

The Bread of Life:

God Nourishes His Pilgrim People through the Sacramental Practice of the Lord's Supper

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## Introduction

By his grace, the Lord nourishes his people, the church, through various means. We are fed by his Word, the sacraments, and the Holy Spirit. Throughout the history of the church, different traditions have tended to emphasize one of these over the others. Gordon Smith explains why Word, sacrament, and Spirit are necessary within the life of the church as “three distinct angles by which we might consider and live in the grace of the ascended Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Each principle is a means of grace that nourishes God’s people and fosters our union with Christ.

Unfortunately, evangelicals, including those in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, tend to emphasize the Word, while neglecting a more robust practice of the sacraments and the appropriation of the Spirit. Marc Cortez articulates three factors that have contributed to the neglect of a robust sacramental practice within the life of the evangelical church. First, he highlights individualism and personal faith as reasons why some Christians believe that they do not need to participate in corporate, embodied actions; they can nurture their own private faith in non-participatory ways.<sup>2</sup> Second, he comments on how the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have given the impression that the Spirit was the primary mode of saving and nourishing people.<sup>3</sup> Third, he acknowledges a skepticism towards the theology and practice of the Roman Catholic Church. He describes how its emphasis on the sacraments may have caused evangelicals to question the frequency and practice of the Lord’s Supper.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal: Why the Church Should Be All Three* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Cortez, “Who Invited the Baptist?: The “Sacraments” and Free Church Theology,” in *Come, Let Us Eat Together: Sacraments and Christian Unity*, ed. George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 210.

<sup>3</sup> Cortez, “Who Invited the Baptist,” 210.

A fourth possible factor in shaping the evangelical prioritization of Word over sacraments is a still-pervasive, Platonic dualism. Beth Jones writes, “We speak all the time as though the really important part of who we are is an immaterial, spiritual, or even purely cognitive thing.”<sup>4</sup> Sacramental practice, by affirming the importance of our physical and communal nature as human beings, helps to correct this false dualism.

Jones defines a sacrament as a “visible sign of spiritual grace”; thus, a sacramental relationship exists between the material sign (water, bread, cup) and the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Regarding the importance of the sacraments, Jones writes, “The church is a church of human beings, psychosomatic creatures who learn through seeing, tasting, touching, hearing, and smelling. God is a gracious God who meets humans where we are, using the stuff of creation - stuff like bread and water - for spiritual purposes.”<sup>6</sup> We are shaped by the embodied practice of the sacraments. John Frame acknowledges that “the fullness of divine teaching is by Word *and* sacrament.”<sup>7</sup> The regular practice of Word and sacrament feeds us in both body and soul.

Baptism is a one-time sacrament of initiation, but the Lord’s Supper is a continual means by which we are fed by God. The Lord’s Supper contains past, present, and future references: a remembrance of his death (1 Cor. 11:26), our present nourishment (John 6:53-58), and an anticipation of our heavenly banquet (Rev. 19:9).<sup>8</sup> Frame states that it is “a means of grace, a

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<sup>4</sup> Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*, 212.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*, 212.

<sup>7</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 1061.

<sup>8</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1066.

way in which God equips us to better serve him” and through it “we sense greater union with him.”<sup>9</sup> The Lord’s Supper is a regular means of grace that cultivates our union with Christ.

We also use a variety of terms to highlight the many facets of the sacrament. Jerome Kodell references the term “Eucharist” (thanksgiving) since the verb “to give thanks” is appropriated in the synoptic and Pauline accounts of the institution (Mark 14:23; Matt. 26:27; Luke 22:17; 1 Cor. 11:24).<sup>10</sup> Kodell also notes the three biblical titles provided by the apostle Paul: “Holy Communion” (1 Cor. 10:16), “Table of the Lord” (1 Cor. 10:21), and “the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20).<sup>11</sup> Lastly, he references an older title, “the Breaking of the Bread” (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42).<sup>12</sup> Through its richness and grace, the Lord’s Supper nourishes us and unites with Christ.

In the Reformed and evangelical traditions, God’s people are primarily nourished through the Word. In this paper, I propose that a robust sacramental practice of the Lord’s Supper is a vital means by which God nourishes his pilgrim people and cultivates our union with Christ.

### **Biblical Foundation**

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God demonstrates his grace and presence by feeding and nourishing his people. To demonstrate how God nourishes his people through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, I will explore John 6 and the bread of life discourse. Unlike the synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John does not include the historical institution of the Lord’s

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<sup>9</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1066, 1069.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 11.

Supper as a part of the upper room narrative. However, John uses Jesus' words of eating his flesh and drinking his blood to highlight our spiritual union with him in general and how this feeding on Christ finds its clearest expression in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Meals, food, and table fellowship are significant themes and occasions throughout the Old Testament. Frame offers a list of occasions in which food and covenant meals play a significant role. He describes how God provided an abundant supply of food for Adam and Eve before the Fall (Gen. 1:29) and for Noah and his family after the flood (Gen. 9:3); he describes the covenant meal, the Passover, that God provided as both a rescue from Egypt and as a remembrance of his mighty deeds (Ex. 12); he reveals the covenant meal that God shared with Moses and the seventy elders (Ex. 24:9-11); he describes the "bread of the Presence" (Num. 4:7) and the various food offerings made at the tabernacle and the temple (Lev. 6-7).<sup>13</sup> Food is an important theme for revealing the provision of God and his intimate relationship with his people.

Because Jesus points back to the "bread from heaven" as part of the bread of life discourse (John 6:32), we will focus on Exodus 16 and explore this narrative as a poignant example of how God nourishes his people and provides food for our journey.

#### Exodus 16:1-36 (Food for the Journey)

The book of Exodus is part of the Mosaic writings, dating to around the fifteenth or thirteenth centuries B.C.<sup>14</sup> The book can be outlined in three major sections: in Egypt (1:1-

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<sup>13</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1068.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 58-62.

15:21), in the wilderness (15:22-18:26), and at Sinai (19-40).<sup>15</sup> This outline highlights how God delivers his people from Egypt, provides for them in the wilderness, and further establishes his covenant with them at Mount Sinai.<sup>16</sup> The Israelites were in a season of “liminality” or transition, frequently associated with being “in the wilderness.”<sup>17</sup> In our discussion of Exodus 16, we will focus on the Israelites in the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Sinai (Ex. 16:1).

According to Duane Garrett, one of the main lessons of Exodus 16 is total dependence upon God.<sup>18</sup> After a month of traveling, the Israelites were low on food and anxious about how they would survive. In their desperation, Victor Hamilton points out how quickly murmuring spread among the Israelites and how easily they fell into a “slave mentality.”<sup>19</sup> However God heard their cries and provided a heavenly food (Ex. 16:9). He was teaching them how to depend on him.

Garrett describes the heavenly origin of their food, manna. He notes how “it kept regardless of the season and regardless of the local terrain.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, it would spoil if kept longer than a day, except for the Sabbath; it would melt in the heat of the day, yet it could be baked or boiled without any problems; and it always satisfied the people of God, for they were

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<sup>15</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), xxi.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, xxiv-xxv.

<sup>17</sup> Victor W. Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 512.

<sup>18</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 427.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> Garrett, *Exodus*, 425.

never left feeling hungry.<sup>21</sup> Through these observations, Garrett concludes that this food was clearly of heavenly or divine origin.<sup>22</sup> The manna was also divinely governed. Hamilton describes how everyone received just the amount of manna they needed. Those who were greedy and gathered more ended up with the same amount as those who gathered a lesser amount.<sup>23</sup> Commenting on this phenomenon in Exodus 16:17-18, he writes, “For one group, God downsizes their portion. For another group, God upsizes their portion.”<sup>24</sup> John Durham also describes the miraculous governance of the manna. He writes, “No matter how much or how little the men collected, they found themselves when they came to prepare and eat the manna with precisely the amount needed and allowed for the day’s food.”<sup>25</sup> The miraculous provision and governance of the manna reveals the character of God and the compassion with which he nourishes his people. God’s math is not our math. He nourishes his people and ensures that we receive, not necessarily all that we want, but just what we truly need.

In addition to divine provision and governance, Garrett notes the Sabbath principle as a key concept in Exodus 16. The Israelites were to collect the same amount each day, even on the sixth day in which God would provide twice as much to give them enough for the Sabbath (Ex. 16:5, 22-23). The Sabbath principle was a new concept, a “test” for God’s people that they first

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<sup>21</sup> Garrett, *Exodus*, 425.

<sup>22</sup> Garrett, *Exodus*, 426.

<sup>23</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco: Word, 1987), 2.

learned during the early part of their wilderness journey (Ex. 16:4).<sup>26</sup> As pilgrim people, they had to learn that God would provide enough on the sixth day to sustain them through the seventh day.

In commenting on what the Sabbath was meant to convey to the Israelites, Garrett writes, “They were to rest, stay at home, and enjoy the provision that God offered.”<sup>27</sup> Sabbath-keeping was a difficult principle to learn for it went against their natural inclinations (Ex. 16:27). Like the ancient Israelites, we have to be reminded of the Sabbath principle for we often rely on our limited, human ability to manage resources out of a fear of scarcity. As Garrett notes, the purpose of pilgrimage is learning to trust and become totally dependent upon God.<sup>28</sup>

Remembering God’s nourishment and provision is another theme in Exodus 16. Durham describes the directions for placing an omer of manna in a jar “as a witness to future generations of Yahweh’s provision for his people in the wilderness.”<sup>29</sup> This omer of manna was to be placed in the ark of the covenant and would be kept without rotting or decaying.<sup>30</sup> Though the account is anachronistic, since the ark has not yet been specified, its purpose is theological in nature. God wants his miraculous provision to be passed down to later generations so their faith will be strengthened.<sup>31</sup> As Christians, we remember the story of God. At the table, we remember what Jesus has done for us and that he is the Bread of Life, the nourishment for our souls.

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<sup>26</sup> Garrett, *Exodus*, 426.

<sup>27</sup> Garrett, *Exodus*, 427.

<sup>28</sup> Garrett, *Exodus*, 427.

<sup>29</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 226.

<sup>30</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 226.

<sup>31</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 226.



As a summary of Exodus 16, Durham contrasts the character of God with the character of the people. He notes how God graciously, compassionately, and miraculously provides for his people despite their murmuring, complaining, and disobedience; and he demonstrates how God's compassion extends to generations to come.<sup>32</sup> Like the Israelites, we often complain, desire more, and do the opposite of what we know would be pleasing to God. Exodus 16 reminds us of our total dependence upon God, his divine provision and governance, the Sabbath principle, and the need to pass on the story of God's mighty deeds.

#### John 6:1-15, 22-59 (The Bread of Life)

As we move to the New Testament, John 6 is an important passage for understanding how God nourishes his people. Most scholars believe the book was written by John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, and beloved disciple (John 13:23) near the end of the first century A.D. to “strengthen a church, probably in Asia Minor, that was either in dialogue with the local synagogue, or had just broken off such dialogue.”<sup>33</sup> The Gospel of John can be broadly outlined into “two halves,” the first being the book of signs (John 1-11) and the latter being the farewell discourse and the death and resurrection of Jesus (John 12-21).<sup>34</sup> Our discussion will focus on the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15), the fourth of seven signs, followed by the discourse on the bread of life (John 6:22-59).

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<sup>32</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 227.

<sup>33</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman and Homan Publishers, 1997), 168, 170.

C.K. Barrett observes that though the Gospel of John has no formal mention of the institution of the Lord's Supper "there is more sacramental teaching in John than in any other gospels."<sup>35</sup> However, scholars are divided on this issue as some see references throughout the Gospel, while others see no references at all.<sup>36</sup> Regarding John 6, Barrett notes that it provides one of the most obvious references to the Lord's Supper.<sup>37</sup>

For Oscar Cullman, John 6 describes both "the historical appearance of Jesus in time past and the presence of the risen Christ in the Lord's Supper."<sup>38</sup> For Cullman, John's Gospel is full of layers; thus, the bread of life discourse can be interpreted as an event from the historical Jesus' past, a meditation on the risen Jesus' current presence in the Lord's Supper, and as an "eschatological" meal to be enjoyed with Jesus in the future when he returns.<sup>39</sup>

Commenting on John 6, Vernon Ruland states, "Between the miraculous loaves into which John reads Eucharistic symbolism and the final squall that greets Christ's explicit summons to eat his Eucharistic body and blood winds a dialogue of great depth and intricacy on themes of heavenly bread, manna, the Word of God, faith, and resurrection."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the overall arc and content of John 6 is full of rich symbolism and eucharistic overtones. We will

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<sup>35</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), 69.

<sup>36</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, The Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), CXI.

<sup>37</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 70.

<sup>38</sup> Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, Studies in Biblical Theology 10 (London: SCM Press, 1953), 96.

<sup>39</sup> Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Vernon Ruland, "Sign and Sacrament: John's Bread of Life Discourse (Chapter 6)," *Interpretation* 18, no. 4 (1964): 452. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000687933&site=ehost-live>.

begin our discussion with the feeding of the five thousand, followed by an exploration of the bread of life discourse.

*The Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6:1-15)*

Barrett understands the feeding of the five thousand as the basis for the bread of life discourse.<sup>41</sup> He describes how John shifts from the “miraculous satisfaction of hunger to a discourse upon the Bread of Life, in which Jesus speaks of the true bread from heaven with an authority greater than that of Moses.”<sup>42</sup> The feeding of the five thousand is necessary in providing the narrative basis for the later discourse.

Raymond Brown sees eucharistic overtones in the feeding of the five thousand, citing how Jesus gives thanks over the loaves and distributes them himself in the same manner that he did at the Last Supper.<sup>43</sup> Francis Moloney also comments on these connections, stating, “The report of the miracle is heavily laden with language that recalls the celebration of the Lord’s Supper: take, give thanks, distribute, gather, and fragments.”<sup>44</sup> The connections between the feeding of the five thousand and the Lord’s Supper underscore the sacramental nature of John’s Gospel and the reality that God nourishes his people, physically and spiritually.

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<sup>41</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 230.

<sup>42</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 234.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, 247.

<sup>44</sup> Francis J. Moloney, “‘He Loved Them to the End’: Eucharist in the Gospel of John,” *Worship* 91 (2017): 45. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI FZK170220001896&site=ehost-live>.

D.A. Carson notes that the reference to the Passover in John 6:4 is crucial to an understanding of John 6 as a whole. Thus, regarding the Passover, the feeding of the five thousand and the bread of life discourse, Carson writes,

The connections become complex: the sacrifice of the lamb anticipates Jesus' death, the Old Testament manna is superseded by the real bread of life, the exodus typologically sets forth the eternal life that delivers us from sin and destruction, the Passover feast is taken over by the eucharist (both of which point to Jesus and his redemptive cross-work).<sup>45</sup>

Carson notes the contour of the narrative from the sign to the discourse, from Moses to Jesus, and from bread to flesh.<sup>46</sup> Without the detail about the Passover, these connections would not be as obvious. Lastly, Moloney highlights how Jesus tested the disciples (John 6:5-6) as the Lord tested the Israelites (Ex. 16:4). Jesus is teaching the disciples to be dependent upon him.<sup>47</sup>

#### *The Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:22-59)*

The discourse begins “in the synagogue at Capernaum” (John 6:59). With this context, Brown highlights the observations of Aileen Guilding, who has made connections between the synagogue lectionary and the bread of life discourse. According to Guilding's theory, Exodus 11-16 would have been read during the six weeks around Passover in Year II of a three-year Jewish lectionary cycle. Thus, it is possible that as Jesus offers his discourse on the bread of life in the synagogue, he is building upon the lectionary reading (Exodus 16) of the day. Brown states that “it seems legitimate to maintain that John vi reflects... themes drawn from the

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<sup>45</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 268.

<sup>46</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 268-269.

<sup>47</sup> Moloney, “He Loved Them to the End’: Eucharist in the Gospel of John,” 45.

synagogue readings at Passover time.” Carson also affirms this plausible scenario, thus strengthening the connections between Exodus 16 and John 6.<sup>48</sup>

Barrett also highlights the similarities between Exodus 16 and John 6:31-35 and points to allusions in Psalm 78:24 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-5. He comments on Paul’s view that we eat the same spiritual food as our ancestors. For them, it was manna; for us, it is Christ, the bread of life.<sup>49</sup> For Barrett, the description of the generations that left Egypt is an important counterpart to the entire bread of life discourse.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding John 6:41-42, Brown notes the similarities between the murmuring of God’s people with Jesus and with Moses in Exodus 16. He notes that in the complaining, “we return to the atmosphere of the Israelites in the desert and the manna.”<sup>51</sup> The people in the synagogue were murmuring about Jesus’ claim to have come down from heaven. They could not believe he came from heaven because he was Joseph’s son (John 6:42). Regarding Exodus 16 and John 6, Brown believes that John “loses no opportunity” to compare these two passages.<sup>52</sup>

Carson notes the three different views that scholars hold concerning the bread of life discourse. One view is that the whole discourse is sacramental; a second view is that the discourse is metaphorical; a third view is that the discourse is both metaphorical and sacramental, “moving increasingly from the one to the other as the chapter progresses.”<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 285.

<sup>49</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 239-241.

<sup>50</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 239.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, 276.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, 277.

<sup>53</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 277-279.

third view can be readily observed as Jesus shifts from saying, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry” (John 6:35) to “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53).<sup>54</sup> Understanding the latter portion of the discourse in sacramental terms helps shed light on its meaning. Commenting on John 6:51-59, Brown writes, “In this section the eucharistic theme which was only secondary in vss. 35-50 comes to the fore and becomes the exclusive theme.”<sup>55</sup> The eucharistic theme climaxes in John 6:51-59 and would have been understood by the readers in John’s time.

Regarding John 6:53-54, Carson writes, “If any part of the bread of life discourse has been understood sacramentally, it is these two verses.”<sup>56</sup> However, Carson provides qualifications to this statement, including the concept of “eternal life” (John 6:54). If John 6:54 is only understood sacramentally, we would conclude that the Lord’s Supper brings us eternal life.<sup>57</sup> Thus, we have to understand John 6:53-54 in the larger context of his redemptive work.<sup>58</sup>

Though the interpretations of John 6 vary, Carson states that it reveals “the true meaning of the Lord’s supper as clearly as any passage in Scripture.”<sup>59</sup> This “true meaning” is the way in which we feed upon the body and blood of Christ at the table. Thus, while the synoptic Gospels

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<sup>54</sup> New Revised Standard Version

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, 284.

<sup>56</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 296.

<sup>57</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 297.

<sup>58</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 297.

<sup>59</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 298.

and Paul's letter to the Corinthians record the institution of the Lord's Supper, John describes how the Lord's Supper is personally meaningful for the believer, cultivating union with Christ.<sup>60</sup>

### **Historical Foundation**

For the historical foundation of my paper, I will focus on Augustine and his homily on John 6. His theology of the Lord's Supper has influenced the Reformed tradition, making his thoughts particularly relevant to my research. I will also explore the eucharistic theology of John Williamson Nevin. Nevin was raised as a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian in Pennsylvania, studied at Princeton Theological Seminary, and was a professor at the German Reformed Theological Seminary located in Mercersburg.<sup>61</sup> Nevin's desire for worship renewal and a robust sacramental practice in the nineteenth century is relevant for Reformed and evangelical churches today.

#### Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Augustine was born on November 13, 354 in Thagaste and died on August 28, 430 in Hippo.<sup>62</sup> He was baptized by Ambrose in Rome on Easter in 387.<sup>63</sup> He served as a priest in Hippo from 391 to 396 and as the Bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430.<sup>64</sup> He served as bishop for thirty-four years, writing, shepherding, and defending the church against the Manicheans and the

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, 292-293.

<sup>61</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 142.

<sup>62</sup> Eugene Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, trans. Ralph J. Bastian (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 20-22.

Donatists; against Pelagianism and Arianism.<sup>65</sup> His body was put to rest in the Basilica of Saint Stephen in Hippo, the church where he taught and pastored.<sup>66</sup>

Augustine wrote many books, sermons, and homilies as he taught and defended the faith. Augustine's homilies on the Gospel of John are thought to have been preached between 406 and 407, between the months of December and June.<sup>67</sup> This biographical information orients us to a real time and place in history and a real community of believers taught and pastored by Augustine, who wrestled with many of the same issues we face today. In his homily on John 6:41-59, Augustine comments on the bread of life discourse as a way to describe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and makes several observations related to how God nourishes his people.

Commenting on John 6:48-49, Augustine connects eating and dying. He quotes 1 Corinthians 11:29 and highlights the importance of approaching the table in a worthy manner and exhorts us to examine ourselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper.<sup>68</sup> Augustine told his people to "bring innocence along to the altar" and regarding the table of the Lord, he says to "approach without a qualm."<sup>69</sup> The bishop's heart is for his people to be at peace with one another as they come to the table. Knowing they will pray the Lord's Prayer before partaking of the elements, he reminds his people to be aware of what they say: "Forgive us our debts, as we

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<sup>65</sup> Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 23-36.

<sup>66</sup> Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 34.

<sup>67</sup> Augustine, Saint, "Introduction," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Part I, Vol. 12, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.11.

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.11.



also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12).<sup>70</sup> He does not wish for them to be liars, and thus, encourages them to come honestly and peaceably to the table. We are called to do the same.

Second, commenting on John 6:50, Augustine observes that we share the same spiritual food as that of our ancestors in the desert, people like Moses and Aaron.<sup>71</sup> Our ancestors fed on manna, we feed on the body and blood of Christ, both spiritually and sacramentally.

Third, discussing John 6:51, Augustine stresses the importance of being a part of the body so that we can draw strength and life from Christ through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>72</sup> He admonishes his people to be at church regularly, asking them how they expect to be strengthened if they are not a part of the body? He then quotes the apostle Paul, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). Connecting this passage to the Lord’s Supper, Augustine writes, “O sacrament of piety, O sign of unity, O bond of charity! The one who wants to live has somewhere to live, has something to live on. Let him approach, let him believe, let him belong to the body so as to be given life.”<sup>73</sup> Augustine’s words to his people in Hippo are just as relevant to us today. To be nourished, we gather with the body of Christ, and we partake of the meal that feeds our souls.

Lastly, Augustine emphasizes what it truly means to eat of Christ’s body and drink of his blood. He quotes John 6:56 and then states, “This, therefore, is eating that food and drinking that drink: abiding in Christ and having him abide in oneself.”<sup>74</sup> Our union with Christ, our abiding

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<sup>70</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.11.

<sup>71</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.12.

<sup>72</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.13.

<sup>73</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.13.

<sup>74</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 26.18.

with him and he with us, is the profound spiritual benefit of the sacrament. When we are communing with Christ regularly, with a clear conscience, we partake of the sacrament in a worthy manner and strengthen our union with the Lord.

Having discussed John 6 and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper through the writings of Augustine, we will shift to the mid-nineteenth century and explore the life and eucharistic theology of John Williamson Nevin.

#### John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886)

Though Nevin was raised in a Presbyterian home and studied and taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, throughout the 1830s he found himself becoming more resonate with the German Reformed Church. On May 20, 1840, Nevin was inducted as the chairman of theology at the German Reformed Theological Seminary and College in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania; shortly after, he also joined the denomination.<sup>75</sup> In this context, Nevin found himself “battling on two fronts.”<sup>76</sup> On the one hand, he was fighting for the “traditional faith” of the Reformed church and on the other hand, he was fighting against the “trite and fickle faith” of the revivalist movement.<sup>77</sup> Nevin was troubled by the state of American theology.

A major issue for Nevin was the importance of the Lord's Supper to the Christian life. Living and writing in the context of the Second Great Awakening (1795-1835) and its new practices, Nevin sought to revive the ordinary means of grace, including a robust practice of the Lord's Supper. In 1843, in his book *The Anxious Bench*, Nevin describes the changes that were

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<sup>75</sup> Linden J. DeBie, ed., *Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology*. The Mercersburg Theology Study Series 2 (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), xxix.

<sup>76</sup> DeBie, *Coena Mystica*, xxxi.

<sup>77</sup> DeBie, *Coena Mystica*, xxxi.

taking place as a result of the “New Measures” and states that they “involve consequences that no man can properly calculate. From various causes, a new feeling is at work everywhere on the subject of religion. As usual, the old struggles to maintain itself in opposition to the new, and a strong tendency to become extreme is created on both sides.”<sup>78</sup> Nevin, wisely discerning the shift in American piety and practice, was troubled and concerned.

Nevin was sensitive to the ecclesial changes around him and was struggling to keep the church on a healthy course. He writes, “In these circumstances, it has not been easy for the friends of earnest piety always in the regular churches, to abide by the ancient landmarks of truth and order.”<sup>79</sup> He lamented how the state of Protestantism in his day (including its sacramental practice) was profoundly different from its Reformed heritage in the sixteenth century.

Commenting on mid-nineteenth century practices, Nevin describes the strong and pervasive “tendency to undervalue all that is sacramental.”<sup>80</sup> He also describes the changes within the Reformed Church as a dismissal of traditional church practices and a bent towards rationalism.<sup>81</sup>

Against the backdrop of revivalism, New Measures, and the waning of traditional piety in Protestantism, Nevin wrote *The Mystical Presence*. Through it, he sought to recover a correct view of the Lord’s Supper by going back to the writings of John Calvin and the catechisms and confessions of the sixteenth century.

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<sup>78</sup> John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (Chambersburg: The Office of the “Weekly Messenger,” 1843; repr., Crossreach Publications, 2017), 6.

<sup>79</sup> Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1846; repr., Philadelphia: King and Baird Printers, 2011), 122.

<sup>81</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 54.

According to Nevin, the sixteenth-century Reformers believed there was a vital relationship between the Lord's Supper and our union with Christ.<sup>82</sup> The sixteenth-century, Calvinistic view is "not simply an occasion, by which the soul of the believer may be excited to pious feelings and desires; but it embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; and this grace is not simply the promise of God on which we are encouraged to rely, but the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself."<sup>83</sup> According to Nevin, the eucharistic theology of his day did not allow for a real participation in the life of Christ, only cognitive thoughts and heart-felt emotions.

Through further exposition of Calvin's eucharistic theology, Nevin reveals that "the participation of Christ's flesh and blood in the Lord's Supper is *spiritual only*, and in no sense corporal; there is no local presence of Christ in the meal, for he is at the right hand of the Father in heaven; the eating of the body and blood is only by faith; and the sacrament is for believers only."<sup>84</sup> Nevin makes the point that he is keeping within the bounds of the sixteenth-century view of the Lord's Supper by avoiding a proclivity towards rationalism on the one hand and Roman Catholicism on the other.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to Calvin's writings, Nevin covers the history of the Reformed confessions and catechisms. Summarizing the Heidelberg Catechism's articulation of the Lord's Supper, Nevin states that it has "all the characteristic positions and distinctions of Calvin's theory...it affirms a real communion with Christ's flesh and blood; allows the fact; but refuses to be bound

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<sup>82</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 58.

<sup>83</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 65.

<sup>85</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 65.

by the Lutheran determination of the mode...not for the mouth, but only for faith...not for unbelievers but for believers only.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, according to Nevin, the Heidelberg Catechism is clearly in line with Calvin’s teaching and is a good representation of sixteenth-century sacramental theology.

After evaluating the Puritan sacramental theology and practice of the nineteenth century, Nevin offers five themes that reflect the Reformed, Calvinistic view of the Lord’s Supper in the sixteenth century: its powerful place in worship; the sense of mystery in the sacrament; the “objective force” of the sacrament; our real participation in the person of Christ; and a believer’s communion with the “Word made flesh.”<sup>87</sup> These five themes form the heart of Nevin’s sacramental belief and contrast greatly with the sacramental theology of his time. For Nevin, robust sacramental practice is what truly nourishes and feeds God’s people and strengthens our union with Christ.

In his chapter, “The Mystical Union,” Nevin describes our union with Christ and recalls the illustration of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-8). He writes, “No more apt or beautiful illustration of this union between Christ and the Church can be imagined than that which he has himself furnished, in the allegory of the vine and its branches.”<sup>88</sup> He understands this relationship to be organic, with the branches in vital dependence upon the vine. Nevin describes how our life in Christ is not merely of a moral nature, but of a real participation in the life Christ. He writes, “The new human life in Christ reaches over, as a central uncompounded force, *by the Spirit*, into

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<sup>86</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 102.

<sup>87</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 137-145.

<sup>88</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 281.

the persons of Christ's people."<sup>89</sup> For Nevin, union with Christ is a powerful work of the Spirit, transforming the whole person.

Nevin also notes the important relationship between John 6 and the Lord's Supper. He agrees with Luther and Calvin that the passage is not describing the Lord's Supper directly, but only how believers receive Christ in a spiritual way.<sup>90</sup> His position appears to be based on chronology: the institution of the Lord's Supper had not yet occurred in John 6.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps Nevin's biblical paradigm did not allow a theological arrangement of the Gospels at times.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, after quoting John 6:53-57, Nevin writes, "All must feel the close correspondence, that holds between what is here said and the terms afterwards employed in the institution of the Lord's Supper."<sup>93</sup> Nevin is articulating the profound connection between a spiritual and sacramental feeding on the body and blood of Christ, a thread throughout the whole book.

### **Theological Foundation**

Having studied the writings of Augustine and Nevin, we will conclude by exploring two theological topics related to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: union with Christ and covenant meal. These two topics elucidate how the Lord's Supper nourishes us and cultivates our relationship with God.

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<sup>89</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 283.

<sup>90</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 290.

<sup>91</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 290-291.

<sup>92</sup> David P. Scaer, "Once More to John 6," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 1-2 (2014): 54-55. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001995080&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>93</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 292.

## *Union with Christ*

The first theological foundation, union with Christ, was a key concept for Nevin because he understood the sacramental practice of the Lord's Supper to be a vital means of strengthening the organic relationship between the vine and the branches, between Christ's life and ours. Like Nevin, Smith includes John 15:4 in his discussion of our union with Christ, "Abide in me as I abide in you." Smith also believes that the power for the Christian life does not come from knowledge and insight, but from the ascended Lord and the indwelling Holy Spirit.<sup>94</sup>

Second, Smith believes that the essence of being a Christian is not just becoming "Christlike," but rather being "united with Christ."<sup>95</sup> Smith would agree with Nevin that the Christian life is not merely of a moral nature, but of an organic nature, a real participation in the life of Christ. For Smith, we can abide in Christ and strengthen our union with him through the Word, through the sacraments, and through the Spirit. For the sacramental Christian, "physical and tangible things can be and indeed are a means by which we are drawn into the life of God."<sup>96</sup> We are not fed only by the Word, but also through the material means that God provides.

In his essay, "For You Have Been Planted Together with Christ," Kalantzis describes how we are united to Christ, not just as individuals, but as the church.<sup>97</sup> We do not live the Christian life alone; we are part of the body, branches connected to the vine. Kalantzis notes that

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<sup>94</sup> Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal*, 12.

<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal*, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal*, 17.

<sup>97</sup> George Kalantzis, "For You Have Been Planted Together," in *Come, Let Us Eat Together: Sacraments and Christian Unity*, ed., George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 196.

as we receive Christ by faith, we join a new family. Thus, the church “is not primarily an institution but rather a body formed by the Eucharist and the celebration of the Eucharist.”<sup>98</sup> Kalantzis describes this new family, the church, through the words of Cyprian, third-century bishop of Carthage. Regarding the church, Cyprian writes, “From her womb we are born, by her milk we are nurtured, by her spirit we are given life.”<sup>99</sup> The church provides the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for believers, one of the vital means of strengthening our union with Christ.

Nevin also discusses the importance of the church in nurturing believers and their union with Christ. He believes that the church “is truly the mother of all her children.”<sup>100</sup> Nevin understands the vital role that the church plays in cultivating one’s relationship with the Lord from infancy through adulthood. He writes that it is “altogether natural, that children growing up in the bosom of the Church, under the faithful application of the means of grace, should be quickened into spiritual life.”<sup>101</sup> For Nevin, our spiritual life and union with Christ are nurtured through the means of grace, such as the Lord’s Supper, faithfully celebrated within the church.

For Schmemmann and the Orthodox faith, our union with Christ is most clearly experienced through the divine liturgy as a journey to our ascended Lord which climaxes in the Eucharist. In the Orthodox faith, our union with Christ is our real participation in heavenly

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<sup>98</sup> Kalantzis, “For You Have Been Planted Together,” 195.

<sup>99</sup> Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, 5.3, trans. Allen Brent (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006).

<sup>100</sup> John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chambersburg: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1844), 129.

<sup>101</sup> Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 130.



realities.<sup>102</sup> For Cullman, the Lord's Supper strengthens our union with Christ and offers us a protective grace because we are communing with the risen Lord; however, those who partake in an unworthy manner "eat and drink judgment against themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29).<sup>103</sup> Thus, for some, the Lord's Supper brings life and union; for others, it brings judgment.

### *Covenant Meal*

The second theological topic that we will discuss is the nature of the Lord's Supper as a covenant meal. Derek Thomas states, "The Supper underlines a deep undercurrent of covenantal consciousness on the part of Jesus. He viewed his Messiahship as the fulfillment of the projected trajectory of covenantal allusions in the Old Testament."<sup>104</sup> According to Thomas, the Lord's Supper is a means of ratifying and renewing our covenantal relationship with God. When we partake of the meal, we remember what Christ accomplished for us on the cross; how he became the Passover Lamb for us; and how his once-for-all sacrifice brought atonement for our sins.<sup>105</sup>

Frank Senn also describes the covenantal nature of the Lord's Supper. He writes,

The Lord's Supper is not only a communion or fellowship meal (1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:17-34) but also a covenant meal, not unlike the one mentioned in Exod. 24:11. In fact, when Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, he uses the language of Exodus 24 with regard to the "blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:28; Exod. 24:8).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revised and expanded (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>103</sup> Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, 98.

<sup>104</sup> Derek Thomas, "Covenant, Assurance, and the Sacraments," in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 580.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas, "Covenant, Assurance, and the Sacraments," 579-580.

<sup>106</sup> Frank Senn, *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 126.

Senn highlights the relationship between the Lord's Supper and the covenant meal that Moses and the seventy elders shared with God. Once the Israelites reached Mount Sinai, the Lord spoke to Moses concerning the law and the various festivals the people were to observe (Ex. 19-23). In Exodus 24, Moses shares with the people all that the Lord spoke to him, and then Moses and the seventy elders enjoy a meal with the Lord. Thomas describes this whole event as a "covenant-ratification ceremony."<sup>107</sup>

When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we remember the new covenant that Jesus inaugurated and ratified through his death on the cross. This meal fulfills all of the meals of the Old Testament including the Passover meal and the covenant meal of Exodus 24.

Marci McFee shares how a particular Lord's Supper experience had a profound impact on her personally and sacramentally. She describes the effect of being in a circle and looking face-to-face at so many people for whom she cared deeply, noting that "Covenant and connection are carried throughout the history of our faith. Our God who created us, delivers us, invites us, and redeems us issues the promise of what all humans crave: to know we are not alone."<sup>108</sup> Corporate worship and the regular practice of the Lord's Supper help to remind us that we are not alone. We live in intimate union with our triune God, and we enjoy fellowship with one another as we journey together on earth. The Lord's Supper is the covenant meal, the food for our journey which nourishes us and renews us in our relationship with God and with one another.

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<sup>107</sup> Thomas, "Covenant, Assurance, and the Sacraments," 578.

<sup>108</sup> Marcia McFee, "Communion, potluck, and the Body of Christ: Embodying diversity in worship practice for a deeper communion theology," *Review & Expositor* 116, no. 3 (2019): 301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637319867406>.

## **Conclusion**

God nourishes his people through the sacramental practice of the Lord's Supper. The body and blood of Christ are food for our journey as Christians. Though the evangelical and Reformed traditions tend to emphasize the Word as the primary means of feeding on Christ, our union with Christ is strengthened through regular, communal participation in the Lord's Supper. John 6 is an important passage, revealing Jesus as the Bread of Life, the true manna from heaven and the same spiritual food that our ancestors ate in the wilderness. As we feed on him at the table, we abide in him and he in us.

Augustine and Nevin inspire us to recover the ancient means of grace in a culture still plagued by dualistic and rationalistic tendencies, looking for the next new thing to satisfy a trite and fickle faith. In this context, as we learn to depend more and more on him, I believe God will provide food for our journey, nourishing his pilgrim people through a robust sacramental practice of the Lord's Supper.

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