is an act of faithfulness to the covenant that God has made with us in water and the Spirit. The entire gathering liturgy might be led by the water, greeting, and call to worship, as well as confession and pardon. The charge and benediction could be delivered from the table, rather than from the font. In fact, the service itself might be conceived broadly as beginning at the font in which the church is birthed, moving to the Word from which we are instructed for living, and concluding at the table around which we come together as a community of disciples, and from

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which we are sent out into the world to serve in obedience to the risen Lord. In addition, seasonal variations will be worth exploring—leading the creed from the font during Lent and Easter perhaps, an echo of the roots of the Apostles' Creed in the practice of Easter baptism. And I have said nothing of those acts of worship which might be most appropriately led from the midst of the gathered assembly, but there are good possibilities here also.

I am convinced that the church will be enriched as we begin to explore the opportunities for leading parts of Sunday's worship from the font and the table, as well as from the pulpit. Worshipers may grow gradually more aware of their own hunger and thirst, not just for the sacramental gifts of bread and wine and water, but for the living God, the risen Christ, who gives them. Congregations may come to see baptism and the Lord's Supper not only as distinct sacraments we perform, but also as spiritual foundations, alongside the Word, undergirding our whole identity and calling as the church. As a church of Word *and* sacrament, we will be strengthened by opportunities to see the bath and the meal, like the Bible, as integral to a lived faith, rather than just as isolated and occasional events in the church's worship.

Some may object that *any* use of water or bread and wine, outside of the actual celebration of a baptism or the Lord's Supper, will damage the church's sacraments and confuse its faith. I am inclined to think precisely the opposite. It is rather a legal and too-narrow definition of sacrament, along with the misguided effort to limit and control the precise way sacramental meaning works, that may threaten the church's faith and practice. Because of

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There is hope for the church in a more vigorous sacramental practice, one that matches our Reformed zeal for the Word of God. Leading Sunday's worship from the font, the pulpit *and* the table is one small way of engaging the church with “practices that can deepen baptismal life and discipleship.”

#### Notes

1. Gordon W. Lathrop, *What Are the Essentials of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, Open Questions in Worship series (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 7 (italics mine). While all these ideas may be found most fully developed in Dr. Lathrop's book *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), I have taken the quotes from his booklet in the Lutheran worship series, because it presents the same basic ideas in a much shorter and more accessible form. This work has also recently been updated as a booklet called *Central Things*, in the Worship Matters series for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. *Ibid.*, 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 11 (italics original).