

**The Food of God for the People of God:
Reconnecting Food to the Eucharist**

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D.Min Abstract

There is an old saying that “you are what you eat.” But I think it goes further than that. We aren’t just defined by what we eat but who we eat with, where we eat, and how we eat. All of it says something about us. Food is cultural as well as biological—it’s spiritual as well as physical. Food is a ritual, communal, and relational act. All living things are part of what we call the food chain: all things are eating or being eaten. For Christians, the Table of the Lord, the Eucharist, should be the height of our eating. It is the apex of our interaction with food. At the Table, we enter the mystery of provision as we are fed by our good and gracious Father.

However, many of us have lost this connection of table to Table. The Western diet has stolen our diverse and bountiful diet and replaced it with the tepid slop of a fast food nation. Our theology of the Eucharist has been boiled down to individual memorialism of Jesus’ death, instead of a robust and hearty theology of remembrance, communion and hope.

So how might we go about reconnecting table to Table? I started with scripture where the Apostle Paul reminds the Church about its identity at the Table and how every table that we gather around forms us. Then I followed this thread through the theology of John Calvin to discover this connection within the Reformed tradition. Additionally, I use the voice of Jean-Jaques von Allmen to demonstrate how every meal that we eat is the prelude to and an echo of the meal that we eat at the Table of our Lord. Finally, I invite the gathered Church and households to engage in some practices of reconnection.

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Forward: Setting the Table

“The Lord be with you.”

“And also with you,” the people respond. The children offer these words to the gathered congregation every communion Sunday at the Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church (AACRC) where I serve as pastor. These words pass under wooden beams stretching heavenward. They move into the pews, to the back of the sanctuary, out to a narthex and into the parking-lot. The children stand nestled between the communion table and the baptismal font, open and full of water at the front of the sanctuary. The children’s arms are raised, mirroring the beams above them as they express greeting.

This exchange is not an interruption but an intentional liturgical move that places the children in the role of liturgist—signifying their part in the drama of the worship service. There is joy in the response. Parents and friends are ministered to by the children of the community. Together we receive the words that lead us into prayer, which lead us into the Word, which lead us into the sacrament of the Supper.

These words serve as the already but not yet invitation. They will come back again as we begin the communion liturgy. The *Sursum Corda* (lifting up of our hearts) draws the congregation into the thanksgiving.

“The Lord be with you.”

“And also with you.”

“Lift up your hearts.”

“We lift them up to the Lord.”

“Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”

“It is right to give our thanks and praise.”

Holy and right it is to give thanks and praise. It is what we do as God’s people. It is an expression of love and gratitude for the God who has done so much for us. The Lord’s Supper is a mystery. The Supper speaks to our present reality and points us to something that is beyond ourselves—something beyond our understanding. It is a moment where God speaks to us. The Supper is a moment in the life of the believer and the community when our identity is stated, our mission laid out, our call affirmed. All this happens through the bread and the cup, given for us. All this happens by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is a gift of God’s grace.

In the Christian tradition, this grace is expressed by three theological moves—Remembrance, Communion and Hope. We remember Christ’s perfect sacrifice offered once on the cross for the sin of the whole world. We have communion with God; we are raised up into God’s space where we are united to our Lord and united as one body, the Church. We hope and look forward to the day when all the saints and company of heaven will be joined together at the wedding banquet of the Lamb. Liturgically, the Reformed Church in America has used these themes as catechesis—a way to teach these themes and to remind us of the rich meaning and mystery at the Table.

Yet, this threefold movement has been collapsed in many Reformed congregations. It has become primarily an intellectual exercise—individualized by the believer as a memorial of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. And while there is nothing wrong with the wonderful thought of Jesus’ sacrifice, it is an incomplete portrait of the Eucharist and misinterprets the meal that Jesus gave his people.

This meal Jesus gave us is first and foremost a *meal*. This is John Calvin's first and last word on the subject when he engages the sacrament in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹ There is bread and there is wine. We need these elements. Communion does not happen without food, and so our attitudes toward food matter a great deal.

Bread is a dietary staple for much of the world. It is four simple ingredients: flour, water, salt, yeast. Yet, bread has become so much more than the sum of its parts. Bread is representative of food as a spiritual, physical, and emotional lifeline. Jesus teaches us to pray for it, and identifies himself as the bread of life. The giving and receiving of food has become a way in which people connect to one another and build relationships. More than that, it has become a cultural tool especially in religious communities. In the Christian tradition communion is a meal where bread and wine have been set apart as sacred elements of God's rich grace.

Yet, even though this vast richness exists in the Christian tradition, there is often a disconnect between food and theology. Because of the fast food culture in America, our food has become more of a utilitarian consumable—a necessary part of life, but one that sometimes gets in the way of what we would rather be doing.

But what if we could reconnect food and theology? What might this look like for disciples of Jesus? What if we could plug back into the rich Christian tradition which has held the tables we gather around very closely to the presence of God in the world? What if we regain a sense of formation and transformation around the Table of the Lord? What

¹ Sue Rozeboom, "A Good Read: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper," *Reformed Worship* 88 (June 2008).

impact would that have on our dining room tables? What impact would that have on how we live in the world as the Church?

Chapter one shows how this disconnect—of food from theology, of our dining tables from our Lord's Table—is present in one Christian Reformed Church. The church's history and cultural setting have influenced its understanding of food and of the Lord's Supper. And, as both survey results and interviews reveal, this community has not connected their theology and life with their thoughts and attitudes toward food. The findings of research will be contrasted with a prayer of John Calvin that he authored for use at mealtime.

Chapter two demonstrates how this is not an isolated problem. There are many Reformed churches in America that experience this disconnect between food and theology. Two issues contribute to this disconnect. The first issue is that many are suffering from the effects of a Western diet—a diet comprised of few vegetables, processed meat, too much sugar, and corn in various forms. It is unhealthy not just for our bodies but also the earth and the people who work in industrial food. The second issue is a thin theology of the Eucharist in Reformed churches that is the result of revivalism and intellectualism in the 19th century. This has left the Eucharist to be little more than a meal where we remember Jesus' death intellectually, instead of the rich reality of the abiding transformation in Christ.

Chapter three proposes that these problems are not native to historic Christianity. Going back to the Apostle Paul and his dialogue concerning meat sacrificed to idols in the Corinthian church (I Corinthians chapters 8-11), we see that Paul was assuming—and

held himself—a worldview which understood the tables we gather around have great theological consequences. The questions of who we eat with, what we eat, where what we eat came from and how it was produced, killed, and eaten all were of great significance to Paul and the early church. Then, Paul ties this ethic of eating to the Table of our Lord. And through the liturgy, we may reclaim a right posture toward food and creation at our tables. Paul sees the meal as a formational part of the Christian life.

Chapter four builds on chapter three by showing that just as for the Apostle Paul, so for Calvin, the Eucharist is a formational meal. In interacting with Calvin and his interpretation of Union with Christ, I show how, for Calvin, the Lord's Supper was a place in which we are united to God in Christ and united to one another. I also use another Reformed voice, that of Jean-Jaques von Allmen to demonstrate a method for connecting our food and theology. Through the use of von Allmen's language of "prelude" and "echo," I show how the meals that we eat are intertwined with the Table of our Lord.

Chapter five is a reclamation project that ties our tables together. Using historic liturgical practices located in the Reformed tradition and beyond, we can begin to articulate a way in which we are formed by the Eucharist. This process of formation is an invitation to reject a diet driven by consumerism and engage in a practice of Eucharistic living—letting the formative values we engage in at the Table move to all places of our lives. Through von Allmen's model of "prelude" and "echo" we can begin to reclaim a more robust portrait of the food we eat and the way in which it is connected to our spirits as well as our bellies.

The food we eat communicates something about our thoughts and attitudes about the celebration of the Eucharist. Our thoughts and attitudes about the Eucharist flow into the other tables we sit down at to feast. We cannot separate the two. Therefore it is time to set the table for a conversation that reconnects our food and our theology, our table celebrations to the Table celebration.

Chapter 1: A Picture of the Disconnect

The Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church began worshipping in 1955. The church was born out of the Christian Reformed Campus Chapel, a campus ministry to the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan is a world-class university that draws over 40,000 students from all parts of the globe.² The draw of the university makes Ann Arbor a very culturally diverse town with cuisine from many different cultures. Ann Arbor is a foodie place—it is a town where there is a high awareness and interest in food. Restaurants and boutique markets share the streets and sidewalks with farmer's markets and artisans.

This culturally diverse setting is the backdrop for a community that is also driven by achievement. Academics are held in high regard, and it is not unusual for high school students in the church to be in multiple Advanced Placement classes and college preparation courses. The membership of the church is highly educated with many people holding advanced degrees in a variety of fields and disciplines.

This academic mindset isn't just due to the proximity of the church to the university, but also the history the church has with the university. The first Christian Reformed presence in Ann Arbor began with the preaching of Henry Baker. Beginning in 1937, meeting mostly in University buildings, a group would meet and Baker would teach them Christian Reformed doctrine. In the academic year of 1948-49, the Campus Chapel opened on the campus of the University of Michigan. Their founding pastor was Leonard Verduin who stayed until 1962. The Chapel maintained a close relationship with

²University of Michigan, "Total Enrollment Overview," University of Michigan, Fall 2015, accessed 1/22/2016 9:00AM, <http://www.ro.umich.edu/report/15enrollmentsummary.pdf>.

Grand Rapids (the city of the denominational headquarters) and Calvin College (the denominational college of the CRC) due to its arrangement with the University of Michigan to fulfill the engineering degrees of Calvin's students. In the past, Calvin students majoring in engineering would attend the college for the first two years and then come to Ann Arbor to finish their degree. There is still a Dutch house on the campus of U of M that has its roots in this relationship.³

In the early 1950s, some members of the Campus Chapel discussed organizing a congregation. At the time the chapel was not a self-governing congregation and had no elders or deacons and therefore could not perform baptisms or professions of faith⁴. During those years, the chapel was under supervision of Classis Grand Rapids East. Some of the students who had been members of the chapel had now settled in the Ann Arbor area, taking jobs with one of the big three automakers (Ford, GM, and Chrysler) or subcontractors thereof. This commitment to the Ann Arbor area and a growing desire to have their children baptized, moved a group of members to petition Classis Grand Rapids East to allow them to organize. At first, this petition had no effect, until the CRC church in Dearborn began to advocate for them. Finally, in April 1955, the new congregation began worshipping in a Seventh Day Adventist church, which was located at 1131 Church Street.

³Phi Alpha Kappa Fraternity University of Michigan, "Our History/Mission," 2016, accessed 1/22/2016 8:34AM, <http://phialphakappa.com/about-us/our-historymission/>.

⁴ A Profession of faith in the Christian Reformed Church is a public statement of faith. This is done after the student has undergone classes relevant to Christian doctrine and Reformed teaching.

Shortly after their separation, the newly formed Council (governing body of the local church) of this Christian Reformed church began looking for places to build. The community desired to be close to students, particularly those coming to the University from other nations, in order to minister and witness to them. After examining many sites, the community decided on the site of 1717 Broadway, which is where the church sits today.

The location and vision of the charter members of the church produced a vibrant ministry to people of other nations. In return, the church was blessed with long-time members who chose to find work in southeastern Michigan and remain a part of the AACRC community, rather than to return to their country of origin. Others returned home and spoke of a Church that became home for them while they were studying abroad. Chinese students still come into our church building today because they have been told by someone in China that if you go to Ann Arbor, you should find the Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church. This is an identity that the AACRC takes great pride in and sees as essential to its mission.

Food is present in the AACRC like it is in many churches. On Communion Sundays we bring in food donations for a local food pantry. We have a garden on the church grounds which provides fresh produce for another local food pantry. We volunteer our time and energy helping organizations who see hunger as a moral issue. We understand food as a natural and necessary part of our fellowship together. We have dinners and potlucks and ice cream socials that are all a healthy part of our community's identity. Food is present at weddings and funerals, anniversary celebrations and after-

church coffee. Food is all around. Because of the church's history ministering to people from other nations, we are also privileged to experience wonderful cuisine from those places. We have Christmas parties with dumplings, baptism and birthday celebrations with sweet potato pancakes and delicious red bean cookies or buns served for coffee and dessert.

While food is present and part of the culture of the church, the connection food has to theology is not always explicit. This is best seen in the example of our monthly "pizza night." Every third Wednesday of the month, our church gathers for various programs. We have a GEMS (Girls Everywhere Meeting the Savior) program for 2nd-5th grade girls, a Cadet program for 2nd-5th grade boys, a program for middle schoolers called Roots, and choir practice. We also occasionally have a book study or Bible study small group. These pizza nights are a time when our church community comes alive in a powerful way. Tables are set up in our fellowship hall. Each circle table has eight seats and families, singles, and the elders of the church all gather their food and head to a table to engage in conversation about a variety of topics. From how the week is going to what the pastor may have said the previous Sunday, people update one another on their lives and their passions. This has become a time where people may connect with those they wouldn't ordinarily connect with due to a Sunday morning rhythm with two worship services. Though the night begins with opening prayer at 5:45, it is a revolving door of activity. Parents drop off their children, they come and go, they grab a bite to eat and they leave. We purchase our pizza from a local Little Caesar's pizza chain.

What caught my ear at one particular pizza night was the amount of comments I received that began to run together. They all carried a similar refrain.

“I love pizza night because I don’t have to think about cooking a night.”

Or,

“Pizza night is nice because it’s so easy.”

Or,

“Pizza night is great because I can just throw some pizza on a plate, put it before my kids, and send them on their way.”

Now there is nothing wrong with these statements. We can all use a break every now and then. As a parent, I myself have felt or uttered words like this on more than one occasion. What is interesting that as we gathered as a church community, food served nothing more than a prop. The pizza was there, but we didn’t pay much attention to where it came from, and we didn’t give much thought to how it became part of us. Moreover, once we ate we were very ready to move on with our evening. We came, we saw, we consumed. The children left and went on to their programs, the parents pulled out computers to work in the fellowship hall, and the choir headed up to the balcony to warm up their vocal cords.

I left that particular pizza night with questions. What role should food play in our church functions? When we eat, is the Table of our Lord in view? Does the community of the AACRC connect what it eats with who we are in Christ? Do we have a theology of eating? I reflected on meals that I shared with others in the community or conversations I had on a given pizza night and recalled having a rich sense of fellowship and

connectedness to others. I also began to see how much the food that we ate was a part of those opportunities for connection. So then, isn't it important to pay attention to what we eat?

I internalized a lot of these questions at first but, as I lived with them, my personal biases and assumptions began to manifest. I had to come to terms with my race and economic standing. I wondered if I was just a bit overzealous about food and theology. I began to question whether or not I was asking others to also share in a connection that I was seeing without considering their thoughts and opinions. I also became self-aware of my interactions with others outside of the church. People were calling or stopping by the church in need of financial assistance in order to buy groceries for their families. I went with one man to buy groceries. I was mortified at what he grabbed, but he had one motivation: how much food could he get for as little money as possible? I was operating in a different circle of our university town. The way I understood hunger and food were limited to my cultural experience in Ann Arbor. On the other end, I also have a graduate degree in theology and so my opinions about the Eucharist are more developed than the majority of my congregation. I spend a lot of time thinking about the sacraments and what they mean to the community. Many people in my congregation don't share that passion in the same way or have the time to read as much as I do. In order for me to engage my questions of connecting food and theology at the AACRC, I needed to own these biases and deal with my feelings as I began my journey towards deeper understanding.

This intentional engagement to study the intersection between food and the Eucharist started in earnest when I surveyed the congregation on their thoughts and attitudes about communion and food at the AACRC. The survey was greeted with mixed results and feelings. There was the full spectrum of thoughts and attitudes toward food and its connection to theology. Some were “thrilled”; they had felt a connection for a long time but needed help putting words around what they were feeling. Others were thankful this issue was taking a larger role in their church since they were hoping the church would join them in connecting food and theology—or, more specifically, food and the Eucharist.

While there were those supporters of the survey, a few respondents expressed skepticism at tying food and the Eucharist together, calling it a "mistake" or "a stretch." Some were worried that this would be a "guilt trip" about food or that I was caught up in "politics." Still others spoke highly of communion but left out food from their responses. Still others expressed thankfulness about awareness our community has created about food and hunger but left communion out of their responses. Finally, there were responses that expressed that people had indeed not thought about this before such as, "this is a new idea for me." And, "I am becoming increasingly sensitive to the ways we act unjustly and unrighteously by our food choices."⁵ All of those responses came in the final open-ended question that asked them if they had anything else to share about communion and/or food.

⁵ Female member who came from a different denominational background, Interview by author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 30th, 2014.

The survey questions themselves revealed some fascinating things about the positions that people expressed in their open-ended answers. When asked about the frequency of the communion only 20% agreed or strongly agreed that communion should be served weekly as part of worship. 47% of respondents disagreed with that statement and 5% strongly disagreed while 27% were indifferent to having communion weekly. In addition, most respondents (82%) would not be more likely to attend service if communion was being served.

Of course, frequency cannot be the primary measure of people's connection or feelings about the Eucharist. What people believe the Supper *means* can also give us a window into how people think about Eucharist. What do people primarily think about when we share in communion? When asked "What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper for you?" respondents were given the opportunity to mark up to the three most meaningful things about communion with a value of (1) representing the most meaningful. Far and away the highest marks were given to "reminds us of the last supper of Jesus and his death," with 84 responses for (1) most meaningful. In total it had 141 responses out of a possible 172. Very high marks. The next highest marks were given to the response "unites us with the Body of Christ." Fifty-six (56) respondents marked it (1) most meaningful while it also scored 141 out of 172. Those numbers suggest that many people of AACRC primarily see Communion as an act of remembrance that calls to memory the last supper and the death of Jesus.

When asked about their thoughts and attitudes regarding food they were asked a series of questions about their personal habits regarding food. These were couched in

language about spending habits. When they shop, do they consider price? health? origin? treatment of the animal? organic? GMO (Genetically Modified Organisms)? When looking at those questions, respondents generally think of health and cost more than the other factors as 83% of respondents said they always or frequently make healthy eating a priority, and 78% said they always or frequently take price into consideration when buying food. The next highest consideration was whether or not a product was organic as 27% of respondents said they always or frequently take that into consideration when making a purchase.

Finally I wanted to see if people made the connection between communion and meals in other settings. Of the respondents, 5% said they frequently think about communion, 22% occasionally think about it, while 47% seldom think about it and 25% never think about communion when they have a meal with family or friends. That means that over a quarter of the congregation never thinks about communion when they eat in other settings and almost half the congregation seldom thinks about communion when they eat in another setting.

After the survey closed and I had these responses, I still had questions. What are people thinking about food and about communion? I set up four interviews and asked the interviewees two questions: Tell me about a meal that is significant to you and tell me about a time that communion was significant to you. In all four cases the interviewee's responses caused me to ask a follow-up of "What does communion mean to you?" In three out of four of those interviews the primary understanding of the Lord's Supper was an individual remembrance of Christ and his sacrifice.

The interviews also revealed some attitudes toward food in general and meals that they share in their daily lives. One interviewee insisted that he is not a connoisseur but believes food, "adds a certain pleasantness to life,"⁶ while believing that, while we should enjoy food, it is "almost utilitarian." Another interviewee shared that the whole idea of food being more than sustenance was a new concept and went so far as to say that he didn't have an expressed attitude toward food, "food was there and we had to eat it."⁷

The most fascinating moment in every interview was that the connection between food and theology was almost always there, beneath the surface. In every interview the words connecting food and theology were on their lips, yet even as they were speaking, they weren't making that connection.

One example of this connection was told by one interviewee about a visit he took to China back in 1982. He was working at one of the universities and at the time he said, "the Chinese were not allowed to speak to foreigners. And, we could not eat together in the same room." Therefore, "I was the only guy in a huge room...as big as our nave."⁸ As he spoke about this story, he spoke slowly and almost reflectively. Then, he switched gears to talk about a meal where he "feels the most blessed." This is a meal with his wife,

⁶ Male Member 75+ who has been a member for 15+ years, Interview by author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 24th, 2014.

⁷ Male Member aged 25-34 who grew up in the Reformed Tradition, Interview by the author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 25, 2014.

⁸ Male Member 75+ who has been a member for 15+ years, Interview by author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 24th, 2014.

children, grandchildren all around him and they have a “peaceful time.”⁹ As he spoke the words came quickly, and a huge smile broke across his face. Yet, as he reflected on these experiences, he clarified by divorcing his comments from food, saying, “as for the food part, I never really appreciated the connoisseur’s views.”¹⁰ In other words, he reflected on times when he ate and appreciated community or, reflected on eating alone, without community, and how different those experiences were. And yet, he also went on to speak about the actual food like it was a prop in the story and not part of the experience itself.

Another interviewee shared a similar line of thinking. When I asked him about meals he spoke about growing up in a home where his father was a pastor. He recalled eating large family meals and how special they were and then went on to describe the meals he now has with his wife and son. What jumped out was the difference he mentioned about the homeyness of growing up and having big meals, and now how being apart from his family, the meals seem rushed and not that homey. He said that there was an understanding that food was there and we had to eat it. He told a story about inviting a single woman from another country over so he and his family could share a meal with her. He said then, “There is something about food that says, “Come in, we want to take care of you.”¹¹ He spoke about the evening as one of love and joy as his two year-old son was going up and giving this stranger hugs and how “touching” that was. He then

⁹ Male Member 75+ who has been a member for 15+ years, Interview by author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 24th, 2014.

¹⁰ Male Member 75+ who has been a member for 15+ years, Interview by author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 24th, 2014.

¹¹ Male Member aged 25-34 who grew up in the Reformed Tradition, Interview by the author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 25, 2014.

brought up that this woman was entertaining to watch eat a western meal because, “she would mix together...things that totally didn’t go together.”¹² He then reflected his warm wishes for her even though they just had the one meeting. For me as the interviewer, I was riveted through this line of questioning. His reflection on communion, despite being primarily about Christ’s sacrifice, began to open up into an understanding about grace where it, “reminds us of where we came from, who we are, where we are going to go, all of that kind of wrapped up together.”¹³

All this data including the surveys results, the interviews, and the history of the AACRC, kept leading me back to pizza night. While pizza night can be a time of rich connection and fellowship with one another, food sat in the background. It was a prop in the setting of the church not something we were gathering around as a community. So, it can be expected that for those there, the evening may not have any theological consequence. After all, we were just feeding our children so that we could get them to programs where they *would* get their theology. It didn’t necessarily occur to anyone that we were already making claims about our theology as we ate.

Given the data, many of the people of the AACRC see communion as an inward remembrance of the death of Jesus. This is the primary purpose of the supper for the congregation, and there isn't a large percentage of those that responded who saw a clear

¹² Male Member aged 25-34 who grew up in the Reformed Tradition, Interview by the author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 25, 2014.

¹³ Male Member aged 25-34 who grew up in the Reformed Tradition, Interview by the author, Ann Arbor CRC, September 25, 2014.

connection with meals in other places or food in general to the supper. Rather, it is an individual event between them and Jesus.

To add to the individualized and internalized view of the supper, the stories people shared of food in their lives revealed an attitude of food that is primarily utilitarian and yet, there is some connection with food and community which is tied to their theology that lies under the surface.

While the disconnect between food and theology at the AACRC maybe isn't that surprising when we think about busy families trying to get their kids to programming, it *is* surprising for another reason. The Reformed tradition has a rich and deep theology of the Eucharist that unites us to our Lord Jesus and to one another. While this theme will be explored more fully in chapter four, it is important to assert that the Reformed tradition carries a theology of the Lord's Supper that is much more than a memorial of Jesus' death on the cross. In the Supper we receive grace, we have hope that God is setting the world right, and we are brought into communion with the risen and ascended Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Reformed tradition also has a strong theology that sees the truth of the gospel move into every square inch of the world and our lives. The Table of the Lord is no different—the grace extended to us at the Table flows into all other facets of life. John Calvin, the French theologian who is the father of the Reformed tradition, saw the link between the Table of the Lord and the dinner table as one that is to be held close. When he was writing in the sixteenth century Europe, the Reformers were trying to articulate their theology of the Lord's Supper. Calvin began by naming the sacrament a meal. This

fellowship is a meal of and for the Church and is connected to who we are. It is only natural then that this theology gets brought from the sanctuary to the dining room in the form of a prayer Calvin wrote to pray before a meal.

Lord, the spring and inexhaustible fountain of all good things: pour out your blessing upon us. Sanctify for our use this food and drink, the gifts of your kindness. Grant that we may, in true thankfulness of soul, always acknowledge, and with our mouth proclaim you as Father and Author of all good things. Let us so enjoy this bodily nourishment that the chief desire of our heart may be for the spiritual bread of your teaching, by which our souls may be fed with growing hope of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁴

In this prayer we are able to see the intersection of Calvin's Eucharistic theology and are able to infer a theology of eating as well. He begins the prayer by acknowledging God as the giver of all good things.¹⁵ After acknowledging God as the giver of all things he blesses the food, asking God to sanctify it for use. This implies that this food isn't insignificant but has meaning in God's world—meaning which Calvin took seriously. After all, this is the same Calvin who declared that creation is a theater of God's glory and if we were to desecrate that in any way it would be an act of blasphemy.¹⁶ Calvin goes on to say that food that comes from God is an act of kindness that is to be received in thankfulness. It is this attitude of thankfulness that causes us again to profess and proclaim that our God is good—or to say it another way, the food is a reminder to be thankful and, to proclaim God is good and kind because this is the Father who longs to

¹⁴Diane Karay Tripp, ed., *Prayers from the Reformed Tradition: In the Company of a Great Cloud of Witnesses* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2001), 334.

¹⁵Paul does something similar in I Corinthians when he cites that all food belongs to God from Psalm 24:1.

¹⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.12; 1.14.20; 2.8.16.

feed his children. He goes on to then to encourage the diner to “enjoy” the food which may seem like just a small thing. But, for this student of Stoic philosophy, to “enjoy” speaks to how food isn’t just a biological function but speaks to deeper realities for all of us. This enjoyment of food is also “bodily nourishment” that helps us realize our “chief desire.” This desire is the “spiritual bread of your teaching.” As food strengthens the body, we are strengthened by the teaching of Christ that we may continue to grow in “hope of eternal life.”

After looking at the survey results, interviews, and history of the AACRC, we see a community that has collapsed this theology of John Calvin into a memorial meal. We have also seen a difficulty in connecting our food and theology. While this may not be the historic position of the Reformed tradition, it seems to be an inheritance that many Reformed communities live with. In the next chapter we will see how this disconnect was forged by a industry of consumerism and a theology of individualism within American culture.

Chapter 2: Stories Around the Table¹⁷

A word of encouragement that I would offer the Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church is that that they are not unique. This doesn't seem like the best kind of encouragement but it's true. The AACRC is not disproportionately uninterested in their thoughts and attitudes toward food compared to the rest of American culture. They don't show disproportionate indifference toward the plight of creation or a particular affinity toward food that is unhealthy or toward the fast food industry. Rather, they are representative of the way most Americans think and eat. And, Americans have a problem with food. The disconnect between food and theology starts with the problem that many of us do not think about our food all that much. Questions of where it comes from or how it got to our plate are things we know in theory but not in practice. Such an ignorance toward food is a dangerous prospect which we will explore in the first half of this chapter.

The lack of awareness concerning our food is also part of the reason we don't connect food with our theology and then, why we have developed a thin view of the Eucharist. In the second half of this chapter we will see how over time in the Reformed

¹⁷ It is a fair question at this point to suggest, as some scholars have, that a disconnect between food and theology is a symptom of a larger issue. Being indifferent toward food or thinking the Lord's Supper is merely a memorial meal, may just be illustrative of a trend in Western culture that separates the sacred and the profane.

Another way to ask this question is to ask is: does Christianity hold a monopoly on narrative? Or, is Christianity unique in its story? In his two volume work *Cultural Liturgies*, James K. A. Smith, explains that we are liturgical animals who primarily products of what we love. Our love is aimed toward a *telos* and directed toward that *telos* by habits. These habits are reinforced by a story. Liturgies then are compressed narratives that help us aim our desire or love toward its *telos*.

Smith makes the point that the Church does not have a monopoly on story or liturgy. The story of the gospel competes with many other stories like the narrative of consumerism found at a mall or the narrative of tribalism found at a sporting event. This competition between stories is an illustration of how things that were once seen as sacred can be outsourced to industry—such as cooking being outsourced to the industry of food processing. Or, how things once seen as mundane like shopping, can become powerful liturgical practices.

This tension between the narratives we live by is illustrated in this chapter as we explore two aspects of formational story (the story of food and the story of the rise of memorialism in the Eucharist).

tradition, the expression of the Eucharist has evolved into something just short of memorialism that is grounded in an individual, intellectual assent and how one voice has critiqued that and sought to bring the Reformed tradition back into its full self.

Food Culture in America

Roughly fifty miles from the front door of the Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church is the city of Toledo, Ohio. The city of Toledo is home to 280,000 people and sits on the southwest corner of Lake Erie, one of the five Great Lakes. In 2014, the city of Toledo was coming up to Ann Arbor and buying up all of the bottled water. Why? Because their city water wasn't potable. There was a large, harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie, which made the water unsafe to drink or even to use for bathing. The citizens of Toledo were without drinking water for three days. This was more than an inconvenience for the people of Toledo. People who were homebound couldn't get out to buy the water they needed. Young parents needed water to mix baby formula, and lower-income families were forced to spend money they weren't expecting.

These few days for the people of Toledo are only more concerning when we look at what a harmful algal bloom is and why it happens. A harmful algal bloom is the abnormally large growth of a certain algae that produces toxins in a body of water. This is the result of a large increase in certain nutrients in a water system—usually phosphorus and nitrogen. For a massive harmful algal bloom to appear in a body of water like Lake Erie, there needs to be quite a surplus of these nutrients. As the harmful algal bloom grows, it consumes the oxygen in the water creating what is known as a dead zone in the lake. A dead zone gets its name from the inability of life to be sustained in the water

where the harmful algal bloom exists; so the fish, many of the plants, and other life, die. The surplus of the toxins that are sometimes present in the blooms can make the water non-potable and even cause skin irritations or other health risks to humans and animals.

So how does this surplus of nutrients get into Lake Erie in the first place? In the case of the 2014 bloom a large part of the answer is agriculture. The western half of Lake Erie is fed by the Maumee River basin. This river basin is home to a large industrial agricultural presence. Farming practices of fertilization and excessive manure spreading combined with a wet spring lead to a large scale run-off of phosphorus and nitrogen into the Maumee river basin which carried the nutrients into western Lake Erie.¹⁸ A rapid increase in temperature created conditions for the excessive amounts of nutrients to feed the bloom creating in the crisis in Toledo. The 2014 bloom event is far from an isolated incident, as late summer harmful algal blooms have become a common occurrence in western Lake Erie over the past 10 years. For example, spring rainfall events produced the largest harmful algal bloom on record for Lake Erie during summer 2011.¹⁹

The harmful algal blooms that affected Toledo are a symptomatic consequence of a larger issue: that the industrial food system is wreaking havoc on our world, our bodies and our brothers and sisters around the world—especially the marginalized. The type of

¹⁸ Donald Scavia, J. David Allan, Kristin K. Arend, Steven Bartell, Dmitry Beletsky, Nate S. Bosch, Stephen B. Brandt, Ruth D. Briland, Irem Daloğlu, Joseph V. DePinto, David M. Dolan, Mary Anne Evans, Troy M. Farmer, Daisuke Goto, Haejin Han, Tomas O. Höök, Roger Knight, Stuart A. Ludsin, Doran Mason, Anna M. Michalak, R. Peter Richards, James J. Robers, Daniel K. Rucinski, Edward Rutherford, David J. Schwab, Timothy M. Sesterhenn, Hongyan Zhang, Yuntao Zhou, “Assessing and addressing the re-eutrophication of Lake Erie: Central basin hypoxia,” *Journal of Great Lakes Research* 40, (2014) 226-246, Accessed June 17, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jglr.2014.02.004>

¹⁹ Michalak et al., “Record-setting algal bloom in Lake Erie caused by agricultural and meteorological trends consistent with expected future conditions.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 110:16, p. 6448-6452. <http://www.pnas.org/content/110/16/6448>.

farming that causes the harmful algal bloom problem in the Maumee River basin is driven by this industrial food system, which is driven by the rise of the American or “Western” diet. Michael Pollen defines this diet as “lots of processed foods and meat, lots of added fat and sugar, lots of everything—except vegetables, fruits and whole grains.”²⁰ Because of processing and preservation techniques present in this food system that originated in post World War II America, many in the West are eating foods that contain ingredients we cannot pronounce from origins that are hidden from us. A quick glance at the back label of many food products we buy shows ingredients that are a mystery to us. Michael Pollan declares that “most of what we’re consuming today is no longer, strictly speaking, food at all, and how we’re consuming it—in the car, in front of the TV, and, increasingly, alone—is not really eating, at least not in the sense that civilization has long understood the term.”²¹ In short, we don’t know what we are eating.

Our collective ignorance about our food is not for lack of trying either.

Americans are constantly dieting. The weight loss industry is a multi-billion dollar a year industry, and most people try dieting multiple times a year using different methods for weight loss and healthier eating. Over half of Americans think that it would be easier to learn how to do their own taxes than eat healthfully.²² Maybe this explains why a large number of us are in the dark about what we eat and where it comes from or how to eat well. What we *do* know, however, is that what we are currently doing isn’t working. We

²⁰ Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 10.

²¹ Pollan, *Defense of Food*, 7.

²² http://www.foodinsight.org/Resources/Detail.aspx?topic=2012_Food_Health_Survey_Consumer_Attitudes_toward_Food_Safety_Nutrition_and_Health

think about nutrition and not about food. We are obsessed with what we consume, yet we remain completely ignorant of what it is we eat.

The lack of relationship we have to our food is taking its toll. We in America are overweight and struggle with diabetes, heart disease, and cancer in numbers never before seen. We are obese and yet we are, at the same time, undernourished. People are being sickened with outbreaks of E. Coli 0157:H7 whose origins can be traced back to the way in which we process our food.²³ Our bodies are rejecting our current diet and we are not listening.

This diet doesn't just affect those who eat too much. Hunger and food insecurity are still a major problem in the United States, with a national average of 15% of the country living with hunger or food insecurity. According to Food Gatherers, a local food distribution organization in Ann Arbor, food security is defined as “a person’s confidence in knowing that they will have enough food to feed themselves and their household.”²⁴ Therefore, if a person is not confident they will have enough to eat, they are food insecure. In Washtenaw County, where Ann Arbor and the AACRC are located, almost 15% of residents are hungry or food insecure.²⁵ The Western diet and industrial agriculture are producing more food than ever and yet, they are the wrong kinds of food and lower income people have difficulty accessing it consistently.

²³ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, 1st ed. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2012), 195.

²⁴ “Food Gatherers 2009 Food Security Plan” 1 Carrot Way Ann Arbor, Mi. 48105.

²⁵ “Map the Meal Gap,” Feeding America, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2013/overall/michigan/county/washtenaw>.

The American diet is even redefining what may be labeled as food. “About 90% of the money that Americans spend on food is used to buy processed food.”²⁶ When I say processed, I am referring to foods that are not found in nature or have gone through some type of preserving process. They are not fresh nor are they even recognizable as what they used to be. In short, many processed foods are not real foods at all. There is even an industry that exists to make these processed foods seem like real food. When we look at the back of a label we see words like “artificial flavors” or “natural flavors.” These are code words for an assemblage of chemicals that are designed to mimic something that is real food. And there really is no telling what goes into this impersonation. “The Food and Drug Administration does not require flavor companies to disclose the ingredients of their additives, so long as all the chemicals are considered by the agency to be GRAS (Generally Regarded As Safe).”²⁷ Eric Schlosser reminds us that “natural flavors” may not be the better alternative that they appear to be: “Natural Flavors and artificial flavors sometimes contain exactly the same chemicals, produced through different methods.”²⁸ That is a lot of energy given to make one food taste like another. This large amount of processed food that is diverse in taste and color thanks to the flavor industry is derived from only a select few crops, including corn, soy, canola, and wheat.

Of course it’s not just the health of our bodies that is affected by our food production and diet. Creation itself is in peril. In their book *Making Peace with the Land*,

²⁶ Schlosser, 121.

²⁷ Schlosser, 125.

²⁸ Schlosser, 126. (quoting Terry Acree from Cornell University)

Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba write, “Ecologists now tell us that all the worlds’ ecosystems are in varying states of crisis. We are eroding our soils and then pounding them with herbicides and fertilizers.”²⁹ Jim Mason and Peter Singer give us the example of the Delmarva Peninsula, a peninsula named because it connects Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. This peninsula is facing the same fate as the Maumee River basin in Ohio. “More than 600 million chickens a year are raised on the Delmarva Peninsula. Those chickens produce more manure than a city of four million people, and instead of getting processed like human waste, chicken manure is spread on fields.”³⁰ This is too much nitrogen and phosphorus for the land to hold so it runs off in the rain, soaks into the groundwater, and streams into the Chesapeake Bay. Just like Lake Erie, the result is a dead zone in a once vibrant ecosystem.

These are not isolated occurrences. The midwest and plains states used to be dotted with small family farms that raised various crops that included corn, oats, barley, cherries, apples, and more. These small farms with their fruits, vegetables, and animals have been on a march toward extinction since the end of World War II and are being replaced with large factory farms that are supporting monocultures. Where we used to see a diversity of crops, now we see a just handful taking over the United States landscape. This has had an incredible impact on the ecosystem and, by extension, our consumption.

According to Indian crop ecologist Vandana Shiva, humans have eaten some 80,000 plant species in our history. After recent precipitous changes, three-

²⁹Bahnson, Fred and Norman Wirzba. *Making Peace with the Land: God’s Call to Reconcile with Creation*. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2012.) 29.

³⁰ Bahnson and Wirzba. 29.

quarters of all human food comes from just eight species, with the field quickly narrowing down to genetically modified corn, soy, and canola.³¹

Our dependence on such a small number of crops and a mistreatment of animals is an alarming reality. Yet, it isn't just the animals that are mistreated in the production of our food. The workers and farmers that produce our food and crops are also at risk. The meat industry provides us with one such example.

The meat industry is incredibly efficient. Through pioneering methods of slaughter, they are able to kill and process an ever growing number of various cuts of meat for Americans. Americans are second only to Luxembourg in their meat consumption, as the average American consumes 270 pounds of meat every year.³² Compare that with India where the average person consumes only 7 pounds of meat annually. Meat consumption (along with production) has been skyrocketing since the early 20th century, climbing to greater than 50 billion pounds of meat consumed in America in 2011.³³ Most of this meat is sold via the factory farm. In fact, “virtually all the chicken sold in America—more than 99%, according to Bill Roenigk, vice president of the National Chicken Council—comes from factory-farm production.”³⁴ The same is

³¹Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (New York: Harper, 2007), 48.

³² Eliza Barclay, “A Nation of Meat Eaters: See how it all adds up” (mp3 podcast), June 27, 2012, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/06/27/155527365/visualizing-a-nation-of-meat-eaters>.

³³ Eliza Barclay, “A Nation of Meat Eaters: See how it all adds up” (mp3 podcast), June 27, 2012, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/06/27/155527365/visualizing-a-nation-of-meat-eaters>.

³⁴ Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale, 2006), 21.

true for pigs: “69,000 pig farms produce 103 million pigs, most owned by four companies Smithfield, ConAgra, ContiGroup, and the Seaboard Corporation.”³⁵

Those are some staggering numbers to think about, but perhaps more disconcerting than those numbers is what comes with those numbers. Animal cruelty, animal neglect, use of hormones, genetic modification, and antibiotics all accompany this behemoth of an industry. Workers are also at risk as they are underpaid and often acquired through undocumented processes so they can be replaced easily. They are asked to carry out horrifying tasks at speeds that keep the profit margin large. Slaughterhouse workers can be asked to process up to 90-120 chickens a minute or 7,200 an hour. When reflecting on slaughtering chickens for a day at a farm in Virginia, Michael Pollan had this to say:

I stepped away from the killing area for a break. Joel clapped me on the back for having taken my turn at the killing cones. I told [the farm’s proprietor] killing chickens wasn’t something I would want to do every day. “Nobody should,” Joel said. “That’s why in the Bible the priest drew lots to determine who would conduct the ritual slaughter, and they rotated the job every month. Slaughter is dehumanizing work if you have to do it every day.”³⁶

After one afternoon of killing chickens for food, Pollan was feeling the toll that taking life has on a person. If that is how one person feels after taking life, how much could those slaughterhouse workers feel?

Yet maybe the most disturbing part of this American diet is that we are sold a narrative along with our super-sized meals that aims to speak to us about our needs. We

³⁵ Singer and Mason, 43.

³⁶Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. (Penguin Books, New York, New York., 2007). 233.

are hungry, we are busy, and we are not rich. So then, the industry of fast food has marketed to us that we need food that is fast, easy and cheap. Fast food has given us the raw materials for building a society of convenience while sweeping away its impact. But, when we view the infrastructure of this society, we can see that it is built on industrial practices that are doing great harm to our world as quickly as the food is doing great harm to us. Maybe the most disturbing truth about all of this is that it is our children who are the focus of most of these marketing dollars. It is the Ronald McDonald characters and the happy meals and the toys and the partnership with Disney that really become problematic. Children are the focus because they are the ones who are most susceptible to the narrative. The food tastes great! The playland is fun. They are given toys when they go there. Who wouldn't want a toy with every meal? And along with the meal, and the toy, and the playland, comes a story of how the world works and the role that food is to play in our lives.

It is the narrative of consumption—that food exists to be consumed—and, as we have seen it has disastrous effects on our bodies, the environment and humanity, particularly the poor. This American diet, and the narrative that accompanies it, is a large part of many families' lives. The severe price we are paying with our health and our planet sometimes appears to be very far from our experience. For the Church, the disciples of Jesus, this invites the question: what story do we claim is *the* narrative to which we appeal? We confess a story of God and God's love that explains to us who we are and what we are about. So, how does the narrative of consumption and industrial eating mesh with the story of God and his love for the world? The answer to this set of

questions is the story that Jesus gave us around the table. It is the story of the Eucharist—of Jesus’ body and blood, given for the life of the world. It is a story of meaning, and life, and resurrection—a story not based on fast, easy, cheap consumption, but a story that declares life, value, and goodness of all creation. Yet, as we will see, the Reformed tradition has also experienced the consequences of the thin narrative of this rich story as well.

Revivalism and the Memorial Meal

In addition to our problem with food, the disconnect between what we eat and our theology is also caused in part because of a thin view of the Eucharist that has permeated many Reformed congregations in America. This thin theology is the result of a history of the Reformed tradition in America that was and is still influenced by the first and second Great Awakenings in American religion. One effect of these awakenings, also known as revivals, on Reformed churches was an inheritance that views the Lord's Supper primarily as a memorial in which we remember Jesus' death. Two factors that lent themselves to creating a climate for memorialism filtered through the revival were “knowledge” and “freedom.”

The new freedom that America was founded on saw a decentralized or nonexistent role of government in protestant Christianity. As D. G Hart tells us in his biography of John Williamson Nevin, “It is not an overstatement or caricature to say that, no longer regulated by the state and no longer administered by ordained officers, Protestant Christianity in the United States became a religion of the people, by the

people, and for the people.”³⁷ The revivalist movement could be understood as a reflection of the freedom and individualistic focus of the American ideal. No longer were governments forcing people to be a part of this or that religion or church but now people could do what they want; the individual was thrust into the forefront while the community and church body took a secondary role. This climate of decentralized religion gave way to groups and churches that saw faith as an inward personal decision rather than something that was tied to a community of faith and expressed in worship. Hart again states that, “the American settlement of church-state relations gave greater plausibility to religious informality, thereby granting an advantage to forms of faith with fewer formal constraints.”³⁸ These constraints could be the word-and-sacrament-life of the Church. The informality now allowed revivalism to explode across this new country.

Because of this explosion and focus on the individual, conversions became the coin of the day and different techniques were employed to maximize results. Hart says, "Conversion-experience-driven techniques of outreach, along with the individualistic and moralistic forms of faith that accompanied them, were by the 1840's well on their way toward becoming the dominant method of evangelism in the church."³⁹ These conversion driven techniques in the church varied in style but could be metaphorically grouped together by speaking of the "anxious bench" This device came to symbolize the revivalist movement by both those inside and outside. The anxious bench was an actual

³⁷D.G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005), 26.

³⁸ Hart, 23.

³⁹ Hart, 69.

bench in some revival meetings. Persons would be called forward to sit on the bench near the pulpit and remain there for the entirety of the sermon. These individuals would be those in attendance that would be particularly concerned with their spiritual well-being. This seat would be used to heighten the guilt of the one sitting on the seat and push them toward a conversion.

For the Revivalists like Charles Grandison Finney, the bench was indispensable as a tool to acquire conversion which was the height of importance. For him, faith was all a matter of the heart. Bradford Littlejohn says of Finney's brand of revivalism:

The theology that was popularized and applied by the radical revivalist Charles Finney in the 1820's and '30's, dissolving the whole complex process of justification, sanctification, spiritual nourishment by the means of grace, etc., into a one-time ecstatic conversion experience."⁴⁰

The personal decision of the individual became the central tenant of what it meant to be a Christian. Because of this focus the church began to take on a different role in the lives of believers. Hart reminds us, "Historic practices of confirmation and the observance of the Lord's Supper fell out of use."⁴¹

This is a tension that was felt in Reformed circles and even caused a schism of the Presbyterian church in 1837. It was at their general assembly that a resolution was passed to oust many people who were sympathetic to the revivalists and their renewed focus on individual salvation. These would be called New School Presbyterians, while those who opposed them would be called the Old School Presbyterians. For the Old School

⁴⁰ W Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 24.

⁴¹ Littlejohn, 69.

Presbyterians, revivalism was a sign of the Church deconstructing. If all that is needed is the bench and conversion, what could be said about discipleship? Community? What would become of the sacramental life of the church?

These questions spurred on by the new American expression of freedom of religion and new-found individuality needed to be answered. How would that happen? What approach would the Presbyterian church use? The answer came in the voices of two different thinkers who engaged revivalism. These two figures were John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge. And, while both agreed that the life of the church was at stake, their differing approaches were a flashpoint for the other factor that led to memorialism—the factor of knowledge.

At the time, Charles Hodge was a giant of Reformed thought, being the president of Princeton Seminary. He had the attention and the ear of the Reformed tradition. Nevin was a student at Princeton Seminary and studied under Hodge. After he received his degree from Princeton Seminary, Nevin taught a class of Charles Hodge while Hodge was away in Germany. He then found his way to a newly formed seminary of the German Reformed church in Mersersburg, Pennsylvania. This is where Nevin began to write and harshly critique the extreme revivalists like Finney by writing *The Anxious Bench*. In his first work he openly challenged the bench's use and spoke about discipleship through the catechism and the sacramental life of the Church. Charles Hodge also was an open and outspoken critic of the Revivalism that was sweeping the nation and was a key voice in

the schism of 1837 which saw the Presbyterian church split between Old School and New School.⁴²

Both Nevin and Hodge were instrumental in critiquing the individualized, ecstatic conversion based Christianity. However, as they moved into the defense of the life of the church, particularly the role of sacraments, disagreements arose between them. The argument arose when Nevin published his work *The Mystical Presence*.⁴³ *The Mystical Presence* was Nevin's sacramental theology as it pertained to the Lord's Supper. It also served as a clarification of his own position as some in the German Reformed Church were worried that Nevin believed in a physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The disagreement between Nevin and Hodge is fascinating, and it is also complex. For the purposes of this paper, what is important to understand is that Hodge, in his understanding of the Reformed tradition, believed the Eucharist was a symbolic event

⁴² Nevin opposed a schism because of his ecclesiology and sought to heal the divide without separation. LittleJohn, 15.

⁴³ Linden J. Debie, in his edited work on the *Mystical Presence* reminds the reader that originally the book was in response to some in his denomination, the German Reformed Church, who accused Nevin at one of their General Synods of teaching real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. So then, in addition to the reaction to revivalism, Nevin was also trying to vindicate himself and other professors of Mersersberg.

in which we actively and intellectually engage with Christ in memoriam.⁴⁴ Hodge held a dualistic worldview in which the spiritual and physical worlds were separate. Therefore, he had difficulty bringing together things like the seen and the unseen. Littlejohn brings this to the fore when addressing Hodge's position on the Incarnation: "Hodge throughout resists incarnated grace, that is, the idea that grace, which as divine action is properly invisible, should ever truly operate through visible means."⁴⁵ Hodge flattened Calvin's theology of the Eucharist into an intellectual exercise in order to avoid the complexities of the Spirit's work in the visible and tangible world.

Nevin refused such flattening of Calvin's theology of the Eucharist. Nevin understood that the Eucharist contained the very life of the Church. In the meal, we have communion with the living Christ. Therefore, we cannot reduce the meal to something that is just about our intellect. It is not a mental exercise but a work of the Holy Spirit. In *The Mystical Presence* he says,

Christianity is not a Doctrine to be taught or learned like a system of philosophy or rule of moral conduct. Rationalism is always prone to look

⁴⁴It is here that we see Hodge have a read on Calvin that is influenced by Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli was a reformer that famously debated Martin Luther on many issues, including the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli maintained a symbolic view of the Supper believing that the Holy Spirit did not need physical means in order to act in the world. In his review, Hodge challenged Nevin's position by attempting to assert that the theology of Calvin was far more Zwinglian (symbolic) in that the presence was a presence that believers understand intellectually.

There is, therefore, a presence of Christ's body in the Lord's Supper; not local, but spiritual; not for the senses but for the mind and to faith; not of nearness but of efficacy. This presence (as Zwingli said, "if they want words,") the Reformed were willing to call real; if by real was understood not essential or corporal, but true and efficacious, as opposed to imaginary or ineffective. So far as this point is concerned there is no doubt as to the doctrine of the Reformed church." (John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge, *Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology* (Mercersburg Theology Study Series) (publication place: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2013), 29.)

By Hodge's understanding, the Reformed position is very clear and careful not to assert a local presence or a corporal presence, which he was right to do according to tradition. Hodge was also going to great lengths to show the intellectual and rational assent needed on the part of the believer.

⁴⁵ Littlejohn, 57.

upon the gospel in this way...In opposition to all this, we say of Christianity that it is a LIFE. Not a rule or mode of life simply; not something that in its own nature requires to be reduced to practice; for that is the character of all morality. But life in its very nature and constitution and as such the actual substance of truth itself.⁴⁶

Christianity is not a rule, doctrine or philosophy. Christianity—life in Christ is life and truth itself. When we eat of the meal, we are not engaging in an intellectual exercise but entering a timeless drama. We are engaging with Christ and the community at the deepest of levels—becoming who we truly are in Christ.

The disagreement between Hodge and Nevin was about how we remember and what we remember. For Nevin, the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit led the Church into its very life in the world. For Hodge, this meal was a memorial. Hart says in his biography of Nevin, “Simply put, Hodge’s scheme denied not only the mystical presence but the sacrament’s mystery. As merely a memorial or symbol, the Supper became wholly dependent on the believer’s mind.”⁴⁷ When we take away the mystery and flatten the meaning, what we are left with is a theology of the Lord’s Supper that is focused solely on a symbolic recollection of the death of Jesus that depends on our intellectual capabilities. And, since the voice of Charles Hodge was much louder than that of John Williamson Nevin during this time, that view of the Eucharist became predominant.

Summary

The American diet has allowed many to see the food we eat as product to be consumed instead of part of the creation in which we dwell and which God created,

⁴⁶ Nevin, 186-187.

⁴⁷ Hart, 135

sustains and redeems. Food has become utilitarian and has been sacrificed on the alters of our idols of fast, easy and cheap. This view point also allows us to compartmentalize its role in our lives, taking it out of the realms of the spiritual, communal or moral. Instead, it becomes a prop in our existence or fuel for a soulless machine.

On the other side of the disconnect, we have seen American Reformed churches influenced heavily by a climate of individualism and newfound freedom of religion that placed the individual conversion experience over against the life of the Church and sanctification. We have also seen an emphasis on an intellectual ascent in the supper from the most prominent voice of Reformed thinking at the time—a position that drowned out the lesser-known voice speaking to a more robust theology of the supper that was more than memorialism.

But there is good news! It hasn't always been this way. In the historic life of the church, the tables we gather around mean a great deal and say a great deal about us. And one church's example about how it could go wrong also offers us a corrective for getting it right and beginning our road to reconnect our food and our theology.

Chapter 3: Isn't this Bread and Isn't this Cup

While the last chapter may have painted quite a bleak picture of food and a rather difficult to digest view of one stream of Reformed thought, it is important to note that these thoughts and attitudes toward food and its disconnect with theology due to a thin theology of the Eucharist, are not native to historic Christianity. Through the course of Christian history there is a full, robust theology of food, that is inextricably linked to the Eucharist. This theology goes all the way back to a theology of creation that informed how people should eat. We see the importance of table fellowship for the Apostle Paul in his letter of I Corinthians. In that letter, Paul addresses with clarity and with power the intersection between food and theology culminating with a reminder of the story which they are all tied to around the Table of the Lord.

In this chapter, I will walk through Paul's discussion of food sacrificed to idols and then his re-narration of the Lord's Supper while addressing the abuses of this meal they shared (or didn't share). After this exegesis, I will summarize the themes found in the Scriptures to demonstrate that, for Paul, there is an ethic in Christianity that has much to say about what we eat and who we eat with. Finally, I will show how this ethic is tied to the Table of the Lord, connecting food and Paul's theology and that modern American churches may have more in common with the Corinthian church than we may care to admit and are also in need of Paul's correction.

Background of Corinth

The city of Corinth, the location of the believers to whom Paul is writing, was a re-established city only a few generations old. In 146 BCE the city of Corinth was

conquered by Rome and its inhabitants were killed. Later it was re-founded by freedmen (former slaves) seeking upward mobility and financial opportunity in a new land. This financial opportunity was provided by the geography of Corinth which allowed it to control a land-based trade route. Corinth was located about 40 miles from the city of Athens and was well situated between two gulfs on the Mediterranean Sea. Because of its location as a connecting city and a trade route that allowed sailors and merchants to avoid a treacherous portion of the Mediterranean Sea, Corinth was an economically prosperous and culturally diverse city. This cosmopolitan hub of the ancient world was known for its artisans of bronze and earthenware.⁴⁸ Corinth attracted many religions, as well as philosophers and sophists who were like itinerant speakers traveling from place to place sharing their worldview. The appeal of financial opportunity and the unique status as a colony of Rome also afforded Rome the opportunity to rid itself of a large population of freedmen.⁴⁹ The desire of Corinth's new citizens to seek financial wellbeing and independence, collided with the cross-pollination of culture and cultic religion, hence Corinth also quickly gained a reputation for being a city where "vice and religion flourished side by side."⁵⁰ While scholars such as Gordon Fee have stated that this has been blown out of proportion, that is not to whitewash the city from the reality that anything was available in Corinth, including men and women for sexual gratification.

⁴⁸J. Paul Samplly. *I Corinthians*. The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles and Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books (Nashville: Abingdon Press, ©1994-2004), 773

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, revised ed., The New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 2.

⁵⁰ Fee, 2.

The apostle Paul showed up to this city around the early 50s CE and began his relationship with the Corinthian people.⁵¹ The church in Corinth was at most a few dozen followers of Jesus who would gather in homes in the city. Homes at the time could house 30-50 people for a common meal, so it would be normal to expect this number for worship.

At this point it is important to remember that, as Richard Hays reminds us, we are reading other people's mail centuries after it is written.⁵² After Paul leaves the people of Corinth, he writes them a letter. He references this letter when he admonishes the Corinthian church for ignoring his advice (5:9). After the first letter, the people of Corinth had responded with their own letter in addition to outside reports from people associated with the community.⁵³ After this letter and the reports Paul has received, he writes them back as the letter we now identify as I Corinthians. Imagine joining a conversation midway through and trying to find your way through the ebbs and flows of body language and expressions of the people involved. It would be quite a task and we are not even given the benefit of seeing or hearing the conversation. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand what Paul is responding to and why he is writing the letter in a general sense before we dive into our discussion of food sacrificed to idols and the Eucharist.

⁵¹ Fee, 7.

⁵² Richard Hays I Corinthians. *Interpretation, Complete Series Set* (Westminster John Knox Pr: W, 2012), 1.

⁵³ Hays, 5.

The Corinthian church is divided. The makeup of the community ranged in socio-economic status with most people being very poor only a few wealthy persons.⁵⁴ They were mostly Gentile (non-Jewish) followers of Jesus, and the division of the people reflected the city in which they lived. The ancient city saw the rich responsible for settling legal disputes, and the ones in charge of various civic responsibilities and so the church began to organize itself accordingly.⁵⁵ This precipitated strife in the community of the faithful as the church took the look of the pagan city around it and the social struggles therein. The divisions among the people ranged from what to do with a case of sexual immorality in their midst and how that was being discussed (chapters 5-6), a disagreement about how sexuality should be expressed in marriage and how to understand celibacy (chapter 7), and if they could eat meat sacrificed to idols, attend idol feasts (8-10), how should their worship look (chapters 11-14), and will there be a resurrection of the dead (chapter 15)? Paul begins this massive theological and pastoral undertaking by acknowledging these divisions (1:10-2:16) and reminding them who they are in Christ by offering metaphors of "servants," "field," and "building." The last image he revisits later in the chapter, reminding them that they are not just any building but they are being built into a Temple and that God's Spirit lives in them (3:16). Finally, he reminds them that they all belong to Christ (3:23) and so should not have these divisions.

These divisions were also exacerbated by two additional benefits of Christ that the Corinthians had trouble filtering through their cultural context. These benefits were

⁵⁴Samplly, 777.

⁵⁵ Samplly, 777.

knowledge and freedom. The Corinthian believers held fiercely to the freedom they had in Christ and the knowledge of Christ which they had received. For these former slaves of the empire, who had been granted freedom to seek financial opportunity in this new colony, the freedom of Christ was something they received with vigor and now wanted to hang on to at all costs. The benefit of the knowledge they held in Christ was also of importance to the Corinthian believers who were surrounded by the sophists and philosophers who used knowledge as a status symbol. Samply suggests even more by saying, "Some at Corinth have used this difference to demarcate between the status of themselves and that of other believers in Christ, a stance Paul totally rejects."⁵⁶ This is why Paul opens his letter declaring that their message is not one of knowledge but one of foolishness (1:21). Paul is not declaring that God wants his children to be fools but rather he is contrasting the "wisdom" of the philosophers and sophists, who were roaming the streets of Corinth, with the wisdom of God, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom," (1:25). To proclaim Christ crucified is foolishness to these philosophers. And this isn't a secret knowledge but a reminder that we are united in Christ who is the source of our wisdom, and our "righteousness and sanctification and redemption," (1:30). Moreover, this knowledge isn't what will save the Corinthians. Samply again contrasts this thinking with that of the philosophers, "stoics understood that knowledge leads to virtue, that knowledge leads to proper behavior, and that knowledge defines and enhances freedom."⁵⁷ Paul wants to make clear that it is not the knowledge of the crucified Lord

⁵⁶ Samply, 896.

⁵⁷ Samply, 896.

who saves, but the crucified Lord *himself* who saves. These themes are centered in Paul's discussion on food sacrificed to idols, as the Corinthians used knowledge and freedom as an excuse to go to idol feasts at the temples. And it is to the divisions on the topic of food offered to idols where we now turn.

Exegesis of I Corinthians 8-10, 11:17-34

Since this is a large portion of the letter to the Corinthians it is important to see a breakdown of the chapters before we move any further. Richard Hays lays out the issue of food sacrificed to idols best when he marks it out with four sections. He calls them movements:

1. First Movement: Knowledge puffs up; love builds up (8:1-13)
2. Second Movement: The apostolic example of renouncing rights (9:1-27)
3. Third Movement: Warning against idolatry (10:1-22)
4. Conclusion: Use your freedom for the glory of God (10:23-11:1)⁵⁸

First Movement (8:1-13)

The first movement begins in verse one of chapter eight. Paul quotes a saying from the Corinthian church which says, "We all possess knowledge." There are some in the Corinthian community who believe that because they know that the idols don't mean anything (v.4) and are not real, that they do not have to worry about being corrupted, because they know better. However, Paul shows them how misguided they are in their aim. They have confused what is important. It is not knowledge that builds up a community of faith rooted in the risen Jesus, but love (v.1). As Fee points out, Paul takes two words that do not seem opposites, and "sets them forth in bold relief."⁵⁹ In other

⁵⁸ Hays, 135.

⁵⁹ Fee, 402.

words, some of the Corinthians are thinking more about themselves, in Paul's opinion, than of others. This will be a theme in Paul's dialogue here. In verse three then, Paul takes the idea of knowledge (*gnosis*) and turns it back on the Corinthians to show that it is love which unites us to God. And those who love God are known (*gnosis*) by God. Right from the start, Paul wants to put knowledge in its right place. The knowledge that we have in Christ isn't like that of the philosophers and sophists: it is a knowledge of Christ crucified. We are saved by grace and the improper understanding of knowledge not only hinders our relationship with neighbor but can also cloud our understanding of grace. As Hays says, "Those in the know could feel superior to others who lacked their privileged perspective. In fact, they could imagine themselves as being saved through their own intellectual and spiritual capacities, rather than by God's grace alone."⁶⁰

Moving on from this, Paul returns to the issue of food sacrificed to idols. Paul warns them not to be so dismissive of other gods and lords that may exist on the earth (v. 5) yet affirms their groundedness in the one God and author of all and in his son Jesus, the Christ, the author of all (v.6).

The problem for Paul is that the affirmation in verse one is based in knowledge, and not every believer is in the same place of faith. As Samply says, "Paul knows that there are believers at Corinth who still have it in their moral consciousness that idols do have some power and that to eat the meat is somehow to continue to show reverence for the deities they all used to recognize."⁶¹ Therefore, Paul wants to make clear that while it

⁶⁰ Hays, 138.

⁶¹ Samply, 899.

isn't the food itself that brings us to God (8:8), this freedom to eat whatever God provides must not become something that confuses or leads others into sin. For Paul, the thought of a "weaker" brother or sister seeing a fellow follower of Jesus going to the temple to eat with the idols, and they themselves also going because of this example—despite their incorrect belief that the idol still has power—is unthinkable. Paul's question was not one of knowledge but one of love for their fellow brothers and sisters. So then, he places an expectation of love on the "knowledgeable."

So the "weak one" is not to be considered inadequate or inferior. That person is merely at one stage or point on the growth continuum, which runs from more limited moral consciousness to a fuller moral consciousness. As the Corinthian babies in faith (3:1) are expected to grow up and mature, so believers are to care for, nurture, and build one another up in love.⁶²

To make his point even stronger, Paul places the problem in the cosmic context of the church. It isn't just a brother or sister that is sinned against when they violate this conscience of their fellow believers. No, when the "knowledgeable" sin against the weak, they also sin against Christ. "Thus I Corinthians 8 must be read as a compelling invitation to the strong Corinthians to come over and join Paul at the table with the weak."⁶³ Paul takes this idea of "knowledge" and "freedom" and turns the tables on the Corinthians. He gives them an example of his own life to say, "if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one to fall," (8:13). Paul has the knowledge about idols and knows that food isn't what will bring him close to God, and yet he takes the "freedom" he has and chooses to do what is loving towards the other believers, not acting

⁶² Samplly, 900.

⁶³ Hays, 142.

on his own personal freedom to eat whatever he pleases. This issue of idol meat is not just about idol meat to Paul, it is an issue of how followers of Jesus live in community.

Second Movement (9:1-27)

In Chapter 9 Paul shifts suddenly and drastically to a defense of himself and his role as an Apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul is using himself, as he often does, as an example of the right role of freedom in Christ. This example is based on his right and his refusal to receive money from the Corinthian church in order to fulfill his role as an Apostle.⁶⁴ Paul offers examples in verses 3-12 of soldiers and other apostles and finally, cites the law in verse 8-9. This is perhaps Paul's most foundational image. In it, he cites Deuteronomy 25:4 which reads, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Paul reasons in all of these examples that he has every right to be compensated for his work just as an ox has a right to chew grain while it helps in the harvest. He then expands this image of the harvest to also apply to all those who are involved in the harvest. In verse 10 Paul cites that God's care is also for those who plow and for those who thresh that they might have a, "hope in a share of the crop, (9:10)." This use of grain imagery is meaningful since Paul will revisit that the community in Christ is one body and eats of one loaf. Perhaps Paul is acutely aware that, in the Spirit, the work of the faithful creates the loaf that brings the community into their fullness as the body of Christ. After Paul finishes this example, he adds one more example also referring to food. He reminds them that the priests who serve in the temple are given the right to eat the meat sacrificed so that their needs may be met and their work compensated. The fact that these fourteen

⁶⁴ Hays, 148.

verses contain so many references to food is not an accident. Paul is in the middle of a discussion about rights and how he has the right to be compensated for his work. And yet, he is also in the middle of making a larger point about food sacrificed to idols and whether or not the Corinthians had the right to eat of that meat. Paul is taking the opportunity to drive home that even though one may have the right, that doesn't mean that they should take part in eating whatever they want because there are others they should be concerned with, namely other brothers and sisters in Christ.

On this issue of renunciation of rights Paul spends the second half of the chapter. As Samplly says, "He has rights beyond the scope of anyone in the Corinthian community...yet, he pointedly reminds them that he has not used those rights."⁶⁵ Paul is keen to remind the Corinthian church that the purpose in the gospel proclamation is to make the gospel free of charge, not to make sure he gains his "commission" from it (9:17). To illustrate this, Paul gives them a startling statement. Samplly writes,

Paul's claim in 9:19—"I, being free from all people, have made myself a slave to all"—must have been shocking to his contemporaries' ears: Paul, the freest of persons, is bound by the gospel, after all (9:16), and in it and for it he chooses to live the life of service to all so that he "might win the more" (9:19)—that is, so that he could carry out the call with which he is entrusted (9:17).⁶⁶

Finally Paul compares the life of faith to a race or a boxing match that requires training and discipline so that they may not run aimlessly or box the air. Rather, they train their bodies so that they may run the race well and that they not be disqualified. This would be a very visceral image for Paul's readers since Corinth was home to the Isthmian

⁶⁵ Samplly, 905.

⁶⁶ Samplly, 906.

(think Olympics) games. These athletic contests would inspire the Corinthian readers to think of the athletes as they train to win the crown due them. What we are reminded of is that the crown worn by the victors of the Isthmian games were crowns of "withered celery." Richard Hays draws the obvious conclusion for us, "Paul is saying, 'If these athletes push themselves to the limit in training to win that pathetic crown of withered vegetables, how much more should we maintain self-discipline for the sake of an imperishable crown?'"⁶⁷

Given these last few verses of the chapter, it can be tempting to think that Paul is now taking the freedom they have and individualizing it, but Richard Hays again cautions us against that danger reminding us, "the self-control to which Paul is calling the "strong" is precisely the discipline of giving up their privileges for the sake of others in the community."⁶⁸

Paul uses this chapter to offer himself as an example. Just as anyone who does work should be compensated, so Paul has that right. However, Paul foregoes that right so that the gospel may be free of charge. In the same way, though the Corinthians Christians may be free from the Jewish law or cultural custom that forbids or demands eating of certain kinds of food, they are to give up that right so that other brothers and sisters in Christ may be benefitted.

Third Movement (10:1-22)

⁶⁷ Hays, 156.

⁶⁸ Hays, 156.

After spending chapters 8 and 9 unpacking the two principal reasons for the division around the Table (knowledge and freedom), chapter 10 moves from Paul's example of himself and his digression about rights to warnings in Israel's history about idolatry. In giving these warnings, Paul wants to make clear to God's people that they, "being chosen by God, being baptized, eating special food and drink—are accountable for their behavior."⁶⁹ Paul uses the phrase "our ancestors" to remind the Corinthians that even though they may be gentiles, they are now engrafted into God's people through Christ. Just as the people of God who were in the desert passed through the waters of the Red Sea and ate manna, so now God's people are given sacraments. However, Paul wants the Corinthians to be aware that the sacraments do not have efficacy in themselves but, rather, have efficacy in the Spirit. That is why he says that, "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness," (10:5). Here is the important reminder for the follower of Jesus: the water of baptism doesn't save us because it is water, and likewise the bread and wine don't save us because they are food and drink. They are *signs* and *seals* of our salvation because they find their reality in the power of the Spirit. And, just as Israel could be found in sin despite ingesting manna, so the Lord's Table won't prevent them from sin just because they eat from it. This typology of Israel further makes Paul's point: they must avoid these meals, not only so that their divisions may be healed but also so that they do not put Christ to the test.⁷⁰ The story of

⁶⁹ Samplly, 914.

⁷⁰ Hays, 159.

the golden calf was carefully chosen by Paul in verse 7 so that this very point could be elucidated. Fee writes of this example:

Instead he (Paul) chose that portion of the golden calf, thus, along with an earlier and later passage (8:10/10:14-22), specifically identifying the idolatry as a matter of cultic meals in the idol's presence.⁷¹

By choosing this point in the golden calf story, Paul is able to highlight the issue he wants the Corinthians to hear later, which is—our tables define us. And, the examples of the Israelites, who are our ancestors, serve as models for us.

The next two verses are Paul's encouragement. After all, they are in Christ and, just as he used the metaphor of an athlete in the previous chapter, so here Paul encourages them to pass the test because God is faithful (10:13). Furthermore, God will not test them past what they are able to endure. He rounds out this discussion on idolatry by simply stating in the imperative that they are to, "Flee from the worship of Idols, (10:14)."

It is here then that Paul's argument reaches its crescendo. What has come before thus far in his discourse sets up his ability to say what is next, and which is of highest concern—that the tables we gather around are deeply formational, so we must choose carefully which ones we gather around. Paul does this by comparing three meals the Corinthians would understand—the Lord's Supper (10:16), the feasts of Israel (10:18), and the feasts of the idols at the temples (10:20).

Paul is asking the Corinthians rhetorically if the cup they bless isn't a sharing in the blood of Christ and the bread which they break a sharing in the body of Christ? Both carry the assumed answer of "yes" for Paul. The order of the elements in this section may

⁷¹ Fee, 502.

be confusing since Paul references the cup first and then the bread, but Hays and others point out that Paul isn't being liturgical here or giving some liturgical precedent (he will use bread-cup order in chapter 11). Rather, he uses this order to make a further point about the unity of the body by sharing in one loaf (10:17).⁷² The word "sharing" in the NRSV in verse 16 (or "participation" in the NIV) is the Greek word *koinōnia*. This word is where we get the idea of communion and community. In this verse Paul makes the implicit explicit by reminding them that when they break bread and drink the cup of the Lord they are creating community at all levels. Kenneth Bailey says it this way, "communion in the body of Christ" unites us both to Christ and to the church that is his body. Paul wants to ensure that his readers catch this double meaning."⁷³

The community that is created is of great consequence for Paul, "For Paul, participation in the Lord's Supper...is the fundamental, even defining, community action of believers. Like no other activity, this fellowship epitomizes believers' relation to Christ and to one another in pristine clarity."⁷⁴ What is being created in this meal is a covenant community. Just as Israel was drawn into covenant with God and used its feasts and festivals as markers and formative events of covenant, so now followers of Jesus are being formed in the new covenant in his blood, into a community—the body of Christ.

The development and formation of this community also carries with it an assumption that just as this Table is defining, so can other tables be defining. Paul draws

⁷² Hays, 167.

⁷³ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 277.

⁷⁴ Samly, 918.

in the feasts of Israel and the temple feasts and declares that the same formative power that is present in the Lord's Supper is present in the meals of Israel and of the pagans. He even goes so far as to say that they can be "partners with demons" by joining in the temple feasts (10:20). Hays gets it right when he says,

Each meal creates a relation of *koinōnia* ("fellowship") among the participants and between the participants and the deity honored in the meal. Paul takes this as a commonplace interpretation of such cultic meals. Once the point is granted, his argument is nearly irrefutable: the God who demands exclusive allegiance will not tolerate cultic eating that establishes a bond with any other gods or powers.⁷⁵

Paul does not take the formative power of communal eating for granted. It is both in his tradition as a Jew and in the cultural context of the idol feasts in Corinth. The meals that the Corinthians were gathering around were shaping them into a community and not always for the best (which is why the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a problem). Paul is unwavering in his desire for them to understand this point. When they are disciples of Christ, having *koinōnia* through the Lord's Supper, they cannot participate in a meal that will lead them to be in *koinōnia* with any other cult or deity. Bailey, in his work, calls this an "impossibility."⁷⁶ The Corinthians are reminded, then, to not provoke God to jealousy (10:22). The assumed connection goes back to the typology of Israel earlier in the chapter and strengthened by the common connective power that meals have. Our God is a jealous God. Therefore, be exclusive to him when you eat.

Fourth Movement (10:23-11:1)

⁷⁵ Hays, 167.

⁷⁶ Paul shows the impossibility of being both "in communion with the Lord" in the Eucharist and joining "in communion with demons" through idol worship. Bailey, 277.

Paul finishes the chapter and the long section on the topic of food sacrificed to idols by giving the Corinthians a bit of practical advice. He starts by again quoting a saying that is common in the Corinthian community, "all things are lawful." Paul uses this saying to set the stage for his conclusion that all food is from God and so they are free to eat whatever they like. However, because all food is from God ("the earth is the Lords' and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1)), whatever the Corinthians eat is to be eaten to his glory (10:31). So then, if their eating affects a brother or sister in their faith, they are not eating to God's glory (10:28), and if they are not eating with thankfulness they are not eating to God's glory (10:30). Therefore, whatever rights they have as free in Christ to eat anything—that freedom cannot place themselves, as members of a covenant community, above another.

Abuses in the Supper (11:17-34)

In chapter 11 Paul shifts his conversation from idol feast to practices in worship. There is an interlude where he addresses gender roles in worship but then comes back to another way in which the Corinthian church was abusing the Lord's Supper. In Paul's explanation, the abuse has the same marks of failure and abuse that permeate the rest of the community especially that of division due to perceived status. That is why he makes a sarcastic remark about how he can barely believe that there would be divisions around the table (11:18).

To get a sense for how this failure took place and why Paul is so blunt in his language that some are going hungry while others are getting drunk (11:21), some initial understanding of the Corinthian culture and how the upper classes ate is important. When

Paul mentions that they are coming together to eat the Lord's Supper, he doesn't mean a liturgical celebration consisting of bread and wine only. Paul, like many in the early church celebrated the supper as part of a much larger communal meal that is sometimes called "the agape" or love feast.⁷⁷ In the Corinthian church, this took on a particularly gentile feel as some of the more well-to-do members of the community would often be involved in Greek celebrations called a *convivia*.⁷⁸ This meal would take place in a private home as there weren't church buildings to go to, usually the home of a more well-to-do member of the community. The homes of some of these more wealthy people we know had certain architectural features--two being very important for our discussion. The dining room was small, holding "only 9 persons," and large atriums that could hold, "another thirty to forty people."⁷⁹ The setup of the house, along with the regular practice of having one's closest friends or high class members of the community sit in the dining room where the food was (those in the atrium given what was left or a lower quality/quantity of portions), led to tensions and divisions in the supper about which Paul saw as incongruous with what it meant to gather at the Table of the Lord. And for Paul this is much more than a simple cultural hierarchy. Fee explains, "in this case it is far more than dishonor or disrespect; they are degrading, humiliating the 'have nots.'"⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Hays, 193.

⁷⁸ Ben Witherington, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, ©2007), 35.

⁷⁹ Hays, 196.

⁸⁰ Fee, 603.

The Lord's Supper for Paul is the central defining act for the believing community, and so these divisions and cultural mores of the Corinthians are not just abuses, they are blatant misunderstandings of what the supper actually is.

Paul exposes the fact that they have broken up into the satisfied rich and the hungry poor, with no awareness of what it means to be "the church of God." The very sacrament that was intended to help create and sustain their oneness had become one more drinking party where some were stuffed and drunk, and others were hungry...and humiliated.⁸¹

Paul sees the abuse and calls it what it is—a failure. They have taken the supper and have so distorted what it was to be through their desire for knowledge and their belief in their own personal freedom, and have made the Lord's supper just another *convivia*. Samply says, "the abusers have privatized their faith and their worship in a way that Paul finds totally unacceptable; they have lost any sense that love as the right relation to others is the proper and necessary expression of their faith as the right relation to God."⁸²

The planter of this fledgling church is not content to let them sit in their abuse and misunderstanding. Paul's corrective for the Corinthian community is his re-narration of the story of the meal Jesus gives us. Paul begins by telling the Corinthians that this is the story that the Lord handed on to him, which means that Jesus is the originator of the meal and plays host at the meal (11:23). He then walks through the story first with the bread, reminding us that Jesus offered the words, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me," (11:24). Paul uses the same four-fold movement that is present in the gospel accounts of the last supper of took, blessed, broke (poured), gave. Paul echoes

⁸¹ Bailey, 318.

⁸² Samply, 934.

with the cup, calling to our attention again the words of Jesus who said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me," (11:25). This re-narration, or liturgical reenactment, is how we get the story right again. Further, it hangs on the key word of "remembrance." The word remembrance in the Greek is *anamnesis*, and the word along with the context suggests that what Paul is asking the people to do is to remember Jesus and his death—but not in just a sense of recalling. The re-narration that Paul gives is designed to help the Corinthians enter the story again. Samply says it this way,

Like the exodus... "The old story becomes the teller's story; liturgy unites the old story with the current worshipper's story. What happened back then is retold to incorporate the new tellers and hearers as a part of the narrative, as participants in the old and ongoing story. So it is with Paul's understanding of the Lord's supper. When Corinthians tell the story, it becomes their story; they "remember" the story in a way that ties their own lives into it in a transforming and illuminating way."⁸³

And this story is all encompassing, It has the power to unite and bring together all people and creation including the divided Corinthians. Samply again says,

Paul thinks that the supper, by what it remembers and proclaims, scans the whole story of redemption in scope and setting of the life they are called to live together. Every time believers take part in the supper, they rehearse God's story, who they are and where they are in God's story. If they live it as they should, their very lives will become a fitting proclamation of the gospel to the world.⁸⁴

To remember is to enter the story and so Paul reminds them of the formative power of the supper he spoke about in chapter 10 and reminds them again to gather around the Table of the Lord, not as they were getting together at the temple feasts or to eat a snack

⁸³ Samply, 935.

⁸⁴ Samply, 935.

on the street, but to gather as the body here on earth. For the life of the church will flow from the table into the world.

Finally, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are to discern the body (11:29). This discerning of the body is sandwiched between chapter 10, where Paul makes mentions the body of Christ that all believers partake in at the supper (10:16), and chapter 12 where Paul uses the body as a metaphor for the community (12:27). Hays reinforces this when he says, "The problem is not desecration of the sacred elements but rather offense against Christ himself."⁸⁵ For Paul, discerning the body doesn't mean that we think as hard as we can about the death of Jesus on the cross. Rather, Paul speaks of discerning the body as a way to speak about the community present and if they have been celebrating the Lord's Supper in unity—making sure everyone has been treated equitably. This kind of behavior is a non-negotiable for Paul as he even places their failures at the Table as a reason some of them are sick (11:30). So then his last word on the matter is to wait for one another (11:33) and for the upper class members to eat something before they come so they will have enough food to go around (11:34).

Conclusion: The Tables that Form Us

The Corinthian problem is our problem. The American church in the 21st century may not have the idols of the sophists, the philosophers, or the temples. We might not bow to Zeus or Apollo for our food, but we certainly have different idols. We have idols of fast, easy, and cheap. We have asked our planet to produce at an unsustainable rate and we have asked the poorest among us to work in jobs that process the food and harvest the

⁸⁵ Hays, 201.

crops. We have asked our bodies to digest a diet that makes us sick and overweight while the majority world still has trouble accessing the food and water they need to live and thrive in this world. We may not have the same cultural idols as the Corinthians but we certainly have many of the same problems. And these problems are eerily familiar to those of Paul's audience. We have placed our own freedom to eat what we want ahead of our brothers and sisters. We have put our knowledge of production over a conviction that the world and everything in it belongs to our God. Our similarities to the Corinthians may be more than we like to acknowledge.

Of course, Paul wasn't presented with the challenges of the church today concerning food. The American church in the 21st century is part of a globalized world that has seen many technological advances and a lot of progress in our agricultural and food preparation techniques. Thanks be to God for them! Many more are able to eat and have access to food because of these advances, and yet they also pose many new challenges as have been outlined in the last chapter. The food most of us eat in America does not live among us, as it did for the Corinthians. Rather, the food we eat travels on average 1,518 miles to get to us.⁸⁶ We demand access to all foods at all seasons in all quantities. Where Paul and the Corinthians had to rely on what was there and in season, we now put great strains on the world to produce consistently for our needs for things that only used to be luxuries or were altogether inaccessible. We butcher animals in ways that are cruel and barbaric in comparison with the ancient world. Where meat spoke to the socioeconomic difference in the Corinthian church, meat is now available to all, and we

⁸⁶Singer and Mason, 135.

consume it in quantities that necessitate that we butcher more and more animals and that they be larger and larger so we can eat more yet. Therefore we pump them full of hormones and antibiotics to keep them from getting diseases from working to digest a diet that God didn't intend for them to eat. Such things would have been unknown to Paul and the Corinthians.

Engaging with Paul in this way can leave us open to the same criticism Paul was leveling at the Corinthians. If we have the knowledge to connect our food and theology through a certain lens, aren't we just puffing ourselves up? No, for I am not suggesting we engage in culinary elitism. No one wants to be scolded by the uppity vegan or the overzealous carnivore. However, just like Paul is arguing in his letter to the Corinthian church, the knowledge available to us about the food we eat should produce in us a love and concern for God's creation and for our fellow humanity, not puff us up so that we demand that others conform to our worldview. Our invitation is the same as Paul offered the Corinthians. You are welcome to eat anything, just do it to the glory of God and do it to the benefit of your fellow humanity.

The model for Paul—all food belongs to God so eat to God's glory with first concern for your sisters and brothers—is then firmly fixed to his theology of the Lord's Supper. And his re-narration is an incredibly powerful corrective for us.

The tables we gather around form and shape us. The story we are invited to enter at the Table of the Lord is the only story that can save us. The story that gathers us around the Table, around the word and sacramental life of the church, is the story that also unites us to Christ and to our brothers and sisters. If we are to eat and drink in remembrance of

Christ, then we are to participate in the life-giving, reconciling reality that he offers. So then, in our faith communities, we should not be divided, we should not be like our culture, and we should take care to examine ourselves as we come before our savior to make sure we are inviting and welcoming all to the Table—that they may eat and drink and be satisfied.

The re-narration is also the beginning of the re-connection that we have been looking for thus far. Paul says food itself will not draw us close to God and he asserts that we are not subject to the law that gives us a dietary restriction. Yet, Paul also rightly asserts that the meals we engage in are formational and shape us. Therefore, we cannot find ourselves at the table of consumerism, convenience, or commercialism and of Christ; just like the Corinthians can't eat at the table of the sophists and of Christ. Finally, Paul asserts that when we gather at the Table of the Lord Jesus we are not simply engaging in an exercise of recollection. We are engaging the story of God who is reconciling all things in Christ. The practice of gathering at the Table of our Lord then unites us to our Lord and to one another. We sit at our place and take our seat not just at any table, but at the Table at which the story of the world being made right is told and entered into. We are drawn into union with Christ not based on knowledge or freedom but we are drawn into union with Christ by love and grace. This is the good news that will be developed by John Calvin and other Reformed voices that will continue to give us the method by which we can reconnect the food that we eat with our theology.

Chapter 4: Union with Christ: Daily Table Fellowship as Prelude and Echo to Eucharistic Table Fellowship

When faced with the abuse of the Corinthian church surrounding the Lord's Supper, the Apostle Paul offered a corrective: the story. Paul offered a different narrative to the people of Corinth than that of their *convivia* or their temple feasts. He offered them the story of God in Christ—given for the world that the world may have life. The church is called to participate in this meal as a mark of its identity and a means of grace—in which we are united to Christ our Lord—to do his will. What Paul offered the Corinthians, and what he offers us in this liturgical move of Chapter 11, is a way to connect food and theology. Paul assumed that the tables we gather around form and shape us, and so we should shape ourselves after the story of God in the Lord's Supper. Paul reminds us that we are united to Christ, and every aspect of our lives should flow from this truth.

In this chapter, I will show how Paul's theology of union with Christ is paramount for John Calvin. Calvin's development of this theology through the understanding of ascent was helpful for the church in making the connection between God's space and our space—between heaven and earth. Then I will conclude by showing how Calvin's theology of the Eucharist was a formative meal which flowed into the rest of our life. Finally, I will turn to a more recent Reformed voice in Jean-Jacques von Allmen to ask some questions about what it means to eat Eucharistically—to connect our food and our theology.

John Calvin

Scholars and students of John Calvin are often challenged to defend Calvin's language and doctrine of predestination—often being asked to account for language that suggests God elects people to heaven and damns people to hell. For some, you would think that was all Calvin ever wrote, or talked about. But, as Brian Gerrish reminds us, the central doctrine of John Calvin was not predestination at all. And, while the doctrine of double predestination needs to be worked through if anyone wants to study Calvin, it is the Eucharist that gives us a different side of this French theologian. Gerrish says, "His understanding of the Eucharist, even if it was not his central dogma, is a better indication of Calvin's primary theme than is the double decree."⁸⁷

That "central dogma" is Union with Christ.⁸⁸ Union with Christ is at the very heart of John Calvin's theology, and for him, it is synonymous with the Gospel. Union with Christ is a theme that is seen all through the New Testament in that "newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith."⁸⁹ The goal and the benefit for the believer and for the community is to be united with their Lord. This is exactly what Paul is reminding the Corinthians as he is writing to them—communicating to them that union with Christ is what is at stake in the supper. This is true for Calvin's sacramental theology in general as well as his theology of

⁸⁷B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: the Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2002), page 2

⁸⁸ For a more in-depth understanding of union with Christ I would point the reader to J. Todd Billings' book, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic: a division of Baker Publishing Group 2011).

⁸⁹Calvin, John. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Vol 2. 1559 ed.) Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960. 3.3.1 p. 592.

the Lord's Supper in particular. Calvin begins his section on the Lord's Supper in the *Institutes* by claiming that Union with Christ is the "special fruit of the Lord's supper."⁹⁰ In this section he says, "Godly souls can gather great assurance and delight from this sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours."⁹¹ So, from the very outset, what Calvin wants the followers of Jesus to have in mind is that that in the meal we are united to God in Christ.

This Union produces in us the ability to receive the nourishment from our Father in Heaven. The grace that is imparted to us is signified in this meal in that, just as we eat of the bread and drink of the cup, Christ is the spiritual food for our souls.

Union with Christ also shows us a picture of Calvin's understanding of God. Throughout the shape and scope of his theological work, we see the predominant image of God being that of a loving and benevolent Father. Just as in baptism, God engrafts us into the body of Christ, so now Christ becomes the food for our souls.⁹² For Calvin, we should always remember and think of God as a good father who wants to feed his children.

Throughout my ministry, one of the things I have done is memorize the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This experience invites us to hear the words of Jesus again, to sit like his disciples sat and really hear them. I had professors that did it for me, and I have committed myself to doing it as well as part of my ministry. I can still remember

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.2.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.2.

⁹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

years ago the first time I was memorizing this wonderful section of our holy scripture. I had just become a father a few months prior, and I came to a section I had read countless times before this one. “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him,” (7:9-11).

I stopped.

I thought about parents willfully starving their children as they begged for nourishment. I thought about the evil it would take for parents to give their child a serpent which could kill them instead of a fish that would bring them life. I thought about my daughter. How much more will your Heavenly Father give you? What a question! This is a central text for Calvin as well. His understanding of God hinges on the reality that God is sovereign and benevolent. Our God is good. This text helps shape Calvin's understanding of the supper by reminding us that God forgets himself and gives to his children with “overflowing liberality.”⁹³

He speaks of this benevolence and abundance as well when he visits the famous text in John chapter 6 where Jesus confesses that he is the bread of life, and anyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood will live.

After having given thanks. Christ has oftener than once instructed us by his example that, whenever we take food, we ought to begin with prayer. For those things which God has appointed for our use, being evidences of his infinite goodness and fatherly love towards us, call on us to offer praise to

⁹³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 500th ed., vol.XVI, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 353.

Him; and thanksgiving, as Paul informs us, is a kind of solemn sanctification, by means of which the use of them begins to be pure to us.⁹⁴

Therefore, that we can take and eat is itself a sign of benevolence from God. His fatherly love is demonstrated to us in that we eat and are able to be sustained. In the meal that we take and share as his children, our God shows us that he loves and cares for us. Our response when we eat and when we drink is to be one of gratitude for they are gifts from God. This has a profound impact then on how we eat and drink in our own lives; Calvin understood this as well, viewing the Lord's Supper as a real meal that is to be eaten. He says:

Just as bread is given as a symbol of Christ body, we must at once grasp this comparison; as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ's body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our souls. When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.⁹⁵

The meal and its benefits—to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden—are part of what Calvin understood as a tie back to creation and new creation. The Eucharist fit into a pattern for Calvin. The line of logic that Calvin sets up in his Institutes shows us the truth of who we are and how the Eucharist tells us and confirms in us who we are.

Brian Gerrish says,

Long before he arrives at the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Calvin has made it clear that for him authentic humanity is constituted by the act of thanksgiving

⁹⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 500th ed., vol. XVII, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 380.

⁹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.3

to the Maker of heaven and earth, whose goodness has prepared a table before us: that is the truth of our being, grounded in the creation.⁹⁶

The meal then confirms the same grace that we receive in our baptism. Since God has marked us as his children, this same God now wishes to feed and nurture us. And, it is in this feeding that we are reminded of our authentic humanity. Not only does our Heavenly Father feed us, but, as Gerrish highlights, our very identity is being wrapped up in Christ in that feeding. This line of thinking also ties back into any meal that is eaten. For Calvin declares that we are to think about Christ's benefits and the realities at the supper as we consider wine poured or bread given around the tables of our lives.

For Calvin this meal itself was nourishment. It was in this meal that our souls are fed their "real food," and we are truly sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit and, reminded of our identity as the thankful people of God for our nourishment at the hand of our Father.

The question that follows is how does this Union with Christ take place? Is it, as Hodge would argue centuries later, an intellectual ascent? That if we think hard enough about Jesus' death we will receive some benefit? Is it like the Corinthians were suggesting that they have enough knowledge of the sacrament to know what "happens" in the meal? Calvin declares, "not so!" Rather, we are taken up into God's space in the Spirit, and these gifts are bestowed on us in Christ. For as we receive these good gifts from our Heavenly Father, we recognize that we are incapable of understanding their reception or appreciating them without help.

⁹⁶ Gerrish, 50.

We receive these gifts by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives manifested in faith. The work of the Spirit produces faith in us that allows us to receive the meal from our good Father. What is at stake for Calvin is the idea of real presence of Christ in the meal. By asserting that the real body and blood of Christ is to be received by faith in order for the Supper to have its benefit, Calvin sets up the Holy Spirit as the way in which the body is communicated. And, in the Spirit we ascend to heaven. Calvin clearly demonstrates this in his commentary on I Corinthians 11 where he says,

I conclude, that Christ's body is really, (as the common expression is,)—that is, truly given to us in the Supper, to be wholesome food for our souls. I use the common form of expression, but my meaning is, that our souls are nourished by the substance of the body, that may truly be made one with him, or, what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving virtue from Christ's flesh is poured into us by the Spirit, though it is at a great distance from us, and is not mixed with us."⁹⁷

Calvin continues:

But that participation in the body of Christ, which, I affirm, is presented to us in the Supper, does not require a local presence, nor the descent of Christ, nor infinite extension, nor anything of that nature...For as to his communicating himself to us, that is effected through the secret virtue of his Holy Spirit, which can not merely bring together, but join in one, things that are separated by distance of place, and far remote. But, in order that we may be capable of this participation, we must rise heavenward. Here, therefore, faith must be our resource, when all the bodily senses have failed. When I speak of faith, I do not mean any sort of opinion, resting on human contrivances...What then? You see bread—nothing more—but you learn that it is a symbol of Christ's body. Do not doubt that the Lord accomplishes what his words intimate—that the

⁹⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 500th ed., vol. XX, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 379.

body, which thou doest not at all behold, is given to thee, as a spiritual repast.⁹⁸

So then, Calvin enters this mystery by contending that it is the Holy Spirit which gives us the faith to ascend to God's space where we are united with Christ. Calvin says this is ultimately a mystery—one that should be experienced rather than explained. Yet, when looking back on Calvin's theology we can see a theology of ascent by the work of the Spirit being the language that he places around this mystery.

In an essay in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Christopher Kaiser delineates Calvin's theology of ascent in the Eucharist. Kaiser lays out that this ascent is nothing of our own doing but is the work of Christ's Spirit that raises us up and that Calvin's theology is rooted in the historic Christian voices that have gone before. Kaiser places this discussion among the debate that Calvin was having with the Lutherans and Roman Catholics of his day in arguing a bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, since Christ has ascended to the right hand of God he is not housed in the bread and the cup but, "Like Jacob's ladder at Bethel, the eucharistic elements are gates and ladders that lead us to heaven (cf. Gen 28:17) The risen Christ illumines us and raises us up so that we are reunited with him and with God in heaven."⁹⁹ This reuniting is, as

⁹⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries* vol. XX, 380. Another place Calvin addresses this is in his Institutes 4.17.31. Here Calvin declares: "They are greatly mistaken in imagining that there is no presence of the flesh of Christ in the Supper, unless it be placed in the bread. They thus leave nothing for the secret operation of the Spirit, which unites Christ himself to us. Christ does not seem to them to be present unless he descends to us, as if we did not equally gain his presence when he raises us to himself. The only question, therefore, is as to the mode, they placing Christ in the bread, while we deem it unlawful to draw him down from heaven. Which of the two is more correct, let the reader judge. Only have done with the calumny that Christ is withdrawn from his Supper if he lurk not under the covering of bread. For seeing this mystery is heavenly, there is no necessity to bring Christ on the earth that he may be connected with us."

⁹⁹ Christopher B. Kaiser, "Climbing Jacob's ladder: John Calvin and the early church on our eucharistic ascent to heaven," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56(3) (2003); 247-267, 251.

Kaiser goes on to say, “a necessary condition for apprehending Christ in the supper.” We are taken up by and in the Spirit that we may be united to Christ. Kaiser makes the point that this would be an unnecessary conversation if the Eucharist was simply a mental exercise. But, he notes that the Eucharist is much fuller in its meaning than that. He explains that for Calvin, “Christ raises us up and feeds us with the energy of his human flesh. The important point is that the eucharistic ascent and union with Christ are placed on the same footing. Both are viewed as actual works of Christ.”¹⁰⁰ And again, reiterating that this is not an ascent by the power of the human mind, Kaiser says, “this was a real event, and not just a change in the believer’s mental attitude.”¹⁰¹

Some of this thinking can be hard for the modern reader, but it is important to note that Calvin was entering a stream of Christianity that was populated by a very different understanding, not just of food but also of the cosmos. Kaiser reminds us that, “For Calvin as for the early church, heaven was a spiritual reality, a cosmic realm distinct from the physical world. The risen Christ and the saints were there. All believers could join this heavenly company already in this life, by the power of the Spirit through the sacraments of the Christian church.”¹⁰² However, this sacramental possibility wasn’t reserved for the believer as individuals. It was for the Church. Calvin was always about the community of faith first, and the believers’ identity and call flowed from that shared reality. As Kaiser reminds us, “the ascent of the believer took place in the context of

¹⁰⁰ Kaiser, 255.

¹⁰¹ Kaiser, 256.

¹⁰² Kaiser, 265.

corporate worship. It was not strictly individual.”¹⁰³ In the context of worship, the individual is given the gate in the bread and wine to ascend to heaven by the Spirit.

What is most profound about this theology of ascent as it relates to union with Christ is that it ties heaven to earth. It brings together the “already” and the “not yet.” For Calvin, Christ was present at the Table which allowed us to be lifted up by the Spirit to be united to Christ in heaven.¹⁰⁴ For the modern reader who daily may experience a disconnect between this life and the life to come or, for the purposes of this paper, our daily bread and the spiritual food of the Eucharist, the theology of Union with Christ by the Spirit shows us how our worlds are often much more connected than we realize. And, it is by engaging in the life of the church that we are formed more and more into who God has called us to be. To say it another way, Calvin saw this meal as a deeply formational moment in the life of the church.

By the time Calvin was working and writing and expressing his own theology of the supper, many variations had found their way into the contemporary practice of the meal in his day, including some that in Calvin's opinion were gross distortions. We perhaps find one such example in Calvin's Tracts and Treatises where he responds to a practice in the Catholic Church where it was believed that only those who understood the liturgy of worship would benefit from the supper. Therefore, only an “elite” few would eat of the bread and drink of the cup while the rest of the community watched. It got to

¹⁰³ Kaiser, 266.

¹⁰⁴ Kaiser, 266.

the point where only bishops and priests then would participate.¹⁰⁵ This is similar to the problem of the Corinthians who also used the meal as an occasion to reinforce social norms, rather than reinforcing the new kingdom way of living that Jesus offered. Calvin saw this as a violation of the worst kind and, "an abuse and intolerable corruption to have masses in which none communicate, seeing that the Supper is nothing else than a sacrament in which all Christians partake together of the body and blood of Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁶ For Calvin, the Supper is a place for the whole baptized community, not just for a select or elite few to participate on behalf of the rest. It is also a meal full of benefit for the believer to be nourished and sustained, and so each should come.

There would be outrage if we heard of a family that only fed the oldest of their children at the supper table, telling the other children to wait, believing that through their oldest sibling they would also receive benefit. Rather, we would cry out that each one must eat to receive the nutrition they need and the benefit therein. Calvin argues that it is the same for the supper. Each of us must eat. In fact, Calvin believed that our faith so needed to be nourished by God because of its frailty that he argued we should partake of the supper at least once a week. In the *Institutes*, while discussing an example of the order of worship that may make up a worship service, Calvin says, "the Supper could have

¹⁰⁵ Macy, Gary. *The Banquet's Wisdom: A Short History of the Theologies of the Lord's Supper*, (Maryville: OSL Publications 1992, 2005), 241. Here Macy engages the work of Dr. Bernard Cooke who reflects that in some communities it was thought the role of the community to cheer on the elite from the sidelines.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, John. *Tracts and Treatises*, 156.

been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week.”¹⁰⁷ He goes on to say that:

It (the Supper) was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ’s Passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim his goodness; finally, by it to nourish mutual love, and discern its bond in the unity of Christ’s body. For as often as we partake of the symbol of the Lord’s body, as a token given and received, we reciprocally bind ourselves to all the duties of love in order that none of us may permit anything that can harm our brother, or overlook anything that can help him, where necessity demands and ability suffices.¹⁰⁸

Calvin’s belief of the frequency of the Supper in the life of the church was rooted in a belief that the Supper called us, by the Spirit, back to our duty and concern for humanity. He believed that the Supper produced in us a faith in action. Our faith would grow and our love for our brothers and sisters would be called to mind as we called to mind the love of God in Christ Jesus, and as we were nourished by his body. Calvin says again, “For it is a sacrament ordained not for the perfect, but for the weak and feeble, to awaken, arouse, stimulate, and exercise the feeling of faith and love, indeed, to correct the defect of both.”¹⁰⁹ This sacrament then, in Calvin’s opinion, is to be experienced often and by everyone, not just sometimes and not by just a few.

Another abuse that Calvin was very well aware of was the abuse of the Supper that was devoid of the Word. For Calvin, Word and Sacrament always belong together

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.44.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.42.

and that the sacrament, “cannot stand apart from the Word.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, Calvin was appalled that during his life the Catholic Church found itself in error because the Supper’s consecration depended on the Priests’ intention.¹¹¹ This played itself out with no words accompanying the act of the partaking of the Supper. To Calvin, this was an error because those who needed to be taught and instructed in the faith were not being taught. The continual act of formation could not be expressed in its fullness because there was no teaching about the mystery that was taking place.

These two abuses were symptoms of something that Calvin was keenly aware of and deeply concerned with: people who eat without properly remembering (we are still carrying over the theology of remembrance from Chapter three, not the idea of remembering as memorial or recollection). The Church, as Calvin saw it, was separating two things that should always be held together—word and sacrament. Furthermore, they were creating a climate of elitism that gave people the impression that the gift of the Eucharist was not for them by only having the bishops and priests partake of the meal. This climate of ignorance was troubling for Calvin for he says that those who “swallow them down without thinking of God, are guilty of sacrilege, and of profaning the gifts of God. And this instruction is the more worthy of attention, because we daily see a great part of the world feeding themselves like brute beasts.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.39.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.39.

¹¹² Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. XVII, 230.

A distinction should be made here, since as Calvin doesn't claim that the meal itself is dependent on our understanding or mental capacity to understand it. For our faith is weak, and it is for that reason that the sacrament is given to us—so that it may nourish us. Yet, even as its efficacy does not depend on us, there is still the mystery in which we receive grace and benefit. Calvin calls to mind the image of a bottle. "For as a vessel, though it be empty, cannot receive any liquor while it is closed and corked, so also must faith give an opening to make us capable of receiving the blessings which God offers us,"¹¹³ In receiving the blessings of God (union with Christ by the Spirit) it would not be to our benefit to take the meal lightly but rather receive it in a matter which is consistent with receiving this blessing. The image of the vessel reminds us that something is being filled, that God is pouring himself into us and into the community. So, like the Corinthians, we are to discern well the gift given to us, even though it is a mystery of how we receive the gift.

Calvin asserts that this deeply formational meal is given by a good father who wants to feed his children. This meal feeds us, nourishes us, and unites us to Christ by taking us up into the heavenly realms in and by the power of the Spirit. For Calvin, like for Paul in the previous chapter, this meal identifies us and tells us who we are. So then, what about all the other tables we gather around?

As we saw in Chapter one, Calvin's theology of the Table flowed out to all the other tables. His prayer for mealtime wove together a theology of joyful gratitude, providence, nourishment, and benevolence that are present in his theology of the Lord's

¹¹³ Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, 158.

Supper. The mealtime prayer also showed how Calvin connected the meal he was eating to the meal that takes place in corporate worship. This connection came from Calvin's rich picture of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that he paints in his theological work. A picture that helps us enter the story of God in Christ. And, in that sacrament we are taken up by Christ in the power of the Spirit that we are united to Christ and to the Church. This is a deeply formational truth for the church and one that flows to all the areas of our lives including other tables. And it is another Reformed voice that will give us a way to understand how our tables are connected to the Lord's Table.

Prelude and Echo

In chapter two we were exposed to the problem of the American diet, a diet that affects our bodies, our neighbors, and God's good creation. We discovered a narrative of mindlessness. Just like the Corinthians trying to push their knowledge and freedom in Christ to do anything regarding food, we are told by our culture that we don't have to think about our food because someone else has done that for us. But if that narrative tells us not to think about food, why are we so surprised that the western church has taken a cerebral approach to the Eucharist? The Eucharist becomes an intellectual ascent like Charles Hodge said it was in the 19th century, not like the ascent advocated by Calvin in which in the Spirit is the condition on which we are united to Christ. We are still fighting the Corinthian problem of knowledge and a misunderstanding of freedom. Martha Moore-Keish echoes this in her book *Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to Reformed Eucharistic Theology*. "For a Christian stream that has so often maintained the priority of doctrine over practice, it is important to recognize that participation in

liturgical action over time deeply forms faith.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, she truly engages with this ritual approach when she says, “We might say that what the eucharist “does” is to form relationships and shape meaning. Meaning does not exist independently prior to practice.”¹¹⁵ The cultural liturgies continue to tell us that what we eat is just fuel and our bodies are just machines. The counter liturgy given in Reformed Christian worship communicates that we are God’s creation invited to co-create with our Lord. Food is the stuff of creation like we are the stuff of creation. H. Paul Santmire in his book

Ritualizing Nature says this:

Ritual is not what humans do in order to express other things, such as their theological ideas or their myths or their power relationships or their fears. Counterintuitive as this may sound to modern ears, this is the idea: ritual creates and sustains the ideas and values and myths, the power relationships and the fears, not the other way around.¹¹⁶

This, by the way, is fantastic news for the world, as Santmire states: “Anyone who, in faith, enters into the liturgy and whose mind and heart is shaped by that practice, can have hope for the whole creation.”¹¹⁷ In the history of Christianity, there is an alternative to such destructive view of food and such a thin view of the Eucharist. In place of the consumerist model there is the Eucharistic model. William Cavanaugh in his book *Being Consumed* reminds us that, “The Eucharist tells a different story about who we—the

¹¹⁴ Martha L. Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to Reformed Eucharistic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 68.

¹¹⁵ Morre-Keish, 69.

¹¹⁶ H. Paul Santmire. *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis, Theology and the Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 89.

¹¹⁷ Santmire, 6.

hungry and the filled—really are, and where we are going.”¹¹⁸ In this model of eating, our very appetites and desires are run through the lens of the cross of Christ. In this model a different narrative is told: one that captures our imaginations and points our desires again to the kingdom of God. However, for such a model to exist, the Eucharist must then be viewed as the height of eating. Our praxis of eating becomes informed by our praxis of the Eucharist and the Eucharist by our praxis of eating.

This all leads to the following conviction: all meals should find their height at the Table of our Lord. Now let me be clear: I am not saying that all of our meals, in the home or with friends or in the fellowship hall, are mini-eucharists. I *am* saying that the same narrative, enacted by the liturgy of God’s people, should be at work in us as we prepare all our food, as we consider what items to buy, as we consider who we are eating with, and as we consider our habits in our own kitchens. This is what Paul was trying to help the Corinthian church understand as well as what Calvin was gesturing towards with his mealtime prayer.

This alternative is not new to the Christian tradition in general or the Reformed tradition in particular. For example, the concept of “prelude” and “echo” bears a strong resemblance to the concept of connection between the Lord’s Table and our other tables.¹¹⁹ Jean-Jacques von Allmen proposes in his “Theological Meaning of Common

¹¹⁸William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 100.

¹¹⁹This use of von Allmen’s work was used by Sue Rozeboom in her essay, “Evangelicalism and Sacraments: Telling Well the Story.” In the essay, Sue gestures toward drawing our tables together using von Allmen’s language of prelude and echo. I am indebted to Sue for this model of connection. Rozeboom, Sue. 2014. “Evangelicalism and Sacraments” Telling Well the Story.” *Perspectives* (November/December): Accessed April 14, 2016. <http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2014/10/30/evangelism-and-sacraments-telling-well-the-story/>.

Prayer,” that “other prayers find their meaning and truth in the fact that they are, as it were, the echo or the prelude to common prayer.”¹²⁰ Von Allmen grounds his thinking in the reformers who would make no distinction between common prayer and private prayers as they appeal to the same, “commandment”, “content”, “hope” and “expectation.”¹²¹ The language of prelude and echo is helpful because it displays a constant connection between the prayers that happen in the home and in the faith community.

The fruit of “prelude” and “echo” does not end simply with their existence in lending themselves as a framework for viewing table to Table in the homes and sanctuaries, respectively, of followers of Jesus. I think some dialogue with the three questions von Allmen asks of Common Prayer could also be asked and applied to the Eucharistic prayer and meal and, by extension, to the homes of people who share meals together. The first question von Allmen asks is the question of what the church *does* when it prays. His answer is twofold: first, the Church is manifesting itself as the Church and advances the world’s salvation;¹²² second, it “expresses its own truest identity and the deepest identity of its members.”¹²³ What prayer *does*, we might say, is help the Church be most itself in the world.

¹²⁰ Von Allmen, “The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer,” *Studia Liturgica* 10 (1974-1976): 125

¹²¹ Von Allmen *The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer*, 125.

¹²² Von Allmen *The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer*, 127.

¹²³ Von Allmen *The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer*, 127.

Von Allmen then asks what does the Church *says* when it prays. For this von Allmen offers a three-part answer. First, the Church celebrates the very fact that God hears us. Second, the Church petitions for the coming kingdom, and third, it intercedes for the world and is strengthened in that interceding.¹²⁴ The Church *says* or testifies to its priestly role when it prays.

Lastly, von Allmen asks the question of what the Church *commits* itself to when it prays. He declares that the Church “becomes responsible for achieving what it asks for.”¹²⁵ The implications of this are beautiful and terrifying all at once. The church is responsible for what it prays for and carrying out what it asks for. The church commits itself to the service of God, in doing what God is asking, and what they are asking God to do. The relational implications here are also deep. One cannot assume von Allmen has a sterile view of God absent from the world but rather a rich theology of God in relationship with the church. In addition to committing itself to be responsible for what it asks for, the Church also commits to being a Church of unity and a church that in patience, joy, and seeking confirms an answer already given in Jesus Christ.¹²⁶ The Church has received the answer to its prayer in Jesus, and the declaration of “*Maranatha!*” (Come, Lord Jesus) is that answer which is also confirmation—Jesus has come and will come again.

¹²⁴ Von Allmen *The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer*, 133.

¹²⁵ Von Allmen *The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer*, 134.

¹²⁶ Von Allmen *The Theological Meaning of Common Prayer*, 135.

These same questions can be now posed to the Supper and answered similarly. In its eating of the supper, the Church *does* what von Allmen says it does: it becomes most truly itself and advances the history of the world's salvation. The Church, in its eating of the Supper *says* what von Allmen says it says: it celebrates, petitions, and intercedes. And finally, the Church, in its eating of the Supper, commits itself to what von Allmen says it does: it becomes responsible to achieve what it asks for, commits itself to unity, and seeks confirmation in patience and joy that the answer has come already in Jesus Christ.

So back to prelude and echo. What if we could approach our suppers in that way: confident that the meals in our homes offer preludes and echoes to what the Eucharist “does,” “says,” and “commits” us to? What if the meals we prepared in our homes and shared with our families and neighbors actually reflected some of the very precious things that are present in our celebrations of Eucharist because they were “preludes” and “echoes” to that wonderful event? What if we were formed so deeply by our habits and practices of celebrating the Supper that they flowed out of us in the Spirit's grace whenever and wherever we ate? Could it be that the people of God, longing to demonstrate the hope of Christ's coming again, were actively engaging in work of reconciliation for all creation around their own tables by making sure that it was sourced in a sustainable way? Could it happen that in remembering God's outpouring of abundant grace in Christ, we too offered of ourselves and our resources to make sure people were fed and those who worked to harvest food were paid well enough so their families could be fed? What would happen to our celebrations of the Eucharist if for every bite and

drink we took, we offered a box of noodles or a jar of peanut butter to make sure a local food pantry is stocked? What if every time we sat down to say grace for the food and the people present with us, we were caught up again in the mystery and wonder of a God that wants to see all people provided for? Through prelude and echo, we can again have a language of formation that helps us name the habits that will continue to point us toward the mission of God. Through prelude and echo, we can again have a language that ignite our imagination of what the Kingdom of God can be here on earth.

In his book, *The Lord's Supper*, von Allmen offers some reflections on the meal itself and how it captures us in the story, “The Christian Supper offers to those who participate in it, not the experience of being in communion with a myth, but participation in historical events.”¹²⁷ He then works through the pieces of the liturgy and remarks, “Anamnesis...is the ritual recalling of a past event to restore its original virtue and, even more, the setting of those who engage in the anamnesis in the very event which the celebration commemorates.”¹²⁸ To say it another way, we are “caught up” in the story, our imaginations are brought into the narrative of God. Continuing to work his way through the pieces of the Eucharist liturgy von Allmen also reminds us that the *Epeklesis* is two-fold in purpose for the praying church: “asking for the spirit which brings life and forms us into the body of Christ, offering us deliverance, but also the confidence that the Spirit will indeed come.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *The Lord's Supper* (Cambridge, Eng.: James Clarke & Co., 2002, 1966), 23.

¹²⁸ Von Allmen *The Lord's Supper*, 24.

¹²⁹ Von Allmen *The Lord's Supper*, 34.

It is easy to feel adrift in modern culture. Standing firm in the tempest of this world is the story of God. Expressed in the liturgy of the Table, this compressed narrative gives us a counter-liturgy by which we can understand ourselves. This is a full and embodied reality that draws us into deeper communion with our God and one another, through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a de-centering and freeing narrative that welcomes us into the presence with the Triune God. By reclaiming a full ritual approach to the Eucharist in the Reformed tradition, we can have the tools necessary to interact in a reconciling way between ourselves and what we eat. The Lord's table shows us how things should be, and through prelude and echo we are given a way to house a formational process that will help reconcile us to God, our neighbors and creation, as well as reconnect our food and theology.

Chapter 5: Food for the Journey

Many people in the west have disconnected their food and their theology. This is not a unique problem. Many people at the Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church don't connect food with theology, many Americans don't make this connection, indeed there are times when I don't connect them. It can be difficult in a culture like that in America to connect things like food and theology. The entire food industry is built on the premise that we shouldn't be thinking about it. Yet, the connection is there—maybe just bubbling under the surface for some. Those whom I interviewed from the AACRC spoke about food as being “mostly” utilitarian, but would go on to give eloquent recounting of food which included relationships, smells, memory, love, and hope.

There is a scene in *Omnivore's Dilemma* where the author, Michael Pollan, is sitting down to a meal that he gathered, foraged, and killed himself. He sits down with people around the table, and he admits that he was searching for some way to start the meal: “The words I was reaching for, of course, were the words of grace.”¹³⁰ For Pollan, this connection is already made, not in the way Christians may make the connection but certainly there is something “more” for him as well. *In Defense of Food* he says this,

Food is also about pleasure, about community, about family and spirituality, about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity. As long as humans have been taking meals together, eating has been as much about culture as it has been about biology.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Pollan. *The omnivores Dilemma*, 407.

¹³¹ Pollan, *Defense of Food*, 8.

And then Pollan offers a very pointed question: “What would happen if we were to start thinking about food as less of a thing and more of a relationship?”¹³² It is that question that we have really been seeking to answer over the course of this paper: that our food tells us something about our relationship with God and God’s good world.

Since there is a disconnect between our theology and food at the AACRC, could it be that there is a disconnect in other places? Chapter two showed us that indeed this disconnect isn’t an isolated problem at one church in Ann Arbor, but a problem for many people in America. And not only is the disconnect one-sided—about only what we eat, but it is also a disconnect in how we see the Eucharist—the principal use of food in our gathered life of faith. The Reformed tradition in America has primarily understood the Eucharist as an individual memorial between the believer and Christ where we recall his sacrifice on the cross. And, as we saw in chapter two, while remembering Christ’s sacrifice is important, to not celebrate anything beyond that is a very thin view of the Eucharist. These two problems, our problem with food in America—what it does to our bodies, the world, and our neighbor—and our problem of a thin view of the sacrament based on an intellectual, individual memorialism, have not helped us see the sacrament for all it can be and live into an ethical relationship with our food.

Chapter three showed us that the problems of a thin view of Eucharist and a misappropriation of food in our relationships is not a new thing for our culture either. The Apostle Paul struggled with the Corinthian church over how they were to live into their new identity in Christ with one another. Around a table where they had been perpetuating

¹³² Pollan. *Defense of Food*, 102.

cultural divisions, Paul reminded them that this was not to be and that they were to eat whatever they wanted—but to do so to the glory of God and the building up of the brothers and sisters. Paul’s corrective for this community, which wasn’t making the connection between food and theology according to the new life of Christ but by some old connection to a theology of cultural idols, is the liturgy. Paul re-narrates the story so that they see that the tables they gather around are of supreme importance. In that supper they are to orient themselves around the Table of the Lord to whom we are united.

Chapter four walked us through John Calvin’s development of Paul’s Union with Christ. For Calvin, we are given every benefit that is Christ’s in the Lord’s Supper and we are united to Christ through the work of the Spirit. And it is Christ himself who lifts us up to God’s space so that we may have this union. Because of all of this meaning, Calvin, like Paul, saw the Lord’s Supper as deeply formational, telling us the story of who we are and who we are called to be in this world.

It would then be another Reformed voice, Jean-Jacques von Allmen who would give us the metaphor for connecting our food and theology. Through the cyclical image of prelude and echo von Allmen uses for corporate prayer, we are able to describe the Eucharist as the height of our eating, and every meal is a prelude and echo to that event. Our meals are to have the same ethics, the same values and the same goal—to form us into Christ’s disciples.

This model needs some practical working out. To say that every meal can be a prelude and echo is fine, but maybe then we need some help in delineating what we mean when we say that. Where do we start to eat eucharistically as von Allmen suggests and

William Cavanaugh challenges? We can start with a declaration that food is more than something to consume. Norman Wirzba, who wrote *Food and Faith: a Theology of Eating*, says it like this: “Theologically understood, food is not reducible to material stuff. It is the provision and nurture of God made pleasing and delectable. It is the daily reminder that life and death come to us as gifts.”¹³³ When we begin to see food as more than merely consumable but as something we share with all creation, we will be able to embrace our own role in creation. Wirzba again says,

Every time a creature eats it participates in God’s life-giving yet costly ways, ways that simultaneously affirm creation as a delectable gift, and as a divinely ordered membership of interdependent need and suffering and help.¹³⁴

We cannot separate ourselves from this reality even though we try. With each meal eaten in the car on the way or with each meal manufactured in a plant, we remove ourselves from the life and death which is right in front of us—which is a part of us. The call to the Church is to not run from this role but to embrace it and reclaim it. And in that reclamation the Church may find itself leading the charge for an ethical engagement with our food.

What I offer below are six practices that may help individuals, families, or faith communities begin to reconnect their food and their theology. It is not a comprehensive list, but it is my hope that these are six practices that most Christians can agree would be good practices for people of faith in Christ. These six practices seek to provide a starting

¹³³ Wirzba, Norman. *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Cambridge University Press. New York, New York. 2011. 7.

¹³⁴ Wirzba, 2.

point that will help us put into practice the conviction that the tables we gather around matter and it all begins at the Table of our Lord.

Be Grateful¹³⁵

Aldous Huxley gained fame in the literary world and worked his way into most high schools when he wrote *Brave New World*. This was a novel about a dystopian future that awaited us if we didn't pay attention to prophetic words he was writing. Years later when he wrote *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley observed that some of what he wrote about years earlier was coming true; in some cases that was hard to argue.

One of Huxley's lesser known novels is also in the utopian/dystopian genre, titled *Island*. In *Island* we are given a picture of an idealized community known as Pala. In Pala they have many different customs and rituals that display a blended and self-aware religiosity. A conspiracy is devised to take over the Island. A reporter, sensitive to the cause of the conspirators, is shipwrecked there and then welcomed into the practices and life of the island's inhabitants. One such practice always strikes me, the reader, as remarkably profound. A large family sits down to eat and they explain "grace" to the

¹³⁵ I am borrowing a list format from Wendell Berry in his Essay *The Pleasure of Eating*. Wendell Berry has been an out-spoken critic of the industrial food system and our culture's overall indifference toward creation. An indifference that he has observed while farming his family land in Kentucky. Through poems, essays, short-stories and novels, Berry has called us to consider our consumption of our land and resources as we consider the consumption of our food. Through his writing and his activism, Berry has captured a large audience and inspired many to see our world as a precious resource worth taking care of and maintaining.

Wendell Berry has inspired many thinkers and writers in the genre of field of agriculture and food. Michael Pollen (*Bringing it to the Table*) and Norman Wirzba (*The Art of the Commonplace*) have both written forwards and edited collections of Berry's work and cited him as an influence on their writing and scholarship. And though I use Pollen and Wirzba primarily in my dissertation, Berry's influence is present throughout.

Like Berry confesses of his own list in *The Pleasures of Eating*, my list is not exhaustive. Yet, I use the list as a method to tease out some of the values we have explored in this paper.

visitor in their midst. A woman explains that they don't say grace "before" the meal but they say grace "with" the meal. She continues:

Grace is the first mouthful of each course—chewed and chewed until there's nothing left of it. And all the time you're chewing you pay attention to the flavor of the food, to its consistency and temperature, to the pressures on your teeth and the feel of the muscles in your jaws.¹³⁶

I confess that I am not sure I have ever taken a bite with that much focus. The visitor at the table also inquired whether he was to give thanks for the bite at which his hosts said "no" for that would distract him. The bite is the point. Paying attention is the point.

This particular example is imperfect since it runs the danger of making an idol out of food, by giving thanks to no one in particular and only but just thinking about the food.

Norman Wirzba is explicit in his warning to guard against this kind of practice.

We can now see that a central task of a theology of eating is to help us guard against idolatry, which we can here briefly describe as the effort to magnify and promote human power. The goal of eating is not to worship food or ourselves. Nor is it to offer food production and consumption to the modern idols of control, efficiency, and convenience.¹³⁷

Yet, we would be misled if we threw out the whole idea of "paying attention" when we sit down at the table. Paying attention or awareness is the beginning of our knowledge about anything, including God. We only need to page back to Genesis to hear the words of Jacob again as he dreamed of angels ascending and descending a ladder to God's Space. "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it," (28:16). Paying attention to our food helps us create an awareness of gratitude for where our food comes

¹³⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Island*, Perennial Classics (New York: Perennial, 2002), 242.

¹³⁷ Wirzba, 11.

from and who it is that provides for us. At its center is an awareness of God. Everything in creation belongs to God, and it is from God that we receive all things. So our paying attention to food gives us a deeper awareness of the God who has promised to provide.

The space that we create for gratitude will also create an awareness for the plants and animals that we share a creation with and who participate in a cycle of life and death so that other things may live. So when we pray, when we take the time to express a deep gratitude for the food that is in front of us, we are engaging in a primal act that ties us to all of creation and to God. Wirzba says it this way, “To say grace or offer a benediction of thanksgiving over a meal is among the highest and most honest expressions of our humanity.”¹³⁸

This isn't easy of course. Being thankful is sometimes an afterthought at meal time. In our families, it can take a tremendous amount of work to gather everyone to the table after work, school, or any extra-curricular events that happen on a given day. It can also seem like a chore to think about what to make for dinner and then, of course, make it. When we finally sit down, it can sometimes be more hectic than the moments leading up to the meal. Kids needing food cut up, gathering cellphones from teenagers, grabbing the salt shaker we forgot to bring to the table. Sometimes the first thought when we sit down is a deep sigh that tells everyone we are questioning whether this whole process was worth it. For others of us, it can seem out of place to pray when “it's just the two of us,” or when we dine alone. But maybe in these moments we can gather the words from the Psalmist who invites us to praise God for the elements of life that sustain us (Psalm

¹³⁸ Wirzba, 179.

104). We are reminded to give thanks for wine, water, bread and oil that we eat and use. Having all we could ever need is like being busy, in that we can forget to be grateful for these simple things. Giving thanks to God for our food is an acknowledgement of the one who provides for us. It is a reminder that we have been blessed and are called to do something with that blessing.

We can't help but be more tied to our food than when we take the time to pause and thank God for what is given for us. Let's revisit that prayer John Calvin gave us and maybe use it as a model to think about gratitude when we eat.

Lord, the spring and inexhaustible fountain of all good things: pour out your blessing upon us. Sanctify for our use this food and drink, the gifts of your kindness. Grant that we may, in true thankfulness of soul, always acknowledge, and with our mouth proclaim you as Father and Author of all good things. Let us so enjoy this bodily nourishment that the chief desire of our heart may be for the spiritual bread of your teaching, by which our souls may be fed with growing hope of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹³⁹

One of the most beautiful takeaways from Calvin's prayer is its move from food, to sacrament, to Word, all couched in the language of gratitude. A rhythm of eating that begins with prayer helps us take a posture of thankfulness. This posture will aid us in being more thoughtful about our food choices and more aware of where our food comes from. It is a gift of grace given by the great provider. May we learn to say thanks always. Grow something

Grow something! This sounds easy enough. If someone were to make a change, this may be the first step in creating a Christian food ethic. It may also be one of the most

¹³⁹Diane Karay Tripp, ed., *Prayers from the Reformed Tradition: In the Company of a Great Cloud of Witnesses* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2001), 334.

important changes someone can make. To grow something is to reconnect. Whether it is tilling a large field or planting a tomato plant on an apartment window sill, the encouragement to grow something seeks to reacquaint us with the land. For many in the Western world, food comes from “somewhere.” It may be a farm like we see on Ranch dressing commercials or from a field full of “Happy Cows,” but we know it has to come from somewhere—the problem is we don’t usually know where “somewhere” is. We have forgotten what is a part of us, that we are all participants in creation from soil to table. This problem of forgetfulness is what Norman Wirzba calls “ecological amnesia.”¹⁴⁰ This problem of amnesia is what keeps us from being involved in the process of food production and leads to a life of consumption. We mindlessly consume because where the “food” came from isn’t the most important question. Wirzba again says of our eating habits that it is as though we are in exile, cast off from the first sin which was a sin of eating.¹⁴¹ This “amnesia” has led us to be a culture of “one-night stand” eaters as Wendell Berry calls us. We are a people who eat but don’t want to think about it before, during, or after.¹⁴²

The fall-out from this ecological amnesia is serious:

Ecological Amnesia is so devastating because it leads us to forsake the material world. It contributes to an impoverished understanding of reconciliation because it trains us to think of ourselves as no longer dependent

¹⁴⁰ Wirzba, 28.

¹⁴¹ Wirzba, 77.

¹⁴² Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 236.

on clean water, fertile soil, diverse forests and fields and multitudes of insects and animals.¹⁴³

In other words, this amnesia has, as we have said before, robbed the natural world of its worth. “Beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a distinctly modern view of science emerged that cast the world as a machine. As such, the world is devoid of its own intelligence and value”¹⁴⁴ When we treat creation like a machine, we begin to measure its value in this way—in what it can produce for us. Wendell Berry challenges us to see creation in a more holistic way. In his essay “Nature as Measure,” Berry reminds us of the link between food and land. As goes the land, so will go our food. He reminds us that seeing the land through the lens of production is damaging. He encourages and challenges us to see nature as the measure itself. If nature is the measure, then everything—animals which inhabit the place, plants which grow in the place, water which is found in the place, air which is cycled through the place, and soil, which holds the place together—is all part of the concern and its well-being should be our measure for whether we are doing justice by the place.¹⁴⁵ If the land is well, we are well.

Eating, then, is part of this grand drama of creation. It was there in the beginning. Part of what growing our own food can do for us is to remind us of the story of creation and allow it to play out in a small way in our lives. After all, Wendell Berry reminds us that, “Eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy

¹⁴³ Bahnson and Wirzba, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Wirzba, 6.

¹⁴⁵ Wendell Berry, *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009), 7.

that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true.”¹⁴⁶

The second part of that quote has been the warning siren for many in the last generation. If we are not acquainted with our food sources, how can we appreciate them?

Berry again says,

Only by growing some food for yourself can you become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again.¹⁴⁷

So that tomato plant on the window sill may seem like a small step, but in reality it is one of the most meaningful things we can do. Our relationship with that plant reflects our value of creation and our God who is Creator. The encouragement to followers of Jesus is to continue to create. God has invited us to participate in creation. With God we continue the wonderful acts of creation that have been a part of our world since the beginning. As Christians this is part of who we are, and it testifies to who we believe God is. By growing something we will be playing a part in God’s good creation and may be one of the most fundamentally human things we can do. And, I would wager those tomatoes will taste better than anything you’ll find in a store.

Eat Locally and Seasonally

In America we are a big appetite people. We have appetites for quantity as well as quality in what we eat. We have also developed a taste for variety. The global market and merging of cultures has given us tastes for foods that come from all parts of the world.

¹⁴⁶ Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*, 227.

¹⁴⁷ Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*, 232.

This is wonderful in the sense that sharing food native to our cultures has given people new and powerful connections with one another. However, this appetite for variety of diet has also put a strain on our world and its ability to produce the food that we need.

Bananas are an example of just such an issue. This fruit is a healthy breakfast food or snack and can be cooked or eaten in a variety of different ways and be made a part of a great many dishes. Banana production, however, is costly to the countries in which it is native and worldwide because of the fossil fuel it takes to produce bananas in large quantities.¹⁴⁸ We are destroying rain forests in order to create a large monoculture to sustain our appetites.

And it's not just bananas. Getting produce to various places, particularly in colder climates, is a massive undertaking. "The average distance traveled by produce sold in Chicago, according to a 1998 study, is 1,518 miles."¹⁴⁹ Our appetite for variety and delicacies are insatiable. For followers of Jesus, our care for the sustainability of the planet as well as the welfare of others calls us to consider the size and scope of our appetites.

For many people, regardless of faith, a movement has been taking hold lately known as the "locavore" movement. People make it a point to eat foods from as close to their own home and location as possible. They try to eat local. This has roots to the theology of Bal Taschit. Rave Chisda said that if someone drinks beer when wine is

¹⁴⁸ Joseph Aaron Skloot. "Let your Table be to You a Temple," in *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*, ed. Mary L. Zamore, Ccar Challenge and Change Series (New York: CCAR Press, 2011), 207.

¹⁴⁹ Singer and Mason; 135.

available then they transgress Bal Taschit.¹⁵⁰ The principle works like this: if we eat food that has to be shipped to us at a large cost and at the expense of the people and place where it is produced, we sin against God for not using what God has given us in our place. Because of our constant bypassing of the land and going to the supermarket, we find ourselves somewhat removed and maybe even clueless as to what is local and what isn't. This quote comes from a Reformed Jewish perspective about observing the dietary laws of the Hebrew Bible, but I think the point is universal: "Today, however, how ironic it is that we too are surrounded by food, but we have lost our sense of keshet, our connection to the food, to the land, and to our Creator."¹⁵¹

When we eat locally we will most likely eat less processed foods and eat food that is produced with a higher level of care. The reason is that eating local foods will mean shopping at places like farmer's markets where you meet the people who grow the food. It will mean participating in crop or farm shares where people partner with a farmer and pay an amount to receive a set amount of goods that are grown on the farm. Eating locally will also bring awareness of the seasons that surround us. When we eat locally it will also increase the likelihood that we eat seasonally. There are no strawberries at the farmer's market in Ann Arbor Michigan in February. They don't grow in February so I go without. It would take a great deal of work to grow strawberries inside a greenhouse in February just as it takes a great deal of work to ship them long distances from another

¹⁵⁰ Kevin M. Kleinman. "Developing a Bal Taschit Food Ethic for Today," in *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*, ed. Mary L. Zamore, Ccar Challenge and Change Series (New York: CCAR Press, 2011), 167.

¹⁵¹ Batsheva Appel. "Jumping Off the Production Line," in *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*, ed. Mary L. Zamore, Ccar Challenge and Change Series (New York: CCAR Press, 2011), 174.

place and climate in February. So the challenge is not to eat them when they are not available for me to eat.

Eating locally and seasonally need to be paired together. They need to be joined by our resolve for how God has called us to interact with creation. Eating locally and seasonally will bring us into the rhythms of creation and help us engage in ethical food choices that will reacquaint us with the abundance that is all around us.¹⁵²

Cook Your Own Food

“The last thing I want to do when I get home is fix dinner for my family.”

This sentence, uttered by a mother in my congregation as I was telling her what my Doctorate of Ministry was all about, is one I had heard before. I have heard it from exasperated parents, single college students, and fearful aspiring epicureans alike. The thought of cooking for some is a chore to add to the list of “to-do’s” or a long process at the end of long day.

Convenience is an attractive reason to abandon the kitchen in favor of the drive-thru. With all the things the average family has to do throughout the week, the thought of taking an hour or more to cook something from scratch can feel like an impossibility. But should convenience be the question of whether or not we cook? I would argue that the

¹⁵² A word about fair trade: I live in Michigan and the fact is I can’t grow cocoa beans for chocolate or coffee beans for a morning brew. So, am I limited in this regard? Am I doomed to always be without tea, olives, avocados and other such wonderful natural delights? This issue is a complicated one for, we would do better off to make our eating reflect more of our region as well as taking into account the discipline of eating locally and seasonally. With the advent of Fair trade, there is a possibility for a good solution. However, we should be careful how “fair-trade” is defined and who is doing the defining. Chances are it will cost more and then may mean that we indulge less in some of our luxuries, but fair trade provides people with the means to purchase foods that we are unable to grow while providing the people who grow them a fair wage. Fair-trade systems also help set the foundation for more sustainable farming practices to work their way into the communities. An additional challenge may be to re-identify them in our lives as luxuries all together. For more information about Fair Trade and how it benefits local economies, the reader can visit the Fair Trade Federation at www.fairtradefederation.org.

answer is “no,” and to reduce our food choices to values like convenience is actually a flattening out of our Christian ethics. Norman Wirzba says it this way: “The very idea of fast, cheap, convenient food suggests eating is not supposed to be the activity whereby people honor God, appreciate creation, or accept responsibility for their membership within it.”¹⁵³ To think of it short hand, let’s simply say this: Food is not fuel, our bodies are not machines. Often values like convenience or cost are symptomatic of a deeper conviction that what we eat simply isn’t that important. Viewing food as a fuel source for our bodies robs food of its intrinsic value; it oversimplifies the connection that we have with the world and with God. As followers of Jesus, we are called to see creation and the gift of food as having value itself. As we have already demonstrated, the American diet is coming at a great cost to our health and to God’s creation.

Cooking is our opportunity to demonstrate the theological weight we believe food and creation have. It is our opportunity to speak afresh into the process of feasting and reclaim it from factories. Instead of buying the pre-made, flash-frozen, re-heatable preservables that were produced somewhere else by someone else, the kitchen can now become the place where families can together enter the lifecycle of provision. We can watch as flour, water, salt and yeast come together and bubble and expand into dough that bakes into fresh bread. We can talk to our children about life and death as we cube steak for stew. We can talk about where food comes from and teach them what a loving God we have that wants to make sure we are fed and nourished. When we cook and when we bring the process from factory to family kitchen we testify to foods’ worth and, by

¹⁵³ Wirzba, 26.

extension, God's worth. Food is worth the time to cook well. And our families are worth the time to cook "for" and "with."

This will not only have a benefit for our moral conscience but also for our health. As Pollan reminds us, "When you cook at home you seldom find yourself reaching for the ethoxylated diglycerides or high-fructose corn syrup."¹⁵⁴ Barbara Kingsolver also adds a similar point: "Cooking is the great divide between good eating and bad. The gains are quantifiable: cooking and eating at home, even with quality ingredients, costs pennies on the dollar compared with meals prepared by a restaurant or factory."¹⁵⁵

The busyness of the Western world is the curse of the Western world. We are busy because we are expected to be. I talk to people everyday who are worn down or worn out. These people often tell me that they would cook if they just had the time but, because they are tired, they speak of cooking as "slaving away." For our busy lives what if we just took one of the meals we eat in a day, how about three meals a week, to cook at home ourselves from start to finish? It may seem daunting to think about. But as disciples of Jesus, can we accept the challenge to reclaim a higher view of bringing food to our table? I think Barbara Kingsolver said it well when she summed up a general principle of eating well.

It's hard to reduce our modern complex of food choices to unifying principles, but this is one that generally works: eating home-cooked meals from whole, in-season ingredients obtained from the most local source available is eating well, in every sense. Good for the habitat, good for the body.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Pollan, *Defense*, 159.

¹⁵⁵ Kingsolver, 129.

¹⁵⁶ Kingsolver, 31.

Taking the time to eat well. Amen, and Amen.

Eat with people

As was mentioned in the section before, connected to an ethic of eating should be a certain view of community. Eating is communal. In fact, meals are something that creates and forms the identity of people—they are ritual actions, just like Paul and Calvin understood them. All the decisions about what we eat and how we prepare it and our attitude as we approach our tables comes to a lived out drama as we sit down to eat. It is at the table where relationships are formed and cemented. To welcome the stranger and extend hospitality creates a renewed awareness about the food and abundance that surrounds us.¹⁵⁷

This conviction is easily lost when we quickly wolf something down in the car or eat in front of our computer screen all alone. Eating is to be a ritual action whereby the convictions we have about God and food are passed around the table, as the unspoken spice that flavors all our meals. This can all begin by creating an ethos of table manners. It may suit your family to say the TV must be off and the cell phones left in the other room when we sit down to eat. It may be that you clear off the dining room table of all the clutter that it accumulates and actually sit around it again. For others it may be that we are intentional about inviting a neighbor or family or person over to eat and share conversation.

¹⁵⁷ Wendell Berry has a wonderful scene in which a man invites a father and son to join them for he sees they are in need and when he enters the kitchen, sees his wife cooking and the strangers there, he is given a fresh vision of his own kitchen and of the provision he and his wife are blessed with. The scene itself is also found in a compilation of Wendell Berry works called *Bringing It to the Table*. 190.

This is a conviction, too, that the Church must share as part of its identity. Angel Mendez Montoya says in his book *The Theology of Food*, "The body politic of the church is, then, centered on a practice of table fellowship: where sharing is an enactment of participation or co-belonging with one another, humanity with creation, and the whole creation with God."¹⁵⁸ We might say, then, that the rhythms we testify to as a believing community are to be demonstrated in our own homes and therefore that the practice of the Table fellowship in the Eucharist should be the practices of our own tables. The ritual by which the practices and convictions of the community become part of us, written on our hearts, sealed in us by the Holy Spirit.

It isn't just the Christian church that understands this importance of ritualizing our tables either.

Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eliezer taught: As long as the Temple stood, its alter atoned for Israel's sins, but now a person's table atones for him" For the Rabbis of the Talmud, food—the proper foods cultivated and prepared in the proper manner—could be as holy as the sacrifices offered on the altar of the Temple long ago.¹⁵⁹

Our tables reflect the significance of our most sacred religious traditions. It is time that the Church began to give its members language that helped them make these connections in their own homes. It is time that we create the meal space and rhythms that give voice to our convictions. Food matters, God provides. Let's create the culinary space to taste and see that God is good.

¹⁵⁸ Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist*, Illuminations--theory and Religion (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 151.

¹⁵⁹ Joseph Aaron Skloot. "Let your Table be to You a Temple," *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*, ed. Mary L. Zamore, Ccar Challenge and Change Series (New York: CCAR Press, ©2011), 208.

Reclaim the historic liturgies of the Church

For faith communities or even for families reclaiming liturgy can be a beneficial practice. The Church has many resources and prayers that have accumulated over the centuries that point us to the fullness of the supper. And, there are resources that point us to the goodness of creation and how we are to take care of it. There are prayers, songs, and litanies that we can say that will help us remember our neighbor and think about our food in new ways. Whether it be as a church community or around a family table, developing a ritual to our meals will help us draw out meaning and richness. Using the liturgies in our churches will also plug us into the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us or, can speak to us from a different perspective in a different part of the world. For families, developing a meal time ritual can be a blessing that helps young and old feel a part of something more and enters into the prelude and echo rhythm of our eating. Maybe it is something as simple as opening meal time with a prayer, or doing devotions after the meal is over. Maybe for your family it is placing a Christ candle in the center of the table to remind everyone present that the Lord is also in our midst. Maybe your family would appreciate the imagery of dipping their hands in a basin of clean water to remember who they are before they sit down, or to be gathered to the table from various places in the home by singing a hymn or spiritual song you may sing on a communion Sunday. The opportunity is there for the people of faith to establish a ritual that will draw us in to the richness of eating together, rooted in the sacrament.

For the church there is a deep implication for the meal that we share as a community. Our praxis of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, becomes informed by our

praxis of eating. Our praxis of eating becomes informed by our praxis of the Eucharist. After all, communion is about abiding and transformation, about abundance and sacrifice. Because of this, any table can become like a communion table.¹⁶⁰ And how we approach every table should be how we approach the Table of the Lord.

Churches can also show families and individuals how to connect food and theology. People could take turns baking the bread for communion. They could have a relationship with local farmers to provide produce for a meal being cooked for the homeless. A church community could start a garden, and have a service to open the garden and close it every season. A church could commit to buying fair-trade coffee for Sunday morning. They could have staff meetings or council meetings catered by restaurants that are working to be locally sourced and use humanely raised animal products. The possibilities for connecting food and theology are all around us. They spring up with the new growth every year. It would be a powerful testimony for the Church to take a leadership role in their communities by expressing their connection between food and theology.

The Church is to present the narrative of how the world is and how it is to function. While our culture continues to berate us with messages about fast, easy, and cheap food, we are to stand and give voice to values of life, equality and self-sacrifice. The cry of the Church is to communicate that our diets matter to God and affect our relationship to God in our attitudes to others and creation. The Church is to present the

¹⁶⁰ Norman Wirzba again has something to say about this when he says, “Here we see how the common table around which people ate could at the same time be a Eucharistic table. Eating could become a time of transformation as people ruminated on what it means to receive the world and each other as gifts given by God.” Wirzba 168.

narrative in which Jesus presents himself as real food and real drink which we must eat to live. And so he invites us into a self-offering life where we participate in the fullness of creation and the coming of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Afterword: Lunchtime

During the season of Lent 2014, my two youngest children were called to lunch. They climbed into their seats next to one another facing the dining room window which captured the interplay between sunlight and snowflakes. Their bowls were placed before them, steam still curling up, trying its best to reach the heavens. Next to their bowls were their spoons and their water bottles, water bottles being necessities for eating children ages 3 and 20 months. Between them in the center of the table was the Christ candle. For nearly a year that candle has taken up residence on the surface of the solid oak gathering space. It bears some evidence of meals gone by—a splatter here, a drip there. Yet, the Chi-Rho symbol and the olive branch remain unharmed by the food projectiles that have flown in the past months. When we sit down as a family the first words proclaimed after the scrape of the match are,

"Jesus Christ..."

The rest of the family responds, "The light of the world."

The proclamation gives words to the truth of the flame in our midst. We join hands, we lift up our hearts to the Lord, and we pray.

As the food sat before sister and brother, the precocious elder sister folded her hands and the brother responded liturgically and folded his own. Before they bowed their heads, she explained to him,

"We need to pray because our food is still hot."

Dutifully their heads bowed, and they said the words of grace and gratitude.

The practices we engage in help us make the connection between *the* Table and our tables. In reconnecting our food and theology we declare with gratitude like the Apostle Paul and like the Psalmist before him, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it!” The wheat that grows and is milled to become the bread on our plates is watched over by the same God who watches over the wheat that is milled to become the loaf that we take to declare that we share in the body of Christ. The water we drink to renew our parched lips and dry bodies is the same water that was hovered over by the Spirit of God at creation and poured over our heads at baptism—renewing our souls and giving us new life.

When we live into these stories and truths, we enter the story of God. When we share a meal with our loved ones, toast an accomplishment, or take a sip of hot soup when our bodies ache, we enter the story of God’s love again. They are preludes and echoes of God’s grand narrative to gather us as his people through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son Jesus, the Messiah. At God’s Table, our bodies, from toes to tastebuds, are given the language of Emmanuel, God with us.

For me, as a parent, as well as a pastor, the snapshot of two of my children praying before the Christ candle is what this connection is all about. Our food is important because it is a gift from God. It is important because the plants and animals give of themselves so we can live. How it got to our plates is important because the people who prepared it or processed it share in the image of God. To see my children learning to pray before a meal means that they are learning about the connection. They are learning that the table where lunch is served is tied to the Table that connects them to

the Body of Christ. They are learning to eat with expectation—that with every bite they have the same hope that the Church confesses, that God is making the world right in Christ. And this Christ will come again, so we work to make the connection between food and theology, between table and Table, with every spoonful and every plate. And we say, *Maranatha*, come Lord Jesus, Amen.

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