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Developing Practices Within the Lord's Supper That Develop Central Identity at Queen City Church of Christ

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ABSTRACT

This project was designed to meet a need at the Queen City Church of Christ (QCC) for developing intentional practices around the Lord's Supper for forming a central identity in a diverse community. The scope of this project focuses on the project group's ability to develop practices based on the theology of the Lord's Supper, biblical teaching, engaging in practices of spiritual formation as a group, and their observations of Lord's Supper practices in other Christian traditions. Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth provides the textual context for the discussion of the role the Lord's Supper plays within a faith community. The theology of the Lord's Supper throughout scripture and church history also informs the theological foundation for the project. Gleaning from the work of James K. A. Smith, the project consults the study of the formation of liturgies as an approach to creating intentional identity formative practices.

A purposeful sample of members at QCC were used for conducting this intervention. The diverse project group were chosen by the church leadership and me from applicants from the congregation. One primary objective of the project was to introduce the group to spiritual disciplines to help them form the habits of spiritual formation. Another primary objective was to connect new practices each week with the teaching from the session and implement them into the group's time together with the Lord's Supper. The intervention was intended to draw upon the experience of a diverse group of Christians who engaged in spiritual disciplines, theological teaching, and observations of the Lord's Supper within the Christian tradition to see if they could

formulate practices for our congregation in our context for the sake of cultivating a central identity in our diverse community. The intervention resulted in a proposal of practices presented to the church elders for their consideration.

Developing Practices Within the Lord's Supper That Develop
Central Identity at Queen City Church of Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

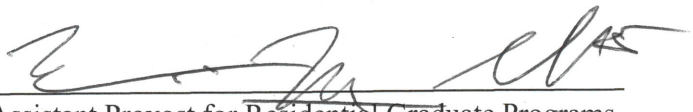
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Ryan Russell

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Doctor of Ministry


Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs

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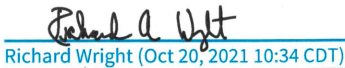
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To my beautiful wife, Erin, who made the most sacrifices to help me achieve this goal. Your companionship, joy, and reassurance help me find my feet and move forward. You make me a better person.

To my late father, who was once asked to teach a class on First Corinthians and read every book he came across on this letter. I long for the conversations we would have had during this process.

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Finally, to my daughters, Elsie and Josie. Elsie, your curiosity and laughter fill our house with joy and excitement. Josie, you are my favorite and most precious deadline. I'm thankful I finished this just before you were born. Being dad to the two of you is my favorite project ever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Title of the Project	1
	Ministry Context.....	2
	The NoDa Neighborhood	3
	The Johnston YMCA.....	5
	History and Culture of QCC.....	7
	Founding Members.....	8
	Early Adopters.....	10
	Newcomers	11
	Appreciative Inquiry Interviews.....	15
	Racial Tensions and QCC.....	18
	Reflection.....	20
	Statement of the Problem	23
	Statement of the Purpose	23
	Basic Assumptions	24
	Definitions	24
	Delimitations and Limitations	25
	Conclusion.....	26
II.	THEOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	27
	The Need for Spiritually Transformative Practices.....	28

Mystagogy	34
First Corinthians	36
Theology of the Lord’s Supper.....	41
Do This in Remembrance of Me	42
The Presence of Christ at the Table.....	49
Theophany	52
Redemption Narrative of the Lord’s Supper	58
A Space for Transformation	62
Ecclesiology.....	67
The Church Is the Temple	67
The Lord’s Supper Is Central to Forming Unity	71
The Lord’s Supper Shapes the Church for Mission	74
Conclusion	76
III. METHODOLOGY	78
Qualitative Research.....	79
Participatory Action Research	80
Overview of the Project Intervention	81
The Project Group.....	82
The Sessions	84
Session 1	85
Session 2	87
Session 3	89
Session 4	92

	Session 5	93
	Session 6	97
	Session 7	99
	Session 8	102
	Session 9	105
	Proposal Discussion	106
	Evaluation Methodology	107
	Procedures for Data Analysis	108
	Insider Angle	108
	Outsider Angle.....	108
	Researcher Angle.....	109
	Conclusion	110
IV.	FINDINGS AND RESULTS.....	111
	Field Notes and Observations.....	112
	Spiritual Practices	112
	Lesson Discussions.....	114
	Lord’s Supper	116
	Observations of Other Christian Traditions.....	117
	Presentation Preparation and Presentation	120
	Group Exit Interviews	124
	Elders’ Response	126
	Conclusion.....	128
V.	CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS.....	129

Interpretations.....	129
Trustworthiness	131
Applicability	131
Credibility.....	132
Reflexivity	133
Significance and Implications	134
Sustainability	134
Personal Significance	135
Ecclesial Significance.....	136
Theological Significance	137
Final Considerations.....	137
Conclusion.....	139
BIBLIOGRAPHY	140
APPENDIX A: IRB Exemption Letter.....	145
APPENDIX B: Consent Form.....	146
APPENDIX C: Questions for Addressing Decisions of Contention.....	150
APPENDIX D: Group Interview Questions.....	151
APPENDIX E: Field Note Protocol	152
APPENDIX F: Weekly Overview for Group Project.....	153

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This project thesis presents a ministry intervention aimed at bringing a diverse group together from the cross-sections of the Queen City Church of Christ (QCC) to develop identity formative practices surrounding the Lord's Supper.¹ A project team was developed to study the theological foundations of the Lord's Supper, engage together in spiritually formative practices, and cultivate practices for developing a central identity in our diverse congregation that would be presented to the church leadership. Chapter 1 constructs a description of the ministry context at QCC along with a statement of the project's problem and purpose. This first chapter also includes assumptions, definitions, limitations, and delimitations for the project. Chapter 2 provides the theological rationale for the project intervention. Chapter 3 describes the intervention and how the data were analyzed. Chapter 4 interprets the qualitative data collected from the non-participant observer, the researcher's observations, the participant exit interviews, and the elders' response. Chapter 5 concludes with the project's significance for the church, including next steps for QCC.

Title of the Project

The title for this project is "Developing Practices Within the Lord's Supper That Develop Central Identity at Queen City Church of Christ." The title clearly describes both

1. Abbreviated as QCC throughout this thesis. QCC is located in Charlotte, North Carolina.

the objective and the location of the project. The objective of this project is to take the first step towards establishing practices to cultivate a central identity within the diverse community of QCC. The location of this project is within the faith community of QCC, and the members therein will benefit from the project.

Ministry Context

The ministry context for this project is QCC. In order to create a thick narrative for my church context, I interviewed the founding preacher and created two focus groups: the “Founding Members”² and “Early Adopters.”³ I then conducted appreciative inquiry interviews with couples who were not part of the focus groups, representing a few of the different demographic groups within the congregation. Lastly, I interviewed some of the members who joined our congregation after this project began. This group represents a fresh perspective of who we are as a faith community and is referred to as “Newcomers.”⁴ Before establishing the thick narrative of the church, I will first construct the context in which the church exists by providing the history of the neighborhood and the church’s partnering YMCA. This narrative, constructed from the variety of interviews

2. Knowing part of this conversation would focus on why they left Pleasant Drive Church of Christ, I wanted the atmosphere to be jovial and relaxed, so the conversation could more easily be kept from sliding into negative reflection. One of the founders suggested that we go out on the lake on a party boat and have dinner together on the water. This provided the pleasant atmosphere to generate positive reflections on how the Queen City Church came into existence. I was delighted that when there were times that the conversation could take a negative turn, these families kept their reflections positive.

3. Fifteen people were involved in my “early adopters” focus group. Early adopters are the people who came to Queen City Church in the early years of its existence. They have experienced the changes and the ebbs and flows of QCCs development.

4. We have added around thirty people since this project began. Some are from the Church of Christ heritage who moved to the area and were looking for a church, others had left the Churches of Christ many years before but found a home at Queen City, and among the rest of the newcomers there are people from the neighborhood who have a variety of backgrounds, ranging from New Age Spiritualist to Quaker to former Catholics.

and from the history and culture of the surrounding community, will assist the reader in seeing the need for the intervention.

QCC meets in the Johnston YMCA, located in the Arts District of Charlotte, North Carolina, called NoDa (North Davidson). I would describe NoDa as a post-Christian community that cares deeply about diversity, unity, equality, and breaking social norms. The NoDa community and the partnership with the Johnston YMCA play a pivotal role in shaping the context of QCC.

The NoDa Neighborhood

The NoDa (North Davidson) neighborhood is currently the arts district of Charlotte, North Carolina. It dates back to the late 1800s, when land north of Charlotte was purchased by industrial tycoons to build textile mills: The Highland Park Mill No. 3, The Johnston Mill, and The Mercury.⁵ The factory owners built row houses and established a self-sustaining community outside of Charlotte. In the early 1900s, Charlotte had the largest concentration of textile mills in the country. Considered Charlotte's "Second Downtown," the north Charlotte community had its own grocery, pharmacy, barber, etc. because the mill workers did not have time to travel into Charlotte for supplies. Each of the row houses had enough land for a garden and some livestock. Due to similarities in life situations, residents of North Charlotte became like family as they formed a tight-knit community. Neighbors exchanged goods and took care of one another. The community eventually built its own firehouse and cinema. The vintage

5. Wall Panels, *Charlotte Neighborhoods*, The Charlotte Museum of History, Charlotte, NC. The bulk of the information in this section came from the NoDa Neighborhood section of the Charlotte Neighborhood exhibition at the Charlotte Museum of History.

storefronts give modern-day NoDa its unique ambiance, and remnants of the tight-knit community still saturate daily life in the NoDa neighborhood today.

The textile community thrived from the turn of the century through World War II, when The Mercury Mill shut down in 1945 and was turned into a warehouse. The Highland Park Mill followed a few decades later and closed in 1969. The closing of the Johnston Manufacturing Co. plant in 1975 was the end of an era for the North Charlotte mill community. With workers leaving the area in search of jobs, the neighborhood was largely neglected and taken over by crime by the late 1970s.⁶

Revitalization came in 1986 when artists Paul Sires and Ruth Ava Lyons took an interest in the crumbling mill village. They recognized the beauty of its period architecture and saw its potential as a future arts and entertainment district. Growth in the newly christened NoDa, inspired by New York City's SoHo, was slow at first. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, a new generation of residents rediscovered the neighborhood and life began anew. The NoDa neighborhood is now a blending of old mill families still holding on, people who moved in for cheap housing during the neglected years, the artists who followed, young professionals, and the affluent who are flipping houses and driving up property values. While in recent decades NoDa has reclaimed the family-like community that defined North Charlotte nearly a century ago, many long-term residents are concerned that this community feel will be lost as available land is developed for high-end apartments. Throughout the ups and downs of transition, one constant has remained from the heyday of the mill community, through the forgotten

6. The neighborhood theater was transformed into an adult movie theater, marking the shift in time.

years, and into this new era: the Johnston YMCA. The Johnston Y has been at the center of the NoDa community for over 70 years and is intrinsic to shaping the future of the NoDa community.

The Johnston YMCA

The Johnston YMCA, originally founded as The North Charlotte YMCA, began service to the mill community in 1948 on 36th Street and moved to its current location on North Davidson in 1951. The move happened when David Johnston, president of Johnston Mill Co., built a community center for the mill workers and their families in honor of his late father, Richard Horace Johnston.⁷ The YMCA was asked to run the daily operations and moved into their new location as the Johnston Memorial YMCA.⁸ The YMCA gifted their original facilities on 36th Street to the Spencer Memorial United Methodist Church in exchange for their land on North Davidson. With the extended history shared between the church and the Johnston YMCA the current location has played a central role in community life in the neighborhood since 1907.

I met with Fred Ashford, the second executive director of the Johnston Memorial YMCA. He worked for Highland Mill #3 before the YMCA was built and began his work with the Johnston Memorial YMCA coaching the boys' baseball team during the summer when he was back from college. He fell in love with the YMCA mission to provide a

7. The Johnston family owned several of the local mills which formed the NoDa community in the early 1900s.

8. "Mr. David Johnston explained that the work done by the YMCA in the North Charlotte community had been so excellent that the foundation was pleased to be able to provide a new structure which was to be turned over to the association for operation. In September 1950, the organization in North Charlotte had 1,100 members, the majority of them boys and girls. With the new building it was hoped that all the men, women, boys and girls of the community could be reached." Mary Lois Moore Yandle, *The Spirit of a Proud People* (Charlotte: L.M. Yandle, 1997), 60.

place for people to grow in spirit, mind, and body. After college, Mr. Ashford served in the Korean War and received mail from a friend at the Johnston Y asking if he would like a full-time job when he returned. A few years later, he became the second executive director of the Johnston Y, serving in that position for many years. In my interview with Mr. Ashford, he reflected on his excitement for serving with an organization which was so focused on serving families and the community as a whole. At the time, the Johnston Y was the only YMCA in Charlotte to allow females to use their facilities.⁹ The Johnston Y was also instrumental in helping launch different programs to serve the neighborhood, such as the North Charlotte Rotary Club¹⁰ in 1952 and the Highland Park Key Club¹¹ in 1955.

The Johnston Y continued as the center point of life in North Charlotte for almost fifteen years before the neighborhood fell into disrepair. One person's vote on the board of directors kept the Johnston Y from closing down during the depressed decades of the North Charlotte community. Thankfully the legacy of being a "safe place for all" has continued, and the Y continues to provide services for under-resourced people in the area. As gentrification continues in the area, the Johnston Y remains resolute in providing services for everyone in the community through the multitude of programs and initiatives they offer.

9. Ashford, Fred. Interview by Ryan Russell. Private Interview. Johnston YMCA, May 31, 2018.

10. The North Charlotte Rotary Club was a very active part of the North Charlotte community and supported the Johnston Y in bettering the neighborhood as well as supporting the Highland Elementary School, the Foreign Students Exchange Program, and other worthwhile organizations.

11. The Highland Park Key Club was organized in 1955 with thirty-two members from the supervisory staff of the Highland Park Mill #3, next to the Johnston YMCA. The Key Club provided scholarships for boys in the community to go to college and provided jobs at the mill during the summer.

With the focus of being a safe place for neighbors of all genders, races, nationalities, cultures, and creeds to come together, the Johnston Y is one of the most diverse YMCAs in Charlotte and continually builds bridges between different people groups in the NoDa community and surrounding neighborhoods. The Johnston Y is an exemplar of the YMCA mission, “That they may be one,” based on John 17. The history of the Johnston Y is important for understanding the developing history of QCC. I serve on the board of managers of the Johnston Y alongside one of the church’s elders. I also serve on the executive committee and co-lead the community impact committee. The relationship between the YMCA and QCC has transformed into a healthy partnership focused on our mutual mission to create a community where all are welcome and diversity is celebrated. Because of our partnership, I continually have opportunity to lead community initiatives to build unity among our neighbors. This partnership provides the church with an incredible opportunity to influence the culture of the surrounding community and help provide a sense of identity for this evolving neighborhood. In order to do this effectively, QCC must first cultivate a central identity within its own diverse faith community.

History and Culture of QCC

QCC is a young church, founded in 2010, and is located in the Johnston YMCA, in the heart of NoDa. Rather than build or purchase a building to meet in, the church has tried to take a different approach to Christianity in America. Instead of renting an empty space where we can house a worship service, we have engaged in a relationship and partnership with the Johnston YMCA, to better serve the surrounding community. QCC began meeting in the small building behind the Johnston YMCA at the beginning of

November 2010 and moved into the gymnasium within the next year. The first deacons were established in February 2014. Elders were established in March 2015, and Greg Casey, the founding preacher, left QCC to work with a church in Raleigh seven months later. I arrived at QCC at the end of June 2016. The leadership structure of the church went through four transitions in fewer than two and a half years, evidence of the growing pains of a young congregation.¹²

In order to establish a historical context for QCC, I met with Greg Casey, the founding preacher of the church. Having spent many years prior to founding QCC ministering with the Pleasant Drive congregation across town, Greg knew the city well and had dreams of a church ministering in NoDa. Greg provided me with his personal documentation that traced the development of QCC from being a mere dream, to the establishment of deacons and elders, to his eventual departure to allow the church to shape her own identity within the evolving neighborhood of NoDa. My conversation with Greg about the timeline and history of QCC began to reveal the void of a cohesive identity within the growing congregation.

Founding Members

Three couples, the Wilsons, the Craigs, and the Georges, make up the remaining founding members of QCC. Their friendship spans multiple decades. They raised their children together at the Pleasant Drive Church of Christ. All three wives worked together at the school that was housed in Pleasant Drive's building. The families were very active

12. The leadership positions of elders and deacons are all men. There are unofficial ministry leader positions that are held by women in the congregation. Other than making an announcement or being asked to speak about a specific ministry during the sermon, women are not visible in leadership from the front during Sunday morning worship.

in the youth ministry at the church, even leading annual backpacking trips for almost a decade. As their kids graduated out of the youth ministry, each family struggled to find their place within the larger congregation. Frustrations developed as there was talk that the school might close. They all believed it was one of their best outreach opportunities. Tracy, who was with the school for twenty-three years, felt the school was treated like a “step-child” of the church and that the work being done there was not appreciated. As the frustrations grew, each of the couples felt invisible in a church that felt too big. “Church should feel like family,” each of them echoed as we reflected together.

Each family left Pleasant Drive on their own and began visiting other churches. After they realized they were all visiting different churches, they began visiting churches together. After six months to a year of visiting the majority of the Churches of Christ in the city, as well as churches of other denominations, they began meeting together in their homes and doing service projects together. It was during this time that they began discussing starting a new church in the NoDa community and reconnected with one of the former ministers from Pleasant Drive, Greg Casey. As they began to dream of what a church would look like in NoDa, they kept coming back to what they felt was lacking in their previous experiences. They wanted to start a church that felt like family and where it was easy to get involved. Greg offered the book *Deliberate Simplicity*¹³ to guide some of their thoughts and discussions as they considered starting a new church. From this book,

13. David Browning, *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

they made the decision that they wanted to build a church community that equipped people to do kingdom work rather than plugging people into church programs.¹⁴

After much prayer and searching, the Johnston YMCA became the obvious solution for where the church would begin. Mark, one of the founding members, commented, “We did not want to just rent a space. We wanted a partnership with a group who was already working in a community. The YMCA was a perfect fit.” Jake Arnold, the Executive Director of the Johnston YMCA, was enthusiastic at the proposition of a church partnering with the YMCA, so QCC began meeting in the small building behind the Johnston YMCA at the beginning of November 2010.

Early Adopters

Fifteen people were involved in my “Early Adopters” focus group. My major focal points were why they left the churches they were attending, how they ended up at QCC, and what made them stay. Through this process, I set out to discover their core beliefs about their own identity and the identity they want QCC to have. As we sat together in a large room, some of the same themes as to why many of these people left their respective churches came up repeatedly. Most everyone who came to QCC from Pleasant Drive Church of Christ left Pleasant Drive because it ceased to feel like family or a community. One person in the group reflected on not knowing large numbers of people in the church: “It was almost as if Pleasant Drive had four churches in it: Upstairs

14. Mark, an elder and founding member, said they did not want their focus to be on the one hour of worship on Sunday but to find a good balance between supporting families and doing outreach. Their experiences through their year of visiting a variety of churches loosened their grip on “drop dead doctrinal issues” and opened them up towards other Christians and their beliefs.

and Downstairs of Early and Late services.” It was hard to get plugged in and be part of the work of the church.

There were others who came from different churches or had recently moved to the area. Lucas Jacobs went through a church split over the issue of clapping that led him to disconnect from Christianity for a time. He found church community when he went to the men’s Bible study at Stool Pigeons, a bar in Charlotte, while he was in college. It was at this Bible study that he found his way back into the church. He fully came back into the church in 2012 when he and his wife got married. QCC played a major role in bringing Lucas back to Christ.

Many were endeared to QCC because it was a small community who wanted to work together in their mission to reach the NoDa community. They knew they could be more involved in the work of the church and feel like what they do actually matters in the kingdom. There were others who came from more sectarian churches and were drawn to QCC because of the openness, freedom, and community they found.

Newcomers

The questions for my interviews with the “Newcomers” focused on their first impressions and experiences at QCC. While each person had different bad experiences within the Church of Christ heritage, the discussions ultimately focused on why they decided to stay at QCC. The common thread in these conversations focused on the kind nature of the congregation and the willingness to have hard conversations across various topics.

Jamie moved to Charlotte within the last few years. Growing up in the Church of Christ, she mostly attended church out of obligation but found it to be stiff and boring.

While in college, she started going to a non-denominational church and found a faith community out of college who was accepting and felt like family for her. When she moved to Charlotte, she visited another Church of Christ in town, but it felt the same as that with which she grew up. When she visited QCC, she liked that we were partnering with the YMCA to reach our community and recognized our racial diversity as a sign that we were an accepting and loving group. Nevertheless, she was concerned that there was no visible equality between men and women at QCC. When one of the elders asked her if she was going to join QCC, she asked to have a discussion about the role of women in the church. After those discussions, she left for a time to keep looking for a church that more aligned with her convictions. Ultimately, she came back to QCC when the church she was attending started validating “personal truth” over teaching from Scripture. She came back to QCC because she appreciated that we were trying to take racial diversity seriously and that we were committed to the study of Scripture, and for the first time in her life she enjoyed listening to sermons because she was actually learning something.

Jamie decided that if she was going to learn about QCC, she needed to spend time with the “core members” of the church. To accomplish this, she began going to the women’s Bible study. In this group, she met an eclectic group of women who were genuine in their interactions with each other and with her. She appreciated their spiritual maturity and saw it as a place where she could grow because of the relationships with these older women. In one study in particular, the conversation shifted to homosexuality. She had a different stance in the conversation than the rest of the group but was treated with love and respect. From that moment forward, she felt closer to the group and found it harder to leave QCC to find another church that more aligned with her convictions.

Jamie realized that genuine community outweighed “the issues” on which people disagree. In reflecting on her decision to be part of our community, Jamie said, “You finally come to realize that we’re all just people. Nothing will ever be perfect. We’re all just here in this moment. If you take ownership of that moment, then the things you want to see start to become reality.”

To add to my interview with Jamie, I had more narrowly focused interviews with five people who had started coming to Queen City Church within the past year. The first couple, who are in their late twenties, Nathan and Michelle, grew up in the Churches of Christ but had not attended a Church of Christ in over seven years because of bad experiences. The husband knew me when I was his youth ministry intern, and they decided to visit since they had just moved to Charlotte. We had not spoken in thirteen years. The next couple, who are also in their late twenties, Brady and Katherine, moved into uptown Charlotte a few months before visiting QCC. He grew up in the Christian Church, and she grew up Catholic. The final person, Lydia, who is in her sixties, has a Quaker background and moved in next door to the Johnston YMCA. She is a member at the Y and asked one of the front desk workers what the YMCA does to help in race reconciliation. Kenya, a woman of color, told her about QCC and the work I was doing in race reconciliation. Lydia visited the next week and has continued to attend since that day.

The first thing each person noticed was that QCC was a friendly group of people and very welcoming. Each person could name the people who greeted them for the first time because they went beyond exchanging simple pleasantries and took genuine interest in who they were. Nathan and Michelle said that QCC was the first church of all the

churches they had visited over the years where they were greeted by someone in the parking lot. One of our members recognized that they had not seen them before and walked up to them. “Queen City felt like home the minute we met Cathy in the parking lot.”

Each person commented on the intimacy of the small congregation, the laid-back atmosphere of meeting in a gym, the diversity of races, and the fact that the service did not feel “produced” like in other churches. We have had several non-Church of Christ visitors comment on the simplicity of our services compared to what they were used to. Brady said, “My first impression was that the service is very laid back and somewhat unpolished, which I like. I noticed that several people were involved in the service for prayers, reading Scripture, singing, and preaching. And it seemed like a good mix of people from different races and ages.” Nathan, Michelle, and Lydia all commented on my willingness to preach on race relations when most churches avoid those topics. When asked what they believed the core values of QCC were based on their first impressions, they collectively responded with community, family, love, inclusion, equality, peace, diversity, scripture, and investing in NoDa and the YMCA.

The scope of these interviews focuses on the visitors who stayed and invested in our church. We have had visitors who did not stay and were not able to be reached for interviews. Through unofficial conversations with members who connected with these visitors, I learned that the visitors shared sentiments that the church was too white, or too conservative, and one woman said she would never come back to a church who restricted

the voice of women.¹⁵ The interviews above paint our church in a very positive light, but there are outside views from the surrounding community that need to be considered.

Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

The appreciative inquiry interviews of church members focused on two main questions: (1) Why did they stay at QCC after they visited? and (2) When did they feel most alive with the church?¹⁶ Their responses were tied together by several major threads: each person felt needed at QCC, recognized that QCC was full of potential, and thought that being part of QCC would matter because everyone had something to offer. Alan and Mary, a couple in their late 20s who came to QCC shortly after moving to Charlotte, felt needed on the second Sunday they visited when Alan was asked if he could help with the church's website. The feeling of being needed endeared them to the church, and they believed the intentions of QCC were clear because of the church's partnership with the YMCA.

Brad and Brooke Evans, a couple in their mid-30s, connected most with the church family during congregational meals, while serving with others, and through getting plugged into a small group. Cathy Langston, a woman in her 60s, committed herself to building strong relationships with other women in the church. She and another

15. The restriction of women in the worship service did not come up in any of the interviews above, but each of the interviewees mentioned it in conversations with me during their time visiting our congregation. While much can be speculated about this omission from their interview responses, it is worth noting that the welcoming nature of QCC overshadowed their apprehensions around the exclusion of women in visible worship roles.

16. I chose eight people who represent different demographics within the Queen City Church and who were not part of the focus groups. The thought of being interviewed made a number of these participants nervous, but when I explained the focus of the exercise, they relaxed and were excited to be part of the process. My wife and I hosted the couples collectively at our house for the evening. I took one couple at a time to another room for the interview. The setting was relaxed and inviting, allowing the interviews to become friendly dialogue.

woman started a women's Bible study that meets weekly in the YMCA. After two years, she feels like the women who attend have created a close sisterhood and their relationships are starting to permeate other areas of the church to build community amongst the women of QCC.

Mary Lynn and William Martin, a Haitian couple, provide another angle on the QCC community. Mary Lynn grew up as a Haitian woman in a white home and has been with QCC since the doors opened the first Sunday. She has a different perspective on the race discussion and has had to "discover her blackness" later in life. In her search to get back into church, she found that the black churches were "too black" and the white churches were "too white." Not only did she find some diversity at QCC, she found a community of believers who she believed genuinely cared about one another. The church genuinely cared about her as a single mother, and she commented that she felt that the church shared in responsibility in raising her daughter. She quickly felt loved and like she was part of the church family.¹⁷ QCC was the first church where Mary Lynn felt comfortable bringing a man she was dating. When William came for the first time, he felt loved and accepted from the moment he walked in the door. William grew up in a very conservative Haitian church but found freedom in the diversity he experienced at QCC. "I felt like I can be myself at Queen City," William smiled as he talked about his early experiences with the church.

Although Mary Ann and William feel cared for at QCC, Mary Ann recognizes a lack of common identity within the congregation. While race is often a factor, she

17. Mary Ann did not feel the same way at other churches she visited. Shame was the common word to describe her experiences at other churches as a single mother.

identifies other divisions within the church. Everyone in the church is from somewhere else. The bulk of the early members came from the Pleasant Drive Church, and other smaller groups within QCC came from other churches in the area. There are several families in the church who have long histories together, and Mary Ann perceives those relationships as cliques. She mentioned, but did not elaborate on, a time when a few black families got together for a meeting and she and her husband William were not invited. They did not feel included in the group that came from the black church but also struggled to feel included with the white families that had a long history together. While these frustrations were present in our interview, Mary Ann and William believe QCC is heading in the right direction and the future is bright.

These interviews reveal that no one stayed at QCC because everything was perfect and well put together. They stayed because they were needed and the people were genuinely loving. When people are active in serving with others and connected with others on a regular basis, there is a shared sentiment of feeling alive. The common theme of connectedness within the congregation is what makes many people feel alive and part of the church. This connectedness helps develop common identity within QCC.

While connectedness and service together are essential to shared identity, there are people within the congregation who do not feel connected. In a congregation where everyone came from other churches, there are some who tend to gravitate towards others with their shared church history, others have connected through common cultural and racial backgrounds, and others have even connected under the commonality of being recent transplants to the city. These interviews, while largely positive, helped me recognize that some of the divisions in the church are not just about race and culture but

are also drawn between common history and church background. Digging deeper would likely reveal differences in political ideologies, stances on the role of women, economic status, and nationality, to name a few. With a community of believers originating from so many different backgrounds, QCC needs intentional practices to shape our common identity in Christ to build bridges between diverse people.

Racial Tensions and QCC

When thirty-two people gathered for the first QCC worship service on November 7, 2010, they came from various churches and backgrounds. As the church grew, the identity of the church diversified. In my interview with Greg, the founding preacher, he commented that the original members had no intentional strategy on becoming a racially diverse church, but they felt that if “they were intentional about reaching the community, the church would then look like the community.” When the Thomasboro Church of Christ, a historically black church in Charlotte, closed their doors due to misconduct from their preacher, a handful of families began to worship with QCC. Because there was no strategy in place for approaching racial diversity within a growing congregation, the dynamics of the congregation changed, leaving the leadership to respond to issues as they arose rather than preparing for the blending of cultures.¹⁸

Greg recalled a Sunday during the 2012 presidential election when John Sims, a white member, was leading the reflection around the Lord’s Table and used the opportunity to bash the current president, Barack Obama. A number of members, both black and white, got up and left while the body of Christ was being distributed. The

18. Many of the white members of the church were excited to be part of a church of such diversity, while most of the black members saw QCC as a predominantly white church. While the ratio of diversity is higher at Queen City than most churches in our fellowship, the lack of intentionality in developing a plan for navigating the dynamics that diversity brings has caused some tension within the church.

church's leaders gave a public response stating they did not agree with nor support John's comments, which then upset some of the white members of the church. These strains quickly became apparent within my first few months of arriving at QCC, as the racial tensions across the country increased.

On my first Sunday preaching, we placed the communion table in the center of our assembly and set up the chairs in a semicircle around it. Holding up the emblems, my sermon focused on our identity in Christ unifying us as diverse people. Within the next few months, an unarmed black man was shot by a police officer in Charlotte, bringing about protests and riots. While the tensions in our country grew with a number of back-to-back shootings of unarmed black men and the assault on officers in Dallas, Texas, the flames of tension in the church flickered. Following the election of Donald Trump that November, five months after my arrival, we placed the communion table back in the center of the congregation and called our members to lay down any identity they had that was in competition with their identity in Christ. Stepping back to allow space for the congregation to come and take the emblems when they were ready, I saw different members seeking out others who stood on the other side of the racial divide. After their embrace, they went and took their identity in Christ together.

While other special communion services have taken place since then, we have to ask whether special communion services three to four times a year is enough to shape our identity as diverse group of believers. The weekly practice of the Lord's Supper is central to our faith community but is often viewed as a time for internal reflection on what Christ did on behalf of each individual person. Developing intentional communal practices in

conjunction with our regular observance of the Lord's Supper will create the space needed for the identity formation of our diverse congregation.

Reflection

QCC's partnership with the Johnston YMCA provides an abundance of opportunities to work within the growing NoDa community. Mark Wilson and I sit on the board of the Johnston Y, and I have expanded my connection into the greater Charlotte YMCA system. These positions have helped legitimize the church's position of influence in the NoDa community. By being present to the staff of the Johnston Y through three executive director transitions and active with community development as well as serving as chaplain of the Y, I have established myself among the staff as one they can go to for counsel. I meet regularly with the Executive Director regarding staff needs, morale, community engagement, and church partnership. My focus over my first year and a half at QCC was to move the church and YMCA relationship from a paralleled existence within the same building to a blended partnership to work within the community. As an executive board member for the Johnston Y, I have the opportunity to add my voice to help strategize how the Y and the church can continue to serve the under-resourced part of our community in the midst of rapid gentrification. I have often been asked to lead community discussions regarding diversity and inclusion.¹⁹

The YMCA's culture and the rich history and culture of the NoDa community play a major role in how we shape our identity as a Christian community. Understanding

19. Since beginning this project, my role with the YMCA has expanded. I co-chair the Community Impact Committee and sit on the Executive Committee for the Y. I was recently awarded the DIG Ambassador award for my work in Diversity, Inclusion, and Globalization (DIG). The church's partnership with the YMCA puts me in a unique position to have a lot of influence in our community.

our cultural context will help keep us from hindering the gospel in our interactions with those around us. Our identity is influenced by these surrounding cultures in the following ways: First, the Charlotte YMCA's mission is "to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all."²⁰ The "for all" at the end of the mission statement is a continual reminder that within the walls of the YMCA, every person is welcome no matter their race, gender identity, sexuality, political leaning, or economic position. Second, the NoDa community celebrates diversity and takes equality seriously. Any hint of patriarchy, supremacy, or intolerance is called out and run out of the neighborhood. Next, the Johnston YMCA continues to provide programs for under-resourced and marginalized people in the surrounding area. The Y also leads many of the initiatives for diversity and inclusion within the surrounding community. Finally, the Y provides a safe place for people to come together to build bridges between diverse people groups through dialogue and initiatives. With the YMCA at the center of the NoDa community, QCC must be intentional with creating a church community where diversity and inclusion can be experienced firsthand as an example to the culture around us.

The front lawn of the Johnston Y, affectionately nicknamed "The Front Porch of NoDa," is our creative space for living out the gospel as a Christian community in the presence of our neighbors. Our partnership with the Johnston YMCA places us in a distinctive position within the post-Christian community of NoDa. While this is the space where the church will engage in life together with our neighbors, we must be deliberate

20. The YMCA of Greater Charlotte, "Mission Statement," accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.ymcacharlotte.org/mission/ymca-charlotte-mission/mission-statement>.

with how we develop our identity as a community of believers. What does NoDa see when they see QCC?

When we discuss “evangelism,” we continue to think about how we create events to attract people, so we can “present the gospel” to them. Quick presentations of the gospel without relationship with the community are found wanting. Relationships are messy and take time, so it is easier to offer a quick presentation or to hand out a pamphlet. The only way we are going to properly engage in meaningful relationships with people in our community is if we first learn to engage in meaningful relationships in the church. The church is the stage where the gospel is acted out before being taken to the world. Relationships take time. Spiritual relationship takes intentional practices to build bridges through the common unity we have in Christ.

In the exodus, God’s people were brought out of their identity as Egyptian slaves into wilderness wandering. Their wandering was a search for an identity found in being the people of God. Ritual practices were developed so they could continually participate in remembering what God did to bring them out of Egypt. One such embodied practice, called the Passover, retells and acts out the narrative of the exodus and continues to shape and reshape their identity as the people of God. This practice is the same ritual meal Jesus utilized to shape God’s people through the Lord’s Supper. As people originating from diverse histories, dissimilar church traditions, and distinctive cultures, QCC would benefit from habitual practices that help cultivate a central identity.

If QCC is going to make any positive impact in this post-Christian society, it will be through living the example of what it looks like to build bridges between diverse people groups through the love of Christ and then extend those bridges into the

community. Because proclaiming the gospel takes place in lives lived in proximity to our neighbors, it is essential that we engage in hard discussions of what equality looks like between different races, genders, and economic positions. When a faith community regularly observes the Lord's Supper but narrowly holds this time for individual reflection, the identity forming nature of this communal meal is diluted. This central meal needs intentional habitual practices to create space for the transformation of the diverse congregation's identity through the sharing of the common grace given by God. These practices will shape how the congregation interacts with one another and the surrounding world.

While QCC may be in a unique situation, the question about intentional development around a central identity is not exclusive to our congregation. It is inevitable that groups develop new identities over time. This project will bring a diverse group of members together to develop a proposal of intentional and habitual practices around the Lord's Supper that will help cultivate a central identity of QCC.

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of identity-shaping practices around the Lord's Supper to develop a central identity among the diverse congregation of QCC.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this project is to bring a diverse group of members together to develop a proposal of intentional and habitual practices around the Lord's Supper that will help cultivate a central identity in the Queen City Church. The group will engage in spiritually formative practices and theological training, observe other Christian traditions

practices around the Lord's Supper, and develop new practices to propose to the church leadership.

Basic Assumptions

This project assumes the weekly practice of the Lord's Supper as vital to regular Sunday morning worship gathering within the Church of Christ tradition. The project also assumes the flexibility to set up the assembly in different ways each week. This flexibility is afforded by meeting in a YMCA gym.

Definitions

Post-Christian culture – Charles Taylor writes about the shift from belief to unbelief within a culture. Post-Christian culture is defined as a culture in which belief in God has moved from being an assumed and unchallenged position to belief in God being one option among the many belief systems, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.²¹

Practice – Dorothy C. Bass points to “practices” as the concrete opportunity to strengthen the Christian life. “Practices address fundamental needs and conditions through concrete human acts.”²² Practices help shape the spiritual life of the individual but also the common life of the community. The Christian community is a community gathered at worship to practice in the same way an athlete continues to come back to the foundational practices of their sport so they are ready in real-time situations. The rhythms

21. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

22. Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 6.

of worship set a common pace for the community to be foundationally transformed and ready to respond to life in real time.²³

Delimitations and Limitations

This project will be delimited to eight to ten participants who regularly attend QCC. The leadership and I chose this number range to ensure the group could have a cross-section of the church without making the group too large to manage. There are many passages addressing the Lord's Supper in the Bible, but my focus will be within the context of 1 Cor 11. While there are numerous Christian traditions around the Lord's Supper for the group to observe, I chose to have them observe the Mass at St. Peter's Catholic Church and the Taizé Eucharistic service at St. Peter's Episcopal Church because both of these services fit the schedule and the timeline of this project and they represent sufficient contrast to the normal practices of our particular tradition as to generate constructive reflection and conversation.

The project addresses only a few practices and liturgies that could be included in the weekly Lord's Supper. While there are other practices and liturgies that could be added or taken away, these are the meaningful practices the group from QCC thought would be best for our context. It should be noted that there are identity formative practices not associated with the Lord's Supper that would be beneficial for congregations to explore. These practices are not within the scope of this project. There are also practices which could be counterproductive in forming a central identity in a diverse community. These practices will not be examined.

23. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, 10.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced this project thesis by providing a historical and cultural framework for my context at QCC. QCC is a young and developing congregation with opportunity to be intentional in forming our identity as a diverse community of believers. In our unique context of the YMCA, the congregation will continue to gain members of diverse backgrounds: social, political, economic, racial, and theological. A deep assessment of QCC reveals the need for practices to shape a central identity in the growing diversity of our congregation. Chapter 2 will examine the theological foundations for the project and intervention.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For much of the Church of Christ tradition, the spoken and taught word of God has been the primary focus of spiritual formation. As a church movement born in the heart of the Enlightenment, the tradition has tended to take a rational approach, engaging the mind to formulate right theology, right doctrine, and right belief. This angle in the Christian tradition has been prone to create a dualistic approach to life, in which the practices on Sunday may have little effect on life lived throughout the week. The Lord's Supper is practiced because of example seen in Scripture, giving more emphasis to "how" and "when," based on biblical example, rather than addressing the "why" and "what" of the practices themselves.¹ Very little focus has been given to the question of how the Lord's Supper shapes a congregation. The earliest sacramental traditions of baptism and the Lord's Supper have been marginalized in many traditions or drained of their transformative power. The focus of this chapter is to examine the theological and practical implications of the Lord's Supper on the community formation of a central identity in Christ. I will approach this discussion through Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, which addresses the abuse of the Lord's Supper in their community, seeking to glean insights applicable to the aims of this project.

1. Some Christian traditions have abandoned sacramental practices on the grounds that they do not add anything to their worship experience.

In this chapter, I will argue that community transformation happens through habitual practices, specifically practices tied to the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. When the Apostle Paul addresses the issues in Corinth, he claims that the believers meeting together does "more harm than good" and therefore the meal they are eating "is not the Lord's Supper."² This chapter will observe the implications of the Lord's Supper as the centerpiece for communal identity formation by analyzing what was taking place in the Corinthian church. This chapter will explain the need for identity formative practices, briefly referencing how the patristic era church used mystagogy to teach about practices within the communal worship. First Corinthians will then provide a glimpse into how these identity formative practices should center a congregation on Christ. The final sections will lay the theological foundations of the Lord's Supper and how ecclesiology is shaped and reoriented for God's mission of reconciliation.

The Need for Spiritually Transformative Practices

James K. A. Smith challenges the anthropological view of the Enlightenment that people are fundamentally rational thinkers, arguing that they are instead creatures of desire. While his book is not intended to be academic, his work falls within the worldview of Augustine, and later Heidegger, and their shared anthropology that holds people to be fundamentally beings of desire rather than beings of reflection and thinking.³ You become what you worship because, being creatures of desire, people engage in daily practices, intentionally or unintentionally, that shape who they are in line with their view

2. 1 Cor 11:17, 20.

3. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 50.

of the good life. Rival liturgies, as Smith argues, shape our vision of the good life by pulling at our desires. Therefore, you must pay attention to the regular habits in which you engage. In the words of Paul, “you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons.”⁴

The rival liturgies of our lives, what Smith calls “rituals of ultimate concern,” have more influence on shaping our lives as habits than the things we are taught. This is the major focus of his book. Smith falls short of providing a holistic approach to the conversation of how the cognitive and the affective are interrelated, but his corrective is nonetheless one to be heeded. It is my belief that practices should accompany knowledge, and knowledge should shape practices. That is why the focus of this project is to equip the participants with foundational theological teachings about the Lord’s Supper, accompanied with intentional practices, so that they can cultivate or adapt practices for our church community. By examining the heart of Smith’s work, I will build a case for how our time around the Lord’s Supper can become the “imagination station” where we reconnect with the identity transformative story of Jesus and reenact the story together to shape our desires as a community.⁵

Leaning on Augustinian anthropology, Smith paints a picture of the human person as, first and foremost, a lover. Humans, as lovers, are “more affective, embodied creatures who make our way in the world more by feeling our way around it.”⁶ With

4. 1 Cor 10:21.

5. The “imagination station” is a concept Smith develops in his book *You Are What You Love*. The imagination station is the counter-formative worship that reorients the heart towards God and away from the orientations of the world. It is the place of “ritual cleansing,” where the symbolic universe of the world is washed clean so that we will more properly be formed into the image of Christ. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 85.

6. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 47.

intention, the heart aims towards something, an end goal, a *telos*. Taylor says, “Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: What constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for?”⁷

The picture of the good life is not captured by lists of rules or ideas but by pictures, stories, and narratives. The good life, “what we think it looks like for us to live well,” according to Smith, is what cultivates our habits and shapes our daily actions and decisions.⁸ Strong beliefs can lead to dogged commitment, but because we are *teleological* creatures, captivating peoples’ imaginations with a new image of who they can be will move them towards that end.⁹

“The kingdom” is one of many ways *telos* can be articulated. Each person has a different vision of the kingdom they desire, and these differing visions bring people into conflict when they realize their hearts are not pointed to the same end, with each believing their vision is the right kingdom. Therefore, it is the task of church leaders to create space within the practices of the gathered community where these visions of the kingdom are examined and washed with gospel. The multiplicity of competing narratives are gathered into a central communal narrative; otherwise, they will continue to breed contention. Smith asserts that this *telos* cannot only be taught but must be embodied

7. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 16.

8. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53.

9. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53–54.

through pictures, practices, and repetition of narrative. Habits and practices need to be developed in order to shape the heart of people towards the same kingdom.¹⁰

The Lord's Supper is a ritual practice that continually engulfs our personal stories and reshapes us in the story of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection toward our ultimate kingdom *telos*. The theological foundations of the Lord's Supper need to be taught in order to develop practices around the table to create a space for transformation within the community. In this light, the Lord's Supper becomes the primary focus of the church coming together. The sermon and every other aspect of the worship service point toward the realities embodied in the practices engaged in around the Lord's Table.

The Lord's Supper becomes the place where the rival narratives of the world are put in check in people's lives. Contrasting narratives continue to develop in our diversifying society, creating tension for the assumed Christian narrative. As culture shifts away from assumed belief in God, the need to articulate a communal narrative for a community of diverse believers becomes essential.¹¹ With the shift in culture, it should not be assumed that the narratives of yesterday were pointing to the kingdom *telos* of the gospel. Taylor presents a three-sided triangle where each side mutually supports the others to develop ideal citizens: "the family was the matrix in which the young were brought up to be good citizens and believing worshippers; religion was the source of the values that animated both family and society; and the state was the realization and

10. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 54–58.

11. Taylor argues that there has been a major shift in our culture away from belief in God, that it is no longer self-evident that our culture believes in God. There may be pockets within our society where it is safe to assume everyone believes in God, but that is no longer the norm, especially in NoDa, where the Queen City Church is located. There was a time in American society when patriotism, religion, and a sense of family values seemed to be in unison. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 505.

bulwark of the values central to both family and churches.”¹² It could be argued that the *telos* of this three-sided triangle was a flourishing kingdom of American ideals. Since God was assumed in society, the church saw no need to be an “imagination station” for shaping a picture of the kingdom. Churches instead divided into different groups along doctrinal, racial, cultural, and economic lines, rather than uniting in their oneness in Christ.

The “good life” presented by American society came into question, Taylor argues, when society was forced to face the struggle of Jim Crow, the Vietnam War, feminism’s bringing into question the nuclear family, and the sexual revolution of the 1960s.¹³ The civil rights movement asked the question of who the “good life” was for, and the church failed to answer. Instead, the church often insisted, sometimes vehemently, that people of color would be more comfortable staying in their own churches where they could paint their own picture of the good life.¹⁴ These problems persisted within my own church tradition and the residual effects can still be felt today.¹⁵ Universities within the

12. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.

13. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506

14. “Though schools, work, and even many homes saw considerable racial integration in the latter half of the twentieth century, eleven o’clock on Sunday morning has remained, as Dr. King said, America’s most segregated hour.” Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and William J. Barber II, *Reconstructing the Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 78. “As America’s original sin led the nation ever closer to a civil war that would separate North from South, Christians anticipated the division by the fracturing of their denominational bodies. In 1838, Presbyterians split over the question of slavery. Methodist Episcopalians followed in 1844, and the Baptists, officially, in 1845. Long before the body politic was ripped in two, the body of Christ was broken by the quiet violence of white supremacy.” Wilson-Hartgrove and Barber, *Reconstructing the Gospel*, 80–81.

15. Foy E. Wallace, a respected preacher in his day within our fellowship, published an article in 1941 in which he articulated his disapproval of the socialization of whites with blacks, accusing white women of forgetting their dignity, by lowering themselves “just because a negro has learned enough about the gospel to preach it to his race.” Foy E. Wallace, Jr., “Negro Meetings for White People,” *Bible Banner* (March 1941), 7. The attack in his article was directed at the famed preacher Marshall Keeble, who responded to the harsh remarks with a softness that kept the division from deepening, asking for Wallace to continue to pray for him. Marshall Keeble, “From M. Keeble,” *Bible Banner* (April 1941), 5.

fellowship were slow to integrate after the civil rights movement, furthering the racial divide within our tradition.¹⁶ The church continued to hold on to the picture of the good life handed to it by American society. As culture changed, the church built thicker walls to safeguard those inside and continued to enforce ideas about what is right and what is wrong in culture. All the while, culture shifted and tugged on people's desires. The church capitulated to the consumerism of the culture and did everything it could to stay relevant. During the 1960s, Taylor attests, the "bland religion of American conformity" was rejected, and we have continued to see that tide shift.¹⁷

What the church needed during that time, and just as much today, is to reconnect with the ancient faith and embrace the Christianity marginalized by society in the first few centuries of the church. I have no intention of disregarding the need for right beliefs. The early church saw many debates that focused on orthodoxy, pointing to the significance of right belief as part of healthy Christianity. What I hope to reclaim in this chapter is the need for orthopraxy, realized in foundational orthodoxy, formed out of the central practice of the Lord's Supper in Christian community. These practices must be shaped by theological teaching.

16. Edward Robinson writes, "One of our Ministers graduated from T.C.U., a Christian Church school, but he couldn't go to Abilene Christian College. However, Bro. Figueroa of Mexico graduated there. Negroes are admitted to the State school at Fayetteville, Ark., but they cannot enter Harding College, a Christian school. They are admitted in State supported schools in Tennessee, but he cannot attend David Lipscomb College in Nashville, Tenn., nor Freed-Hardeman College in Henderson, Tenn. If these schools will disassociate the name Christian from them, their practice would not reflect so badly on the Cause of Christ." Edward Robinson, *The Fight Is On in Texas*, (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008), 130.

17. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.

Mystagogy

In the patristic era, theological foundations for the practices of the church were laid through teaching and preaching. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper were connected throughout the narrative of Scripture, bringing the two Testaments together as a continual narrative to shape the lives of newly baptized Christians. This form of teaching is called mystagogy, or the "teaching of the mysteries," and its formal expression dates back at least to the late fourth century, although crucial aspects of its form and functions may be found in earlier Christian practices of formation.

In Late Antiquity, these homiletical teachings were presented to those who had recently gone through catechesis and experienced initiation into Christianity at the Vigil of Easter.¹⁸ Enrico Mazza provides helpful observations of the mystagogical sermons of Ambrose of Milan, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and John Chrysostom, and the homilies ascribed to Cyril of Jerusalem. Their exegetical method, typology, works from the presupposition of a "similarity between something God does in the First Testament and something God does in the New Testament."¹⁹ The former anticipates the latter, and the latter refers back to the former. In this typological method, the cross is at the center of history for believers, with God as the Lord of history, standing above and at the center of history. History moves outward from the cross, paralleling and mirroring events as a type

18. Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age* (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co., 1989), x.

19. John Goldingay, *Reading Jesus's Bible: How the New Testament Helps Us Understand the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 14. "The Greek word translated 'pattern' is *typos*, from which we get the English word *type*. The study of the comparison and contrast in the First Testament story and the New Testament story is thus called *typology*."

of fulfillment.²⁰ The relationship between the Testaments works towards a true picture of divine revelation. The ancients themselves, according to Mazza, described this as “spiritual” or “mystical” interpretation of scripture.²¹

While Ambrose of Milan, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Jerusalem all approached mystagogy differently, each founded their typological interpretations on the relationship of the two Testaments and the connection of the sacraments to the saving events narrated in the Scriptures.²² Mazza provides a comprehensive analysis of their work, aiming to establish mystagogy not only as a preaching style for catechesis or spiritual theology but rather as a true and proper theology in and of itself. It is a liturgical theology.²³ Explaining the meaning of the sacraments through typology, the newly initiated Christians could participate meaningfully in the sacraments as salvific events manifested from scripture. This type of formation connected ideas and information with ritual behavior and bodily experience within the communal setting of the church and against the backdrop of the grand sweep of the historic and continuing narrative of God’s work and purposes.

While the participants in my project are not recent initiates into Christianity through baptism, the teaching portion of this project is influenced by the approaches the patristic authors took in their teaching. This mystagogical lens helps establish a teaching

20. Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 25.

21. Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 10.

22. It is not within the scope of this paper to examine each of the mystagogical approaches of these patristic authors. Their approach to providing teaching around the sacraments is influential on my work in this chapter.

23. Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 25.

foundation for developing practices of the Lord's Supper, including the traditional method of pursuing a sacrament-centered formation through a synthesis of rituals, ideas, stories, and personal and communal experiences. This is where Smith meets Mazza, to bring the narratives of life into contact with the narrative of Christ and to reshape the heart's desire for presentation of the good life narrated through Scripture. Within Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, we find an example where a habitual practice at the center of the Christian community has disconnected from its theological foundations.

First Corinthians

In Paul's address to the Corinthian church, he says their meeting together does "more harm than good" (11:17), pointing to the Lord's Supper as a means by which their divisions are highlighted (11:18), therefore negating it as the Lord's Supper (11:20). When this call to unity is seen as the central theme of Paul's letter, his correction of their table practices takes on more weight.²⁴ Paul's correction of the Lord's Supper is a bold critique of their misuse of a central practice within the Christian community that should counter developing factions within the community. The cross and resurrection shapes what table fellowship looks like as Christ followers remember the life and ministry of Jesus.²⁵ When the Lord's Supper ceases to be the Lord's Supper, it loses its ability to

24. The exegetical history of 1 Corinthians has predominantly focused on the disunity and divisions of the church in chapters 1–4, leaving the rest of the letter (5–16) to focus on various unrelated pastoral and theological issues facing the Corinthian church. Margaret Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 65–66.

25. Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 35. Reflecting back on the life and ministry of Jesus through the cross and resurrection, the New Testament writers find new meaning. The tables at which Jesus reclines with "tax collectors and sinners" roll forward and become one with the table of the Last Supper, setting an example of what table fellowship looks like in light of the cross. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 35.

bring about meaningful transformation within a community.²⁶ While this section of the letter does not provide a full exposition of Paul's understanding of the Lord's Supper, we can learn a great deal about how the church in Corinth was practicing the Lord's Supper by what Paul offers in his correction.²⁷ If their divisions can negate the meal as the Lord's Supper, it is the task of this work to examine how the Lord's Supper can be utilized as a space to unify the factions of a diverse church.²⁸

The church in Corinth was likely made up of several house churches around the city with the most affluent members of the community hosting thirty to forty people for the common meal.²⁹ The makeup of these house churches would have spanned the socioeconomic spectrum which was highly unusual for any voluntary association in the ancient world.³⁰ The divisions specifically tied to the meals seem to be initiated by the more well-to-do members, who treated this common meal like a private dinner party, bringing shame to the poor and discriminating between the "haves" and "have nots."³¹

26. Paul claims that their negated practices within the community are causing some within the community to become sick and have even caused some of them to die (11:30).

27. Ben Witherington III. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 241–53.

28. There are many issues of division evident within the Corinthian church: which teacher to follow, legal issues with other believers, how to handle marriage with non-believers, singleness, spiritual gifts, attendance of idol feasts, and divisions based on gender and socioeconomic status.

29. If the factions mentioned in 1:12 represent different house churches, then there could have been around 150 Christians in Corinth at the time of Paul's writing. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 6–7. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Text and Archaeology*. 3rd rev. (Liturgical Press, 2002), 182.

30. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 6–7. The early Christian movement was characterized by what sociologists call "status dissonance," or "status inconsistency," in which economic wealth is not correlated with upward mobility of status in society for non-economic reasons. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 22.

31. Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 241. For the divisions seen within the cultural meals of Corinth, see Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early*

Their socioeconomic divisions made them blind to Christ's presence at the table, which sets the communal meal apart from ordinary meals, causing them to eat judgment on themselves (11:29).³²

The Corinthians lived in a culture of upward mobility, pride, sexual promiscuity, social placement, and self-seeking displays of wealth and status.³³ Their encounter with Christ at the Lord's Table establishes a new ethic and sets them apart from the world around them. They cannot share in the tables of demons and the Lord's Table as well (10:21). Being united with Christ at the table, their bodies are temples of the Spirit and therefore cannot engage in the sexual promiscuity of their culture (6:12-20). The table rituals of the Lord's Supper should provide a new ethic in which to live, rivalling the liturgies of the surrounding culture.

The primacy of love manifested in Christ on the cross is the new ethic for those who follow Christ and the central focus of Paul's address of the worship gathering (1 Cor 11–14). It is impossible to have union with Christ while being separated from the community of believers or dismissing anyone as unneeded. Anyone that destroys the community, the body of Christ, is attacking Christ himself (11:29). Jesus's presence is

Christian World (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) and Dennis E. Smith, "Meals and Morality in Paul and His World," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 20 (1981).

32. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 12. This is also the framework for the issues around the meal in Antioch where Peter left the Gentile table to create two tables within one community, separating the Jews and Gentiles. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 174–75.

33. The "nouveau rich" elites and semi-elites were made up of veterans and freed slaves turned entrepreneurs, social climbers, and people of local political prominence. David Arthur DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 556. This is likely why Paul addresses the Christians in Corinth, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth" (1:26). See also Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 100; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 3.

made known at the table when “the identity of Jesus is embodied in practices that reflect his death; otherwise, Jesus is absent and the meal is not the Lord’s Supper (11:20).”³⁴ Those who embody the practices of love use their gifts for the good of the community (1 Cor 12:7). The church is to be a place where shared rituals invite each follower of Christ into a shared narrative and ethic found in the wisdom of the cross where love is the driving force (1 Cor 13).³⁵ God’s act of love through Christ reimagines people and relationships within the redemptive presence of God in the Holy Spirit, which transforms us to be co-rulers within the ministry of reconciliation.³⁶ When socioeconomic divisions are elevated over familial connectivity, the power of Christ’s resurrection loses its meaning.

This building up of the body through each person’s gift is embodied through the participation in the body of Christ. Participation in Christ’s self-giving love moves love beyond being the “better gift,” feeling, or attitude, and elevates this love as the driving force behind all that is said and done in the building up of the community. Love is the “generic name for specific actions of patient and costly service to others.”³⁷ While each

34. Participation in Christ’s body is only possible when the partaking “is an expression of the more fundamental *koinōnia* of being clothed with Christ and his self-giving, others-oriented love.” Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 30–31.

35. Hays describes the attitudes and actions of the Corinthians as “virtuoso spiritual soloists,” which is why Paul works through this section to call them back to a view of worship as a communal action that requires complementary participation by all. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 12.

36. 2 Cor 5:17–21. J. P. Greenman and G. Kalantzis, *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 42. Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 30.

37. When spiritual gifts are devoid of love, they mean nothing (1 Cor 13:1–3). Love contrasts with the behaviors displayed in the Corinthian church (13:4–7). Finally, Paul emphasizes the temporary nature of spiritual gifts (13:8–13). Hays, *First Corinthians*, 222.

of these gifts serve a purpose in the building up of the body of Christ, these gifts will pass away when reconciliation comes. Even faith and hope will come to fruition and will no longer have a purpose, but one thing will be carried into the new creation: love (13:13). What I am calling the “participation in the body of Christ” is what I believe Paul is calling “the most excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31): love.

The wisdom of the cross is the way of love, embodied by Jesus serving at the Lord’s Supper and on the cross for those who abandoned him and for those who crucified him. This model and narrative of redeeming love calls all Christ followers into a new life lived for the redemption of the world, a new eschatological ethic.³⁸ The Lord’s Supper can be seen as a pivot point within the text, moving the addressing of division into the embodied love of the community as those who hope in the resurrection. When the resurrection comes, love will continue as the full reality of God’s presence with creation. Participation in Christ brings each follower into the benefit of God’s mission of liberation and reconciliation and calls them to bear witness to this divine mission by faithfully embodying and furthering God’s reconciling love for the world.³⁹ When addressing issues within the Christian assembly, the Lord’s Supper frames the discussion around love and reconciliation, asking how the outcome of the discussion might build up the church to live within the mission of God’s call for reconciliation of all things.⁴⁰

38. Richard Hays understands Paul’s framing of the ethical issues in theological terms as part of Paul’s pastoral strategy of using eschatological theology to critique the various issues within the church. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 8. Fee’s work is helpful in seeing larger theological frameworks within First Corinthians. Gordon Fee, “Toward a Theology of 1 Corinthians,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 28 (1989): 265.

39. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 36.

40. The issues addressed in 1 Corinthians 11 focus on the equity provided by the Lord’s Table in the face of disparity the world assigns to diverse peoples. The table continually frames the church’s focus on her purpose for gathering as a community, who they are as people in God’s image, and how they

Paul's pastoral task when entering a new city was to establish and nurture a community of believers. The gospel for Paul, at its foundation, is the story of Jesus crucified and raised from the dead and he emphasized this story for shaping communal identity.⁴¹ Paul holds theology and ethics as inseparable as he approaches the central issue in First Corinthians: salvation in Christ is manifest in the behavior of those "who are being saved" (1 Cor 1:18). The misguided spirituality of the Corinthians destroyed their shared identity in Christ because their behavior negated their theological claims. Transformation is cultivated in shared ritual practices founded in theological teaching for the sake of community formation. It is to these theological foundations we now turn. Theological convictions should shape shared practices of a community. Theology should always lead to reflection on community practices.⁴² Transformation is cultivated in shared ritual practices founded in theological teaching for the sake of community formation. Ritual practices act as a bridge to help communities embody the teachings for the sake of transformation. These early Jesus communities were centered around the communal meal, baptized with the meaning of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection. It is to the theological foundation of the Lord's Supper we now turn.

Theology of the Lord's Supper

Paul's letter to the Corinthian church provided a glimpse into the implications of neglected transformative practices. For these rituals to be transformative they must be

understand the diversity of each person gathered in the assembly. With the Lord's Table as the focal center of the church, there are questions churches might consider when making decisions of contention. See Appendix C.

41. 1 Cor 2:2; 11:23–26; 15:3–5. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 9.

42. A church's orthodoxy should shape orthopraxy. Right teaching shapes right living. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 11.

founded in strong theological teaching. In this section, I will lay the foundation that the Lord's Supper is an embodied practice central to the church for shaping the identity of the community. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he recalls what he passed on to them, which was given to him from Jesus, "do this in remembrance of me" (11:23–25).

Do This in Remembrance of Me

When Paul addresses the practices of the church in Corinth, he diagnoses the situation with theological terms and brings their undeveloped theological issues into conversation with the gospel in a way that reshapes their narrative.⁴³ The validity of the gospel is at risk when churches fail to examine their practices theologically. Paul recounts Jesus's words in 1 Cor 11:24–25: "in remembrance of me." These words, etched on the Lord's Table in many Protestant churches, need to be re-rooted in their first-century context to better understand how transformative they are for a community. *Anamnesis*, a term that means "remembrance," is the key word for sketching the theology of the Lord's Supper in this section and provides the emphasis for the common meal being a unifying meal around the shared identity in Christ.

The solitary experience of quiet reflection on the events of Jesus's death would be foreign to the first-century Jews and Christians. When they practiced the Lord's Supper, it was a ritual experience of active participation. When "remembering" is restricted to the mental exercise, the transformative depths of the ancient eucharistic rituals are missed. For those in the first century, "remembrance was a corporate act in which the event remembered was experienced anew through ritual repetition. To remember was to do

43. Many of their practices were motivated by social and cultural factors, such as popular philosophy and rhetoric, but one should not assume that these factors were consciously theological. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 8.

something, not to think about something.”⁴⁴ Stookey offers a suitable example to demonstrate the differences between our typical understanding of “remembrance” and the first-century understanding of *anamnesis*. When asked to remember one’s high school graduation, a person from our cultural context might spend a moment or two recalling the details of what took place. This act of “remembering” is quite different from the ancient context Paul addresses. Stookey explains:

But if you “remembered” after the fashion of the ancient Hebrews, as mediated to the Corinthians by Paul, you would do something quite different. Challenged to remember your high school graduation, you would rent a cap and gown. Clad therein, with great dignity and pride you would walk across a room while a recording of “Pomp and Circumstance” played. Having previously engaged a caterer, you would then throw a party for your friends.⁴⁵

The Jews reenact events as though they were happening again. Their festivals are participatory reenactments of remembrance. Their remembrance looks to past events and actions, as well as remembering forward, into future events and actions, while reenacting it in the present.⁴⁶ Gathering around the table “in remembrance of me” emphasizes Jesus’s command: “Do this.”

The people of Israel gathered yearly around tables to celebrate the Passover. While breaking bread during the Seder, the exodus story is told, recounting God delivering them from slavery as though it were happening to the current participants themselves. This act of embodied remembrance shapes the life of the Jewish people. The exodus story begins with people groaning under bondage in slavery: “And God heard

44. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 28.

45. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 28.

46. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 181.

their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition.”⁴⁷ God was not forgetful of his people. Rather, God’s response is an active remembrance, where he arrives and acts out the covenant with his people. In similar ways, when God’s people cry out for him to “remember” them, they are not reminding God of something he had forgotten. God is not forgetful. “Remembering” throughout Scripture refers to present action rather than passive recognition.⁴⁸

In the reenacting of God’s actions in the exodus through the celebration of the Passover, the Haggadah states that it was not the Jews’ ancestors who were brought by God out of bondage into freedom, but the contemporary Jews themselves. The Seder supper is not a memorial of God’s saving action in the past, but an appropriation of that same saving power in the present.⁴⁹ To this day, Jews continue to say “we” instead of “they” when they tell the story of the exodus during the Seder. This use of grammar derives from the way the Bible itself consistently understands the exodus as a living event.⁵⁰

These rituals are how the Jews, as bearers of their story, carry their tradition. The exodus story is the master story in which the Jewish tradition has its roots.⁵¹ As heirs

47. Exod 2:24.

48. Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 217.

49. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 217.

50. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 216. Amos 2:6 is an example of this kind of understanding. In Amos 2:10, God says, “I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness...” Hundreds of years after the events themselves, the people still associated themselves as the people whom God carried out of Egypt.

51. For what is tradition in the end but a community’s way of telling its story over time? As Exodus 12 and 13 remind us in depicting the beginnings of the people Israel’s traditions, tradition properly

through Jesus and the apostles to these formative aspects of Jewish tradition, Christian communities should learn from these remembrance practices to see how central identity is formed through a shared story. Richard B. Hays says, “We come to understand Scripture only as we participate in the shared life of the community, enacted in meals shared at the table.”⁵² It is in this sharing of life together that the story of God is told and retold in a way that shapes the identity of the community.

The events of Jesus’s death and reflections on atonement theory take the focus of most modern Western Christians. While each have a place in the story of Jesus’s passion, they do not tell the whole story. Jesus chose the Passover as the time to establish the new covenant in his blood, giving meaning to his death, burial, and resurrection. When Jesus wanted to explain this to the apostles, he gave them a meal and a practice rather than an atonement theory.⁵³ Jesus places these events in the middle of the story of the Passover as a way of understanding what was taking place: the liberation of all people and creation from the slavery of sin into the promised land of God’s kingdom.

The Passover and the exodus are the prototypes for the Lord’s Supper, which underscores the active presence of God doing something completely new in the liberation found in Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Fleming Rutledge explains that

understood enables us to tell our communal story properly. In that respect, tradition requires us to act out our larger master story in each of our own individual life stories such that in the process, we become transformed. For when we no longer simply study or recite the story, instead, we *become* the story. Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians, Getting Our Stories Straight: The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 99.

52. Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 16.

53. Jesus ties the meaning of his death on the cross to the Passover celebration rather than Yom Kippur, the atonement festival. When the Lord’s Supper is narrowly focused on the atoning work of Jesus, the larger picture is missed in what Jesus is calling his followers to in this practice. Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*. Living Theology 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 85.

this “something completely new” is God taking a different approach to intervention: “instead of intervening from on high as in the exodus, the intervention has taken place from within God’s own life, in the form of the Son’s self-offering.”⁵⁴ Eucharistic liturgies utilize the Passover language saying that God, through Christ, has brought us “from bondage into freedom,” “from sin into righteousness,” or “from death into life.” This passage from death into new life in the resurrection becomes our story as in the Passover Haggadah. When the focus is too narrowly on the cross as the point of individual salvation, the greater story is missed. We miss the proverbial forest for the trees.

The identification of Jesus’s death with the new Passover and his resurrection with the new exodus is found in the earliest Christian communities.⁵⁵ A mere twenty-five years after the resurrection, Paul says that Christ, “our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7–8). Paul not only assumes that his mostly Gentile audience in Corinth will understand this symbolism but also that they will identify with Israel.⁵⁶ The paschal lamb in the exodus story is not for atonement of sin but rather for setting apart Israel as a distinct people.⁵⁷ Israel’s houses being marked by the blood of the lamb on the doorposts sets them apart as under God’s protection from the destruction at work in the world outside. It is against this narrative backdrop that Paul gives the church instructions on how to handle the situation of the

54. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 217.

55. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 217.

56. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 83.

57. Exod 12:26–27.

sinful man in their community.⁵⁸ Paul weaves the exodus story throughout the letter to connect the identity of the Christian community within this story.⁵⁹

In the practice of *anamnesis*, the church not only remembers backward through the Lord's Supper but also forward to the messianic banquet in the heavenly celebration when all things are made new. All meals are brought together into the reality of this shared meal.⁶⁰ The Passover also shapes their eschatological view, looking forward to an expected new exodus, a new creation.⁶¹ So too, the Lord's Supper has the potential to shape the eschatological view of those in Christ; the certainty that God will act is guaranteed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁶² The remembering forward calls followers of Christ to live a life embodying the new creation where all things are "made new" by Christ.⁶³ The narrative of the church is shaped by the cross and the resurrection, celebrated in the Lord's Supper.

58. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 83.

59. It should be noted that the Passover imagery in this section of 1 Corinthians is not primarily eucharistic. The imagery instead points to the necessity of community purity and discipline. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 86.

60. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 31.

61. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 220.

62. Just as God raised him up, so too will he raise up those who follow the way of Christ (1 Cor 6:14; 15:1–28). Christ is the firstfruit, God's guarantee of the full harvest (15:20). The resurrection is celebrated because death has been rendered helpless and salvation has found its fulfillment. The one who initiated this salvation, God the Father, will be made "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28) because all dominions are destroyed. Fee, *Toward a Theology of 1 Corinthians*, 281.

63. Isaiah, and his echo in Rev 21:5, says, "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isa 43:19). The exodus becomes the paradigm for future redemption, offering a pattern of God's intervention in history, both in the past and in the coming future. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), 3.

The believer's baptism washes them into the narrative of the church, which carries an ethic all are called to live. The strong Christology in Paul's letter is often overlooked because the content deals largely with behavioral problems rather than doctrine. Paul interprets the issues he addresses in light of "the testimony of Jesus" (1:6) and the gospel, Christ crucified and raised from the dead.⁶⁴ It is Jesus's self-sacrificial death that defines communal patterns for life that individuals are expected to adhere to.⁶⁵ Paul uses his theology to call the Corinthians to reimagine themselves, their bodies, the church, and the world around them in light of the death and resurrection of Christ. To not live into this new ethic is to not fully take hold of the gospel.

The Lord's Supper takes center stage as the embodied practice where the exodus story of liberation, the gospel, is lived out as central and formative for the identity of the community. This is where life is reimaged when surrendered to Christ and his liberation.⁶⁶ This common meal reorients the Corinthian church to their common identity as a Jesus community as they live into the future reality of the resurrection in this present age. Jesus is present in the bread and cup among those who gather to participate around the table (1 Cor 10:16–17) and unifies those whom the world has divided (1 Cor 11:17–34). "It is therefore at the Supper that the community's foundational story of Jesus' death

64. 1 Cor 2:2; 11:23–26; 15:3–5. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 9.

65. Hays clarifies that "the Christology of the letter does not emphasize Jesus's death as a means of atonement for sin; rather, Paul highlights Jesus's role as the initiator of a new apocalyptic age, the precursor of a new humanity set free from death (15:20–28)." Hays, *First Corinthians*, 9–10.

66. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 9–10

is told, guided by the assurance of his presence as the resurrected and coming Lord (1 Cor 11:26).”⁶⁷

The active participation of remembrance reorients Christians in their common identity in Christ and the life they are called to in following Jesus. The church should wrestle with how Christ is made known through the breaking of the bread, where faith is acted out in an encounter with the living Christ. We must accept that no explanation will ever be complete. This experience with Christ is where Stookey offers a definition of theology: “Theology is faith seeking understanding, not faith seizing understanding, let alone faith explaining everything to the last detail.”⁶⁸ Theology must always seek understanding and never settle on an understanding. This definition of theology points to the need to take these experiences out of the hands of the rational and into the divine. In the next section, I will build on the theological foundation of *anamnesis* and the implications of Christ’s presence at the table.

The Presence of Christ at the Table

The questions surrounding Christ’s presence at the table have been debated for millennia. Is Christ “actually” present? Is this just a metaphor? Are the table and elements of the supper just memorial reminders of what happened? Is the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ? Literally? Symbolically? The questions have taken different forms throughout the centuries, and it is important to continue the discussion.

67. Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul’s Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 20.

68. This definition of theology will be explored further in the later discussion around the mystery of Christ’s presence at the table. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 41.

With all these questions, it is important to reexamine how the earliest followers of Jesus understood the act of breaking bread together.

Within the Hebraic view of *anamnesis*, the earliest followers of Christ understood Christ to be present with them. When Jesus said, “This is my body . . . my blood,” they took it on faith. This was never explained but accepted as a mystery.⁶⁹ In the third century, Christian thinker Plotinus adapted the philosophical system of Plato and set out to explain what Christians before him had accepted as mystery. This Neoplatonism gained wider influence in the fourth century due to Augustine. The explanation of how the substance of the bread and wine is transferred, or transformed, within the Mass into the body and blood of Christ is called *transubstantiation*.⁷⁰ For the sophisticated in the Middle Ages, mostly clergy and scholars, the explanations of *transubstantiation*, found in subtleties of Moderate or Extreme Realism, held deep meaning. For most, who could not grasp these deeper philosophical understandings, the sacramental bread and wine were the literal, physical body and blood of the Jesus of history. Despite the best intentions of the theologians of the time, who attempted to clarify the teachings of *transubstantiation*, Stookey explains, “the esoteric character of medieval Platonic and Aristotelian thought inexorably produces gross superstition among ordinary people.”⁷¹

69. The Catholic view affirmed in the Council of Trent, as articulated by Jeffrey Gros, is that “the sacramental encounter with Christ in the community is a mystery.” Gordon T. Smith, ed., *The Lord's Supper: Five Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 17.

70. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 47.

71. For example, when receiving the bread, a congregant would slip the body of Christ into their pocket to take it home to be used for different purposes: to be saved for medicinal purposes when a miracle might be needed during a grave illness, to be rubbed against persons or objects to bless or protect them, or even to be consumed as an aphrodisiac. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 77–78.

The domestication of the mystery of Christ's presence and the superstition around the elements in the Middle Ages invoked responses from the Reformers, who could not accept transubstantiation.⁷² Protestants consider Catholics to be superstitious and even idolatrous, and Catholics, in turn, regard Protestants as irreverent and even blasphemous. When we enter discussions surrounding the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, we get stuck trying to give sixteenth-century answers to twenty-first-century questions rather than returning to the roots of the discussion in the early church and her context.

While it is not within the purview of this paper to tease out the intricate detail of the arguments between Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin in their responses to transubstantiation, it is important to give a brief sketch of their conclusions on the debate. None of these Reformers could accept the teachings of transubstantiation but they each came to different outcomes in their arguments. Luther believed that the Lord is "particularly made known" in the breaking of the bread and therefore sought to explain the eucharistic presence in a satisfactory way.⁷³ Calvin, on the other hand, could not find a satisfactory way of explaining the Lord's presence but chose to believe in the Lord's presence at the table nonetheless.⁷⁴ Zwingli could not find a satisfactory way to explain the Lord's presence at the table and therefore concluded that his presence could not be at the table. The Lord's presence, in Zwingli's view, is not made known in the breaking of the bread and therefore the meal is only a symbolic representation of Jesus's death,

72. In Chapter 3 of *Eucharist*, Stookey provides an overview of the Reformers' arguments against transubstantiation. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 41–62.

73. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 58.

74. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 58.

burial, and resurrection.⁷⁵ His approach to the Lord's Supper is often called "memorialism" because for him the elements of the meal function as reminders of the body and blood of Christ, encouraging those who are gathered to remember the historical events.⁷⁶

Within my own tradition in the Restoration Movement, we have often worked from Zwingli's teachings, assuming we were leaning on the first-century church. Our Lord's Supper service has often been described as a "memorial service" where we remember the historical event of Jesus's death on the cross for our sins. The piety passed on to us by Zwingli created a thoughtful yet passive contemplation of events that are long past. The aim of this project is to move the church from the twenty-first-century mental exercise of "remembrance," handed down from Zwingli, to the first-century understanding of *anamnesis*, a participatory action, leading to recognition that Christ's presence at the table is central for forming communal identity. In this next section I will provide a biblical framework for Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

Theophany

The early church took it on faith and understood it as a mystery that when Jesus said, "This is my body . . . my blood," he meant it. How the bread and the wine are the body and blood of Christ should remain as a mystery.⁷⁷ That being said, there is a theological framework for understanding the reality of Christ's presence at the table. In

75. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 58.

76. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 54–55.

77. The church first came to know the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread. It is at this point that the church then began to ask, "How can this be?" When the mystery of the faith is explained to satisfaction, we have boxed in the living God. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 41.

this section, I will survey the theological understanding of theophany as a framework to understand Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper with us. A theophany, simply defined, is a visible manifestation of God, a self-disclosure of the deity.⁷⁸ The theophany is temporarily present to accomplish a purpose and then the divine presence ceases. Throughout the biblical narrative, God makes himself present to his people and to individuals to bring them to transformation and lead them into a better reality.⁷⁹

A well-known theophany takes place at Mount Sinai, where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. There are no records of anyone going back to worship the bush as though it were God. It is the theophany that sanctifies the space.⁸⁰ God's presence was recognized in the bush, but the bush was not worshipped as though it were God, nor was the bush protected as though it were God. The object served its purpose for creating space for God's presence. When God made himself present to Moses in the burning bush, the ground Moses was on was holy, but this did not mean that the bush itself was literally God. The theophany made the space holy, "Do not come any closer, take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exod 3:5).⁸¹

78. "The word does not occur in the OT or NT but is a theological word formed by the combination of two Greek words, *theos* (*god*) and *phainein* (to appear). Thus *theophany* refers to an appearance of God." M. F. Rooker, "Theophany," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 859.

79. Because theophanies are temporary, they should be distinguished from the ongoing testimony of God's existence found in nature, which Paul points to in Rom 1:19–20.

80. Rooker, *Theophany*, 862.

81. Other examples of theophanies found in Scripture include: angel visiting Abram (Gen 18), angel wrestling with Jacob (Gen 32), pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13:21–22), on Sinai in the form of thunder and lightning (Exod 20:18), Tent of Meeting (Exod. 29:42–43), and on the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–38). When Solomon built the temple, God filled it with his presence (1 Kgs 8:10–11), and his presence departed because of the people's idolatry (Ezek 10).

The narrative arc of God's manifest presence finds its climax in the incarnation of God in Jesus.⁸² The presence of God with his people finds its completion in the new creation, where there is no longer a need for a temple to house the presence of God "because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."⁸³ The gospels continue the narrative of God's presence with his people and lean heavily on the exodus narratives and the theophany texts. Two major examples of theophanies in the synoptic Gospels are the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus.⁸⁴

A full theophany usually concludes with divine words, spoken for those who take part in it as witnesses.⁸⁵ In the case of the transfiguration passage of Luke 9:28–36, the stage is set with imagery from the theophany narratives on Mount Sinai in Exodus: the mountain, cloud, and heavenly voice.⁸⁶ God's presence is placed on Jesus at his baptism in the theophany of the dove descending from the opened heavens and on the mountain with the heavenly transformation undergone by Jesus and the appearance of Moses and Elijah.⁸⁷ Each instance concludes with the divine voice as evidence of God's presence in the human world.⁸⁸ The divine voice on the mountain places emphasis on Jesus as one

82. John uses the tabernacle imagery in the opening of his Gospel account, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [tabernacle] among us" (John 1:14).

83. Rev 21:22.

84. Both events take place with historical imagery drawing the reader's attention to the exodus narrative and are accompanied by the divine voice pointing to Jesus's identity. Armand Puig Tàrrach, "The Glory on the Mountain: The Episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 58. 2 (March 2012): 172.

85. Tàrrach, "The Glory on the Mountain," 172.

86. David Marvin Miller, "Seeing the Glory, Hearing the Son: The Function of the Wilderness Theophany Narratives in Luke 9:28–36," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72. 3 (July 2010): 498.

87. Tàrrach, "The Glory on the Mountain," 152.

88. Tàrrach, "The Glory on the Mountain," 172.

with authority who should be heard: “Listen to him” (Luke 9:35).⁸⁹ These theophanies within Jesus’s ministry point to his identity as the one in whom God is with his people. The Fourth Gospel frames Jesus’s story differently from the Synoptics, leaving out Jesus’s baptism, transfiguration, and institution of the Lord’s Supper. This Gospel account reads the First Testament as a web of symbols to be understood as figural signifiers for Jesus and the life that he offers. The temple becomes a figural sign for Jesus’s body, and the great feasts of Israel’s worship are seen anew as awash with signs and symbols of Jesus.⁹⁰ The Gospel of John emphasizes Jesus’s connection to the temple by placing the temple cleansing at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry. For John, “Jesus is not only the Temple—the place where we meet God—but he is also himself the God who meets us and rescues us by gathering us into union with him.”⁹¹ Even though the Fourth Gospel does not have Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper, this Gospel account is filled with eucharistic teachings.

The discourse in John 6 is viewed as a developing catechesis on the Eucharist.⁹² The lifegiving body and blood of Christ, the bread and the wine, point to the presence of Christ as theophany in the Lord’s Supper. When we consume the bread and the wine, we take Christ into ourselves, to then carry him into the world. John omits the institution of

89. Miller, “Seeing the Glory, Hearing the Son,” 499.

90. The pouring of water, the kindling of light, the rededication of the temple, the good shepherd who truly feeds and heals God’s people, and the Passover lamb. The narrative of Israel in the exodus permeates Jesus’s life and ministry, and the manna from heaven signifies Jesus’s flesh. This all makes hermeneutical sense because “Jesus is the Logos, the Word present before creation.” Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 94–95.

91. Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 84.

92. Vernon Ruland, “Sign and Sacrament: John’s Bread of Life Discourse (Chapter 6),” *Interpretation* 18. 4 (October 1964): 459.

the Lord's Supper in the supper discourse in John 13, yet in 6:51b when John has Jesus say, "This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world," John echoes the Synoptic and Pauline Supper parallels: "This is my body, which is for you" (1 Cor 11:24).⁹³ The "Bread of Life" sign Christ gives in John 6 is tied to the exodus story and the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness. The bread, which is Jesus's body, brings eternal life and resurrection (6:32, 49–51a). Jesus proclaims, "I am the bread of life" (6:35, 38–40, 49), calling for the mutual indwelling of those who "eat my flesh and drink my blood" (6:53–58).⁹⁴

The brief examples of theophanies in the Synoptics and John's Gospel give a glimpse into how the early Christian communities understood the symbols surrounding Jesus's life and teaching. More specifically, the John 6 passages illuminate the early church's belief in Christ's presence in the symbols of the bread and the wine. While this is only a brief glimpse at the concept of theophany, it provides a lens for viewing the presence of Christ in the bread and cup in the Lord's Supper.

The bread and the cup are often referred to as "symbols." It is important to establish a working definition of "symbol" before we move forward. In modern times, the meaning of the word "symbol" has been depleted, with the phrase "just a" placed in front of it. Symbol was originally a powerful term, meaning "to bring together" with force. A sacramental symbol, in this definition, is the bringing together of the material element

93. The dialogue in John 6 delves with intimacy into the themes of heavenly bread, manna, the Word of God, faith, and resurrection. In the feeding of the five thousand in John, it is Christ himself, rather than the disciples, who distributes the bread. "His actions over the bread become the supper institution account: ' . . . took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them . . . ' (vs. 11), and only John connects this miracle with the Jewish Passover (vs. 4)." Ruland, "Sign and Sacrament," 451.

94. Ruland, "Sign and Sacrament," 453–54.

and the reality that the material element communicates.⁹⁵ In the ancient world, a symbol was understood as the visible part of an invisible whole and, at the same time, within the symbol the visible reality of the invisible whole was present.⁹⁶ It is in this definition of symbol that I find the theological concept of theophany to be helpful. The material elements of the bread and the wine carry the presence of Christ as the visible reality of Christ himself.⁹⁷

William Dyrness asks the question, “Where in the service do worshipers feel that they are closest to God? Or, to put it another way, what part of the service constitutes a ‘theophany’—that is, what is the particular element that communicates the presence of God?”⁹⁸ The focus of the worship service should be on the transformation of the community as well as the individual.⁹⁹ The symbols of the body and blood of Christ should elicit a response from those who gather and partake at the Lord’s Table. When Christians hold the body of Christ in their hands, they hold that reality to which Christ has called them as a people. The Christian community in Corinth lacked unity on multiple fronts, and their assemblies did more harm than good (1 Cor 11:17). Paul says

95. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 138.

96. Klemens Richter, *The Meaning of the Sacramental Symbols: Answers to Today’s Questions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 14.

97. A modern example of this definition of symbol would be the American flag. It is the embodiment of America. Any disrespect to the flag elicits a strong response, as though someone were disrespecting America itself. When a flag burns, rarely does anyone respond with “it is just a symbol.”

98. William Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship: Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 68.

99. This journey into Christlikeness is a challenging, exciting, and sometimes painful journey that is God-ordained, fulfilling God’s purpose of reclaiming his image within us in Jesus Christ. Alexis Abernethy, ed. *Worship That Changes Lives: Multidisciplinary and Congregational Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 185–86.

that “those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves” (11:29). Many in the church in Corinth failed to recognize Christ’s presence in this central meal and allowed the meal to become a source of division. Likewise, in many modern churches, there are unchecked divisions among different cultural groups, genders, economic classes, and family groups.

Intentionality around developing the rituals of the Lord’s Supper, recognizing the presence of Christ in the theophany, creates a space in the weekly worship gathering for the transformation of hearts and community. The bread and the wine become the presence of Jesus, through faith, and make that space holy. Not only is the space transformed but the time at the table is transformed, bringing the past and the future into the present moment.

Redemption Narrative of the Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Table is the space where all believers gather, not only in the presence of Christ, but also with the saints who sit at the messianic banquet. This future table, brought into the present, sets the church’s focus on the eschatological hope into which we were called. Remembering the life from which we were called, the table places us in the exodus narrative where rival identities and liturgies are relinquished and redeemed for the kingdom of God. Both secular and religious narratives are embodied in liturgies, or as defined by Smith, “rituals of ultimate concern.”¹⁰⁰ Liturgies allow for participation in the narrative which ultimately shapes our lives. Smith defines such formative liturgies as follows:

Liturgies are covert incubators of the imagination, because they play the strings of our aesthetic hearts. Liturgies traffic in the dynamics of metaphor and narrative

100. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 215.

and drama; they are performed pictures of the good life that capture our imagination and thus orient our love and longing. By an aesthetic alchemy, liturgies implant in us a vision for a world and way of life that attracts us so that, on some unconscious level, we say to ourselves: “I want to go there.” And we act accordingly.¹⁰¹

Paul utilizes the exodus narratives to correct the actions of those in the Corinthian church who continued their attendance of meals and festivities in the temples of pagan gods, as they had before their conversion. This was a normal part of social life in their culture, and, from their point of view, posed no spiritual danger because they knew that there is only one God and this knowledge set them free from the trivial rules and restrictions of ordinary religious life.¹⁰² They did not see the dangers in engaging in these rival liturgies. It is easy to see how the idolatry of the ancient world created rival liturgies. Smith provides wonderful insights into how Christians today are shaped by the rival liturgies through a more subtle temple worship. Before raising the issues addressed in Smith’s work, I will first provide an overview of how Paul addresses the same issues in Corinth in 1 Cor 10. The Lord’s Supper is where these rival liturgies are placed on the altar and the unifying identity of Christ is lifted up.

In 1 Cor 10, Paul rereads the First Testament stories through the privileged perspective of the new eschatological situation in Christ, finding that these stories speak in direct and compelling ways about the situation of his churches and concluding that God has ordered the events of the past for instruction to the church in the present.¹⁰³ Paul draws sacramental parallels between these Gentile Christians leaving behind their pagan

101. James K. A. Smith, “Alternative Liturgy: Social Media as Ritual” *The Christian Century* 130.5 (March 6, 2013): 30.

102. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 159.

103. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 162.

past through baptism into Christ and the Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt, having been “baptized into Moses in the cloud” (Exod 13:12–22) “and in the sea” (Exod 14:21–22). These two elements correspond to the Spirit and water in Christian baptism.¹⁰⁴ Israel’s manna (Exod 16:1–36) and water from the rock (Exod 17:1–7; Num 20:2–13) are paralleled with the Corinthians receiving spiritual food and drink when they eat at the Lord’s Supper. Paul goes on to interpret that Christ was present with Israel in their wanderings as the rock from which they drank (1 Cor 10:4), implying that in every respect, Israel enjoyed the grace and presence of God.¹⁰⁵

Paul’s main point is that when believers break bread in the presence of God, God is really with them and not some abstract divine principle in their world of “polytheistic superstition.”¹⁰⁶ This God whom Israel enjoyed the presence of is a jealous God who sternly condemns idol-worship and punishes those who dabble in it. Paul shares these stories to invite the Gentiles into the ancient narratives of their spiritual ancestors.

Paul is careful to undo any notion that the church has superseded Israel as God’s people.¹⁰⁷ Including the Corinthians in the narrative of ancient Israel, Paul tries to

104. Hays cautions not to take these parallels too literally, as though Israel really had “sacraments.” “The interpreter should not make the mistake of supposing that the Old Testament itself interprets these events as sacramental symbols or that Jewish tradition before Paul had conceived of these events as figurative foreshadowing of future realities. For example, the expression ‘baptized into Moses’ is nowhere to be found in Jewish sources; Paul has coined the phrase on the basis of Christian language.” Hays, *First Corinthians*, 160.

105. “The metaphorical identification should not be pressed too hard, as though preachers should solemnly seek to determine whether Christ was igneous, metamorphic, or sedimentary.” Hays, *First Corinthians*, 161.

106. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 159.

107. “To revert to the image from Romans 11, he does not think in terms of God cutting down one tree (Israel) and planting another (the church). But neither for that matter does he think of God planting a second tree beside the first tree. There is only one tree, the Israel tree into which Gentiles are grafted.” Goldingay, *Reading Jesus’s Bible*, 29–30.

structure their thinking through highlighting that Israel had the “full Christian experience” of baptism, spiritual food and drink, and Jesus with them to nourish them, God still let that generation die in the wilderness. Paul does not want these Gentile believers to think they are “safe” just because they went through the Christian initiation of baptism and receive the spiritual food of the Lord’s Supper. The God of the exodus is the same God of the Corinthians, so he shares Israel’s story as a warning.¹⁰⁸ The church is called to learn from the example of our spiritual ancestors (1 Cor 10:6).¹⁰⁹ The experience of baptism and the Lord’s Supper call the Christian into a space of transformation that elicits new behavior. The table becomes the place where the other tables we dine at are brought into question.

In 10:7, Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to become idolaters as some of them had and then quotes from Exod 32:6, “They sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” Without a doubt, Paul has selected this one verse from the Exodus passage because of its reference to eating and drinking, reinforcing the theme of his appeal throughout chapter 10.¹¹⁰ God is a jealous God, and catastrophic consequences come to those who flirt with idolatry and “crave” idol-tinged food. It is easy to justify what you are doing when you engage in actions that are common in society and even expected by one’s neighbors and peers. The Corinthians are confident in their own power, or *exousia*,

108. Goldingay, *Reading Jesus’s Bible*, 29–30.

109. Paul leans on the wilderness narrative for this purpose, “that we might not be cravers [*epithymētas*] of evil, just as they also craved [*epethymēsan*]” (10:6, translation by Hays). The emphasis Paul gives here on “craving” possibly alludes to Num 11, when the Israelites craved for meat (Num 11:4) and God’s anger was kindled against them, bringing about “a great plague” upon them (Num 11:33). Hays, *First Corinthians*, 162–63.

110. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 163.

because they have received special *gnosis*, so they are able to stand against the temptations and dangers associated with the temples.¹¹¹ When rationalizing why your actions are justified because of your knowledge, it is easy to dismiss the struggles of others as weakness and simplemindedness.

The Lord's Supper covenants the community together as one body where each person should examine their actions to determine whether they are working towards unity or division. When Paul addresses the divisive Lord's Supper practices in Corinth, he contends that some have become weak and sick and have fallen asleep because of their abuse of the communal meal (1 Cor 11:30). The infiltration of rival liturgies through idol worship will have the same outcome as it did for Israel in the wilderness. The Lord's Supper, the eucharistic celebration, creates *koinonia* with Christ and with the community.¹¹² The regular breaking of bread together in the community should lead to deeper levels of unity as the Lord's Table sheds light on rival liturgies that draw us away from the fellowship of believers, the body of Christ. In all things, the unity and building up of the church is paramount over the wants and desires of the individual (10:23–24; 10:31–11:1). If the Lord's Supper is going to act as a place to redeem our hearts from the idols which pull our wants and desires away from God, we must recognize the rival liturgies and the temple worship around us today.

A Space for Transformation

We often fail to recognize the power that rival liturgies have in our lives when we engage in regular habit with the idols those liturgies belong to. The habits in which a

111. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 165–66.

112. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 167.

person engages with any regularity shape their heart's ultimate concern, because humans are first and foremost lovers. It is easy to recognize the problem of idolatry in the Corinthian context to which Paul writes. N. T. Wright helps recognize the idol worship we engage in today:

When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship; what's more, you reflect what you worship not only to the object itself but also outward to the world around. Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sex objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch.¹¹³

The "obvious" idol worship in Corinth was the fabric of their culture and part of everyday life for them. Christians from another era and culture would potentially be baffled by our dismissal of the idolatry in our lives that is woven into the very fabric of our culture. The heart's ultimate concern, as Wright frames it, reflects the object being worshipped. We often address the major actions which flow from these idolatrous reflections and fail to recognize the minuscule habitual acts that lead to these sins. Smith argues that "what appear to be micropractices have macro effects: seemingly inconsequential microhabits are, in fact, disciplinary formations that begin to reconfigure our relation to the wider world."¹¹⁴ Intentional practices around the Lord's Supper can

113. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 182.

114. Smith, "Alternative Liturgy," 31.

become the microhabits that reshape and reconfigure the surrounding world for a Christian community.

When followers of Christ gather for worship, do they expect this time to be transformative?¹¹⁵ What is the purpose of the worship service? Many see worship as an act of bringing glory to God, placing emphasis on the practices of worship being pleasing to God. This asks very little about what brings transformation in the service. The worship service culminates in the spoken word of God, which stems from influences of Zwingli and Calvin in our tradition. When Calvin developed his new catechesis, he replaced visual images and practices, which were used to shape the lives of believers, with textual teaching from the Bible for both children and adults.¹¹⁶ The images and practices were eliminated within a generation of Calvin's shift towards preaching and teaching. With the emphasis on right forms of worship and articulating biblical knowledge through teaching and preaching, many believers in our tradition may not have considered the question of what brings transformation in the worship. The leaders' role is to ensure that space is created for transformation.¹¹⁷

Transformation is founded in the incarnational act of God in Jesus. God's desire to be with his creation culminates in the birth of Jesus, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. God's act of bringing about the beginning of the new creation through the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead is the hope of a transformed humanity. This is a gift

115. "To ask how worship is transformative is, in part, to ask what worshipers *expect* will be transformative." Abernethy, *Worship That Changes Lives*, 101.

116. Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship*, 36.

117. Because not everyone shares the understanding that the aim of worship is transformation, it is essential to know where people are, in order to apply levers to naturally move them to places of growth. Abernethy, *Worship That Changes Lives*, 178.

from God. The receiving of this gift is fundamental to Christian life and brings us into the presence of God, by grace, through the sacraments.¹¹⁸ The Lord's Supper is the mirror we gaze into regularly to see the areas of our lives that fail to reflect the image of God we are called to embody.

The defining moments in the narrative of Christ are the same defining moments in the narrative of all who are in Christ. Paul understands life to be shaped from beginning to end by these two moments: "it is an experience of death and resurrection."¹¹⁹ When Christ took bread and cup during the Passover and said, "This is my body and blood," he invited those who follow him into the greater narrative of God's redemption of a broken creation. This is the church's story. We are washed into the story of Christ as a community of those who are baptized. The narrative of death and resurrection is reenacted in the celebration of the Lord's Supper where Jesus is present in the bread and the cup among those who are gathered to participate around the table (1 Cor 10:16–17). This meal should be unifying for those whom the world has divided (1 Cor 11:17–34). "It is therefore at the Supper that the community's foundational story of Jesus' death is told, guided by the assurance of his presence as the resurrected and coming Lord (1 Cor 11:26)."¹²⁰

The gift of the Holy Spirit for all believers, through baptism, reconnects us to the goodness God created us to be and our vocation as co-rulers cultivating a new creation of

118. Baptism and the Lord's Supper have been given deeper meaning in many of our churches through grounding them in "Scripture and the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus . . . rather than justifying them by reference to a particular Scripture." Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 144.

119. Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 20.

120. Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 20.

reconciliation.¹²¹ Living in the resurrection opens our eyes to the realities of the world around us. Worship should reiterate the narrative of the story of Jesus. It is in the Lord's Supper that we draw close to Christ, taking his body and blood within us, to be transformed in the Spirit, so that we might embody God's ministry of reconciliation.¹²² Transformation, through our communion with God, finds ways of expressing the heights and depths, joys and sorrows, found in the lived experience of this broken world.¹²³

The power of liturgies, both secular and religious, are that they are "caught rather than taught; the ideals are carried in the practices, not disseminated through messages."¹²⁴ If the routines and rituals of the world are continually engaged by Christians, without scrutiny, their hearts are constantly being directed towards the rival deities of consumerism, materialism, individualism, racism, nationalism, comfort, and the like. This is Paul's message in 1 Cor 10:14-22. Carelessly engaging in the temple practices of their society has a lasting impact on the Corinthians' life. Paul gives a hard warning not to allow these rival ritual practices to shape who they are. He then lifts the Lord's Supper up as the counter-narrative needed to shape our love and desire for God.

The Lord's Table welcomes all to come and gather. Everyone comes to the table through the same grace and undergoes the same transformation in the presence of Christ. This space where we continually come to have our hearts reoriented back to God also

121. 2 Cor 5:17-21.

122. "God comes to us through the events of redemptive history. We appropriate this presence by means of the practices of worship. In turn, these practices, by the working of the Spirit, form us into the likeness of Christ." Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship*, 98.

123. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 267.

124. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 54.

reorients our hearts in how we view one another at the table and the world around us. This space for transformation reminds us where we came from as sinners and where we are called to as saints. The Lord's Supper is the place where ecclesiology is formed.

Ecclesiology

If the Lord's Supper is central for shaping identity in a community of believers, then it also plays a central role in shaping our understanding of the church. Paul utilizes multiple images to call the Corinthian church back to unity as a community of believers. With Christ's presence at the table reshaping our experience and interaction with one another, the space at the table becomes transformative for the church to reorient itself back to her God-given identity.

The Church Is the Temple

When the church gathers around the table in the presence of Christ, "redemption from" also brings into focus "redemption to." What is the church called to be as the redeemed people of God? The divisions within the church cause believers to question their understanding of who they are called to be as a community. Paul utilizes both garden and temple imagery to bring the purpose of the church into view. While there are a few places to start with Paul's ecclesiology in the Corinthian correspondence, the task of this section is to build on the already established functions for the Lord's Supper and create a picture of what the church looks like with the Lord's Supper at the center.

The Lord's Supper in the center of the Christian community serves to emphasize that God is the one who works to bring about transformation and growth. Paul understands his own ministry, and the ministry of Apollos, in this light. Paul regularly addresses the role of the Spirit in each person's understanding of wisdom (2:6–16) and

questions their maturity based on whether they live “by the Spirit” (3:1).¹²⁵ Paul and Apollos take on positions of planting and watering, but neither amount to anything more than field workers and planters because their efforts are fruitless if not empowered by God (3:6–7).¹²⁶ Paul uses the metaphor of building to point to the Spirit-filled reality of the church as God’s temple.¹²⁷ When the Spirit dwells in the church, individuality gives way to the community where God’s temple becomes the embodied reality through the Holy Spirit.¹²⁸ Paul then uses the imagery of the temple to address the disunity of the church.¹²⁹ He emphasizes the sacred nature of the temple and God’s wrath, which will come on anyone who tries to destroy it.

Paul’s imagery of agriculture and architecture should be taken together in the culminating image of the church as a “garden-temple.”¹³⁰ Israel’s temple was designed as a microcosm of the whole creation, with the holy of holies as the temporal space where

125. “The discourse in 2:6–16 has to be read as ironic. This sort of ironic reversal can be shown to be characteristic of Paul’s style. Paul would completely undercut his own position (1:18–2:5) if he really did mean to dangle some sort of esoteric wisdom other than the cross before his readers.” Hays, *First Corinthians*, 40.

126. This is the mysterious power of God: the workers can only do what is assigned of them, but they are absolutely powerless to make the seed come to life. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 52.

127. “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.” 1 Cor 3:16–17.

128. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 56–57.

129. With the temple still standing in Jerusalem at the time this was written, Paul is making a world-shattering claim when he transfers God’s divine presence onto the predominantly Gentile church in Corinth (cf. John 4:21–24). Hays, *First Corinthians*, 57.

130. G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 246. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2013), 102.

heaven and earth came together, and God met with his people.¹³¹ This concept of Israel's temple has interpretive connections with the city-temple, or city with no temple, in Revelation 21 and the new creation to come.¹³² The temple is the image of God's good creation and pointed Israel to the restoration that is to come.¹³³

The Jewish expectation of the coming Messiah was coupled with the return of God's presence to his temple.¹³⁴ God's presence returning to the temple to bring restoration to his people and to the land was the expectation of first-century Jews. They were not looking for someone to come and take them away from the land but for someone to come and restore the presence of God among them.¹³⁵ The temple was restored, but in a different way than expected. The church, through the Holy Spirit, is now the temple where God makes himself especially present to his creation.

God's holy temple points to the rejoining of heaven and earth, where all things will be made new again in Jesus Christ.¹³⁶ The temple is the reflection of what the good creation is supposed to look like in this world.¹³⁷ Paul corrects the divisions, ethics, and

131. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 101.

132. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 29.

133. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 105.

134. Ezek 48:35; 35:10 stand as a reminder of the Lord's presence in the temple and the hope of its return. The example in Ezekiel 48 is the "promise of a rebuilt temple with YHWH coming to take up residence, so that 'the name of the city from that time on shall be, YHWH is There.'" Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 105.

135. "To those who pored over Torah night and day, looking for the consolation of Israel, this combination of motifs—Temple, presence, glory, kingship, wisdom, creation, exile, rebuilding, and unfulfilled promise—would be part of their mental and emotional furniture. Touch one and you would touch them all." Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 107.

136. Rev 21:5. Then, there will no longer be a need for a temple because the presence of God will be the reality. Rev 21:22

137. The prophetic imagery surrounding the temple calls Israel back to transformation that can only come from an encounter with the presence of God at the temple. Amos 5:18–27 alludes to the stench

practices of the church because he believes the faithful Corinthians make up part of the final “end-time temple” that will withstand the final judgement, which will come as a fiery storm.¹³⁸ Paul utilizes “God’s temple” in reference to the church three times in 3:16–17, placing God’s Spirit central to their temple reality. This temple is a work in progress, continually built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Paul uses this language of “building upon” three times (3:10, 12, 14), implying that the work of the minister, and of the congregation, is never complete until the work is made complete in the coming of Christ.

This image of “continual building” of the temple can leave a negative impression of the temple being “unfinished.” The garden-temple is different. The continual building of this Edenic temple is a picture of flourishing, growth, and the church living into the lifegiving garden God intended it to be. The church as the “end-time Edenic temple” broadens the picture from geographical Israel as the place of God’s presence, to a cosmic view of the church taking God’s presence into the whole creation.¹³⁹ The implications of God’s real presence resting on the church in Corinth, both individually and communally, shapes a new ethic for how they interact with idolatry, one another, the sharing of gifts for the common good, and for the church’s witness to the world around them.

of the temple worship because of the injustice that is going on in the streets. Ezekiel 47:1–12 paints a picture of the waters of life flowing from the temple to bring life to everything around it. It is no wonder that the fruit from the tree of life in Revelation 22 is for the healing of the nations.

138. As Paul talks about the building up of the church, we hear echoes of the prophets. Malachi looks forward to the fiery final judgment, which will burn like a furnace (Mal 4:1), where fire will test the merit of the workers. The passages of Malachi 3–4 and the imagery of Solomon’s Temple appear to be the backdrop of Paul’s writing of 1 Cor 3:10–17. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 250–51.

139. This brings in the inclusion of Gentiles, who are being built on Christ, the true foundation of the temple. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 252.

Taking the ecclesiological understanding of the church as the garden-temple beyond the metaphor moves us into reimagining the practices of the Christian assembly to reinforce this ecclesiological identity. The gathered church is the temple where God's presence dwells. A pilgrimage takes the traveler from their home to the temple in Jerusalem, drawing closer to the location of God's presence with his people. They come into the courts, as far as they are allowed, and finally the high priest enters the Most Holy Place on their behalf.¹⁴⁰ Imagining the pilgrimage of the diaspora Jews, the pilgrim moves from the world to the presence of God, and then back into the world. Likewise, the journey to the Lord's Supper is the rhythm of the Christian life. We move from the world to draw close to the presence of God. At the Lord's Table we take the presence of God within us to then carry his presence into the world.¹⁴¹

The Lord's Supper Is Central to Forming Unity

Each person is given the same Spirit and called to the table by God, through Jesus Christ, no matter their history, race, gender, socioeconomic status, education, etc. No one is worthy to come to the table except through God's grace. Before approaching the altar to receive the Eucharist, the community of Trappist Brothers at Mepkin Abbey confess together, "We are not worthy, but you have made us clean."¹⁴² This confession places

140. This is a simplification of what is described in Leviticus 16, reimagining the journey of diaspora Jews coming to Jerusalem for Yom Kippur.

141. This movement of the church will be revisited at the end of this section.

142. Brothers of Mepkin Abbey, Personal Retreat, Eucharist, March 2007.

them in a position of humility, recognizing that they are not worthy to approach the most holy place, but thanks be to God, Jesus has interceded for them.¹⁴³

Each person who receives the Spirit and is invited to the table in the most holy place reclaims their vocation as God's image bearer and co-worker in cultivating the garden of the new creation and has a gift given by the Spirit for the building up of the church.¹⁴⁴ Baptism, for Paul, is the extension of grace through Jesus Christ, to bring the diversity of all people together as "one body" through "one Spirit," and therefore all are equal around the table—"whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free."¹⁴⁵ When each gift is given for the common good of the community, each person is in a place of both giving and receiving. Social hierarchical structures can develop in communities when members are not open to receiving from others, placing one group in the giving position and another group in a position of receiving.¹⁴⁶

In the eucharistic ritual found in many traditions, the priest lifts up the bread and the wine as gifts to God from the community and then asks God to transform them into the body and blood of Christ. God could have used a number of items from within creation to represent Christ, but he chose items that require human participation to prepare for the table. Instead of grain, he asks for bread. We take the grain that God

143. The Hebrew writer lifts up Jesus as the high priest who meets us in our weakness and brings us into the presence of God with confidence. Heb 4:14–16.

144. 1 Cor 12:1–11. The imagery of reclaiming the vocation is hinted at in Paul's use of "New Adam" for Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15. This is the fulfillment of the church's mission in 2 Corinthians 5 to be the "new creation" in Christ, and therefore be "Christ's ambassadors" of this new creation. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 475–95.

145. 1 Cor 12:12–14.

146. When a church with this kind of underlying social hierarchy enters any level of conflict, the inequity of power quickly comes into view.

provides, mill the flour, knead the dough, and bake bread, and then offer that bread back to him as a gift. The same holds true for the wine. The grapes and the vine could represent Christ, but God allows for us to take the grapes he has given, press them to make wine, and then offer that wine back to him as a gift. God, who needs nothing from us, creates space where we are welcomed into his community by allowing us to offer something at the feast. What we eat and drink at the Lord's Table creates a relationship between the Creator and creatures.¹⁴⁷ If God, who spoke creation into existence, can humble himself to receive from us, who are we to look at anyone with a gift of the Spirit and say, "I do not need you"?¹⁴⁸ This diversity of gifts is emphasized in Paul's imagery of the body.¹⁴⁹

When the church gathers around the table to receive the body of Christ, the community of believers are reminded to live into the reality of being the body of Christ in which they partake. Augustine of Hippo, in reference to the sacraments, says, "Behold what we are: may we become what we receive."¹⁵⁰ Later in his sermon, Augustine reflects on one of the deep truths of the Christian faith: "through our participation in the sacraments (particularly in baptism and Eucharist), we are transformed into the body of

147. Stookey, *Eucharist*, 16.

148. 1 Cor 12:15–26.

149. "The body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts for one body, so it is with Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." 1 Cor 12:12, 27.

150. In some churches, the one who presides over the Lord's Supper says the first part, "Behold what you are," and the congregation replies, "May we become what we receive" to act as a reminder of their ongoing transformation into the likeness of Christ.

Christ, given for the world.”¹⁵¹ Augustine, speaking to those who were newly baptized, said:

If you wish to understand the body of Christ, hear the apostle speaking to the faithful: You are the body of Christ and members of him [1 Cor 12:27]. If you are the body of Christ and members of him, your own mystery is placed upon the Lord’s table. You receive your own mystery. To that which you are, you respond “Amen”—and by your response you give your assent. For you hear, “The body of Christ,” and you respond, “Amen.” Be a member of Christ’s body, so that you may speak a true “Amen.”¹⁵²

Glimpsing the crucified body of Christ in the broken bread and wine, we behold the incalculable depths of God’s intimate love, the lengths to which God will go for each of us. We recognize the life of love we are called to live as we “Behold what we are: May we become what we receive.” When Christ is recognized in each person who gathers at the table, it is difficult to say, “I do not need you.” Rather, each person should be received as though Christ is being received.

The Lord’s Supper Shapes the Church for Mission

Imagine the Sunday morning assembly structured like the temple with the Lord’s Table front-and-center as the point of focus for all that happens in worship. This is the most holy place where the presence of God is encountered, consumed, and then carried into the world. Just as the table reorients who we are as God’s people, it also brings clarity to our mission of reconciliation in the world.¹⁵³ The presence of God calls each

151. Augustine, “Sermon 272. Preached on the Holy Day of Easter to the Infantes, on the Sacraments,” accessed November 14, 2020, <https://stanselmminstitute.org/files/SERMON%20227.pdf>

152. Augustine, “Sermon 272.”

153. In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church, he implores them to be “Christ’s ambassadors” and through him become the “righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:20–21). Those who are in Christ are a “New Creation! The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17). Since they have been reconciled to God through Christ, they are to then go into the world with the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18).

person into a new way of living in and interacting with the world. Christians live as though the presence of God is on display in their lives for others to catch a glimpse of what the redeemed creation looks like. The habitual remembrance of Jesus acts as the transformation station to launch redeemed people into the world.

Christian mission is shaped by this rhythm of drawing close to the presence of God to then take his presence into the world. David Fitch frames this rhythm with three types of circles: close circle (church family), dotted circle (life together inviting non-believers in), and half-circle (being present in non-Christian contexts).¹⁵⁴ Rhythm must continue the flow between the tables, otherwise churches who never leave the close circle fall into “maintenance mode” and become too focused on maintaining the numbers of the close circle and keeping a well-run worship service. Eventually, those churches become cut off from the surrounding neighborhoods and cut off from the mission.¹⁵⁵ The Lord’s Supper brings our story into the narrative of the sending God who is on mission to redeem the world, James W. Thompson explains, “When the story of the cross becomes our story, reminding us of the one who did not please himself, we find a new identity . . . This transformation can occur only when we reaffirm the story of the cross as the story of our congregation.”¹⁵⁶

154. This is the overarching theme of David Fitch’s book. I used his imagery of drawing close to Christ’s presence to then go be Christ’s presence as both host and guest in the world. In the second part of his book, Fitch presents seven disciplines as means for carrying God’s presence into the world: The Lord’s Supper, Reconciliation, Proclaiming the Gospel, Being with the Least of These, Being with Children, Fivefold Gifting, and Kingdom Prayer. David Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

155. Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 41.

156. James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 117, 150.

By contrast, churches who focus entirely on the half circles of life, disregarding the close circle of Christ's presence, move into "exhaustion mode," engaging the world by their own efforts and means to solve all the problems they see. Devoid of his presence, it is difficult to discern where God is already working in the world. These Christians exhaust themselves by attempting to be the source of their own power over the world.¹⁵⁷

The incarnational presence of Christ, found in the theophany at the table, is taken in us to the other tables in our lives. The Lord's Supper is the reenactment of the communal story of God's action to redeem his people then, now, and in the days to come. The "dotted circle" becomes the gathering place where committed Christians are the host of Christ's presence at the table, creating space for neighbors and strangers to come and draw close to the presence of Christ.¹⁵⁸ In the same way, the Christian then takes Christ's presence within them to the surrounding community as "guest" around their tables.¹⁵⁹ The narrative of the Lord's Supper moves us into an incarnational rhythm as the garden-temple cultivating new life wherever we go.

Conclusion

Habitual practices shape who we are as people and communities. With well-formed intention, these practices can transform a diverse community of people. The table practices in Corinth were disconnected from their theological foundations and became a source of division rather than a force for unity. The Lord's Supper gathers the community

157. Rejecting church communities who have fallen into maintenance mode, many of these Christians have rejected Christian organizations altogether, instead lifting up the mantle of social justice. While many good works of mercy may be accomplished, these Christians fail to bring Christ's kingdom in the end. Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 42–43.

158. Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 40.

159. These are the coffee shops, the restaurants, breweries, bars, etc. Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 41.

of believers to remember the story of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection, which reorients identity, relationships, and mission back to the presence of Christ. When Christians of diverse backgrounds come together in this shared narrative and intentionally engage in habitual practices of spiritual formation, their divisions become washed by their commonality in Christ.

In this next chapter, I will demonstrate how a diverse group of people from my church developed a proposal for practices to be adapted into our worship service to cultivate a central identity in Christ. They developed these practices by engaging in practices of spiritual formation together, theological teaching on the Lord's Supper, and regularly breaking bread together in shared meals and in observance of the Lord's Supper.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This project was designed to address the apparent need for identity formative practices within QCC's weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. Chapter 1 showed QCC to be a young congregation with fewer than ten years of history together and in a transition of new members coming in and early adopters moving on, which has led to a diversification of backgrounds, cultures, history, and experiences. The NoDa neighborhood has a rich history, is one of the fastest growing parts of Charlotte, has economic divisions, and is gentrifying. The Johnston YMCA, which QCC is in a partnership with, is the most diverse YMCA in Charlotte and provides services for the multiplicity of backgrounds represented within the larger community. Chapter 1 presents QCC as being uniquely positioned to exemplify how unity can be cultivated within a diverse community. One focal point that developed out of this contextual analysis was the need for a central identity in this growing congregation. While everyone in the congregation would agree that Christ is central to who they are, there are no definite practices surrounding the Lord's Supper focused on creating this identity in Christ for the congregation.

In Chapter 2, I provided the rationale for the need for habitual practices for identity formation within a community, provided context for the issues Paul addresses in Corinth, and laid out the theological foundations for the Lord's Supper. I presented the Lord's Supper as a corrective for the issues Paul addressed in Corinth as a way of

exploring how intentional practices with the Lord's Supper can work toward preventing divisions by centering the church in a common identity found in the table practice. These practices in turn shape the church toward mission as the ones who carry the presence of Christ with them from the table into the world, where they become the presence of Christ at the tables of the world. In this chapter I will provide details for the methodology for the project, giving account of the sessions that resulted in the proposed practices for the Lord's Supper at QCC.

Qualitative Research

The project was designed to bring a diverse sampling of people together from the larger congregation to create practices around the Lord's Supper to cultivate a central identity in a diverse community. This type of project, where a sampling of people is brought together for the purpose of research, is generally called qualitative research. *Qualitative research* focuses on the social world of the experiences of people, "seeking to make sense of lived experience"¹ In other words, qualitative research seeks to examine how a collection of people observe and develop meaning within their common experience. Qualitative research utilizes "a variety of methods and approaches which enable the researcher to explore the social world in an attempt to access and understand the unique ways that individuals and communities inhabit it."² The major characteristics of qualitative research, delineated by Sharan Merriam, provide a descriptive outline for this project. First, the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning. Second, the

1. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 57.

2. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 28.

researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Third, the process is inductive. Finally, the product is richly descriptive.³

Participatory Action Research

This project also takes on the form of participatory action research. Usually the community being studied would “be the primary actor in defining the project’s problem, data collection, methods of analysis, and how and where to use the findings.”⁴ As the primary investigator in the project, I guided the participants through theological reflection to determine the project’s proposed problem and then develop some identity forming practices within the church’s observance of the Lord’s Supper. Ultimately, I introduced the group to “an intervention in order to provide ministerial leadership for the transformation of the organization.”⁵

The participants in the project do not hold any special positions of leadership within the congregation and each have had varying levels of involvement in their time with the church. The participants worked together as a group and developed cohesion through regular meetings and by participating in spiritually formative practices together. The group was authentically involved in taking ownership of the project because they were tasked with learning the material, observing and participating in new practices, and developing new practices for our church leadership to consider implementing into our service. Their participation was real, not perfunctory. I took on different roles as I

3. Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 15.

4. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 58.

5. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 58.

worked with the group as the researcher. I was the facilitator, collaborator, and learning resource for the group.⁶

Overview of the Project Intervention

With the assistance of the Elders, nine people were hand-selected by purposive sampling.⁷ The group was selected from those who responded to the emails and announcements explaining the project. The intent of hand-selecting the participants was to ensure a diversity of age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, and race that best represents the demographics of our congregation. The objective was to call upon individuals who are invested in QCC and have the ability to offer practical insight into the development of identity shaping practices.

The purpose of this project was to assemble a diverse group of members to engage in theological training around the Lord's Supper and the need for spiritually formative practices with the Lord's Supper to observe how they engage in developing new practices and liturgies for the Table to cultivate spiritually formative practices for a central identity in QCC.

The group committed to meeting for nine weeks of theological discussion and exploration of eucharistic practices. We met during the class time following our Sunday worship and stayed an hour after. Lunch was provided each week, and each person made their own arrangements for childcare as needed. The first five weeks were focused on theological teaching and discussion around the Lord's Supper. During this time,

6. Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 185.

7. A purposive sampling is a selection of people who are aware of the situation and meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to the research at hand. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 83.

participants were also introduced to spiritual disciplines that were intended to aid in preparing the participants for the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper as a congregation. The next two weeks took the group off-site to observe how other Christian groups practice the Lord's Supper. Each of these sessions of observation were followed by dinner and discussion focused on what participants experienced and learned from the practices they observed. In the eighth week, the group met to take everything they learned through study, practice, and observation and develop a proposal for practices for our congregation to adopt in our weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. These practices were then presented to the church elders in the ninth week for their consideration. Following the proposal in the ninth week, I conducted a group exit interview, for which participants provided written responses via email.

While it would have been ideal for every participant to be present at every session, it was nearly impossible to balance everyone's schedules accordingly. No participants missed more than twice. At most, only two participants were gone at any given time. Every participant was able to observe the practices of another tradition. We altered the schedule so that everyone could be present together to develop the proposal as a group. One person had to miss the presentation to the elders, but the group did well to represent and articulate the input of the one who was absent.

The Project Group

Over the course of three weeks, I explained my project to the congregation and asked for volunteers. I also sent out subsequent emails outlining the project and explaining the role of the volunteers. My desire was to assemble as diverse a group as possible from a selection of the church. By asking for volunteers rather than approaching

individuals, I was surprised by some who submitted their names to be considered. These unexpected participants added a lot of value to the project.

There were only six who volunteered who were not selected. Three were not selected because of scheduling conflicts. Two others were not selected because they only wanted to participate if they could do so as a couple. The elders and I thought having a couple in the project would shift the dynamics too much. The last person was not selected because their demographic was already heavily represented, and we thought the others who were selected brought more variety within their demographic.

Nine in all were selected from the congregation to participate in the project. There was one male in his twenties, a female and two males in their thirties, one male in his fifties, and three females and a male in their sixties. Racially, the majority were white; there was one African American male and one male who is biracial. Educationally, the spectrum ranged from high school education to those with graduate and doctoral degrees. Politically, there was a good mix of Republican, Democrat, and moderate leaning participants. All but two had backgrounds in the Restoration Movement, with one having little to no church background and the other being raised in the Presbyterian Church. There were white-collar and blue-collar workers as well as educators and stay-at-home parents in the group. Theologically, they spanned the spectrum from conservative to liberal, with some advocating young Earth readings of Scripture and others supporting a more open reading of Scripture. Everyone who participated came with an openness to being challenged and taught. While I would have desired more ethnic diversity and a few younger and older members to have been in the group, the group that signed up represents a decent view of the diversity of our

congregation.

In addition to the project group, I asked a non-participant to observe and take notes for each session, providing her with a note-taking template and protocol.⁸ It was my intention to only use one non-participant observer, but we had two scheduling conflicts and I had to utilize another non-participant observer during those times.

The Sessions

The first five sessions followed the same basic format, only altering the flow as needed for the group discussions.⁹ I provided a new spiritual discipline each week to prepare participants for taking communion the following Sunday with the congregation. We began each session with lunch and a discussion about their experience with these practices and how it had affected their participation in the Lord's Supper that morning. We would then take a break and reconvene in the yoga studio down the hall, where communion was prepared. Each week I encouraged the group to prepare themselves for entering that space as though it were sacred. I did not give details for what that looked like but left it up to their interpretation. I would then teach a different element of the theology of the Lord's Supper found in Chapter 2 of this thesis. We finished each session with the Lord's Supper. I baked the bread for the Lord's Supper each week and prayed for each person individually and for the group as a whole while I baked the bread. I adapted different practices into these times so participants could embody in practice the theology we had discussed. After a short discussion on the experience focused around how those practices might be transformative, we dismissed.

8. See Appendix E.

9. See Appendix F for an overview and focus of each of the nine sessions.

Session 1

When I arrived for Session 1, everyone was already in their seats ready to go. They had already introduced themselves to one another, since a few in the group were still new to the congregation. I began the session by thanking them for committing to this project and articulated the importance of their work for the future of our congregation. Everyone signed and handed in their consent forms, and I led them through the formation of a group covenant for how the group would conduct themselves throughout the project. They developed four main pillars for the covenant: confidentiality with what is said, generosity in how things are said and received, humility when discussing the project with others in the congregation, and consistency in attendance. We all agreed that this covenant would provide a good base to work from as a group, and I reminded them of our covenant each week.

The primary objective of Session 1 was to introduce the need for practices to intentionally shape who we will become as people and how practices shape the way we understand our relationship with God, one another, and the world. To help orient me as to where they were in their interactions with practices around the Lord's Supper, I asked each of them to share with me their most meaningful experience with the practice. I received a range of responses. Some people had developed their own practices around how they take the Lord's Supper each week that have developed deeper meaning for them. Others recalled how our church will have special Sundays where we will change how we participate around the table. Some reflected on the regularity of the practice and how that rhythm was meaningful for them. One confessed that they are new to any practices around the Lord's Supper because they did not remember any regularity of

participation in their upbringing and they had not been to church in over a decade before coming to our church. I followed up this discussion with the question of how our current practices and rituals around the Lord's Supper shape our relationship with God, one another, and the world. The group struggled to pinpoint any practices beyond having the regular rhythm of the practice. Identifying the lack of intentional practice for identity formation set the tone for the rest of our discussions through the project.

When I dismissed the group, I reminded them to take a moment to center their focus on being in the presence of God and to treat the space where we would meet for the second half of the session as a sacred space. Everyone came into the new space in their own time. Some entered the room and stood to the side in quiet reflection. Others took a seat and entered a posture of prayer. Some sat in silence reading Scripture. I began our time with the Lord's Supper *lectio divina* on 1 Cor 11:17–26, encouraging them to listen for a word from God. I then had them share with one other person what they believed they received. Each person then shared with the group what their person shared with them.

After our time of *lectio divina* bringing us into focus, I prayed for the bread and the cup and served each person individually. Each time I presented the bread to them, I said, "The body of Christ broken for you." And with the cup I said, "The blood of Christ poured out for you." Each person met these remarks with an "amen" or a "thank you" and made eye contact with me. I wanted this first time of breaking bread together to be close to "typical" for our tradition. When we were done, we had a discussion on how their time with *lectio divina* affected their time with the Lord's Supper. I asked for responses to the home baked bread, and they were all generous with their comments

about my botched attempt at baking the bread. I then asked how their time at the table might have been different if they had known that they were each prayed for while the bread was baked. They were moved by this notion, and there was a good discussion on how actions like that might transform a congregation and even more so transform the people who took time to pray for the church while performing this act of love.

The end of the first session focused on the issues Paul was addressing in Corinth as outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis. We covered the concept of *anamnesis* and what it means to “remember” in the Jewish mindset. This part of the discussion set the stage for understanding how this meal was to be experienced anew through ritual repetition. This session set the framework for the need for the intentional practices this group would later develop.

Session 2

After beginning with prayer and reviewing our group covenant, we discussed our time with *lectio divina* while eating lunch together. This was a new practice for almost everyone in the group. The discussion was centered around two basic questions. How was your time with *lectio divina* this week? How was communion different this morning after meditating on Scripture all week with this practice?

For the teaching portion of this session, I presented Smith’s teachings from *You Are What You Love* and *Desiring the Kingdom*. Most everyone tracked with the teaching that we are lovers rather than “thinking beings” but struggled to make the connection that the worship service should shape our loves. This is due in part to our tradition not having a recognizable liturgy. I tried to utilize Smith’s example of exegeting the shopping mall and drawing parallels for how the mall shapes our hearts to worship rival

deities. On the whole, I did not believe this teaching landed and decided to come back to it another week. The main point that did resonate with everyone is that “we might not love what we think we love” and the need for disciplined habits to shape our hearts towards an “ultimate concern.” The final takeaway was the contrast that bad habits are created by neglect while good habits take intentional practices and habits. This discussion laid the foundations for the need for intentional practices for shaping hearts for God.

After our short break, we reconvened down the hall in the yoga studio and everyone entered the room with reverence in their own way. I introduced the practice of “Breath Prayer” or “The Jesus Prayer” to focus our time around the table together. Breathing in and out slowly, we repeated quietly, “Lord, Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” A time of silent reflection followed for a few minutes after the prayer. Breaking the silence, I read from 1 Cor 10:14–22 and focused on our tendency towards other deities and our desired one-ness as the body of Christ represented in the one loaf. Giving a brief comment on our unworthiness to receive the bread and cup, I then thanked God that he has made us clean and through this cleansing we are made one body, the body of Christ. Offering the bread and cup in the same manner as the previous week, each person’s focus was on the bread rather than me this week.

After communion, I taught a brief lesson on 1 Cor 10 and the rival deities Paul was addressing. We discussed the need for silent reflection to allow God to speak to us and challenge the rival liturgies we have in our own lives. When I asked why we struggle to slow down and listen to God, one of the older participants surmised, “We’re too busy thinking we know what God says to actually hear what he says.” Others

commented that this mindset of “knowing what God says” creates a deity that is rival to God. This deity is our own understanding of God. The discussion was brought back around to the Lord’s Supper as the place where we examine our own understandings of God in light of what we see in the body and blood of Christ and allow God to challenge where we have worshipped idols in our lives. We are sinners in need of mercy.

Session 3

Beginning our time with prayer and lunch together, we followed our usual rhythm of sharing how our time with the spiritual discipline was during the week. The discipline of the “Jesus Prayer,” or “Breath Prayer,” brought mixed responses. There were some who were uneasy with the focus of sinfulness, leading to an important discussion on the need to adapt the practices to where a person is on their journey. The responses to the practice showed that the group was engaging with the discipline and integrating the practice into different areas of their lives while they were going about their day.

As we finished lunch, I moved into the teaching section of the session, altering the schedule slightly from the previous weeks. This week’s teaching focused on Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. This was one of the harder concepts for the group to wrestle with, and they did well to track with the discussion. The discussion began by drawing distinctions between “God being everywhere” and God making himself specifically present in a space and time. The discussion was able to bring God out of the clouds and into the tangible spaces of our existence for the group. There was a wide recognition that many were raised in a tradition that expected very little or no interaction from God in daily life. Overall, though somewhat disoriented, they were eager to dig

deeper into what it means for God to be particularly present to us.

I offered a description of the Lord's Supper as "a memorial service to remind us of what Jesus did to save us from our sins," and almost everyone had been taught that at some point. Asking how this description coincided with the understanding of "remembrance" being *anamnesis*, they were able to quickly point out the disconnect in the understandings of the early church and what we have often taught. They made the connection themselves that in *anamnesis* we are participating with Jesus rather than undergoing a memory exercise to recall what he did.

I briefly walked the group through the history of teaching regarding Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, how the early church understood it to be a mystery not to be explained, how Plotinus and Augustine gave explanation through Neoplatonism, and how that led to the superstition in the Middle Ages that the Reformers were responding to in their teachings on Christ's presence. When I gave Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin's responses to *transubstantiation*, the group quickly made the connection that the teachings they had heard around the Lord's Supper were echoing Zwingli rather than the early church. Some in the group responded strongly that we have been missing the point of why we do the Lord's Supper every week. One person brought the discussion together with this astute comment, "We treat the Lord's Supper as a funeral memorial . . . and even then, we do the funeral wrong because we focus so much on Jesus' death that we forget the resurrection all together."

I ended this section of teaching with the introduction of the concept of "theophany" to give some framework to the early church's understanding of Christ's presence as mystery. Through discussion, the group made the connections between

Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper and God's presence in the burning bush in Exodus 3. To help them make a modern-day correlation, I appealed to their emotions with something being more than "just a symbol." I talked about the American flag in the same way that we often talk about the Lord's Supper. The flag is just cloth and ink that reminds us of our country and what has been done to make our country great. The discussion intensified with the notion of disrespect given to the flag, and the connection was made that the flag is more than "just a symbol" and embodies everything that is America, her history, ideals, and identity. To disrespect the flag is therefore to disrespect all of these things about America. While this is not a direct parallel, it does tap into the emotions people have for symbols. This example better solidified the teaching of theophany for many of them, and I encouraged them to go further with the understanding of theophany as the presence of Christ at the table. With this, I ended the discussion by encouraging them to take some time to prepare themselves to enter the space where the Lord's Supper was prepared as though they were entering the real presence of Christ.

We transitioned to the yoga room where the Lord's Supper was prepared. After our time around the table, they shared their responses to the presence of Christ at the table with them. There were mixed responses ranging from excitement and awe that Christ was with us to others who struggled with fully recognizing Christ's presence. The array of responses helped reiterate the need for habitual practices to help people move from their head to their heart.

I ended our time with introducing the Examen as the next week's spiritual discipline. The group was asked to pray the Examen twice a day, or at least once at the

end of the day. The focus for this discipline was to help them recognize Christ's presence with them throughout the day so that they will better recognize Christ's presence as Host at the table. This practice helps participants make inroads from the transformation at the table into their daily lives through taking the presence of Christ with them. The Examen creates space in their day to slow down and recognize God's presence with them.

Session 4

Our lunch discussion on the Examen highlighted the struggles of trying on new practices. Some struggled with different aspects of the practice and especially the call to slow down and be mindful amid the "rat race mindset" many find themselves in. As each person shared their different struggles with the practice, the group encouraged one another. As the group has continued with their focus on growing together to be like Christ, their interactions have positively changed. The discussion focused more on the need for incremental and intentional changes than on the practice itself.

As we wrapped up lunch, I introduced the spiritual practice of "fasting." They were asked to begin their fast after dinner on Saturday and then to break their fast with the Lord's Supper Sunday morning. The focus for prayer was to be on the church, their relationships with those in the church, and where they seek to find nourishment.

After a short break we turned to the teaching portion of this session. The focus of the teaching was on the need for the Holy Spirit, the resurrection, and the restoration of all things to the glory God intended them to be. Through this discussion, I wanted them to examine how life, authority, divisions, etc. looked in the Garden of Eden, pre-fall, and how all of these would look when everything is restored to perfection. The group did

well to discuss the general unity of the garden, but I wanted them to wrestle with the harder realities of our world here and now. I opened my Bible to Galatians 3:26–29, where Paul talks about oneness in Christ and how the divisions of the world are no more because we have been clothed with Christ.

I wanted to drive this point home that our churches should represent glimpses of the new creation, so I brought up the uncomfortable reality that just sixty years ago the people of color in our group would likely not have been welcomed at this table even in most of our churches. The group discussed how the table is intended to level the playing field where all are made equal in Christ. I pushed the conversation into other areas to make participants wrestle with oneness on multiple levels. What does this say about the equality of women in the church? How do we view economic diversity in the church? What would it mean in an early Christian community that a slave could be an elder in the church over a person of higher economic means? What messages does that send to the surrounding society? Overall, the group understood the principles being taught, but the concept is hard to materialize in life.

I did not manage the time well, and our discussion got really deep. When I mentioned that we would not have the Lord's Supper due to our discussion running long, people began to pack up. No one protested to not having our time around the Lord's Supper. I needed to be more mindful of the time and model the importance of our time around the Lord's Table.

Session 5

We began this session with lunch and discussed our experience with fasting in preparation for the Lord's Supper. We never really made much headway into how

breaking the fast with the Lord's Supper shifted their focus on what it means to receive nourishment from the Lord's Table. Most of the discussion stayed on the surface and focused on how they managed to get through it. If I were to present this spiritual discipline again, I would broadly explain what fasting is supposed to be and allow more time for the group to discuss meaningful ways to adapt the practice into their lives. Retrospectively, I realized that I tried to control the outcome of this practice by giving it too many parameters. The practices which had the most success were the ones in which space was created to explore the practice on their own.

Moving into the teaching time, the final teaching session focused on the mission of the church. What does it mean to draw close to the presence of Christ around the Lord's Table to then carry the presence of Christ into the world? This mindset places us within Paul's vision of the church as a ministry of reconciliation in 2 Cor 5:11–21. If the habits we engage in regularly around the Lord's Supper shape a central identity in a diverse community of believers, then these habits should also shape the church for God's mission to the world. I framed this mission within Adele Calhoun's definition of hospitality, "Because we have been welcomed into the love of Christ and received as dearly loved children, we can offer the world a place of safety and healing."¹⁰ I challenged the group to discuss the differences between how they typically have thought of hospitality and what it means to create space for the world to come to know Christ. Their comments centered on this being a kind of evangelism that everyone can engage in rather than only those who are gifted in having a Bible study.

10. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 139.

The teaching of this session focused on the temple imagery used to describe the church in 1 Cor 3:16–17. The imagery I wanted them to understand is the Lord’s Table being in the place of the holy of holies in the temple. This is the place where the church gathers to draw close to the presence of God, to be transformed by his presence, and to take his presence into the world for transformation. One of the major concepts I wanted them to understand was the concept of thin spaces. These are spaces where the spiritual and the physical come together. Thin spaces point to the reality of God’s full presence in creation in the Garden in Gen 1–2 and in the new creation in Rev 21–22. The discussion really began to click for the group when we got to Rev 21:22, which says there was no temple in the city, because “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” To bring the previous week’s discussion forward, I asked the group what the world would look like if God’s presence were fully realized, and they quickly jumped to there being no more pain, suffering, war, etc., and finally no more death. All would be right in the world and God’s presence would be the reality.

God’s intention for the temple was to create a space in the world where this reality was experienced. This is the prophetic voice throughout the Old Testament calling the people to bring justice and reconciliation. Ezekiel 47 shows the river flowing from the temple and bringing life to the Dead Sea and to everything along the way. Amos 5 nods to the same imagery that justice needs to roll like a river. Because Israel neglected justice, God hates their worship in the temple and their sacrifices are a stench to him. After pointing to these images of life and justice intended to flow from the temple, I took them to the imagery in Isa 11:1–9 about how creation will look when one comes from the shoot of Jesse and the Spirit rests on him. Asking them to access their

creative imaginations, we discussed what it would look like for the church to be the temple in the way the temple was intended to be. How might the church create spaces in the world to bring peace? There was good conversation around social justice issues and how the church addresses the hungry and the afflicted in the world. When I shifted the conversation back to the personal and how each person exists as the presence of God in the world, they picked up on the themes in Jesus's teaching that we are to give water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, etc. One person commented that this view shifts the focus from "doing good for the sake of going to heaven" to a better focus of bringing heaven to the world. Another talked about how this is a more exciting existence for the church rather than being a holding station until we finally go to heaven later.

If the church is the new temple, built together through the Spirit, and the Lord's Table is the holy of holies containing the presence of God, then the church gathers together to come into the presence of God to then take his presence into the world as a ministry of reconciliation. We come to the table where Christ is host to take his presence within us. We then take Christ's presence into the world where we invite people to the tables of our homes where we are host for the presence of Christ to the world. We then take the presence of Christ with us to the tables in our community where we become the presence of Christ as guests.¹¹

We took a break and I reminded them to prepare themselves for joining around the Lord's Table together. I added the "offering of the peace of Christ" to one another as part of the Lord's Supper in this session. Before they received the elements of the Lord's

11. This is the overarching theme of David Fitch's book. I used his imagery of drawing close to Christ's presence to then go be Christ's presence as both host and guest in the world. David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

Supper, they turned to one another and said, “the peace of Christ be with you” or some variation of offering Christ’s peace to one another. While they admitted that this practice initially felt awkward, they quickly saw the value in offering peace to someone. This is a movement towards the table where we receive our peace found in Christ. We share that peace together to then take it into the world. They experienced this practice in both churches where we observed, and this became one of the proposed practices for our church.

Session 6

The structure of this session was split between an abbreviated meeting immediately after worship, observing the Catholic Mass at Saint Peter’s, and the dinner and discussion that followed. We began our time after worship with a group exercise of *lectio divina*. Everyone got into pairs to share with one another what they heard during the exercise. This is a practice of active listening because they were to then offer to the group what their partner heard from the text.

To prepare the group for our time of observation that evening, I reminded them that we would be there to observe and learn from the practices of the Catholic Church, emphasizing that we are guests in their space. I gave some examples of the different rituals that they might observe during the Mass. The discussion diverted into comments about how their practices were wrong. The conversation struggled to differentiate between ritual and ritualism. I ended our lunch reminding them again that we will be guests and are there to observe the practices to learn from them, rather than offer critique.

When we arrived at Saint Peter’s Catholic Church in Uptown Charlotte, Father

Shea was greeting his parishioners arriving for Mass. He was delightful and took time to meet everyone in our group. He gave us a brief introduction to what we would experience at this particular parish. The group asked insightful questions about the church itself and their prominent location in Charlotte. Father Shea listed off a dozen or more city-wide initiatives that this parish had instituted to address the increasing homeless population. While he was giving us these details, multiple people from the homeless population entered and were greeted by Father Shea. This was noted later by the group. This church not only developed meaningful ministries but also created space for relationships with that population.

We took our seats in the back two rows in the corner of the sanctuary. Father Shea introduced our group to the congregation, welcoming us to their community. He offered a prayer for our church and asked publicly that we pray for their church as well. This was deeply appreciated and moving to a few in the group. Everyone participated at their own comfort levels though the experience on a whole was disorienting for most of them.

We discussed our observations and experiences over dinner. The discussion stayed positive in the beginning but diverged towards negative comments about Catholicism in general and assumptions about their practices. Their observations focused on: intentional body movement throughout the service, congregational responses, involvement of women, respect given to Scripture through standing during the reading and by parading it through the church. One person noticed that different people knelt toward the altar whenever they passed by it. The biggest takeaway was that everything throughout the service took place to the sides of the altar. The eucharistic feast was the

only part of the service that was central. This had profound impact on many in the group. Not only was the altar central in location, it also took central focus in the service. They even noted that the homily was short and did not overshadow the Eucharist.

The discussion ended with a focus on how a group might be positively shaped by the practices they observed. The group as a whole was moved by the importance placed on the eucharistic feast by making it central to all of the activity of the Mass. They also mentioned the involvement of women in the service, which captured the importance of multiplicity of voices, even in a Christian tradition with a long history of excluding women from official positions within the church. One subtle element they picked up on that I did not expect was that every person who took part in the service was well prepared, articulate, and calm. Those who read Scripture had obviously prepared for the reading, paying attention to cadence and emphasis of the text, and read in such a way that encouraged the church to receive it for meditation. The time of silence which followed was awkward for the group since they were not used to it. The intentionality of silent reflection was moving for them and came up often in future discussions. It created a longing to create space for reflection in our services.

Session 7

For this session, we did not have a meeting immediately after worship but met at Saint Peter's Episcopal Church for their Sunday evening communion service. We all met outside to walk in together. A woman greeted us near the entrance and handed us an order of worship to guide us through the practices. This guide helped the group to sit within the practices and to observe from a more experiential level.

I chose Saint Peter's Episcopal Church for observation primarily because they

had a communion service that fit our schedule for meeting on a Sunday evening. The other reason I chose this place for observation is because, on this particular Sunday evening during the month, they practice Taizé worship. This practice has a number of subtle differences from the liturgy of a Catholic Mass, but for those who are not familiar with liturgy in general, the differences might be missed. These practices are a lot like wearing someone else's clothes and can be a bit awkward.

This particular service had a number of interactive opportunities for participants. The priest invited everyone to come forward to light a prayer candle, take communion, receive a blessing, and offer the peace of Christ to one another. I participated in each of the practices in order to give permission to the group to participate as well if they were comfortable.

The setting of this service was more intimate. This Episcopal church is smaller than the Catholic church we had visited the week prior down the street. There was only a small group attending the service, and it seemed obvious that they had practiced Taizé worship together for a while. The more intimate setting provided a great opportunity for our group to not only observe the practices but to participate while feeling included. The intimate congregation quickly included us in the practices, and most of the people there came to offer the Peace of Christ to each of us and made sure no one was excluded as a guest. Once the service concluded, we were thanked for our participation and our group took the opportunity to explain what we were doing and asked questions.

The older layperson who offered the homily spoke with us extensively. When asked if they took communion every week, he quickly replied that he would not go to a church that did not have it every week. "Sometimes I take it midweek as well," he

offered and continued to talk about how amazing it is that you can take Christ within you and that Christ goes with you from the table. His passion for the Lord's Supper was evident in how he spoke. He finished by reflecting on hard times he has gone through and that the Lord's Supper was a reminder that he was not alone in his suffering. With conviction he looked at us and said, "You always have Christ with you!"

We transitioned to our dinner together, hosted by one in the group who lived nearby. The focus of the evening was like the week before. The group collectively reflected on how our Christian tradition has often felt superior to other Christian groups because we take the Lord's Supper weekly. The conversation with the man after worship about what the table meant in his life was moving for the group and demonstrated how regular participation and intention around the table has shaped his life. Our convictions for the Lord's Supper often fall short in their focus on frequency and fail to go deeper into what this frequency does to shape who we are as Christ followers and as a congregation.

I shifted our focus to the times of silence found in the service. While there were times of silence in the Catholic Mass, it was in the Episcopal service that the group realized that this was intentional. Active listening is not found in our tradition. Recognizing these times of silence as intentional and active pushed against our culture to fill our time with activity and words. It is difficult to hear the voice of God if there is never a time and space prepared for listening for his voice.

Our conversation moved to the joy that this small group shared in their gathering around the table. This was evident in their intention to make sure and offer the Peace of Christ to each of us visitors and not just the two or three people immediately around

them. One person who was not able to make it to everyone in our group sought out the people they missed after the service was over to apologize and made sure to offer peace to them.

We ended our discussion with the symbolism we observed. Most of the discussion focused on the basin of water that was placed in front of the altar, where the Lord's Supper was present, to symbolize our baptism and that all who approached the altar had to come through the water to receive the body and blood of Christ. The congregants also used that water to cross themselves as a symbolic gesture of remembering that their baptism calls them to carry the cross. I ended our time encouraging them to think about the symbolism we could use to capture who we are as a diverse church meeting in a YMCA and how the Lord's Supper shapes us for mission in this place.

Session 8

Session 8 took place nine days after the last session. The group adjusted their schedule in order to accommodate everyone. While different people missed individual sessions, it was essential that everyone was present for the planning session. Lisa hosted everyone in her home for dinner. Appropriately, we were all able to fit around her dining room table for discussing the group's proposed practices. This meal took on symbolic meaning for the group, who would never meet in this capacity again since one of the members had found out earlier that week that her husband's job was relocating their family out of state. This was an emotional close to her time with our congregation and with this group.

The group approached this conversation with a reverent seriousness. It was

obvious that they understood the weight of the task ahead. I asked them to prepare for this meeting with prayer and reflection regarding the practices our church might adopt to develop a central identity in Christ among a diverse community. I began the session with a reminder that the group would be presenting these ideas to the elders of the church for their consideration. The eldership would have the final say over what will be best for the congregation as a whole. The main focus for the project is participants' ability to articulate the spiritually transformative nature of the practices they present.

Before opening the discussion of their proposed practices, I reiterated the need for rituals to develop the spiritual muscles. I asked where the letter "C" was on the keyboard. Almost everyone lifted their hands in front of them as though they were typing to then imagine where the letter "C" was located. We had a short discussion on the differences between learning something with your mind, memorizing material, and developing the muscle memory through practice. This exercise was effective for bringing home the point that practices need to be cultivated to develop the muscle memory of what the church knows about the Lord's Supper.

When it was time to begin our discussion around what practices we might propose for the Lord's Supper, it was obvious that everyone came prepared. The conversations were generous, and everyone gave attention to what others were proposing. They derailed a few times to chase some topics that were less about proposed practices. The group had grown accustomed to wrestling with hard questions together and had to refocus and sideline some conversations.

An important distinction the group made was that some in the group found our congregation to be "small," at 125 members, while for a few others, this was the largest

church they had ever been part of. They all recognized that in a church our size, there would be some who would feel disconnected. They were in agreement that the church's size would have to be overcome in order to create more of a body. I brought them back to our classes on Corinth and that our church would be double to triple the size of house churches in Corinth and that the way we develop community in the church today is different. They determined that we can evaluate growth in this area when we see people seeking out new people to sit with when we have our "Fifth Sunday Family Meals." We often see people sitting with others who share a common demographic. The group proposed that we pay attention to whether or not our time around the Lord's Table translates to our time around the Family Table on these Sundays.

The group shared their individual proposals with one another while everyone listened intently and took notes. The final proposal took shape and was agreed upon by everyone in the group. The proposal emphasized the Lord's Supper as the focal point of why we come together on Sundays for worship, with the time around the table being moved to the end of the service as the focal point everything else points to. The Lord's Table will physically take central focus in the worship assembly. Children five and under will remain in Children's Worship. A reflection will be offered by a member of the church. A time of meditation and reflection will be provided before the congregation breaks bread together. After this person gives thanks for the bread and cup, he or she will encourage the congregation to offer one another "the peace of Christ" as they enter a time of fellowship before approaching the Lord's Table to receive the bread and cup when they are ready. The worship leader will lead a song to bring the time of communion to a close. The service will end with one of the church leaders reminding the

church that they carry Christ's presence into the world and praying a blessing over the church.

I ended our session by praying for the group, the Spirit's guidance on how this proposal might be implemented, the unity of our church, and where the Spirit will take us in the future to be Christ's presence in NoDa. Following the meeting I sent an email so the group could sign up for who would present the different parts of the proposal. Each person took notes to best represent the group's intentions when presenting their portion of the proposal.

Session 9

In the final session, lunch was provided for the group and the elders during the presentation. After the presentation, everyone moved to the yoga studio down the hall, where the Lord's Supper was prepared. After participating in the Lord's Supper together, the elders were dismissed and the group reconvened in the conference room for their exit interview. Two in the group were absent, and their exit interviews were conducted one-on-one at a later time.

The group was well prepared and articulate when they presented to the elders. The give and take in the discussion showed how this group had developed relationships over the two-month project. They spoke with conviction and confidence. The elders took notes, made eye contact, and received the proposal with the same seriousness in which it was presented. The elders responded with enthusiasm and gratitude for the work that the group had put into this project.

As the practice had been with this group, we took a break after our initial discussion and reconvened down the hall, where the Lord's Supper was prepared. I

offered the same instruction, to treat this space as though it were sacred. Our time around the Lord's Supper was led by different members of the group following the proposed practices. To show my appreciation for the hard work of everyone in the group, I purchased small ceramic goblets to commemorate our time together for this last Lord's Supper as a group. This final time around the table together in this capacity demonstrated the intended outcomes of the proposed practices. A group, diverse on many levels, who largely had not interacted with one another before this project, cultivated a central identity through the practices of spiritual formation, study of theological foundations of the Lord's Supper, and the repetitious practice of breaking bread together.

We ended the final session with the group exit interview. I offered these questions ahead of time, asking each person to provide individual written responses. I also interviewed them as a group. The group was asked six questions to evaluate our time together. How do/would these practices affect you? With these plans in place, in what ways do you see our congregation changed in the next five years? How will these practices shape Christian community among the diversity of people in the Queen City Church of Christ? How would a person's understanding and relationship with both God and the church change as a result of taking part in these practices over five years? In what ways would a child who grew up with these practices have a different relationship with the church than if they did not have these practices? What would be some positive or negative outcomes if this project were to be put in place?

Proposal Discussion

Two weeks after our last group meeting, I met with the elders to discuss what the group proposed. The focus of the conversation was on their response to each of the

practices presented, whether they saw the practices as beneficial to our congregation, and the practical implementation of these practices for our congregation. The enthusiasm the elders shared for the proposal when they initially received it had not waned. The two elders shared their responses to the proposed practices and how they saw these practices as formative for our community, and our conversation ended with what was practical for implementing in our congregation. They tasked me with communicating their appreciation again to the group for all of their hard work and asked that I share their response for what would be implemented in our regular worship service.

Evaluation Methodology

I evaluated the success of this project using three metrics. First, the group must be able to articulate how the proposed practices can be spiritually transformative.¹² Any practices for which the group cannot articulate the spiritually transformative nature of the practice will not be adopted. Second, each practice must have theological merit. We will not adopt practices that cannot be rationalized theologically. Finally, each practice must be logistically and thoughtfully implementable. The eldership and I will evaluate whether the new practices will be adaptable to our context and congregation.

The proposed plan would be considered a failure if it does not accomplish one or more of the above goals according to the evaluation methodology stated below. If the plan fails in any of the three areas, I will go back after this project is completed to try and shore up the success metric that failed. The evaluation of this project is focused on

¹². Whether or not these practices will actually be spiritually transformative is beyond the scope of this project.

the proposed plan and not the planners themselves or the actual implementation of the plan.

Procedures for Data Analysis

Throughout the project, data were collected and triangulated from three angles: insider, outsider, and the collaborative notes from the researcher and a nonparticipant observer.¹³

Insider Angle

The insider angle came from the eight to ten participants. The knowledge they gained from the theological discussions aided in processing their experiences as observers of other congregations' table practices. The project concluded with a group interview to focus on their assessment of how these new practices would affect the congregation both positively and negatively if they were added to our regular communion service.¹⁴

Outsider Angle

The elders provided the outsider angle through how they responded to the group's presentation. When the group proposed the new practices to the elders, they explained how the practices are spiritually transformative for creating communal identity and theologically grounded, and how they would be implemented in the Sunday worship. The elders then evaluated if these practices met the three criteria stated above.

13. Non-participant observation "involves the researcher observing the subject 'from a distance', in other words avoiding any interaction with them." Giampietro Gobo and Andrea Molle, *Doing Ethnography*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 6.

14. See Appendix D: Group Interview Questions.

Researcher Angle

Finally, the third angle came from my observations as the researcher with the assistance of a nonparticipant observer who took notes through the entire process. At the end of each meeting, the nonparticipant observer and I compared notes and organized the data.

The data received from these three angles were then analyzed by themes, slippages, and silences. Themes are the patterns in the data where there is significant overlap. Slippages are areas where there is variance or disagreement. Topics that would be expected to be found in the data, but are not, are called silences. Silences often represent unspoken beliefs or attitudes, which are taken for granted or viewed as self-evident.¹⁵ The data collected from each angle were cross-examined through triangulation,¹⁶ in which I utilized the field notes¹⁷ from the project and examined them alongside the interviews with the insiders and outsiders. My protocol for coding¹⁸ identified themes that emerged from the theological discussions centered in 1 Corinthians 11 and early church practices. Language pertaining to the concepts of table, host, sacrament, unity, sacred space, and identity formation were some of the terms that

15. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 197.

16. Triangulation is a multi-method approach in which efforts are made to cross-check findings, “and in a more extensive study, to use more than one method of data collection.” Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-Time Researchers*, 6th ed. (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 120.

17. See Appendix E: Fieldnote Protocol

18. “Coding (sometimes called ‘indexing,’ ‘tagging,’ or ‘labeling’) is a way to get a handle on the raw data so that it is more accessible for interpretation. Coding assigns units of meaning to descriptions, quotes, texts, etc.” Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 202.

were looked for in order to organize the data.¹⁹

Conclusion

Chapter 1 presented the contextual analysis for QCC and the need for an intervention. In Chapter 2, I examined the practical and theological foundations for the project. In this chapter, I presented the project intervention and the methodology I used to gather and process the collected data. In the next chapter, I will present my findings.

19. These concepts were refined and finalized through the theological section.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Chapter 1 provided the congregational analysis that demonstrates that QCC would benefit from developing intentional practices around the Lord's Supper to cultivate a central identity within a diverse congregation. Chapter 2 demonstrated that the Lord's Supper should be a unifying meal for a diverse faith community, examining 1 Corinthians and theological foundations. Paul addresses the divisions within the church in Corinth and emphasizes that their abuse of the Lord's Supper negates the sacred meal they eat. Chapter 3 then communicated the process I used for gathering a diverse team from QCC to learn about the theology of the Lord's Supper, engage in spiritually formative practices, and work together to create practices to present to our elders to consider adopting for our church. This chapter will present the results of the intervention described in Chapter 3, which come from an evaluation of the field notes along with my own observations throughout the project, the group interview questions, and the responses from the elders.

The project was designed so that the group would not only learn about the theological rationale for the Lord's Supper but also actively participate in spiritually formative practices during the week to prepare them for receiving the Lord's Supper. Having prepared throughout the week, they gathered around the Lord's Table, where I guided them through practices connected with the theological discussion we engaged in that week. These sessions prepared the group to become observers of the Lord's Supper

in other Christian traditions. The project culminated in the group preparing a proposal for potential practices for our congregation to adopt in our weekly observation of the Lord's Supper. The aim of the project found maturation in how the group utilized the various facets of the project in the development of their proposal. I will present my findings through each leg of my evaluation methodology.

Field Notes and Observations

The field notes from my nonparticipant observer in collaboration with my own observations as the researcher make up this methodological angle. Throughout the project, I observed changes in relationships and interactions among group members of differing backgrounds. Due to the vastness of this project, I will divide my findings into smaller parts to articulate how each aspect of this project worked to accomplish my aim. The areas of focus are as follows: Spiritual Practices, Lesson Discussions, The Lord's Supper, and Observations of Other Christian Traditions. I will present my findings for each section and then present my findings from my observations of the group's preparation for their presentation and the presentation itself.

Spiritual Practices

The spiritually transformative practices the group engaged in throughout the project were foundational for driving home the need for identity forming habits. For most of the group, these practices were outside the norm of their typical approaches to prayer and Scripture reading. The journey from the head to the heart for the sake of transformation was a difficult journey for some. There were a few in the group who were already familiar with many of the practices and helped as spiritual companions on the journey in the disciplines. The group supported and encouraged one another as they tried

these new practices. When one person was concerned about doing a practice wrong, they were reminded that the point was to create the habits of spiritual formation more so than execute the exercise correctly. This theme of encouragement towards habits and transformation continued as different practices settled differently for group members who then adapted the practice to where they were rather than trying to force themselves into something uncomfortable. The concept I was teaching about identity formation through spiritual practices was captured well in a moment of encouragement from one member to another, “progress is made in millimeters.”

Common words used throughout the discussions of the practices were: intentionality, reflection, refreshing, transformative, centering, and peaceful. The word or concept that showed up the most in the discussions was the idea of intentionality. In reflecting on their experiences with the Lord’s Supper on Sunday mornings, many of them shared their frustration that the time was rushed, making it hard to focus. These practices helped them learn how to slow down and focus on prayer. “Intentionality” and “holy experience” became common words in our discussions when talking about creating space for listening to the Holy Spirit. One member said he felt as though he could hear the Holy Spirit speak when he took time to slow down and listen. Talking about the Holy Spirit speaking seemed like new and uncomfortable language for some.

One major development for a lot of the group was the shift from seeing the spiritual disciplines as something to do only in a sacred space and time. They recognized the need for setting rhythms of time and space for spiritual formation but developed the understanding that these disciplines can be implemented into everyday life as well. One person utilized his train commute across the city as his time for *lectio divina*. One of the

moms in the group made the transition from seeing her kids as a distraction from the disciplines to finding ways to invite them into the disciplines with her. The slippage that occurred is that while they were able to develop these practices within the hustle and bustle of everyday life, there was an ongoing debate about the distraction of children during the Lord's Supper that keeps others from having a "holy experience." Looking to *lectio divina* on the train commute as an example, one member offered that "our surroundings should not determine our ability to spend time with God."

The spiritually formative disciplines as a major focus for the group's weekly interactions together provided the space needed for the group's identity to be formed. The nonparticipant observer and I both observed developing interactions outside of the group meetings among members of various backgrounds. These observations continued within the group dynamics as some members became more intentional with changing where they sat around the table so that they would interact more with different people each week. While these observations are hard to measure, they are indicative of how identity is formed through ritual practices together even when the practices are not practiced in person together. Sharing in the journey of transformation into the image of Christ together reorients the group towards their common identity.

Lesson Discussions

The lesson discussions, which accompanied the first five sessions, were intended to help the group wrestle with the hard theological concepts that are at the core of the Lord's Supper. The group recognized our history of focusing more on cognitive understanding and the struggle to move into the heart for spiritual transformation. The concept of *anamnesis* as an active remembrance was a difficult paradigm shift but it

continued to be discussed throughout the project. There were times where this understanding was disconnected from what we were doing. I offered *anamnesis* as a context for understanding the critique one member had that the Catholics believed “Christ was being crucified over and over again.” The connection of *anamnesis* to this teaching never connected, but this likely had more to do with an ongoing skepticism of the Catholic tradition than a lack of understanding of the concept of *anamnesis*.

The themes of intentionality and active participation, which stemmed from the discussions about *anamnesis*, shaped a lot of the proposed practices for our Lord’s Supper. The theme of slow intentional transformation continued to build with each session. The other sessions provided the aim for these practices. Two other major slippages in the group’s discussions came with the need for the Holy Spirit and the understanding of the resurrection. When asked what they understood about what happens after we die, a few people shared the response that “there are different views of what happens after we die. Why does it matter?” Some connected the new creation teachings with how they are cultivated at the table of the Lord’s Supper. The good creation that God intended in the equality between male and female was a major silence in the presentation as to why women should be able to have visible participation in the practices around the Lord’s Supper. The other areas of equality discussed in our sessions regarding race, economics, education, politics, etc. were never brought up in the proposal. There was a hint towards these teachings, “all people come to the table through the same grace,” but the transformative nature of receiving the Holy Spirit was never clearly articulated.

The theme of Christ's presence with us was a major focal point in a lot of the discussions. Once the theology and historical understanding of his presence was worked through, the theme of his presence was mentioned most in our discussions, our time around the Lord's Supper together, and even in the observations of other traditions. During one of our times around the Lord's Supper together, one participant exclaimed, "He's here right this moment!" Some struggled with the understanding that Christ was present with us and were open about their struggle. These responses reiterate the need for practices and repetition to move people from their head to their hearts. This theme developed throughout the sessions and ultimately foundationally shaped a major portion of the proposal, especially the movement of coming to the table to receive Christ to then take his presence into the world with us.

Lord's Supper

Our time around the Lord's Supper together in the first five sessions was where the teachings were given a space to be experienced and practiced. While it is difficult to measure any qualitative observations during this part of the sessions, there are a few general observations worth noting. The nonparticipant observer and I both noted that the majority of the group changed their posture each session. Some physically bent over in prayer, others opened their hands towards God, and others stood back to prepare to approach the table before we started. Each time they entered the room where the Lord's Supper was prepared, they did so with reverence and intention. It appears these changes in posture and approaches were new for many of them, but they felt comfortable in this space to be more intentional with their time at the Lord's Supper.

Observations of Other Christian Traditions

In both observation experiences with the Catholic Mass and the Taizé worship with the Episcopal church, everyone participated at their own comfort levels. Major themes in both observances were the centrality of the Lord's Supper, intentional silence and reflection, sincerity of volunteers in the service, and the importance of multiplicity of voices. Slippages included the use of symbols and images in the worship, the grandeur of the sanctuaries, and whether children would be a distraction during times of silent reflection. Silences include the presence of Christ as host at the table, *anamnesis*, and equality in the Holy Spirit.

In the Catholic Mass they noticed the intentionality of making the Lord's Table central. All acts of the worship service, including the homily, were conducted from the sides of the altar. Only when it was time to break bread did the priest move to the center of the stage. The Episcopal service had the table central but had movement coming to and from the table throughout the service. They recognized the presence of a basin of water representing their baptism as they approached the table.

The volunteers, both men and women, who led during both services were sincere, reverent, and well-prepared. The way they led in their different aspects of worship communicated the importance of what they were doing. Those who read Scripture had obviously prepared for the reading, paying attention to cadence and emphasis of the text, and read in such a way that encouraged the church to receive it for meditation. It was apparent that each person led with awareness of the gravity of bringing heaven and earth together in that space for the people to commune with God. It was not lost on the group that both men and women took part in the public reading of scripture and song. The

group was moved by the genuine joy shared in this small group who gathered for the Lord's Supper at the Episcopal church. They were delighted that we were there. Their joy seemed specifically connected to their practices around the Lord's Supper.

This joy was a major theme in the observations at the Episcopal church. We had more opportunity to interact with the congregants since we increased their attendance by fifty percent. There was genuine joy in gathering together and they were welcoming to us as visitors as though they were welcoming us into the presence of Christ. When it was time to offer the "peace of Christ," many in the congregation went out of their way to make sure they came to offer the "peace of Christ" to each of us personally. Everyone in our group interacted with at least one person from the congregation and was able to ask questions about what the Lord's Supper means in their life. One member of our group commented, "For the amount of ceremony, I was surprised that there were some pretty in-depth people. I've associated ritual with a lack of deep spiritual life. Maybe I was wrong. I was shown that tonight." This was a significant realization that received nods of affirmation from others in the group who journeyed down that same path that evening. This was a pivotal moment for the group to have articulated out loud. This experience with these members brought many of our discussions into light because they were able to see a group who had been shaped by intentional practices around their regular observation of the Lord's Supper.

The theme that came up the most was the moments throughout each service for intentional silence and reflection. The phrases "intentional silence" and "intentional reflection" were used often in our discussions. The silences were awkward at first, but they were all moved when they realized that the entire congregation had paused to listen

for God to speak. This created a longing in the group to create space for reflection in our services.

The first of the two major slippages in our discussions focused on these times of intentional silence and reflection. The slippage was about whether children should be present because they would be a distraction from hearing God speak. The congregants of the Episcopal service were all adults, most of whom were over the age of fifty. One of the parents of younger kids in the group commented that she could not attend a church where her kids would be viewed as a distraction. Others in the group were quick to point out that in the Catholic Mass the sanctuary was full and there were numerous children. The redeeming part of this discussion is that they all recognized the need for developing the “spiritual muscles” of listening even with children present. This was a theme carrying over from the spiritual disciplines from earlier sessions.

The other slippage was a debate around the grandeur of the buildings and the use of symbols and images. There were some who were in awe of the reverence these spaces commanded as they created space and expectation to come and meet with God. Others commented in response that these churches seem to be overcompensating for something, that the “visual stuff is there to project a certain image.” Another argued that Jesus was poor and that he has a problem with churches who spend extravagantly. Both the nonparticipant observer and I observed that when the group entered the Episcopal church together, they were chatting freely together until we walked through the doors, and they all became quiet without anyone telling them. It was as though the space commanded reverence for preparing to enter the presence of God. One member gave pushback to these critiques asking about our own symbols that we do not recognize

because we are used to them and asked if it is better to have intentional symbols or to have them develop randomly? This discussion helped the group as a whole to recognize the need for more intentionality around creating sacred space in a gymnasium and how to transition into a place of expectation for meeting with God.

Presentation Preparation and Presentation

Moving the Lord's Table to the front and center of the assembly and making the Lord's Supper the climactic point of the worship service was quickly agreed on because participants believed this would create the emphasis needed for transformation. Everything would focus on and build towards Christ's redemptive work at the table. The Lord's Supper, according to one member, would become the active response to what the preached word calls the congregation to embody. This shift in the service would bring focus to receiving the word to then participate in remembrance through fellowship around the Lord's Supper. The only pushback this received was that making the Lord's Supper centrally focused would make it too much like the Catholic Mass and that our worship services focus on more than "just the Eucharist." The person argued that we need to keep the function of our gathering in mind, that we focus on worship, fellowship, and edification. Everyone received the pushback and gently reminded them that all these elements are still captured in the service and given rich meaning through the Lord's Supper.

The group decided to propose that the reflections before the Lord's Supper be simplified to leading the congregation in a time of reflection on Scripture with time and space given for intentional reflection. "Times of intentional silence draw people together in the Spirit." After the prayer for the body and blood of Christ, it was suggested that the

congregation should be encouraged to offer one another the “peace of Christ” and enter a short time of fellowship.

After this time of fellowship, the congregation can come forward to share communion together when they are ready. They will be free to receive communion individually or in small groups and even encouraged to seek deeper connections by seeking one another out to connect at the table together. One of the members emphasized that this time to come to the table “gives action” for the congregation to draw closer to Christ together, rather than as individuals. This time of fellowship around the Lord’s Supper will be concluded with a song. One of the shepherds of the church will then pray a prayer of blessing over the congregation and encourage them to go and live a life shaped by the Lord’s Supper. I was pleased that the group was not so focused on the action of coming forward that they forgot that some might not be able to come forward. They worked through this potential dilemma and suggested that we would need to prepare some members to be watchful for those who have remained where they are and offer to serve them the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper is a place where the equality of all people is realized and professed. We all come to the table through the same grace and receive reconciliation. These were the highlights in the discussion around proposing equal participation of women in the Lord’s Supper. One person reasoned, “If we are all equal in Christ, and this meal represents that reality, what do we communicate when we do not allow women to have equal participation in leading?” When this was presented to the elders, this theological point was not articulated. Some in the group said that they did not believe our church was ready for that change, but the group decided it was worth bringing to the

leadership's attention, knowing they have the final say in what the congregation needs at this time.

The biggest discussion of the evening was focused on the presence of children during communion. Most of the group were agreeable to the absence of the children during our Lord's Supper practices. The main focus was that the absence of the children would allow for the parents to have a more meaningful experience with the Lord's Supper without the children being present as a distraction. Only one person gave pushback to the motion to exclude the children. I offered some reflection on the nature of the Lord's Supper to bring together the body of Christ and what the absence of the children might communicate. The group largely remained adamant on this decision.

Their intention in this decision came from a good place but also showed where they might be missing a larger picture in spiritual formation of a community. They focused on creating a more "holy experience" for our people to enter into the presence of God for transformation around the table together. With the children absent, the adults could be more intentional with their time in order to have a more meaningful moment. They did make a major shift from talking about worship being something we do for God to viewing worship as a space we enter for transformation in God's presence.

There were two key deficits in this discussion that need to be highlighted. The phrase "problem of kids" was continually used throughout the discussion. This was one of the few times I felt as though the group missed the unity of the body in this project. My hope would be that through more time around the table together, we would not see any part of the body as a problem but as an opportunity for creative inclusivity. The other shortfall in the discussion came when we discussed how other parents might

respond to this proposal. One person in the group mentioned that while some parents will be offended, we will “take that burden from them, and make the change for them.” This was more of an authoritarian comment that fell short of the focus of building up the body.

The final proposal about the exclusion of children included two points of clarification that bring the whole discussion into a better light. First, this proposal does not apply to all children but only to those who are five and under. Second, most of these children will be in Children’s Worship and this time will be utilized to teach them about what is happening in the Lord’s Supper. When the elements are brought down for the teachers, they will then teach the children what this meal means to them on a level that the children can understand.

One logistical proposal worth mentioning is that the “offering” would be moved to earlier in the service and tied to the morning announcements. The reasoning was that this shift ties the offering of the church to the work of the church and reminds the congregation that “sacrifice and offering is part of worship.” Children five and under who usually go to Children’s Worship will be dismissed before the sermon and will not come back into the service until the end. The sermon, having been moved to earlier in the service, now has the intentional function of challenging the congregation to live out their calling to be Christ’s presence in the world. Sermons point to the reality that will be proclaimed in the breaking of the bread. This will concretize the cognitive aspects of the service with ritual to cultivate transformation. The flow of the Lord’s Supper is deliberate. The congregation moving towards the table is a symbolic action of drawing close to the presence of Christ, taking Christ within, to then be sent with the presence of

Christ into the world. One of the elders will then get up to send the church out with a blessing in prayer.

Group Exit Interviews

The second leg of evaluation consisted of a combination of the group exit interview and the individual written responses to the same questions provided ahead of time. I will begin my evaluation with a shared experience from the group in their time at the Episcopal church. In our last session, they reflected on their conversation with one of the congregants who shared his beliefs about the Lord's Supper in his own life. They were moved by the conviction with which he spoke in saying that he often comes to the table multiple times a week to make sure that Christ is the center of his life. He said he desired being close to Christ, echoing the belief in the real presence of Christ at the table. The presence of Christ with him at the table carried him through the loss of his wife and through the hardest times he has faced. For the group, this man was an example of someone who had been shaped by the theology and practices of the Lord's Supper we had studied through this project.

Throughout the exit interviews, also reflected in the written responses, the theme of community appeared the most. Different words appeared within this theme: community, relationships, connection, body, and church. The discussion of community was not limited to those who presently gathered in our assembly. It was clear to me that they understood the broader teaching of what the church is and who is present at the table when the church gathers. The phrase "communion of the saints" was used once in reference to those who have died as well as those who are to come later. The table was referred to as "Family Time," where the diversity of the church is celebrated, and focus is

placed more on what we have in common rather than what makes each of us different. There was a continual emphasis that the Lord's Supper helps make the connection that the individual's relationship with God is never disconnected from their relationship with the "Family of God."

The second biggest theme was the idea of "holy experience." This theme was captured in their focus on creating an intentional space for encountering the presence of God. "Intentional" was used in reference to space, location of the table, order of the service, silence, readings, and fellowship. In most of the conversations around "holy experience," the group was referring to what each person got out of that time personally and "holy" often seemed to be equated with silence, reflection, and contemplation. "Experience" is a term that can have negative connotations pointing towards a passive consumerism. The conversations around this theme were coupled with other words such as: introspection, reflection, reconciliation, focus, and transformation. This theme bordered on becoming a slippage, but their focus was also on intentionality around interactions in fellowship around the table and the importance of connecting as a community of believers in the space around the table. The theme of "holy experience" focused on slowing down our time around the table for the sake of entering a sacred space of transformation both on a personal and a communal level, offering the "peace of Christ," and entering a time of fellowship as the church approaches the table to commune together.

The more minor themes in the exit interview focused on the long-term implications for the children of our congregation. The discussion focused on the strong foundation these practices would establish through their focus on the death, burial, and

resurrection of Jesus. In the emphasis on these foundations and the major theme of “one body” in the discussions, there was a slippage in the visible exclusion of the youngest children from the gathering.

Notable silences in the exit interviews: Christ’s presence, *anamnesis*, rival liturgies, mission, and the church as the temple of God’s presence. None of these concepts were directly mentioned. Some of the terminology is new and not adapted into the regular language of the group. Some of the concepts were given a nod in the conversation, but it is uncertain if these were intentional or not. Overall, it is clear to me that the group understands and sees the need for the practices they created for the Lord’s Supper to cultivate a central identity in our diverse congregation.

Elders’ Response

The elders were quick to thank the group for being so diligent in working on this project and for providing such practical applications for our congregation to consider adopting. They recalled special communion services we have had in the past and said they look forward to how the consistency in these proposed practices will affect our congregation. One of the elders reflected on an event from his past. He said he used to believe that our tradition had the highest view of communion because of our diligence in following Scripture and having a weekly observance. This conviction came into question after a friend he baptized returned to the Catholic tradition because “they took the Lord’s Supper more seriously than we did.” The other elder shared his conviction that the Lord’s Supper should be more central to who we are. He offered that we should make more of our time around the table together. Both were encouraged by the work put in by this group and asked to get their input on how we might develop some practices throughout

the year and in our small groups to take this project further for the sake of transformation. They did not offer much response to the individual practices proposed but asked a few clarifying questions and assured the group that they would collaborate with me and get back to them with a decision for what will be adopted in our worship service.

The elders and I reconvened two weeks later to discuss the proposal. Their enthusiasm for the group's work had not diminished. They believed all the proposed practices would be useful for shaping a central identity in our faith community but that implementing all the practices at once would likely be jarring for many of our members and would have adverse effects. The three of us adapted the proposal to what we thought would be manageable for our congregation as a whole. The inclusion of women in visible roles of leadership in the Sunday assembly is one that needs to come with teaching and community conversations before changes are made, so that part of the proposal was tabled for later.

The elders believed the act of everyone coming forward to take the Lord's Supper whenever they were ready would feel chaotic for a lot of the members, especially with the other proposed changes. Because they believe in the practices that the group proposed, they want to make sure it is successful from the beginning. They did connect with the intention of the congregation moving to the table to then be sent from the table into the world. To capture this practice, they offered that we should continue our church's tradition of having special communion Sundays throughout the year when we can use this practice to instill this teaching into the church.

They were really encouraged by the proposal to add time to the Lord's Supper

for communal reflection rather than rushing through this part of the service. Creating space for silent reflection will teach our congregation intrinsically to “be still” and to “listen to God.” They also were sure to add the practice of “offering the peace” because of its intentionality around reminding one another of who we are and what we have together in Christ. They moved the “offering of peace” to after the Lord’s Supper is received. This time will end with a song to bring everyone back together for the shepherd’s prayer and sending.

While it is difficult to qualitatively categorize the response of the elders as the project’s outside observers, it was evident that they saw the transformative implications of the practices and that they shared the desire for the Lord’s Supper to take more precedence in our formation as a faith community. I was encouraged by their eagerness to implement these practices in a way that was thoughtful and practical for our congregation. It was clear to me that they not only understood the implications of these practices but that they believed in them enough to engage in serious discussion about how to best implement these changes for the best results for our congregation.

Conclusion

The data gathered from the three angles presented in this chapter point to the success of this project bringing together a cross-section of the diversity of a congregation to develop identity forming practices to create a central identity in Christ within the congregation. The data did suggest, however, that the project could be adapted to avoid some slippages around various teachings, practices, and observations. The next chapter will present my interpretations and the implications this project has for other churches and how it has affected me personally.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

QCC is a young congregation developing its identity as a diverse community of believers from various backgrounds. From the beginning, QCC desired to be a diverse congregation, reflecting the diversity in the surrounding community. While communal participation around the Lord's Supper is a weekly occurrence, I identified that there are no intentional practices during this part of the worship service that help build a central identity within this diverse community. To help the congregation at QCC create identity formative practices around the Lord's Supper, I worked with a diverse cross-section of QCC to learn about the rich theology of the Lord's Supper and to develop practices to embody these teachings to shape the identity of the congregation. Based on the triangulated data presented in the previous chapter, I will present my interpretations and the implications this project has for the church and for me personally. In conclusion I will present my vision for the future of this project and consider unanswered questions.

Interpretations

Paul addresses the divisions in the church in Corinth with humility about his position as one who merely planted the seed. God is the one who causes growth, and all other leaders are nothing in comparison. The leaders of the church have a purpose, cultivating the soil and watering it for the sake of growth. Church leaders must always keep a humble position knowing that any success in their labor is given to God as the one who brings growth (1 Cor 3:5–9). It is in this mindset that I have approached this project.

The success of this project is in the cultivation and watering of the soil. The goal of this project was to create intentional practices around the Lord's Supper to cultivate a central identity in a diverse community. By gathering a cross-sampling of the diversity of our congregation, I was able to evaluate how the teachings and practices brought growth to a diverse group as they worked on this project together.

The project group offered a proposal for changes to the worship service to create transformative practices around the Lord's Supper. While each part of their proposal had theological rationale, the elders did not accept every item proposed as something to be implemented. They appreciated the intention behind everything proposed but advised caution with making too many changes at once. The practices that the elders chose to keep were to move the table to the front and center of the congregation, move the Lord's Supper to the climax of the worship service, and implement a time of meditating on Scripture before breaking bread together. They did not take on the practice of everyone coming to the table to receive the bread and the cup because of logistical issues and confusion. They did, however, suggest that we have special communion services throughout the year to highlight these other practices. The involvement of women in the leading of the Lord's Supper was not articulated from a theological position by the group; instead, they stated that it was their belief that women should have a place at the table in the same serving roles as the men. The elders received that well but do not believe our congregation is ready for that change just yet.

The group did not fully embrace the theological language from our study together, but they did communicate the core ideas in their own ways. It is difficult to fully embrace new ways of understanding practices in which you have engaged most of your life. One

of the major focuses of this project is that most beliefs are learned through habit rather than teaching. In such a short time for the project, I was not able to implement too many habits for them to begin to embody the teaching. It would have been beneficial for me to have given the same rituals every week along with teaching a new spiritual discipline. They needed exposure to a variety of spiritually formative practices, but routine practices each week would have driven the point home a bit better.

This project was only the first step in a much larger congregational undertaking. Being able to bring together a cross-section of the diversity of QCC to propose new practices helped me recognize areas of importance that I would have missed had I come up with these practices on my own. The larger task of cultivating a central identity in a diverse community was bolstered by this project. Having created these practices together, the next step in the larger task will be to implement the practices in such a way that the congregation will understand the need for the changes. The ultimate success of these practices will potentially not be known until years later.

Trustworthiness

Applicability

This project was designed to address the current need for developing practices to cultivate a central identity in our diverse community in Charlotte, North Carolina. Other congregations have varieties of histories and contexts, which pose different needs within their own fellowships. While this project was designed specifically for our context at QCC, I do believe many congregations have a need to be more intentional with their practices around the Lord's Supper. Following the design of this project could help other

congregations to think through their practices and how identity is being shaped around the table.

Throughout the process of preparing for, executing, and writing this intervention, I had opportunities to discuss my project with leaders from other churches, both inside and outside my immediate fellowship. Most of the leaders I spoke with shared that their time in worship around the Lord's Supper lacked intentional focus and was often seen as something to rush through as quickly as possible. Many of them longed for a more meaningful time spent around the table and what that might mean for transforming a community. These conversations have made me believe that the work done in this project is applicable beyond my own context. Congregations could utilize this project to assess their own practices and how identity is formed in comparison to the theological teachings of the Lord's Supper. They could then create their own practices around the Lord's Supper that would be more applicable for their community.

Credibility

The subjective nature of the possibility of identity formation from ritual practices makes evaluation of this kind of project challenging. The usual methods for quantitative measurements cannot be utilized for projects like this. To ensure the credibility of the data, I followed the procedure for qualitative research by collecting data from three points of view and utilized the method of triangulation to evaluate the data. The insider view came from the exit interviews of the nine participants, while the elder's response to the presentation made up the outsider view. The collaborative notes from the non-participant observer and my additional notes provided the researcher view. Throughout the project, there were drastically different opinions and views on how practices should be adopted

and what they might mean for those who practice them. The group was able to collaborate and come to agreement on what should be presented. The presence of divergences gives credibility to the methodology of this project.

Reflexivity

This intervention was created by me, proposed to the leadership of the church, and advertised by me to the church in order to find volunteers. I taught all of the classes, determined the content that would be studied, decided which churches we would visit, and kept the discussions “on topic” when I thought we were moving away from the point of the discussion. Therefore, my influence and biases heavily directed the project. I was deeply invested in the outcome of this project and prepared a significant amount of research prior to the intervention. While I had a lot invested in this project, I did my best to hold my opinions back and allow the group to investigate and discuss the material themselves while I asked questions to move the discussions along. There were few times where I interjected my opinions, and those opinions were received as weightier in the discussion.

I provided recaps of our discussions on most weeks if someone was absent. This had an influence on the group since the distributed document was heavily influenced by my recounting of the information. I was able to share what I thought the absent group member needed to hear. This means they did not receive the discussion that the group went through but the outcome of that discussion from my perspective. My personality must also be accounted for within the group. Everyone on the team views me as part of the church leadership and views me as a trusted teacher on the Bible, church history, and theology. I am relaxed in my leadership style and sometimes should interject more than I

do. There were a few times we went over time in our discussion because I allowed conversation to continue rather than moving us forward. It is possible that my relaxed approach to leading may have kept us from digging deeper into some topics because we spent too much time on others.

One final area to contend with is my own emotions that may have had an influence during the project. I grew up in a church tradition that was very suspicious toward anything different and was heavily anti-Catholic. I have spent most of my adult life exploring the rich history of spiritual formation in other traditions and have encountered criticism from congregants due to the connection these practices sometimes have to the Catholic tradition. There were some in the group who were suspicious of the Catholic practices and tended to be overly critical without taking time to examine the practices before offering criticism. I made efforts to curb my personal feelings through active listening, thoughtful questions, and preparing for the discussions through prayer.

Significance and Implications

Sustainability

The ultimate sustainability of this project will not be apparent until the ritual habits have been formed within congregational life and become part of the fabric of the worship service. As the new practices are adopted, I will begin to adapt my preaching to point forward to what the church is doing when it gathers to break bread together around the table. I will play an instrumental role in informing those involved in planning the service of the need for these changes and their end goals. Sustainability will also be dependent on the leadership as a whole understanding the need for transformative practices to shape our community.

I also learned a great deal about the need for voices from diverse backgrounds to be represented in major changes for the congregation. In a congregation of our size, it is easy for me to make decisions in isolation and roll them out to the congregation. I have learned the importance of utilizing the tools for triangulation from different perspectives to help make better decisions for the congregation as a whole. With our leadership being made up of a narrow selection of our diverse demographics, these tools will be helpful in helping us navigate future changes within the congregation.

Personal Significance

This project had a profound impact personally for me. Bringing together a diverse group of people from the cross-sections of our congregation to address the needs of our community helped me share the burden of ministry in significant ways. By committing to spiritual formation together as a group, the focus of the group shifted to shared commonalities rather than our differences. This focus created a bond within the group that helped them reorient to what was most important when there were debates over differing views. Witnessing group members' interactions with one another outside of our meeting times brought a deeper conviction for the need to develop space for groups to come together to develop spiritually formative practices to build spiritual bonds with one another, deepening their relationships. Through this diverse group, I gained a better breadth of perspective on the theological leanings and backgrounds of the congregation as I listened to them articulate their views and beliefs on the various topics we covered.

My approach to preaching has changed as a result of the implementation of this project. Preaching from the Lord's Table has helped me emphasize the Christ-like characteristics the Lord's Supper should cultivate within the believer and in the

community of believers. My sermons have naturally focused more on the maturation of those on a walk with Christ and offered an invitation to those who have not committed to a walk with Christ to join us around the table where we unite in our identity in Christ.

Additionally, the process of taking a group through this kind of project taught me a great deal. I now have a better understanding of how to practice practical theology within my congregational context because of the process of clearly articulating a problem and developing an intervention that utilizes qualitative methods. I have learned the value of not making decisions in isolation. Triangulation of data was critical in helping me learn the importance of multiple check points in a process to give credibility to major decisions being made for a diverse congregation. Lasting and adequate change takes time. This project has helped me slow down and work through the problems rather than making unilateral decisions when I think I have a good idea. I am a better minister going into the future because of the tools I have developed through this process.

Ecclesial Significance

This project has significance for the community of believers at QCC. Developing habitual practices to center the Lord's Supper as the main focus in our time together as a church renewed focus for the intervention group. As the congregation heard more about the project and the practices were implemented, there was an effort to recenter our focus on the event and practices that unite us as the "body of Christ." One of the implemented practices was a time of meditation on Scripture in preparation for breaking bread together. The congregation has met this time with enthusiasm because we have slowed down to spend more time around the table together rather than feeling rushed through the ritual. The focus on unity and identity around the table has helped us solidify language

for our end goals as a congregation when there is conflict between people. This will continue to be significant in the growing cultural tensions surrounding us.

Theological Significance

The theological significance of this project is found in the outcomes it aims to produce. When Paul begins to address the divides in the church in Corinth, his pastoral theology frames the image of the community of believers as the “garden-temple” where God’s Spirit dwells (1 Cor 3:9, 16). This image of the church coming together in unity as the place where God’s presence dwells is the founding image he contrasts against when he addresses the church’s divisive practices around the Lord’s Supper, going so far as to claim that they no longer partake of the Lord’s Supper. Paul’s pastoral focus implies that the meal and the practices around it should be unifying, even in the midst of a very diverse congregation. This project is an attempt to be proactive with creating identity shaping practices for unifying the church around remembering Christ in the regular practice of breaking bread together in the Lord’s Supper. The collective perspectives and experiences from the cross-sections of our church cultivated the soil for the maturation of communal practices through shared experiences in spiritual formation and shared focus together.

Final Considerations

This project has unanswered questions that require more consideration. First, the future development and implementation of this project is a concern. It would have been beneficial for the group to have proposed a timeline for both long-term and short-term implementations for the rollout of the proposals to help the leadership see how these practices could more easily be adopted into the worship service. Implementing the

suggested practices of the group will also involve getting the worship deacon on board and communicating the changes to the congregation through a series of lessons. While QCC is open to new practices, it is uncertain how the congregation will respond to the changes. I will need to create a series of lessons that highlight the theological teaching surrounding the Lord's Supper and the need for intentional practices for identity formation.

The second unanswered question is whether we have underemphasized anything in the practices. We have a rich history of knowledge-focused teaching in our tradition. It is unclear at this point how well the teachings will be embodied for a congregation who tends to lean towards cognitive learning over habitual practices. This awareness of how people are wired within the congregation will help reorient my preaching to connect teaching points to these practices. Will the implementation of these formative practices have the transformative implications we intend in a tradition that is historically not mindful about their practices?

Another consideration for this project is with the experiences the group had with various practices of the Lord's Supper. Due to scheduling constraints, the group was only able to observe two services, which had a lot of similarities. It would be beneficial to broaden the experiences to include faith communities whose practices are drastically different from our own and inclusive of children. Regarding the sessions, the group engaged in Lord's Supper practices which promoted more individualistic practices. It would be beneficial to create practices where community was engaged more fully. Integrating practices into the congregational time of Lord's Supper would have helped the group imagine practices for our non-traditional context of meeting in a YMCA

gymnasium rather than having a separate room set aside as sacred where we shared the Lord's Supper apart from the congregation. These considerations would help keep the theological focus of the project centered on the church as a body gathering around the presence of Christ at the table as a diverse community.

The final consideration in question is how these practices will impact the children who grow up with these practices. While most adults in the congregation have become comfortable with their practices and worldviews, the children will have their practices and worldview shaped by this regular time around the table with the church. Are the practices strong enough to reorient many of the adults, or will they have a more lasting effect on the generations coming up?

Conclusion

Bringing a diverse cross-section of our congregation together to develop practices for identity formation around the Lord's Supper is an important first step in developing a central identity in a diverse community. Many of the practices around the Lord's Supper in our tradition have led to individualistic spiritual formation devoid of connection to the larger community. Focusing intently on the formation that takes place in these habitual practices helps reorient our congregation back to the reason we gather, to unite in our calling to be the body of Christ as we take his presence into the world. My vision is that the implementation of these practices will cultivate an environment of intentionality around what we do together as a community, shape us as those who encounter the presence of God at the table, and move us into mission as people who carry God's presence with us as host at our tables and guests of the tables in our community.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Exemption Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



September 3, 2019

Ryan Russell
Department of Bible
Abilene Christian University

Dear Ryan,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Developing Practices within the Lord's Supper to Cultivate Central Identity at Queen City Church of Christ" (IRB# 19-075) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46.101(b)(1)).

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

ACU IRB # 19-075

Date of Approval ___/___/___

Introduction: DEVELOPING PRACTICES WITHIN THE LORD'S SUPPER THAT DEVELOP CENTRAL IDENTITY AT QUEEN CITY CHURCH OF CHRIST

You may be eligible to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member.

PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION: The research of this project is focused on how you as a participant speak about the Lord's Supper in these group discussions and how this diverse group comes together to develop and articulate these practices in a presentation to the elders. My hope is that through this project, you will develop a deeper appreciation for the Lord's Supper that will be transformative for your life.

If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend nine visits with the study staff over the course of nine weeks. Each visit is expected to take two hours. During the course of these visits, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures: weekly spiritual practices, group discussion, group observation of a Catholic Mass, individual observation of your choice of Lord's Supper practices from another Christian tradition, and group development of practices.

The Lord's Supper is central to who we are as Christians and our practices around the Table shape who we are as a community. This project will take a group of diverse volunteers through an in-depth study on the foundational theological premises around the Lord's Supper. The goal of this project is for the group to develop intentional practices for our congregation during our time at the Lord's Supper. The group will be able to articulate how these practices are theologically based and able to cultivate a central identity in Christ in a diverse community.

The project will last a total of nine weeks. The first five sessions will focus on the theological study of the Lord's Supper and the issues Paul is addressing in First Corinthians. These first five sessions will have two distinct parts lasting no longer than an hour each. Lunch will be provided during these meetings. Coinciding with each study, the group will participate in spiritual disciplines focusing on what they learned that week in the study. The spiritual disciplines are intended to prepare the participant for the Lord's Supper the next Sunday. The second through sixth sessions will begin with an open discussion of how the participant's experience around the Lord's Table was shaped by their preparation throughout the week based on the discussion from the previous session.

During the sixth and seventh sessions, the group will visit other Christian traditions to observe their practices around the Lord's Supper. These sessions will be followed up with a discussion of our observations. The sixth session will take place at 5pm at St. Peter's Catholic Church on that Sunday. The seventh session observation location will be provided during the first session.

The eighth week, the group will come together to develop practices to present to the elders to potentially be adopted by our congregation during our time at the Lord's Supper. The group will need to

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Version 01/01/2018

Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

Additional Information

The ideal participant is expected to be at every session if at all possible, be respectful of different views in the group discussions, be open to new experiences in spiritual formation, and assume a position of learning. If a participant needs to miss a session, they need to inform the researcher ahead of time to make arrangements for the content and practices. It is important that each participant is involved in the entirety of the project is at all possible.

If at any point a participant has begun to act in a way that will hinder the group's ability to cultivate healthy discussion they will be asked to step down from the project. Some of these actions might include but are not limited to dominating discussion, being disrespectful to fellow participants or suggestions, or missing sessions without explanation. Your participation may be terminated early by the investigators under certain conditions, such as if you no longer meet the eligibility criteria (attendance, participation in weekly spiritual practices, engagement in dialogue, etc.), the researchers believe it is no longer in your best interest to continue participating, you do not follow the instructions provided by the researchers, or the study is discontinued. You will be contacted by the investigators and given further instructions in the event that you are withdrawn by the investigators. If for any reason you are asked to withdraw from the project, your status and relationship with the church, the researcher, or the elders will not be impacted.

be able to articulate how these practices are theologically formed and how they believe the practices will be transformative for our community. The group will then present these practices to the elders during the ninth week. The role of the elder(s) in this project is to listen and to respond to proposal of the group and provide their feedback.

RISKS & BENEFITS:

While there are few known risks involved in this research project, one potential risk a participant may encounter is discomfort with the discussions.

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include: a deepening of one's faith, a greater appreciation for diversity in the church, a deeper conviction for our central identity in Christ, and spiritually transformative practices to continue to grow in your faith. While these are the possible benefits, the researcher cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study.

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY: Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by this process: In my field notes and notes of the non-participant observer, all names will be given anonymity. Your name will not be linked to any documents and any use of this material in reports, publications, or presentations will never be associated with the participants in this study without permission. No one other than the project leader associated with this project will have access to the raw notes for this project. The project notes will also be protected by being stored on the project leader's private, password-protected computer, which is stored in project leader's private residence or private office always behind two locked doors.

While the names of the participants will not be made public knowledge, the eldership of the church will know who participates.

CONTACTS: If you have questions about the research study, the Principal Investigator is Ryan Russell and may be contacted at (cell) 940-781-2861 or (email) rdr02b@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact Ryan's Primary Advisor, Curt Niccum (office) 325-674-3764 (email) curt.niccum@acu.edu. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885
megan.roth@acu.edu
320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to decline or withdraw will have no impact on your relationship with the church, elders, or researcher.

APPENDIX C

Questions for Addressing Decisions of Contention

The table continually frames the church's focus on her purpose for gathering as a community, who they are as people in God's image, and how they understand the diversity of each person gathered in the assembly. With the Lord's Table as the focal center of the church there are questions churches might consider when making decisions of contention:

1. What is the good creation that God is restoring his people to in Jesus Christ?
2. Does this practice bring restoration?
3. Is the person filled with the Holy Spirit?
4. How will the gift given to them through the Spirit build up the church?
5. Is there something in what they are doing that would confuse outsiders regarding the gospel lived out in our church?
6. Does this practice help the world see the orderly completion and goodness of God's intention for creation or does it continue to show signs of the fall of creation?

APPENDIX D

Group Interview Questions

These questions are intended to gain insight from the assessments of the participants on the long-term implications of this project for the Queen City Church of Christ.

1. How do/would these practices affect you?
2. With these plans in place, in what ways do you see our congregation changed in the next five years?
3. How will these practices shape Christian community amongst the diversity of people in the Queen City Church of Christ?
4. How would a person's understanding and relationship with both God and the church change as a result from taking part in these practices over five years?
5. In what ways would a child who grew up with these practices have a different relationship with the church than if they did not have these practices?
6. What would be some positive or negative outcomes if this project were to be put in place?
7. What is one practice you are going to keep moving forward in your spiritual disciplines?

APPENDIX E

Field Note Protocol

1. Each week record the participants that show up for the session. In the first session, be sure to document age, gender, and race.
2. A two-column format will be used for recording notes. The outside observer will take initial observation in the left column and then notes will be detailed together with the project facilitator after each session.
3. Pay close attention to the focus, body language, and seriousness (or lack of) towards the Lord's Supper practices at the beginning of each session.
4. Pay attention to body language and other non-verbal communications during discussions. What did the person react to? Negative? Positive?
5. Pay special attention to language such as host, table, identity, community, habit, transformation, remembrance, presence, etc.

Sample Note Template:

Initial Observations	Detailed Notes
Session #	Session #
Name:	Name:
Name:	Name:
Name:	Name:
Name:	Name:

APPENDIX F

Weekly Overview for Group Project

Each week will begin with a meal together following our worship service. During this meal, we will discuss our experience during the Lord's Supper earlier that morning. I will provide them with spiritual disciplines to engage in during the week to prepare themselves for the Lord's Supper the coming Sunday. Each spiritual discipline will coincide with the previous week's discussion. After our lunch time discussion is finished, we will transition to another room which will be set up ahead of time for the guided discussion around the Lord's Supper. At the end of the session, each person will receive a guided devotional to interact with throughout the week based off of that session's focus.

1. Week One – Sign consent forms. Create Group Covenant.

Remembrance/Anamnesis – A Need for Practices

During the lunch portion of this session, we will sign consent forms and create a group covenant. As a group, we will create a covenant which will cover: how we will conduct ourselves through this process, confidentiality, having a humble demeanor when discussing this project with others, and consistency in attendance. Each person will share their most meaningful experience around the Lord's Table, and we will discuss why those were so meaningful. I will give an introduction to the need for practices. James K. A. Smith's book *You Are What You Love* will play a major role in this presentation. We will examine how practices shape the way we understand our relationship with God, one

another, and the world. From this point forward, they will begin thinking about what is communicated or not communicated in our time around the Lord's Table.

The second part of the session will transition into a room that is set apart as a sacred space for these discussions around the Lord's Supper. This first week will lay the foundation of Jesus' call to remembrance. The idea of remembering has a different meaning in the Jewish mindset. Stookey's work on the Eucharist will heavily influence our discussion. Remembering is reenacting. We remember by looking back, but the act of remembering is also forward. What practice can we put in place to remember in this way?

2. Week Two – Redemption – Recognition of our sinfulness and God's mercy

The session this week will build off of the narrative of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, draws parallels with the narrative that Israel received baptism and ate the spiritual food and drink but remained unchanged. This food should nourish transformation into the people God has called us to be. To lay the foundation for transformation, one must recognize their own sinfulness before God and their need for his mercy. The table becomes a place to not only look into the mirror to examine one's own internal life but to also examine how they interact with others from different groups. Relationships are messy and require God's grace. The Table centers us in our need for God's mercy so that we will extend God's mercy to others in our diverse relationships.

3. Week Three – Jesus Christ is Host at the Table

Jesus's presence at the table as host is transformative for understanding who we are as his church and for understanding our mission. David Fitch's book *Faithful Presence* will help with this framework over the next few weeks. From the theological

perspective, I will talk about Christ's presence in the elements as a theophany. How does faithful belief that the presence of Christ is in the elements of the bread and the cup bring transformation? What are the implications for continual transformation? The teaching of theophany will shape the discussions in the next two weeks as we look at ecclesiology and missiology.

4. Week Four – Ecclesiology

We will focus on the cultural world of First Corinthians and Paul's use of temple imagery to describe the church. Building on the understanding of theophany from the week before, I will bring the temple imagery into the discussion. If the church is the New Temple and the elements of the Lord's Supper act as a theophany, then the table acts as a "holy of holies" for the New Temple. What does this mean for how we treat one another in the church? How does this shape our desire for unity?

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul addresses their abuse of the Lord's Supper and the divisions they are causing. We will discuss how the Lord's Supper should act as a unifying activity in the Christian assembly. We will discuss the need for diversity of gender, race, culture, economics, etc. and how the Lord's Supper shapes our understanding of who we are as a community of believers and the New Temple.

5. Week Five – Missiology

The Lord's Supper should shape us for God's mission for the church. The Supper brings us into the presence of God, who is host, and we receive God within us, calling us to live within our baptism. This participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is celebrated each week in the Lord's Table and draws us into God's mission. We will again lean on Finch's book *Faithful Presence* and his emphasis on moving from the

Lord's Table where Christ is host, to taking the presence of God with us and being host with God's presence for others at our own tables. We then carry God's presence from host at our own tables to being guest at the tables in our community.

We will look at the temple imagery throughout the prophets where Israel is called to transformation and mission renewal. This fits within Finch's imagery that the church needs to have balance between maintaining the church through rituals of close community and mission of the church through social justice engagement. If a church only leans into one side or the other, they will not be healthy.

At the end of this session, I will give a brief glimpse into different practices around the Lord's Supper. I will encourage them to reflect on their learning over the last five weeks and prepare themselves to be observers and investigators of meaningful practices. I will cover basic observation skills and prepare them to take the posture of learner as they go into these settings.

6. Week Six – Observation of Practices – The Catholic Mass

We will meet together before entering the service. I will remind them of their purpose for being there and encourage a humble spirit of learning. We will visit St. Peter's Catholic Church Sunday evening at 5 p.m. St. Peter's is a Jesuit church, founded in 1851 and located in the center of Charlotte. We will attend the service and meet with the priest to ask questions. Afterwards, I will provide dinner for our group where we will discuss what we learned from our experience and observations. The time together will end with a discussion of what they observed, what they learned, and how intentional practices like what they observed might shape a Christian community like ours if adopted.

7. Week Seven – Observation of Practices – Exploring Other Christian Traditions

The group will attend Lord's Supper services for different Christian traditions from our own. I will provide times and locations to choose from since not every tradition offers the Lord's Supper every week. We will gather back together to discuss our experiences and observations. The time together will end with a discussion of what some of these elements might look like in a church community like Queen City. Their homework before the next time we meet will be to come up with a few practices we might implement into our time together at Queen City. These practices should have the foundational teachings in mind which were covered in our sessions.

8. Week Eight – Brainstorming – Formulation Synthesis

This week will focus on coming up with a presentation of new practices to implement into our time in the Lord's Supper. We will begin by establishing what we believe the Lord's Supper is supposed to accomplish in a faith community. With the foundational teachings from the first five sessions in mind, we will narrow down which practices need to be implemented. By the time we leave we will have a clear vision for who the church is supposed to be, what function the Lord's Supper plays within the community, and what practices we would like to implement to help create healthy habits within our church to transform us into the people we will be. This will be presented to the eldership the next week.

9. Week Nine – Presenting Practices to the Elders

The elders of the church will join the group for this final session. Beginning with a meal together, the group will share what they have learned through this process with the

Eldership. The group will then present to the elders the practices they have developed for the Lord's Supper. During this time, I will evaluate how they describe their experiences and understanding of the Lord's Supper to the elders. The goal of this meeting is to clearly communicate the purpose of the Lord's Supper within a community of faith, articulate the foundational understandings of the Lord's Supper, and present practices that have potential to shape the congregation's identity as a people of God.

BRIEF VITA

Ryan Russell was born in Wichita Falls, Texas, on February 15, 1984. He graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in Bible from Oklahoma Christian University in April of 2006. After graduating, Ryan spent nearly ten years in youth ministry working with congregations in Statesville, NC (2006–2009) and Oklahoma City, OK (2009–2015). He completed a master’s in divinity degree at Oklahoma Christian University in 2014. He married his wife, Erin, in 2015. He taught at Harding University for the 2015–2016 school year before moving to Charlotte, NC to minister with the NoDa Church of Christ. Ryan and Erin have two daughters, Elsie (2020) and Josie (2021). Ryan entered the Doctor of Ministry program at Abilene Christian University in 2017.