




# *Gifts of God: The Sacraments*



For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

1 Corinthians 11:23–24

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Romans 6:4

A Study Guide for the *Gifts of God: The Sacraments* DVD



## Our Mission

*Gifts of God: The Sacraments* DVD, with the companion study guide, was created to strengthen Christian disciples by helping them cultivate a deeper, more personal appreciation and understanding of the Sacraments in our Reformed faith tradition.

Each video story, “Baptism: A Sign of Promise” or “Communion: A Feast of Grace,” when explored through personal reflection or through group interaction with the study guide, introduces the rich meaning and deep mystery of Baptism and Communion.

## Using the Resources

- Determine who will benefit from a study of the Sacraments in your context; consider confirmation students, new members, or officers.
- Depending on your setting, use these materials for personal reflection, small group interaction, or larger presentations and multiple sessions.
- In addition to introductory material, the Baptism and Communion sections of the study guide feature Scripture and quotes from the video story, a paragraph or two of theological and liturgical reflection, and questions inspired by the quote. If used in a group setting, the facilitator will want to be familiar with the video stories and adapt the study guide information and questions for the audience.
- Obtain a free copy of *Gifts of God: The Sacraments* DVD by calling Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS), (800) 524-2612, and ordering item #844695-10. You may also watch, stream, or download a copy of the video from <http://pcusa.org/education>.
- Additional copies of *Gifts of God: The Sacraments*, A Study Guide for the *Gifts of God: The Sacraments* DVD, are free from <http://pcusa.org/education>.
- You will need a TV/DVD player with remote or LCD projector and computer with DVD capabilities to watch or project the video.

## In Appreciation

*Gifts of God: The Sacraments* DVD, an ecumenical project of the Presbyterian Reformed Educational Partners (PREP):

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Moravian Church in America  
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*Gifts of God: The Sacraments*, A Study Guide for the *Gifts of God: The Sacraments* DVD, written by Rev. David Gambrell, associate for worship, office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

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### Table of Contents

Setting the Stage: Sacraments in the Reformed Tradition.....	2
Sacraments in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).....	2
Exploring Baptism: A Brief Introduction.....	4
Digging Deeper—Baptism: A Sign of Promise .....	4
Exploring Communion: A Brief Introduction.....	12
Digging Deeper—Communion: A Feast of Grace.....	12
For Further Study with Endnotes.....	18

## SETTING THE STAGE:

### Sacraments in the Reformed Tradition



Churches of the Reformed tradition celebrate two Sacraments: Baptism and Communion (also known as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist). We affirm these two Sacraments to be ordained by God and instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ (see Matthew 28:19–20 and Matthew 26:26–29). In Baptism we are united to Christ as members of his body, the church; at Communion we join with the church in every time and place to give thanks for our salvation in Christ. In Baptism we are washed and welcomed by the grace of God; at Communion we are nourished and strengthened by that same grace.

Alongside the proclamation of the Word, the Sacraments are “marks of the church”—vital signs of the church's identity, mission, and ministry. They help to identify the church as a covenant community—the people of God and the body of Christ, joined in committed relationship to God and to one another through Christ. As the preeminent Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509–1564) taught: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9).

The Sacraments are “gifts of God for the people of God.” They are a visible, tangible, and even taste-able way of experiencing God's immeasurable grace and unfathomable goodness—the same grace and goodness we have come to know above all through Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh.

The Sacraments are “signs” and “seals”—signs of God's gracious promise and seals of God's life-giving Word. They show us who God is and what God has done for us and for our salvation in Jesus Christ, expressing God's claim upon our lives and confirming Christ's calling to be faithful disciples. At the same time, the Sacraments provide a way for us to respond to God's grace and goodness with our gratitude and praise, offering our lives in joyful service.

The Sacraments unite past, present, and future. We remember the history of God's saving work and proclaim the mystery of faith: the dying and rising of Christ for the salvation of the world (see Romans 6:3–4 and 1 Corinthians 11:26). We rejoice in the presence of the risen Christ and celebrate the new things that God is doing in the world, here and now. We also look with hope to the day of Christ's coming again, at the dawning of God's new creation.

The Sacraments are Trinitarian events. They represent our celebration of, and participation in, the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. As noted above, they are gifts of God's goodness and grace. We receive these gifts only by the power of the Holy Spirit, who also works through the Sacraments to equip us for ministry in Christ's name. Therefore, in the Sacraments we give honor and glory to God Almighty, through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

### Sacraments in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Denominations often differ over what they recognize as Sacraments. Some recognize as many as seven Sacraments; others have no Sacraments in the life of the church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has two Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>1</sup>

#### Sacraments



“The Reformed tradition understands Baptism and the Lord's Supper to be Sacraments, instituted by God and commended by Christ. Sacraments are signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, renews their identity as the people of God, and marks them for service” (*Book of Order*, W-1.3033.2).

“The early Church, following Jesus, took three primary material elements of life — water, bread, and wine — to become basic symbols of offering life to God as Jesus had offered his life. Being washed with the water of Baptism, Christians received new life in Christ and presented their bodies to be living sacrifices to God. Eating bread and drinking wine they received the sustaining presence of Christ, remembered God's covenant promise, and pledged their obedience anew” (*Book of Order*, W-1.3033.1).

## Baptism



“In Baptism, the Holy Spirit binds the Church in covenant to its Creator and Lord. The water of Baptism symbolizes the waters of creation, of the flood, and of the Exodus from Egypt. Thus, the water of Baptism links us to the goodness of God’s creation and to the grace of God’s covenants with Noah and Israel. Prophets of Israel, amidst the failure of their own generation to honor God’s covenant, called for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). They envisioned a fresh expression of God’s grace and of creation’s goodness — a new covenant accompanied by the sprinkling of cleansing water. In his ministry, Jesus offered the gift of living water. So, Baptism is the sign and seal of God’s grace and covenant in Christ” (*Book of Order*, W-2.3003).

“Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world” (*Book of Order*, W-2.3006).

“The water used for Baptism should be common to the location, and shall be applied to the person by pouring, sprinkling, or immersion. By whatever mode, the water should be applied visibly and generously” (*Book of Order*, W-3.3605).

“Baptism is received only once. There are many times in worship, however, when believers acknowledge the grace of God continually at work. As they participate in the celebration of another’s Baptism, as they experience the sustaining nurture of the Lord’s Supper, and as they reaffirm the commitments made at Baptism, they confess their ongoing need of God’s grace and pledge anew their obedience to God’s covenant in Christ” (*Book of Order*, W-2.3009).

“As there is one body, there is one Baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes all Baptisms with water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit administered by other Christian churches” (*Book of Order*, W-2.3010).

## Lord’s Supper



“The Lord’s Supper is the sign and seal of eating and drinking in communion with the crucified and risen Lord. During his earthly ministry Jesus shared meals with his followers as a sign of community and acceptance and as an occasion for his own ministry” (*Book of Order*, W-2.4001a).

“Around the Table of the Lord, God’s people are in communion with Christ and with all who belong to Christ. Reconciliation with Christ compels reconciliation with one another. All the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table, and none shall be excluded because of race, sex, age, economic status, social class, handicapping condition, difference of culture or language, or any barrier created by human injustice. Coming to the Lord’s Table the faithful are actively to seek reconciliation in every instance of conflict or division between them and their neighbors” (*Book of Order*, W-2.4006).

“The Lord’s Supper is to be observed on the Lord’s Day, in the regular place of worship, and in a manner suitable to the particular occasion and local congregation. It is appropriate to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as often as each Lord’s Day. It is to be celebrated regularly and frequently enough to be recognized as integral to the Service for the Lord’s Day” (*Book of Order*, W-2.4009).

“The invitation to the Lord’s Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God’s love and grace in Christ Jesus” (*Book of Order*, W-2.4011a).

# Exploring Baptism: A Brief Introduction

Baptism is one of two Sacraments practiced by Reformed Christians (Communion is the other). The act of Baptism is deceptively simple—but in a handful of water, there is a deep well of mystery and meaning:

- Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace made by God through Jesus and extended to us.
- In Baptism, God claims us as beloved children and calls us to lives of Christian discipleship.
- Through Baptism we share in Christ's death and resurrection and become members of Christ's body, the church, a community of Christ's followers.
- The practice of Baptism affirms that we are washed clean from sin as we renounce the power of evil and seek the will and way of God.
- In Baptism we receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us with gifts for ministry in the church and world.
- Baptism marks us as Christ's own forever, with hope and through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for the fulfillment of God's eternal realm of justice and peace.<sup>ii</sup>

## Digging Deeper—Baptism: A Sign of Promise

HO, EVERYONE WHO THIRSTS COME TO THE WATERS.

ISAIAH 55:1



*God has always spoken to me through water. All our vacations, soft summer days . . . family gatherings were centered on water. I've always appreciated the healing power and calm that water gives. But there's an even deeper meaning.*

Water is a powerful and evocative natural symbol. It is a necessary ingredient for life on earth, and one of the primary components of the human body. It is also a common element of everyday life, used for bathing, drinking, cooking, cleaning, recreation, and in countless other ways. The Sacrament of Baptism draws on these symbolic themes (and others) in conveying the meaning and mystery of the grace of God we have received through Jesus Christ.

- What positive associations do you have with water? What fond memories? How is water a source of life and healing, either in a physical or spiritual sense?
- What negative associations do you have with water? What anxieties or fears? How can water be a source of danger or implement of destruction?
- How are these themes and associations reflected (or not reflected) in the Sacrament of Baptism?



*Even before we were married, my wife and I made a commitment to help our children experience God's love, the same nurturing kind of love that we received from God for ourselves. We had our daughter baptized when she was just an infant to show that God loved her and chose her from the beginning, even before she could speak for herself. We were responsible for showing our daughter the Christian faith. And, in a way, we were her first Christian community. And that community continues to grow.*

In the Reformed tradition, infant Baptism and believers' Baptism are equally valid and appropriate expressions of one and the same Sacrament because Baptism is primarily about God's action, not our response. The Baptism of infants and children expresses our faith in God's gracious initiative—the belief that God chooses and claims us even before we have the capacity to choose or claim our own faith in God. In this practice of Baptism, the family and church play particularly significant roles in forming and nurturing the faith of the child, promising to show and share the way of Christ with the newly baptized.

- What is your earliest memory of faith, of church, or of the experience of God in your life?
- Who are the people in your life that have had an impact on your understanding of God or who have played an important role in your journey of faith?
- How is your faith consistent with, or different from, the faith of your parents or grandparents? What have you claimed or inherited? What have you left behind?



*I was baptized as a young adult, and that was just a very significant day that I feel like I need to celebrate each year, because that was the day that I declared my desire to be marked as one of Christ's own and to be united in a covenant relationship with God. I remember it also as a day that I entered into a covenant relationship with the faith community.*

The Baptism of believers expresses our calling to respond with faithfulness to the gift of faith we have received. An adult or young adult declares his or her intent to trust in Christ and live as Christ's disciple. When we claim the gift of faith through Baptism (or when it is claimed on our behalf, as in infant Baptism), we enter into committed relationship with Christ and the members of his body, the church. This kind of relationship is best described by the biblical term "covenant"—a solemn promise established by God, in which we receive God's blessing and seek to love and serve God with all of our lives. Later, this covenant relationship is deepened and made real when a young person makes a profession of faith and reaffirms his or her Baptism at Confirmation.

- Can you think of a time when you claimed the gift of faith and sought to dedicate your life to God in an intentional and special way?
- What does it mean to be "marked as one of Christ's own" in Baptism?
- How is a covenant with God the same or different from other promises we make? What does it mean to be a part of a "covenant community"?



*Baptized in water and the Holy Spirit, we celebrate the promise of God's love. Baptism is a symbol of God's washing, life-giving, transformative power. In the Sacrament of Baptism we experience the embrace of God's calling upon our lives, and in turn, we embrace that calling in our Christian life and faith.*

When Jesus was baptized by John in the water of the Jordan, the Spirit of God descended upon him and the voice of God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," (see Matthew 3:13–17). In the Sacrament of Baptism, God says the same thing to us: "You are my beloved child, and I look upon you with blessing and favor." Like Christ, we are washed with water, a sign of the cleansing of sin and the renewal of life we receive through him. Like Christ, we are anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, empowering us to live as his disciples.

- What is "the promise of God's love"? How do you interpret that phrase? How do you experience or celebrate it in Christian worship and in daily life?
- How is Baptism like washing? In what sense is it life-giving or transforming?
- How do you understand the "embrace of God's calling"? How have you chosen to embrace God's calling in your Christian life and faith?



*Those who stand in and take those vows while a child is being baptized should stand by that child during those years when that child is growing. The time will come when that child will make his or her own profession of faith and confirm his or her faith. But in the meantime, the child's parents' role is very important in the upbringing of that child, because their life provides an example for the child. What parents do, in terms of how they love God and how they show God's justice, will be a living example to that child, and he or she can grow stronger in faith by their example.*

When a child is baptized, parents, guardians, and sponsors (if applicable) make certain promises: to support and nurture the child in his or her journey of faith, and to model Christian faith and commitment through their own lives. The rite of Confirmation (which in the early church represented the seal of the Holy Spirit through an anointing with oil) is an opportunity for those baptized as infants to claim their Christian faith in a mature and personal way, even as they continue to grow into its implications.

- In what ways do (or did) your parents, guardians, and/or sponsors model (or not model) Christian life and faith for you?
- In what ways have you been (or might you be) an example of Christian life and faith to others, particularly to children or young people in your life?
- If you have been confirmed, what do you remember about that event? In what ways have you continued to grow into an understanding of your Baptism?



*What my parents did for me—when they accepted God’s gift in my name when I was just a baby—is a wonderful thing. The people here love me, and I love them. They can count on me, and I can count on them. It’s comforting.*

Baptism is a corporate or communal event in the Reformed tradition—not a private occasion or family affair but one that is witnessed and celebrated by the whole church in the presence of God. In Baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ, becoming members of Christ and of his church throughout the world. Therefore, the local congregation has a vital part to play in extending the love and welcome of Christ to the newly baptized. The Christian congregation continues to nurture those who are baptized throughout the lifelong journey of faith, always reminding them of God’s promises and holding them accountable to their own commitments to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

- Why is it important for the congregation to witness and participate in the Sacrament of Baptism?
- How is the love and welcome of Christ symbolized or enacted in the practice of Baptism in your church? In what way does the congregation demonstrate or embody its commitment to the one being baptized?
- How does your congregation live out its commitment to nurture, comfort, and challenge those who are baptized, so that they will continue to live and grow in Christian faith?



*It’s a great day in our church when a child that I’ve baptized comes forward years later and reaffirms his or her commitment to Christ. We accept everyone who accepts God’s love in his or her life. I’ve baptized people of all ages and from all walks of life. It’s wonderful to see them start anew with a strong, new family of God and a strong, ever-present faith.*

The rite of Confirmation (discussed above) is one way we reaffirm our Baptism, confessing our commitment to Christ and claiming the promises of the gospel. There are many other opportunities to reaffirm our Baptism in Christian worship—welcoming new members from other churches, Christian Marriage, Ordination and Installation, commissioning to special acts of mission or service. All of these other promises and commitments are founded upon our covenant relationship with Christ in Baptism, and are therefore appropriately celebrated around the baptismal font.

- In what sense is Baptism a one-time event?
- In what sense is Baptism a lifelong process of transformation and growth?
- In what ways do you reaffirm the Sacrament of Baptism in your congregation?





*Maybe it's like the resurrection . . . an old life ends and a new one begins.*

The Sacrament of Baptism represents our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptized in Christ Jesus, we are dead to the power of death and sin and alive to the promise of the gospel and the hope of everlasting and abundant life. As Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

- What does Baptism have to do with death and resurrection?
- What does Baptism have to do with sin and forgiveness?
- What represents the "old life" for you? What do you believe about new life in Christ?



*A new life, washed free of sin, where the power of evil is renounced and the baptized choose to seek the will and way of God.*

In the Sacrament of Baptism there is a sense of "saying no" and "saying yes." God says no by defeating the powers of sin and death forever; God says yes by claiming us as beloved children, heirs of the promise of Christ: eternal and abundant life. We say no by rejecting our allegiance to sin and evil; we say yes by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and seeking to live as his disciples, relying on the help of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the vows associated with Baptism typically include a renunciation of evil and sin (saying no) and a profession of faith (saying yes), using the words of the Apostles' Creed.

- What kinds of things does one renounce or give up in the Sacrament of Baptism?
- What kinds of things does one embrace or accept in the Sacrament of Baptism?
- If we are "washed free of sin" in Baptism, what ongoing effect does sin have in our lives (see Romans 6:1–10)? What power or ability do we have to "seek the will and way of God"?

*THEREFORE WE HAVE BEEN BURIED WITH [CHRIST] BY BAPTISM INTO DEATH, SO THAT, JUST AS CHRIST WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD BY THE GLORY OF THE FATHER, SO WE TOO MIGHT WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE.*

*ROMANS 6:4*



*Being covered in water symbolizes a death of the old life, and coming from the water is entering our new life, given to God. It symbolizes Christ dying and rising again. So the abundance of water symbolizes the abundant grace of God.*

The practice of Baptism—the way it is celebrated in a particular community of faith or service of worship—conveys a great deal about the meaning of the Sacrament. Although there are a variety of valid ways to celebrate the Sacrament, different approaches can communicate different things, in ways that are both powerful and subtle. The common elements in all Christian Baptism are the use of water and the Triune name of God—“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 28:19). The physical action of pouring is evocative of the outpouring of God’s Spirit in Acts 2:17 and Joel 2:28; of sprinkling, in Ezekiel 36:25.

- How were you baptized? How is Baptism practiced in your congregation?
- What is symbolized or communicated by the different modes of Baptism (pouring, sprinkling, or immersion)?
- Why is an abundance of water an important part of the Sacrament of Baptism?



*In the Scriptures, God uses water to cleanse the world of evil. God freed Israel from bondage through the waters of the sea. Water has always been God’s way of delivering the faithful from that which oppresses them. Water flows throughout the story of our Christian faith, and it spills over into a life of faithful discipleship.*

From the Spirit of God moving over the chaotic waters of creation (Genesis 1), to the story of the great flood (Genesis 6—9), to the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) and the Jordan (Joshua 3), to the vision of the river of the water of life (Ezekiel 47 and Revelation 22), the imagery of water plays a profound role in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Water is a sign of creation, redemption, providence, renewal, transformation—and all of these biblical themes (and many more) are reflected in the theology and practice of Baptism.

- What biblical stories and themes can you think of that are related to water? (Consider the story of the woman and Jesus at the well in John 6; the Baptism of Jesus in Luke 3; the water of life in Isaiah 55; the fountain of living water in Jeremiah 2.)
- How are these biblical stories and themes reflected in your understanding of the *meaning* of the Sacrament of Baptism?
- How are these biblical stories and themes connected with the church’s *practice* of the Sacrament of Baptism?



*God's family in the community doesn't stop in my church or in my backyard. It's all over the world, everywhere I go. When I was baptized, I became a part of a community that believes Christ rules as Lord of all life, all creation, in a society and people shaped by the sovereignty of God. I carry that power, the gift of ministry, with me everywhere I go. I'm like an ambassador. I share all that God has done for me with everyone I meet. In this way, we who are baptized are equal as Christian disciples.*

Through the Sacrament of Baptism we become members of the body of Christ, the universal church—a community of faith that spans centuries, bridges generations, transcends cultures, and stretches around the globe. In a sense, each Christian's Baptism is also an ordination to ministry: to a lifetime of service in Christ's name, empowered by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All Christians share this calling by virtue of their Baptism, no matter what their vocation in daily life might be. We profess Christ to be sovereign in our lives and in all the world, and seek to live according to Christ's new commandment of love (John 13:34).

- How does your Baptism connect you with the Christian church or family of God throughout the earth?
- How does your Baptism influence your relationships with others beyond the church and in the larger world?
- How does your Baptism shape who you are, what you believe, and how you live? In what ways are you an ambassador of God or a minister in Christ's name? In what ways is Christ sovereign or does Christ reign in your life and in the world?



*I remember my Baptism—even now, years later—and I'm just so very thankful and grateful for it.*

Although Baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event—whether in infancy or adulthood—the significance of Baptism continues to unfold throughout our lives. When faced with situations of suffering, distress, illness, and adversity, we can remember God's promises to us in Baptism and give thanks that nothing in life or death can ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:37–39). Each time we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion we have another opportunity to remember our Baptism, giving thanks to God and reaffirming our commitment to Christ. We are reminded that Christ broken and poured out for us is a gift, like Baptism, a gift of God's grace.

- What do you remember (or what have you been told) about your own Baptism?
- What does it mean to remember your Baptism—or to remember *that* you are baptized?
- When you remember your Baptism, for what things are you thankful?



*Just as a parent embraces a child, in Baptism God embraces us. We're joined with Christ and to one another in a new family, the people of God. We're then called to reach out to others, extending the same grace and love and welcoming that we've received. And the family of God continues to grow.*

In the words of the Great Commission, Jesus tells his followers, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20). Baptism is a summons to mission and evangelism—to share the good news of the gospel in our own neighborhoods and throughout the nations, making disciples, baptizing others, and teaching the way of Christ in word and action.

- How is the church like a family? How is it not like a family?
- In what ways do you share the grace and love of Christ with others?
- How is your congregation engaged in mission and evangelism—in the local community and/or in the world? How does that mission extend the grace and love of Christ and help the family of God to grow?



*My Baptism means I'm a part of the new thing God is already doing in this world, God's new creation. There is a greater hope, a higher calling. I can't ignore it. It changes the way I live.*

The Sacrament of Baptism is a sign of our citizenship in Christ's coming realm, God's new creation. In Baptism we renounce the powers of sin, oppression, and death, and "pledge our allegiance" to a new way of life in Christ, a way of justice, righteousness, and peace. Therefore we live in hope and anticipation, watching, working, and praying for the fulfillment of God's promises and the coming of Christ's kingdom, "on earth as in heaven."

- How is Baptism a sign of the kingdom of God?
- How have you witnessed the unfolding of God's new creation in your own life or in your community of faith? Where have you seen signs of Christ's kingdom?
- What difference does Baptism make in your Christian life and faith? How does it—or how might it—change the way you live?

# Exploring Communion:

## A Brief Introduction

Communion (also known as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist) is one of two Sacraments practiced by Reformed Christians (Baptism is the other). In this simplest of meals—a morsel of bread, a sip of juice or wine—there is a great feast of mystery and meaning:

- Communion is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace made by God through Jesus Christ and extended to us.
- Around the table that Christ prepares, we give thanks and praise for God's creative power, redeeming love, and sustaining care.
- With gratitude, we recall Christ's gracious life, saving death, and life-giving resurrection—even as we await his coming in glory.
- We pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who nourishes us with Christ's presence and makes us one in ministry with the church throughout the world.
- We enjoy a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come, when we will feast with all the saints in God's eternal realm.<sup>iii</sup>

## Digging Deeper—Communion:

### A Feast of Grace



*As far back as I can remember, a meal has been a celebration to me. We celebrate life's good moments, and we celebrate God's gifts.*

Eating is a universal human phenomenon and a common practice in everyday life, in every time and place of the world. As we depend on food for nourishment, so we depend on God's providence for the sustenance of life. The *sharing* of meals, particularly in times of celebration, is also an important social practice, marked by a rich diversity of tradition throughout the world's cultures. We gather at tables to rejoice, give thanks, tell stories, enjoy one another's company, and share the gifts we have received, seeing that all are fed and satisfied. The Sacrament of Communion draws on these symbolic themes (and others) in conveying the meaning and mystery of the grace of God we have received through Jesus Christ.

- Think about the best meal you ever had—a great feast, a rich banquet, a family dinner, or an intimate gathering with friends on a special occasion. What made this meal so special? What made it memorable?
- How do you “say grace”? How do you celebrate God's gifts and life's good moments at everyday meals? Are there special prayers or other practices in your personal life or family tradition?
- How is Communion like an everyday meal or family dinner? How is it different?

*JESUS SAID TO THEM, "I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE. WHOEVER COMES TO ME WILL NEVER BE HUNGRY, AND WHOEVER BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER BE THIRSTY."*

JOHN 6:35

*THE LORD JESUS ON THE NIGHT WHEN HE WAS BETRAYED TOOK A LOAF OF BREAD, AND WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS, HE BROKE IT AND SAID, "THIS IS MY BODY THAT IS FOR YOU. DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME." IN THE SAME WAY HE TOOK THE CUP ALSO, AFTER SUPPER, SAYING, "THIS CUP IS THE NEW COVENANT IN MY BLOOD. DO THIS, AS OFTEN AS YOU DRINK IT, IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME." FOR AS OFTEN AS YOU EAT THIS BREAD AND DRINK THE CUP, YOU PROCLAIM THE LORD'S DEATH UNTIL HE COMES.*

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–26

These words of the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth—echoing the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are an integral and vital part of the Communion liturgy. They recount the story of how Jesus established the Sacrament, at what may have been a Passover meal with his disciples, and instructed them to keep this feast in his name. Paul reminds us that whenever we celebrate Communion we proclaim the “paschal mystery” or “mystery of faith”—that Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose from the dead for our salvation, and that he is coming again to reign in glory.

- What does Jesus mean when he says the bread is his body, given for us?
- What does Jesus mean when he says the cup is a new covenant in his blood?
- How do we “proclaim the Lord’s death” when we celebrate Communion?



*According to Luke, after Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples first recognized him at a meal. It was after the breaking of the bread that their eyes were open. Ever since then, whenever Christians gather at the table that Christ has prepared, we know that Christ is with us.*

In Luke’s Gospel, after Jesus rises from the dead on the first day of the week, he appears to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. They talk with Jesus about the Scriptures as they walk along, but it is in the breaking of the bread that they recognize him as their risen Lord (Luke 24:13–34). For two thousand years, Christians have celebrated the Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day (Sunday, the first day of the week and also the eighth day, an apocalyptic symbol of God’s New Creation), rejoicing in the presence of the risen Christ among us. Christians in the Reformed tradition affirm the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Communion—not that the elements of bread and wine are physically transformed into Christ’s body and blood, but that Christ is really *spiritually* present (by the power of the Holy Spirit) whenever the church (the body of Christ) celebrates this feast in his name.

- Think about other meals that Jesus shared with his followers—the feeding of the multitude (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–15; see also Matthew 15:32–39; Mark 8:1–10), the upper room (Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20); breakfast on the beach (John 21:1–14). What is the significance of Jesus’ followers recognizing him in the breaking of the bread?
- Do you think of Communion as a meal with the *risen* Christ? If not, how might that change your experience of the Sacrament?
- What does it mean for Christ to be spiritually present in Communion? How is that different from other understandings of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament?



*There are so many ways different people celebrate Communion. Some churches offer individual servings, and others break the bread and dip it into a common cup. There could be grape juice or wine, even bread that’s customary to the culture, like rice cake or even pita.*

Jesus uses the elements of bread and wine in the Jewish Passover meal to establish a new feast for his followers: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me . . . This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19–20; see also Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; and 1 Corinthians 11:23–25). Jesus also uses the images of bread and the vine as a way to explain or reveal who he is to his disciples: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35) and “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5).

- What do the elements of bread and wine (or grape juice) communicate about the grace of God? How is God’s grace like bread? How is it like wine?
- What does the type, flavor, or quantity of bread convey about the grace of God? What about the grape juice or wine? What is communicated by the use of a common loaf and cup, or by individual servings?
- Think about different ways of distributing or sharing the bread and cup that you have practiced or observed—passing plates through the aisles, coming forward to eat and drink, or gathering around a common table. What do these symbolic actions say about the grace of God, Christian life, and the nature of the church?



*What is important is that we celebrate Communion as a gift that God gives us. Communion is a visible form of an invisible grace. It conveys something that words cannot express. It reminds us of God’s promise. The two Sacraments that we celebrate remind us of who we are in God, what God has done for us, and who we are in Christ and in the Spirit.*

One of the classic definitions of a Sacrament is “a visible sign of an invisible reality” (Augustine) or “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace” (*Book of Common Prayer*). Reformed theologians also describe Sacraments as seals of the Word, confirming the promises of God, received by faith, and marking believers for lives of faithfulness. There is a kind of two-way dialogue that takes place in the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion: God’s gracious gift of self-giving love for us and the offering of ourselves to God as our expression of gratitude for the gift of God’s grace.

- Why does God choose to communicate with us through Sacraments—visible signs of an invisible reality? What is the invisible reality that Communion demonstrates?
- How do Sacraments serve as seals of God’s Word, confirming the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ? What is the promise of God confirmed in Communion?
- How does the Sacrament of Communion express God’s grace and love for us in Christ? How does it express our response of gratitude and praise?



*It seems to me when Christians break bread in the Spirit they’re celebrating the goodness in life. It’s like we really are one body, the body of Christ. And somehow it always seems that God is there with us. I’m just saying, I’ve seen arguments fade, and people who have differences between each other . . . it just melted away. When we share this meal, it’s like we’re getting a taste of the world to come, where nobody is left out and everyone is fed. At this table, I gain nourishment and strength to go out there, work hard, and pray for the day to come.*

Reconciliation is an important theme in the Sacrament of Communion. In preparation to celebrate this Sacrament we confess our sins against God and one another, and seek to be at peace with God and our neighbors (see Matthew 5:23–24). Having been fed at Christ’s table, strengthened and renewed in the Spirit, we go forth to work and pray for peace, justice, and reconciliation in the world. We seek to feed others as we have been fed by Christ’s grace, and to welcome others as we have been welcomed in Christ’s love. In a sense then, the church’s ministries of service, witness, and outreach are all centered around the Lord’s Table.

- Can you think of a time when you have had a powerful sense of reconciliation and peace in a service of worship?
- How do you envision “the world to come”? What does Communion have to do with that vision?
- How have you been nourished by Christ and strengthened in the Spirit? How might you share that nourishment and strength with others?



*Christians of all ages, whether they are a member of our church or not, are welcomed to the Lord’s Table.*



In the Reformed understanding of the Sacrament of Communion, the Lord's Table is open to Christians of all traditions. Communion represents our fellowship with the universal church; the table belongs to Christ, who is our host at this great feast. Baptized children, equally members of the body of Christ, are welcome to participate in the Sacrament. We are all children of God, and we continue to grow into our understanding of the Sacraments throughout the life of faith.

- Have you ever experienced Communion in a church of another tradition? How was it the same or similar? How was it different?
- What does it mean to "receive the kingdom of God as a little child" (see Matthew 18:4; Mark 10:15; and Luke 18:17)?
- How have you grown in your understanding of Communion?



*These words that Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," have been central to our Christian life for two thousand years. They have been repeated everywhere in the world where Christians gather. And time and time again we see how Christ draws us together. Christ gives us spiritual nourishment and strengthens us for the life of faith. Christ renews us with love.*

The Great Thanksgiving (or Eucharistic prayer) is an ancient part of the Communion liturgy that expresses our thanksgiving to God, our remembrance of Jesus Christ, and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The Words of Institution ("This is my body . . . Do this in remembrance of me") are sometimes spoken at the Invitation to the Table, sometimes during the Great Thanksgiving, and sometimes at the Breaking of the Bread. Wherever they occur, these words convey a central meaning of the Sacrament—that Christ is our spiritual food, our strength and sustenance in this world and the next (John 6:51).

- When Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," to what does "this" refer? Eating bread? Keeping a feast? Giving thanks to God? Sharing food with others?
- Why is the recollection of these words Jesus spoke concerning the bread and cup such an important part of the celebration of the Sacrament of Communion?
- What kind of nourishment do we receive through our Communion with Christ? How does the Sacrament renew our faith?



*Communion is about giving thanks to God, building community, and encountering Christ. Even if it's just a few people celebrating together, we're reminded that Christ lives in us and is with us. In that moment we experience the community of Christ's presence, too, as we take part in a great feast—the same feast we share with millions worldwide, the same feast we'll share one day with all the faithful in heaven.*

The different names for this Sacrament emphasize different facets of its meaning. “Eucharist” is from a Greek word that means “thanksgiving”; we give thanks for the countless gifts of God, above all the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. “Communion” refers to our spiritual union in Christ; we are connected in faith and fellowship with Christians of every time and place. “The Lord’s Supper” reminds us that it is Jesus Christ who institutes the Sacrament; we encounter Christ at the feast that he prepares. This Sacrament is also a foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will enjoy in the realm of God (see Isaiah 25:6–9; Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; and Revelation 19:9).

- What names for the Sacrament are most commonly used in your place of worship? How do these terms connect (or not) with your experience of the Sacrament?
- How is Communion a “great feast”? How might we celebrate it in such a way to best convey that meaning?
- Read some of the passages above that describe the heavenly banquet. How is Communion a foretaste of the life of the world to come?



*These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Come join us! Join this joyful feast.*

The Sacraments of Baptism and Communion are “gifts of God for the people of God.” God gives us these good and gracious gifts to celebrate and enjoy—but also to share with others, scattered like bread, poured out like wine. Jesus promises that “people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). As Christ’s disciples, we are called to “extend the table” far and wide, spreading a joyful feast wherever we go, as we proclaim the good news of God’s saving power and love to all the world.

- What gifts have you received through the celebration of the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion?
- How is Communion celebrated in your congregation? Is it a joyful feast? How might that vision of the Sacrament be more fully realized and experienced?
- How might we “extend the table,” inviting others to join this joyful feast? How might we share these gifts of God with others?

## For Further Study

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> This statement and the following quotations from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order* come from “Presbyterian 101: A General Guide to Facts about the PCUSA.” Available online: <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/101/sacraments/>.
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