

Bridges of Hope: How God's Grace Touches Your Life

A Pastor's Perspective on Baptism and the
Lord's Supper

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PREFACE

**“O taste and see that the LORD is good! Happy is the one who takes refuge in him!”
(Psalm 34:8)**

The life of faith can seem like a tug-of-war between the very real to-do list of living; grocery shopping, unanswered mail, doctor’s appointments, work, family obligations, and the real need for the peace, comfort, and connection that God provides. Prayer time and Bible reading can help. At the same time, they might have quite the opposite effect. The exasperations, demands, and confusions of living can seem to be more than a match for our weak spiritual lives. And this can especially be the case if we believe that the ‘real’ pathway to God leads us out of this world into the realm of the spiritual. But if God is not ‘out there’, then where is God to be found?

The good news is that the hope, comfort, assurance, and faith that characterize life with God are not on a distant, spiritual summit we must conquer along with everything else life expects from us. These wonderful gifts of God are not bits of cosmic, spiritual debris that we must seek after ‘out there’.

While you may have been chasing that elusive, spiritual rainbow your gracious God has been right there in the luxuriant flowers beneath your feet! Which is another way of saying if we are going to be grasped by the radical grace and mercy of God we need to look no further than the Creation. For it is in the Creation that God wants to be found. And to put an even finer point on it, God wants to be found in a word of promise, water, bread, and wine. You don’t need a spiritual antenna. What you do need are ears and taste buds!

As you read, it is my hope and prayer that those elusive, untouchable rainbows of spirituality will vanish. And in their place you will come to see that good and gracious God who has been right there all along, walking beside you, bringing good out of evil and opening your future for the sake of Jesus.

Pastor Mark Anderson

THE TEMPTING MIRAGE OF SPIRITUALITY

Let's get right to the point. Spirituality should come with a warning label:

'Danger! May cause prolonged bouts of self-examination, detachment from daily life, and endless speculation around the esoteric secrets of the universe!'

Preoccupation with spirituality can take us into the murky labyrinth of life's imponderables, leaving us bewildered either by the entanglements of our inner lives or the perplexing mysteries and enigmas of existence, usually both! Whatever god or spirituality we may find inside the black hole of our convoluted selves or out there in the cold, limitless cosmos, we will not find the God we need. We will not encounter the warm-blooded, down-to-earth God of Creation, the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus.

When we speak of the God who is known in Jesus, we are speaking of a God who is Spirit, a hidden God to be sure. At the same time, the down-to-earth God of Jesus sidesteps spirituality. The God of life comes in the midst of Creation, in the 'stuff' of Creation, to reveal and carry out His decision to reclaim what is His. God does not come virtually, but actually!

But wait! Aren't the greatest spiritual insights above us or deep within us? Isn't what I need to know about God above and beyond the material world? Isn't the material world an obstacle to be overcome, to be seen through, in seeking after God? It is in questions such as these that the danger is revealed. If you tend to think this way, you are not alone. Nor is this a new idea.

An ancient belief system that looked to spirituality as the key to enlightenment was called Gnosticism (from the Greek word, 'gnosis', knowledge.) Let's look at a few examples of how Gnostic beliefs took hold among some Christians. In fact, they still do.

The Gnostics saw the physical world as flawed and empty of spiritual meaning. A bleak, dark, low-resolution wasteland, really. The goal of life was to obtain the release of what they believed was a divine spark that was trapped within the flesh, transcend the material entanglements of the physical world, and enter the high-resolution state of spiritual perfection.

Because the Gnostics viewed the material world as evil, isolation and detachment from the world were preferred over participation and engagement with life. This led to a disregard for the well-being of oneself, others, and neglect of the practical affairs of living. The purpose of life was to escape the corrupt material world to that higher realm of existence, where one could reunite with

the divine. The Gnostic Christians believed that Jesus came to assist that inner spark in reuniting with the Divine, spiritual bonfire! The important point for our purpose is to point out that all of this served to undermine the value of Creation and ran contrary to how the God of the Bible is made known.

For a time, most Christians embraced or were influenced by Gnostic ideas. Gnostic groups sprouted up like weeds for several centuries! What these Gnostic groups had in common was this overvaluing of the spiritual at the expense of the material world. Which goes to show that the majority is not always right!

One group of early Christian Gnostics were called Docetists. This is another word from the Greek and means 'to see' or 'to appear'. The Docetic Christians taught that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body. He appeared to be human enough, but he was, in fact, purely spiritual, a celestial hologram, a virtual Jesus! Jesus' physicality was an illusion. His suffering and death on the cross were also illusions. He did not really suffer, and he certainly did not die. To put it bluntly, God was 'faking' the humanity of Jesus!

Rejection of the Old Testament was another move some Gnostics made. They believed the God of the Old Testament was a malevolent, bungling deity. The creation of this messy, material world was his fault! They claimed that the true God, revealed in Jesus, was a kinder, gentler, completely, and purely spiritual God separate from the incompetent God of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament, with its promises, prophecies, and foreshadowing, finds its fulfillment in the New Testament through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Gnosticism's focus on escaping the world through the possession of secret, spiritual, unworldly knowledge distorted the unity and continuity of God's redemptive plan. It veered away from the beauty of the Old and New Testaments working harmoniously to reveal God's mercy and love for creation, in creation, and His unfolding purpose for humanity, especially in the coming of Jesus. In doing so, Gnosticism produced a fragmented and highly distorted understanding of God's revelation. According to the Gnostic Christians, Jesus was not the word become flesh who actually died, carrying your sin and mine. The Christian could attain pure, mystical knowledge of God, unity with God, by following Jesus' teachings and his example of sacrifice. Just as a few loose threads can unravel an intricate tapestry, this Gnostic perspective undermined the coherence of the Biblical narrative and most importantly, the true nature of Jesus and his mission.

Gnosticism in all its forms was an attempt to escape what it believed to be a corrupt and evil world and to find relief and solace – salvation in the pure, spiritual realm.

In terms of actual living, you can probably see the appeal. The Gnostics, after all, were people like you and me. We experience, as they did, that life can be brutal, harsh, unfair, unpredictable, and unjust. And in the end, you die! Under such circumstances it can be hard to see the good in anything associated with life in this world. Where do we find a God of love in a transient world of mortality, suffering and death? This led the Gnostics to devalue the material creation to the point of saying that it could have nothing to do with the God of Jesus. If there is a God of love, you won't find him here! Like a mirage in the desert, Gnosticism seduced a deeply rooted human impulse to seek refuge in the illusion of a higher, purer, shimmering, spirituality.

Lost in the Fog

The English rocker, Steve Winwood, had a 1986 hit song entitled, "Higher Love". Part of the lyric says, *"Things look so bad everywhere. In this whole world what is fair? There must be higher love down in the heart or hidden in the stars above."* A hardened Gnostic could not have come up with a better lyric! The truth, real spirituality, higher love is out there, somewhere in the transcendent realm of the spiritual or the inner life of mystical knowledge. But not here in the messy, material 'stuff' of creation!

Isn't there a little gnostic in all of us, just dying to get out? Who has not had those moments when we have had enough of the heartbreaking, messy, business of living and called out, "Stop the world, I want to get off!", or "Beam me up, Scotty!" Perhaps the appeal of 'Star Trek' and other escapist, cosmic fantasies conceal a demythologized gnosticism!

Since the Gnostic way of thinking can affect our understanding of the Creation, the material world, it can also impact how we understand the sacraments. If we take the hyper-spiritual turn then the Word of God given in water, bread, and wine becomes abstracted and untethered from God's good creation. Instead of God being for us right there in the water of baptism, the eating and the drinking of the Lord's Supper, the sacraments become a summons to either transcend ourselves or look inside ourselves. We wander in the spiritual fog looking for that 'higher love'. Surely to perceive the deeper, hidden meaning of the sacraments we must look beyond them or through them.

THE GOOD CREATION

The first and most fundamental confession of faith for the Christian is in these words from the Book of Genesis: “In the beginning God created...And God saw that it was good.” (Genesis 1) God, Creation and good. This beautiful trilogy of words belong together. Everything in the universe, from the vastness of the cosmos to the smallest living organism, bears witness to the God who gives Himself in and through the Creation. The Bible makes it clear that while sin and evil are undeniably real, the material world is an expression of God’s goodness and love. But there is more.

This fundamental confession wants to recognize the immanence, the nearness of God in Creation. The God of the Bible is not distant or aloof but intimately involved in every dimension of Creation. In the Bible God did not fall into the background after the calamity of sin appeared. God is very much active in the working of Creation. The Holy Spirit, who is always active and creating, bringing life, isn’t going anywhere!

The God of the Bible is a rough and tumble deity. He rolls up His divine sleeves and dives headfirst into every aspect of Creation. Noah knew God as a nautical architect intent on making him into a sea-going zookeeper! Jacob knew Him as a cosmic wrestler, ready and willing to contend with him and for him. Moses watched as God orchestrated the humiliation of a prideful, world superpower and carried out an epic rescue mission for His people. God the matchmaker orchestrated a happy marriage for Rebekah and Isaac. The God of Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was always hands-on, never afraid to get His hands dirty. Finally, the Living God was born of a woman, lived, and died right here in this world.

At the same time all of this is in the present tense. God is the ultimate cosmic protagonist, writing an epic saga through Law and Gospel in your life, where He is both the author and the central character, always ready to dive into the fray with you, contend with you, and defend you. Martin Luther said it with gripping certainty in his famous hymn. ‘A Mighty Fortress’.

“Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing; Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God’s own choosing: You ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth His Name, From age to age the same, And He must win the battle.”

This is where the ancient Gnostic Christians stumbled badly. The God of the Bible, of Creation, is not remote and isolated in the spiritual realm. God’s presence fills the entire created

world, the world He created and continues to sustain by His Word. Although God cannot be equated with the material, natural world, God is active in the physical, natural, and human dimensions of life. Those three words above, 'God, creation, and good', point to a living God, active in history with a redemptive purpose. And that redemptive purpose was revealed supremely in the creation when "The Word became flesh and lived among us". (John 1:14) God is in the midst of the battle with us!

SACRAMENTS, THE CROSS, AND THE FREEDOM OF GOD

God is free to appear in unexpected ways and places within the material world, including the brokenness and suffering of life. God is God, after all. And when He says His ways are not our ways it is good advice to take Him seriously! This truth finds its most paradoxical expression in the crucifixion of Jesus. This brings us to the theology of the cross and the freedom of God.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) report a crucial moment in the Lord's ministry. Jesus has just told the disciples that his fate will lead him to suffering and death, followed by his Resurrection. Peter, no doubt saying out loud what the others were thinking, pushes back on Jesus' words. Suffering and death are not in Peter's salvation scheme! The Lord rebukes Peter in the strongest possible terms. In objecting to the Messiah's suffering, Peter has become the voice of the Devil himself.

What Peter missed, and what we can miss, is that Jesus was actually speaking of the goal of his baptism. And this was nothing new. In Mark 10 and Luke 12, we are given two instances where Jesus refers to His baptism. In Luke Jesus speaks of the ongoing reality of His baptism as the life He is actually living, and He is anxious for His baptism to be completed. In Mark Jesus speaks of the outcome or final goal of His baptism which is death under the law upon the Cross.

God did not come into this world as a conqueror, adorned in regal splendor leading a victorious army. He came in the flesh, a humble, suffering servant, bearing the weight of humanity's sin, your sin and mine. Paul wrote of Jesus with these words; "...though he was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8)

In what we call 'real time', and after betrayal by His disciples, a joke of a trial, and a severe beating, Roman executioners lead the man Jesus, dripping with sweat and blood, to a hill outside

Jerusalem. That hill had seen many victims. Jesus and the two men who were with Him were the latest. With deadly efficiency the execution squad staked Him out upon the rugged Cross and hoisted Him up for all to see. Jesus hung there bleeding, suffering, and dying on that Cross, without any help from us! The meaning of the Cross does not lie beyond it somewhere. The Cross is not a spiritual lesson to be learned or an example to follow. The Cross confronts us with our sin, our need for salvation. At the same time the Cross reveals for us the Savior we need. Jesus' death upon that Cross was His work alone. On the Cross, and through the Resurrection which followed, the gritty, down-to-earth work of Jesus' baptism was completed for us.

The wisdom of Christ's Cross and Resurrection, which defines our baptism, also defies, and offends our human reason. The world, then as now, calls it foolishness. Nevertheless, in His perfect freedom, God has freely chosen the path of merciful, suffering love to bring about redemption and reconciliation on His terms and in His way. In this unexpected twist, the mighty becomes meek, bearing the burden of the law and sin in the weakness of our humanity. The bloody Cross is the scene of victory. The yawning chasm of the grave becomes the gleaming triumphal arch through which we enter eternal life!

The wisdom of the Cross means that when Christians speak of God, we speak in terms of what we see in Jesus only; the God who names and confronts sin, who forgives real sinners, who is merciful, faithful, and committed to bringing salvation to His people. In Jesus we meet the God who has come in the flesh and blood of humanity, as part of the Creation. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus really suffered and really died and was raised from death *for us*. There was nothing virtual, abstract, fake, or symbolic about the water that covered Him in His baptism, the blood that flowed out of his wounds or His broken, limp body as it hung upon the Cross. The resurrected Jesus bore the marks of His suffering and death.

The Sacraments, therefore, are not an invitation to transcend ourselves. Just where are you planning on going, anyway! The Gospel word delivers the living Word of God, Jesus Christ your Lord, right there in the water, in the eating and the drinking.

BAPTISM: SALVATION IS ON THE CALENDAR

My baptismal certificate is framed and hanging on the wall in my study. That piece of paper, dated and signed by the pastor and the Christian witnesses who were present, reminds me of a simple truth; the Sacraments are concrete, objective events in time. What we Lutherans call an

‘external word’. God takes the initiative and comes to us, imparting grace quite apart from our works or efforts. The Word comes in baptism to create faith. The same can be said for the preached Word and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. In coming to us in this way, God keeps it real by meeting us, deciding *for* us each and every time the Word of promise is given to us through the Word and Sacraments.

You can think of the proclaiming of the Gospel, your baptism, and receiving the Lord’s Supper as promise events on the ongoing timeline of your life in this world. The very tangible, ordinary elements of the Sacraments, water, bread, and wine, keep the Word of God down to earth where we need it. Yes, there is a deep, numinous, inaccessible mystery here. There is no doubt about that. But that’s not what we’re concerned with in the sacraments. What we are concerned with is receiving the One, True Living God who opens His hand in the water, word, bread, and wine, *for us*.

The water, bread, and wine of the sacraments bridge the gap between the saving events of Jesus’ Cross and Resurrection and our present reality. The sacraments save, here and now! The Word of the Gospel’s promise present in the water, bread and wine enables us, by God’s sheer grace and mercy, to participate in the life-giving effects of Christ’s death and Resurrection. The sacraments serve as channels, bridges of divine grace, reconciling us with God (faith), the creation, (hope) and one another (love). The sacraments, joined with God’s Word of promise, are where God’s grace touches our lives.

The sacraments affirm the profound significance of God’s presence in and for creation. As spiritual gifts, therefore, the sacraments come counterintuitively. Instead of sending us into ourselves or into the spiritual fog to ponder abstractly what the sacraments mean, we are given water, crumbs of bread and a sip of wine with a word of promise right there as we come to the font or as we kneel at the altar. The water, bread, wine, and word of the Sacraments find their meaning in the person of the crucified and risen Jesus, the Word of God, who meets us there. The direction is critical. When we look at the Sacraments in the light of Jesus we do not say, “Beam me up, Scotty”. Instead we plead, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ And He does.

God Doubles Down On Creation

Christ meets us in the Sacraments to bring us back to this good earth, to establish us in the freedom of faith in order that we might take up our proper identity as creatures in God’s good world. The water of Holy Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper connect us to the

organic, earthy reality of our physical existence. And this, of course, is where the Word in the ‘stuff’ of the Sacraments can be an affront and offense. The desire to reject God’s presence in the ‘stuff’ of creation has an insidious, sinful dimension. Like Adam and Eve, we want more than just being a part of the mundane business of living. Creation is not enough. Being creatures in God’s world, dependent upon God’s word for life, was rejected by Adam and Eve. They had divine aspirations, just as we do! Our desire to become more spiritual, at its heart, is the desire to be like God, to be in control, to be a little god unto ourselves.

When the serpent set about to attack the promises God had given to Adam and Eve, this was the tactic. In effect what the serpent said was, “You don’t have to settle for this limited, creaturely role. God is holding out on you. The material world is an obstacle holding you back. You can transcend yourself and know what God knows. You will be like God!”

But the material world is not an obstacle to our seeking after God. That was and is a big lie. The material world is an obstacle to our desire to *be* gods! So, God comes to us in the sacraments, as in the Creation, as in the flesh and blood of Jesus. God comes against the grain of our spiritual pretensions, doubling down on the goodness of Creation. While we are busy climbing the ladders of spirituality, pursuing our aspirations to divinity, God comes humbly, simply, in the good Creation He has made, to forgive us for our spiritual conceits!

God always wanted to be known through the goodness of Creation. Adam and Eve were not given a mountaintop on which to ponder the zodiac! They were given a garden which they could tend and care for. In that garden they were free to enjoy one another, the gifts of God and God Himself. As Genesis so beautifully describes, God went for a walk in the garden in the cool of the day. God wanted to be with them and for them in the midst of Creation. In this respect, nothing has changed. God is not a distant deity, detached from His Creation, but rather a God who desires companionship, who seeks to be with us in the ordinary moments of life. To be present in this world is to be present with the God who is *for you* in and through the Creation. In the hearing of the Word and the receiving of the sacraments the presence of the Living God is palpable, tangible, immediate, right there in real time for you. In the Word of the Gospel and the sacraments God is right where He wants to be, *for you*.

The Eyes To See

Jesus was a dinner guest at the house of a Pharisee. Mary Magdalene was also present and anointed Jesus' feet with costly perfume. Upon witnessing this there was grumbling and grouching among some of the guests. 'Why was this costly substance wasted like this? Surely the perfume should be sold, and the money given to the poor', went the pious objections. Why waste such value on Jesus, the worrisome troublemaker!

Why did Mary make this extravagant gesture? The answer for faith is obvious. That rabbi eating matzo, figs, olives, and dates, and engaging in spirited conversation was God Himself, sitting right there at dinner! In Jesus Mary saw the gift. Jesus did not symbolize or represent the gift. His presence did not point beyond itself into the far reaches of the cosmos to some deep, spiritual meaning. Mary had received the gift of God's love and mercy *in* Jesus. Through the gift of faith's sight, she saw and knew Jesus for who He was; God for her, in the flesh, and she gave thanks.

To restore us to faith, to Himself, to reconcile us, God takes up the water, bread, and wine (gifts of the old creation) and joins them to His word of promise. In this way God bestows upon us the benefits of the new creation. The eyes of faith are opened to see what was always there but hidden, blinded, by sin; the gift of Creation and the Giver who is at the heart of Creation, revealed in Jesus Christ. When faith's sight is restored through the Gospel, the Christian sees in the Sacraments the supreme gift of God Himself, bestowing all the benefits of the Gospel. The water, bread and wine are not 'mere' symbols pointing to something beyond. The symbol and what it symbolizes are mysterious yet actually, one. All of Creation is connected to the redemptive work of Christ Jesus.

What About Faith?

Doesn't this mean that receiving the sacraments depends upon my belief, my faith? You would probably like to think so, but, in a word, no. It is foolishness to think that our faith is what connects us to God. Our faith, our trusting God, wanders, and wobbles, and that is on a good day! On the other hand, God's faithfulness to us is rock solid. If my faithfulness in receiving Baptism and the Lord's Supper was the issue, then they would cease to give that blessed assurance. Instead, they would be a source of uncertainty and anxiety, even fear. I would wonder; 'Am I faithful enough? Do

I believe all the right things about the sacraments? Have I truly repented of my sin? Am I worthy to receive God's grace?' Those troubling questions would remain.

Under these circumstances it is easy to have real uncertainty about the basis for faith. This life is lived under the constant demand of the law. And the law comes at us in many, many forms. As a Christian I am called to trust in the unconditional freedom of God's grace and mercy. But that trust is always under attack! That little voice inside taunts me, 'There is no free lunch! You have to do something to earn God's favor or at least show you are serious about God.' The old sinner in me is always ready to roll up his sleeves and do something!

For many years I brought the Lord's Supper to the homebound and to those who were hospitalized or dying. In those precious moments, in the midst of very challenging, distressing circumstances, the word of the Gospel and those simple gifts of bread and wine brought great comfort and assurance. Instead of putting you on the spot so that all you can see are your shortcomings, obligations and faltering faith, the Lord comes in His Supper to meet you *in* your faltering faith. The external word of God's promise creates and nourishes faith apart from the demands of the law even as we must live under those demands. The Christian receives faith right there in the divine word, in the eating of the bread, the drinking of the wine, and in the hearing of the promise, "Given and shed for you".

The Gospel delivers unconditional freedom and assurance to sinners who live under the accusing voice of the law and all those troubling questions. In the eating and the drinking we receive Christ, even if our faith is not always at the point of being able to trust the promise. For that is just the point; the Lord comes to renew and revive our faith. The Word of God's promise in the sacraments brings us out of death (unfaith) into life (faith). Faith, however weak or flimsy, is the goal of the Lord's Supper.

When you are encountered by the grace of God in Word and Sacrament, you have not wandered into a parallel, spiritualized universe! That which is supremely and ultimately real has happened to you in God's word here and now. As the Lord often declared, 'The kingdom of God has come upon you!' God's promise is as real as your hearing, it is as real as your taste buds! It is right there, immediate, present, tangible. Like Jesus calling out to very dead Lazarus, "Get up!" And life is given. That's how the Sacraments work. "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "This is my body, for you. This is my blood, for you." Right here, right now. Don't try to take it inside and spiritualize it. Simply receive the Spirit as God is giving it. Let

these gifts of grace be what, in fact, they are. God *for you*, pressing and impressing Himself on you with His forgiveness and mercy, bringing life out of death!

Now, that way of receiving the sacraments leaves nothing except to rejoice in them! To celebrate them! To live within them! For they set us on the path that Jesus came to set us on. The path of a freedom which begins now and will be brought to perfection in the life to come. The Sacraments keep us in the fellowship of forgiveness. Our good Lord never holds the past against us. The freedom of faith restores us to our roles, our vocations as creatures in this world, and with some joy, too!

So, when faith receives the water, bread, and wine, together with the word of promise, what is perceived in these simple, very material elements of creation is the gift who is the crucified and risen Jesus. It is as simple and direct as that. Or is it?

THE LORD'S SUPPER: TWO PLACES AT THE SAME TIME?

A question my confirmation students often asked was, 'If Jesus is in heaven how can he be in the bread and wine?' How can Jesus multi-task between heaven and the communion table?! Christians have asked this question for a long time. This was the kind of thing that bothered the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. When he and Martin Luther held their famous meeting in the year 1529, they found agreement on almost everything they discussed. Ulrich stumbled, however, over how Jesus could be present in the bread and wine everywhere, now that he had ascended to heaven and was comfortably seated at the right hand of the Father. To solve this offense to his reason Ulrich called the bread and wine 'mere' symbols.

Think of it this way. You are seated in a five-star restaurant filled with excitement, anticipating the excellent fare about to be served. And you are hungry! The server arrives at the table with an empty dinner plate on which there is a picture of what appears to be a delicious meal. The server smiles and says, "Use your imagination!" Really? Is that how we want to view the Lord's Supper?

Both Martin and Ulrich agreed that Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father and that from that position He would one day come to judge the living and the dead. But Luther argued that we should understand the right hand of God outside the limitations of reason, space, and time. Jesus' place at God's right hand is the place of power, where the will of God is directed, and God's purposes are carried out.

Throughout history, the right hand was considered the position of honor, power, and favor. Rulers, kings, and queens would often have a trusted advisor or second-in-command seated at their right hand, symbolizing their authority and participation in governance. In Rome, Marcus Agrippa was the right-hand man of Caesar Augustus. Queen Elizabeth the First relied on the unwavering support of Sir William Cecil. Joseph, whose story is told in Genesis, held such a position in Egypt. While pharaoh attended to matters of state and enjoyed the luxurious benefits of royalty, Joseph was busy sailing up and down the Nile getting things done! Similarly, in Christian theology, Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father signifies His exalted position and His participation in divine authority. It emphasizes His equality with God the Father and His role in the active governance of the entire universe.

To confess that Jesus is at God's right hand, therefore, is to say that He is active everywhere! Christ, the Word of God, is not lounging at the right hand of God, looking at His watch and waiting for the end of the world. He is supremely active in all of Creation! And where God is redemptively active, present, engaged, involved, is in the work of the Law and the Gospel through Word and Sacrament, right here in the very down-to-earth world. The sacraments, therefore, are not God's virtual presence. The sacraments are God's actual presence, with us and *for us*.

A Closer Look At The Language

Lutheran Christians often use the words 'in, under, and with' to describe Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. We want to be careful here, however. Grammar can be tricky. This language wants to point to several things the Lord's Supper is and is not.

First, the language wants to say that while we are literally eating and drinking bread and wine we are not literally eating and drinking Christ's body and blood! Some ancient Romans took these words literally and they freaked out! Imagine the Romans scratching their heads, pondering over these gatherings where the Christians would talk about eating the body and drinking the blood. They couldn't help but conjure up wild theories, like the infamous accusation of cannibalism. This misunderstanding served as a partial justification for some of the persecutions endured by the Christians.

Second, these three words want to say that the Lord's Supper is not merely symbolic or figurative. *In* points to location and inclusion, "*under and with*" point to accompaniment and participation. This trio of words, taken together want to say that God relates to us intimately and

personally, physically, and spiritually in the eating and the drinking. Again, the creation is very much in play as God comes *for us*.

What ‘in, under, and with’ want to convey for you is that the bread and wine are the means, the actual vehicles through which Christ gives Himself to you, mysteriously, incomprehensibly, supernaturally, yet right here in and through the creation. Bread, a humble host, becomes a vessel of His presence, offering nourishment for your hungry soul. The wine flows with His Spirit, bringing comfort, assurance, and renewal. However far above our pay grade the intricacies of this giving may be, we want to say that Christ comes to us ‘in, under, and with’ these tangible things.

Another bit of historic language that some churches have used to describe the Lord’s Supper is the ‘Real Presence’. Christian groups who engage in all manner of church fights on other aspects of the faith do agree on this. Among them are the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Eastern Orthodox churches, along with some others. There are differences among these churches that have to do with the mode of Christ’s presence. But all agree that Christ is ‘really present’ in the Supper.

Some have elaborated on the ‘Real Presence’ by suggesting that something happens to the bread and wine to transform them into Christ’s body and blood. As widespread as this view may be, there is no biblical evidence to support it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians mention the Lord’s Supper, but they do not tell us how the bread and wine are Christ for us. Luther, in good pastoral practice, encouraged Christians to focus on the words of promise, again with those words, ‘This is my body, this is my blood.’ He especially liked those powerful, punctuating words, ‘Given and shed *for you*’.

It is not difficult for the God of Creation, who is everywhere present in Creation, to be present in the water, bread, and wine. What is difficult is trusting and believing the promise that God who is Spirit bestows His very life in mercy for us in this ordinary, material, down-to-earth way. The temptation is always there to look behind or beyond the actual water, bread, and wine for the deeper, hidden, spiritual meaning. Or to look inside myself for evidence of my worthiness to receive such a gift. But the Good Lord does not serve empty plates at his meal! No imagination required!

Two Club Memberships

By being for us in the very down-to-earth, unspiritual sacraments God makes clear that grace is not limited to a spiritual realm. The Word that comes in preaching, water, bread, and wine closes

the gap between God and Creation. In this way the life of God in Christ becomes tangible and accessible making us relevant to how God wants to be known. Here it is helpful to look at Luther's understanding of the two kingdoms: the spiritual kingdom, which pertains to the Gospel and salvation, and the temporal kingdom, which encompasses the earthly realm and civil society. God is active in both realms but with different goals. Luther emphasized the importance of distinguishing between these two realms while recognizing their interconnectedness. He highlighted that the Gospel, given in Word and Sacrament, brings the spiritual kingdom bestowing freedom, forgiveness, and new life by grace through faith in Christ. At the same time, the sacraments come to us as we live in the temporal kingdom. The temporal kingdom operates through the laws of all peoples in every place and deals with civil and societal matters.

Think of it like having memberships in two clubs; Club Gospel and Club Law. In Club Gospel you have VIP access to all the gifts of the Gospel; forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. You are surrounded and sustained by grace, living in the freedom of faith. Nothing is demanded of you. Everything is given!

But because you remain a creature in this world you are also a member of Club Law. Here you go by the legal playbook, respecting authority, paying taxes, showing up for work, taking up life's obligations and responsibilities. In this club you take up the tool of the law and work for the good of creation and the neighbor. Seeing Christian life in this way recognizes that while we are saved by God's grace as a gift quite apart from anything we can do, we will continue to live under the law's demands in this life. We will struggle with these demands and the sin the law exposes in us. In the midst of this struggle our Good Lord comes to us in the preached Word, Baptism, and Holy Communion. Through these means we are restored to a living faith by the very life, the Spirit of God. He does this not apart from the Creation but from within the Creation.

Not How but Why

What finally matters is not that we grasp the 'how' but the 'why'. Why does Christ come in Word and Sacrament? It is certainly not to invite us to plumb the abstract depths of how God's presence actually works. Trying to understand how God works in the sacraments would be like trying to solve a Rubik's cube, blindfolded, while riding a unicycle on a high wire! Good luck!

The 'why' question is answered every time the water of baptism is poured out in the name of the triune God. The 'why' question is answered when the pastor proclaims the words of

institution. Those tangible words are proclaimed in the living present *for you* so that Christ's promise may reach out to you and assure you that when you receive the sacraments, you are receiving God's mercy. Earlier, we saw how faith is the goal of the sacraments. Luther put it simply and clearly; "The glory of our God is precisely that for our sakes He comes down to the very depths, into human flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, our heart, our bosom . . ." (*This is My Body*, 1527, LW, Vol.37, 72).

Food For The Journey

Like the manna that kept the ancient Israelites going through their desert sojourn, the Lord's Supper is food for our long journey out of death into life. Reflecting on this, again one of my confirmation students called the Lord's Supper "pit stops during the race of living". I thought that was pretty good! After a week of grappling with obligations, personal challenges, societal pressures, emotional turmoil and so much more, we come to the altar quite mindful of the anxieties, trials and tribulations that are taking the life right out of us. Our tanks are nearly empty! In this way, the Lord's Supper is linked to baptism's life of dying and rising with Christ. God's proclaimed Word in water and God's Word in bread and wine are one Word, after all. Everything the Lord brings in the Gospel and Sacraments is meant for us, here and now, amid the very ordinariness of living. God shares His life humbly, quietly with the real flesh and blood sinners who come to the table. Because it is Jesus, the Bread of Life, we receive there, we know that baptism's promise of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation will continue to empower and sustain us even as we are kept united in the body of Christ through faith as we gather to receive the bread and wine.

WHY THE CHURCH?

If the Word of Promise is the point, then why not stay at home, read the Bible, and have some bread and wine. Why do you need church? To put it simply because you belong to Jesus Christ. Many churches do bring the Lord's Supper to those who are home-bound or in the hospital. Often it is the pastor who brings the sacrament. Sometimes it is members of the congregation who have been specially appointed and trained for this purpose. In several of my congregations, many of our elderly members found it difficult to be in worship regularly. The pastors and teams of lay people would bring the sacrament to them right after the Sunday morning communion service. This practice served to underscore the communal or family nature of the meal. Those who could not be

present with the congregation were given the clear message that we all belong to one another in Christ. Whether it be the pastor or lay people who bring the sacrament, in either case, they stand in for the presence of the entire congregation. Saint Paul brings out this important aspect of the sacrament in 1 Corinthians where he writes,

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Over many years I served communion to folks in every condition of life. Thousands of hands opened to receive, together, the grace of Christ in the bread and wine; a college professor who lost his wife to cancer; a farmer whose rugged, burly hands spoke of a life of hard work; a smiling, young mother with her baby in one arm, showing the little child the communion wafer before taking and eating; retired businessmen, high school kids, college students, husbands and wives, widows and so many more. I recall these same folks gathering after worship for fellowship, sharing their hurts and hopes with one another, taking part in life together in that unique fellowship that is the living body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper, like Baptism, incorporates us into the body of Christ. We come as sinners, weak in faith, battered and set upon by the world, often tangled up in problems of our own making. In the Supper, the Lord restores us by faith to Himself, to one another and to the Creation. 'Participation' is the word Paul uses. Normally we come together for Holy Communion, as the church has done from the very beginning, to receive with other Christians that gift of grace that we have in common. Individual communion is the exception, therefore. At the same time, when two or three are gathered, we participate in His life, together, as God's people.

BLESSED ASSURANCE

Although we have been baptized into Christ and belong to Him, we remain connected to the brokenness of the world and its fallen nature. Just as a fisherman may occasionally be caught in the snare of his own nets, so too can we find ourselves entangled in the powers of sin and evil. Our lives in this world are just as subject to these powers as the rest of humanity. By burying Himself deep in the Creation, God uses water, bread, and wine, the produce of Creation, to meet me in the

midst of all that entangles me, so that I may know that God is for me right here in the crucible of life.

In the Sacraments God comes to join me with Jesus Christ that I may take up the gritty business of living in the resilience and freedom of a living faith, knowing with certainty that God is with me and for me. Through the sacraments, God touches my life, speaks to my heart, assuring me that He is near, walking with me, and pouring out His grace upon me. In these down-to-earth moments, I can rest in the knowledge that God's love is real, His promises are true, and His presence is an unwavering gift for me in the here and now.

Think of it like this. If the water, bread, and wine are 'mere' symbols that point beyond themselves, I can easily turn in on myself and the troubling questions begin. Did I really hear the spoken word of forgiveness, or did I mishear it? Did I hear the word of forgiveness correctly? Did I understand it properly? Was that word really for me? Am I spiritual enough? Am I close enough to God? Do I have enough faith? To make the sacraments virtual reality, 'mere' symbols, deflects faith into the spiritual void. When this happens, I may be tempted to look either inward or outward and see the water, bread, and wine through the lens of my murky motives and troubling questions. I may begin to question everything but my own doubts and fears!

But when actual water is poured over me and when I literally taste the bread and wine, I have the blessed assurance that these gifts are *for me*. In baptism I may be sprinkled, dunked, or splashed. The manner of baptism is not the issue. The elements of the Lord's Supper may not be the freshest French baguette or the vintage a great Napa cabernet! No matter. God calls me to trust that in the washing of baptism and the literal eating and drinking of the supper, God's mysterious, merciful yet tangible presence is there *for me*! If we can confess with Saint John that "The Word became flesh...", it does not seem like much of a stretch to say that the Living Word of God can be truly and actually present in water, bread, and wine.

The Future Comes To Meet Us

As Jesus began his earthly ministry, His very first miracle took place at a wedding feast, a sign of what the joy of the kingdom is all about and a foretaste of the future. In the closing days of His earthly life, when our Lord Jesus gathered with His disciples for the Last Supper, He was giving them, and us, a foretaste of that same future. "I will not drink of the cup again", He said, "until I drink it with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:29)

Someday, the Lord will gather us together at the heavenly banquet. Fellowship with the Living God will be the occasion for us. The endless drone of the world's melancholy and the law's relentless accusations will finally give way to the joyous harmonies of eternal Easter, the glorious celebration that Christ has prepared for His people.

Come As You Are

As we await the glorious fulfillment of God's kingdom we come to the table as we are. And we are the baptized. We come as people caught in the conflicts and dissonance of this world and the sin and selfish desires that plague us. In the Sacrament of Baptism God has promised to walk with us along every path of life's journey, constantly bringing good out of evil, life out of death.

We come to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be reconciled to God, to ourselves and one another. We come trusting that the Word of promise given 'in, under and with' the bread and wine will close the yawning, frightening gap between heaven and earth.

Sometimes we kneel in a posture of prayer, humility, and anticipation, acknowledging our blindness and our need for forgiveness. At other times we stand, our eyes brimming with tears, our hearts burdened with grief, fear, and uncertainty, seeking assurance and comfort. We most often come with full hearts in thanksgiving for the gift of life and the supreme gift of Jesus, the giver of our forgiveness and the author of faith.

However, or wherever we come, under the soaring vaults of a cathedral, in the small confines of a wind-swept prairie church, or as we lay dying in a hospital bed, what is important is to know that your Good Lord is there *for you*. From the day of your baptism, that first communion when you were young, bright-eyed, and full of potential, until that final taste of the bread and wine in those closing days of life, the Word of God's promise remains constant, touching your life with grace, bestowing forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Right here in God's good creation, in the midst of your burdens, you are made one with Him who walked with the weight of the world on His shoulders. As you walk day by day in your baptism under the demands and obligations of what can be a difficult life, you are made one with Him who walked in His baptism through trials and suffering, all the way to death, that you might live. As you taste the wine and bread, uncertain about your place at the table, your place in the world, you are made one with Him who, on that fateful night, knowing they would betray him, broke

the bread of promise, and poured out the wine of the new testament for his disciples, calling them friends.

Friend in Christ, God is not 'out there' waiting for you to find Him at the end of some restless, spiritual odyssey. In all earthly humility, the Lord, the God of this good Creation, is present for you right where He wants to be *for you*. You need not attempt to escape the world within which God has bound Himself to you in love through Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3:16-17)

In this time between the times, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the tangible, sensory, down-to-earth gifts of God's amazing grace. Right there in the hearing, the eating, and the drinking your good Lord is accessible *for you*. Through the mouth of the preacher, the water, sun, and soil of this good earth, the Spirit of the Living God produces the refreshment and nourishment of a living faith. By such faith you, together with all God's people, are anchored in God's good Creation, that we might be of service to the others, proclaiming in hope the Lord's death until He comes.

BRIDGES OF HOPE:

A Pastor's Perspective on Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Are baptism and the Lord's Supper just water, bread, and wine? Are they merely symbols, rituals that summon us to look for deeper meaning either within ourselves or in the 'spiritual' realm?

In this brief exploration of baptism and Lord's Supper, Pastor Mark Anderson reverses the symbolic view and presents the sacraments as profound yet down-to-earth, expressions of God's Grace. More than symbols, Baptism and the Lord's Supper tangibly and intimately bestow God's grace, bringing that very life of God which transforms the human heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During his 46 years in the parish ministry, Mark Anderson served both rural and urban congregations in Minnesota, Montana, and California. He also served for a time as an Air National Guard chaplain, with tours at Buckley Air Force Base, Denver, Colorado, and March Air Force Base, Riverside, California.

In retirement, Mark is engaged in an online ministry in partnership with the 1521Foundation LLC, Corona del Mar, California, and Luther House of Study, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. You are invited to learn more about Mark's work and these organizations at:

www.pastormarkanderson.org.

Mark and his wife Linda (his constant support, advocate, best friend, and by far the better half!) reside in Coto de Caza, California. They have enjoyed many travel adventures together with a definite preference for Italy! They have three children, Erik, Kristin, and Geoff (married to the adorable Jenn).

