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God's Movement through the Sacrament of Communion

In 1517 Martin Luther published the 95 Theses against indulgences used by the Catholic church. This set off a chain of events that led to the reformation and the separation of catholic and protestant, reformed faith. One of the differences between the catholic and reformed faith is that the Catholic church recognizes seven sacraments: baptism, eucharist, confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and ordination. The reformed tradition recognizes two sacraments: baptism and the eucharist, or more commonly known in the reformed tradition as communion. Communion, in the reformed tradition, is a sign and seal of the covenant. Therefore, all of God's children are welcomed to participate in this sacrament. Communion is a gift from God for the people of God.

This paper will seek to analyze communion within the larger context of reformed worship and theology. Specifically, this paper will give an overview of the history of communion in the reformed tradition, delve into the use of a specific patten and chalice in the PC(USA) congregation of Orange, Virginia and then assess the relationship between this particular patten and chalice and the invitation for all to receive communion in this particular context.

Reformed Communion Liturgy

A sacrament is a practice within the reformed tradition of divine grace that has been ordained by God through Jesus the Christ. Since communion is one of two sacraments in the reformed tradition it is to be held in reverence. The reformed tradition believes that Christ is

present in the giving and receiving of communion, although the bread and juice are not transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ.

In a reformed communion worship service, the communion liturgy starts with a great thanksgiving that acknowledges Jesus' presence at the table. A common Great Thanksgiving would be the following:

Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God! They will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God. According to Luke, when our risen Lord was at table with his disciples, he took the bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. This is the Lord's table. Our Savior invites those who trust him to share the feast which he has prepared.¹

This Great Thanksgiving that comes from the PC(USA) Book of Common Worship explains that in Jesus' life the table was of upmost importance. Before he died and after he was resurrected, he joined his friends at table. The most important part of communion are the words of institution that must be said by an ordained minister of the word and sacrament. There will be more on the significance of that below. The words of institution come from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.²

Paul is reiterating Jesus' words to his disciples during the last supper before he died. These words remind us of Jesus giving his body over to the authorities to be crucified, and yet also of

¹ Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 68.

² 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, NRSV

the promise of resurrection, that death is not the end. When we take of the bread and cup given for us, we remember Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We participate in the same meal Jesus invited his disciples to. We continue the feast as directed until Jesus comes again in glory. This meal is a foretaste of another feast we are promised in the life ever after. Therefore, the sacrament of communion is an ongoing event.

The communion liturgy continues by delving into God's works throughout all time and space. The sacrament of communion is not a one-time event, rather it is an acknowledgement of God's on-going work in the world. At communion all of the saints, past, present and future are invited to share in this meal that Jesus prepared. The bread is broken, and the cup is poured. The reformed tradition calls for all who wish to take of the elements of bread and juice to eat of the same bread and drink of the same cup. This represents the oneness of the meal. Communion is not an individual act, rather it is an act of the community. By taking of the same bread and same cup the community is acknowledging their oneness as the body of Christ.

The body of Christ is the idea that all of God's children are indeed one body in this world. Believers are called to act as the hands and feet of Christ to serve the world and bring about the promised kingdom of God. Communion is an act of the body, meaning, as previously stated, it is not an individual act but the body of Christ moving together as one to receive this sacrament.

Communion does not end when the bread and cup have been consumed, rather communion sends the body of Christ out into the world to be active participants in the kingdom of God. "To eat and drink at this table is to be united with Christ by the spirit and to be challenged to extend self-giving, other-affirming, community-forming love of the triune God to

all people.”³ Communion is not an individual act for individual salvation. Rather is it a connectional event. It invites believers to taste and see that the Lord is good, and also sends believers out to the word to share this same meal. According to the PC(USA) Book of Order, The Lord’s Supper also reflects our calling to feed others as we have been fed and offers a foretaste of that heavenly banquet when God will wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.⁴ This sacrament of the meal continues as Jesus welcomes anyone who puts their faith in him to come and eat this same meal.

The liturgy of communion lifts up its history as the meal of thanksgiving. It is meant to acknowledge God’s continued acts in the world, and Jesus’ act of salvation for all of humanity. Communion is a gift of grace from God to humanity. It is a time of remembrance and renewal for believers of every time and space, and it is also a time to act as the body of Christ in the world; to go out into the world to share the good news and the meal which has been prepared for all God’s children.

Humanity and a Divine Sacrament

As previously mentioned, in the reformed tradition, only an ordained minister of word and sacrament can speak the words of institution to officiate the sacrament of communion. In their ordination, a minister of word and sacrament is yoked with the responsibility of leading the people in worship; this includes in the taking of the bread and cup for communion. While

³ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2004), 293.

⁴ *Book of Order 2019–2021: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2019). (W-3.0409)

communion is the gifts of God for the people of God, it is the minister who leads in the invitation and feeding of the people. It is believed to be part of the minister's call. However, as Letty Russell writes, "The church has been careful to say that it is God in Christ who makes the sacraments efficacious, and not the ones administering the sacraments or the community in which they happen."⁵ This is to say that while it is part of the minister's call to officiate communion, it is not up to the minister to sanctify communion, that is God's doing.

Historically, ordained ministers of the word and sacrament have been heterosexual men. It has not been until recently that women and even more recently LGBTQ folks have been accepted in the reformed tradition as called into ordained ministry. This inclusion in ordination also means inclusion of those who may officiate the sacrament of communion. By widening the inclusion of who may officiate, ipso facto there is a widening of who is included at the table. God sanctifies communion, and God calls whom God calls to ordained ministry. By widening the invitation and officiation of communion the reformed tradition is recognizing that it is God who does the work at the communion table, and throughout the rest of our lives. Therefore, the reformed tradition has taken steps to share the invitation to the table to more and more of God's children.

As the communion liturgy states, "Our Savior invites those who trust him to share the feast which he has prepared."⁶ It is not the responsibility of the ordained minister of word and sacrament, or even the church elders, to decide who is called to the table. However, that has not always been the case. There have been cases of fencing the table throughout history. One example of this is the use of communion tokens. These are literal tokens given to whose whom

⁵ Letty M Russell, *Church in the Round* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 142.

⁶ Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. *Book of Common Worship*, 68

have been deemed worthy to receive the bread and cup of communion. For example, the Presbyterian church has used communion tokens to highlight the reverence of the table. There are Presbyterian churches that have held diets of examination during the weeks before communion where members would be assessed. “If the minister were satisfied that those presenting themselves were versed in the Lord’s Prayer, the Creeds, and the Ten Commandments, and that they did not lead scandalous lives, then the Elders would distribute the tokens...”⁷ Therefore the church ministers and elders determined who was worthy to come to the table based on a person’s actions. There have also been historic debates about whether one needs to be baptized in order to participate in communion. For example, up until 2017 the PC(USA) Book of Order mandated that, “All the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table...”⁸ Another debate around communion is whether or not children are permitted to take of the bread and cup. All these things are versions of fencing the table. Like many parts of the church in the world, humanity has attempted to understand the meaning of God’s intentions. However, since humanity cannot fully understand God’s intentions there is a constant need to re-evaluate and reform our understandings. Historically, the human powers that be, have made it so that only those deemed worthy by the human powers that be, are allowed at the table. However, as previously mentioned attempts are being made to open the table to all of God’s children.

According to Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”⁹ As often, but how often is enough? Since the reformation, there has been no uniform understanding of how, or when

⁷ H. S. A Copinger, "Communion Tokens Used in England, Wales, and the Channel Islands," (*The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society* 1964) 319.

⁸ *Book of Order 2015–2017: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2015). (W-2.4006)

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, NRSV

communion takes place. This is another attempt for humanity to understand the great mystery of the sacrament. Historically, communion has been required at least quarterly, with some within the reformed tradition putting more specificity on dates, such as the first Sundays of March, June, September, and December¹⁰. While bread and wine are the elements that Jesus Christ used at his Last Supper, even that is a point of debate. There are places around the world that do not readily have bread and wine, therefore these are substituted for more culturally appropriate elements such as rice and tea or bananas and oranges.¹¹ In many reformed congregations it is common to see a table called the Lord's Table in the worship space with the bread on a patten and the juice in a chalice. This has become part of the communion practice. Interestingly, while a cup in mentioned is the Apostle Paul's words of institution, a patten or plate is not. These are all examples of how humanity has taken a sacrament that is a sign and seal of the covenant and interpreted it within individual contexts. While there is an attempt to widen who is invited to the Lord's Table to take and eat the meal that has been prepared, it is important to understand that it is still a human interpretation of a divine act and will therefore fall short of God's intentions.

A Thick Description of Communion at Orange Presbyterian Church

On the night before he died Jesus of Nazareth gathered with his friends to eat the Passover meal. This meal was a remembrance of God passing over the Hebrew people in Egypt during the tenth plague of killing each first born. This tradition was a time for the Jewish people to gather and eat a holy meal. Since Jesus was a Jewish man, he participated in this tradition.

¹⁰Thomas Burns, James McGregor, and Alexander J.S Brook, "Old Scottish Communion Plate." (Edinburgh, R&R Clark. 1892,) 2.

¹¹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 144

However, that night he used the tradition of the Passover meal to start another tradition. That night he took the bread of the meal and blessed it, he then broke it and gave the bread to his disciples saying take and eat, this is my body given for you. He then took the cup of wine of the Passover meal and said this wine is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins, drink of it. Jesus told his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup as a way to foreshadow what was about to happen. Jesus was about to be arrested, tried in a kangaroo court, and executed as a criminal on a cross. Jesus gave the bread and wine to his disciples as a way to remember what was about to happen, that Jesus was about to willingly give himself up to die on a cross, but then Jesus would be resurrected. In his death and resurrection Jesus would bring salvation to all of humanity. Jesus gave his disciples the bread and wine that night to remember his saving death until he comes again.

Since that night, the church has remembered. This tradition remains. Throughout history the church has taken the bread and wine, the church has eaten and drank of these elements to remember that night before Jesus died. There have been many interpretations of what happens in this remembrance. Historically, The Roman Catholic church believes that the bread and wine actually transform into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. During the reformation starting in 1517, Martin Luther taught that, ‘Christ is present ‘in, with, and under’ the elements of bread and wine.’¹² John Calvin advocated for the idea of the real presence of Christ during communion. Although there is debate about what happens to the bread and wine as we remember this last supper, there is agreement that the Lord’s Supper, Communion, the Eucharist, is a sacrament, a sign and seal of the covenant between God and humanity and should indeed be remembered.¹³

¹² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 290

¹³ Ibid.

During the remembrance of Jesus' last supper, traditionally each worshiping community has used a patten and chalice to hold the bread and wine. These pattens and chalices are provided by the worshiping community and often hold historic reverence to said communities. The bread and wine, or juice, cup of the vine, are also provided by the community. Members of the local church will purchase or make the bread to sit on the patten. Cup of the vine are brought and poured into the chalice by members as well. The community works together to remember this Last Supper of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is the case for Orange Presbyterian Church in Orange, Virginia. Orange Presbyterian Church is a congregation with a long history. The congregation was formed in 1845 in rural Virginia. Throughout its 175-year history the church has seen many significant families contribute to its worshiping life. In 1845 the West Hanover Presbytery approved a request from a group of 23 people from Orange and Madison County to form a new Presbyterian Congregation. The congregation was led by Rev. Daniel Blaine Ewing and eventually grew into three different congregations. The congregation of Orange, VA was one of the three. This church became a staple of the community. For example, during the American Civil War the church building was used as a hospital. In 1910, due to rapid growth, the congregation moved to a larger building. In 1923 an education wing was added to the building, and in 1971, the congregation added an even bigger sanctuary, converting the old sanctuary into a fellowship hall. The congregation has gone through other changes as well. There have been multiple manses throughout the life of the congregation. A pipe organ valued at \$1,500 in 1911 is still in use to this day. The congregation has sponsored missionaries and seminary students. The congregation has been through times of long tenured pastors and long periods of time without a called pastor. There have been times of

prosperity and times of want. Throughout its 175-year history, Orange Presbyterian has been active in the community.¹⁴

Families have given of their time, talents, and treasures to this congregation for generations. One such family is that of the Leland Lord's. William Leland and Georgie became members of Orange Presbyterian in 1923, after moving to Orange to teach at the Woodberry Forest Boarding School. William became a Ruling Elder the next year and served the session on and off for the rest of his life. Both William and Georgie were active in the life of the congregation by teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, and participating in the Presbyterian Men and Women of the church. Their dedication to Orange Presbyterian was well known within the community. The bulletin for William's memorial service reads, "As a father, his devotion and character were symbolic; As a teacher, his influence lives with Woodberry men everywhere; as a humanitarian the glad memory of his cheerful, buoyant nature still warms men's hearts; as a Christian, his love for Christ and his Church still leads men on."¹⁵ Although William died in 1960, the tradition of contribution continued with William and Georgie's daughter, Louise, who also became active in the life of the congregation. The Leland Lords were leaders of the community and the congregation. Their legacy is remembered around the town of Orange and specifically Orange Presbyterian Church to this day.¹⁶

The congregation honored and memorialized the Leland Lord family in many ways. The church library was named the Leland Lord Library. In 1962 the women of the church purchased

¹⁴ Orange Presbyterian Church, "A Brief History of OPC," Accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.orangepc.org/opchistory.html>.

¹⁵ Orange Presbyterian church, "OPC News and Views," Accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.orangepc.org/opcnews/category/leland-lord>.

¹⁶ Orange Presbyterian Church, "Leland-Lord"

hymn boards in memory of William and Georgie. According to the church's memorial record book, a patten and chalice were given to the church in memorial of William and Georgie by their daughter, Louise, also in 1962. This patten and chalice have served as the patten and chalice used for communion ever since. They were placed on the communion table in what is now called the Old Sanctuary, the sanctuary that is now the fellowship hall. This same patten and chalice were brought to the new sanctuary when it was built in 1971. Every Sunday this patten and chalice sit on the communion table to remind the congregation of the importance of the bread and wine, even on Sundays when communion is not served. They are made of silver and have the inscription, "To the Glory of God and in loving memory of William Leland Lord and Georgie Hume Lord." In this way the Leland Lord family continues to serve Orange Presbyterian Church even after they have joined the church triumphant.

The congregation does see this patten and chalice as a gift. As mentioned, they remain on the table every Sunday even when the policies and procedures around communion have changed. Historically, the congregation of Orange Presbyterian Church observed communion quarterly. It was not until within the past ten years that the congregation moved to observing communion monthly, on the first Sunday of each month.¹⁷ Traditionally, a member of the congregation has been the point person for communion, so to speak. This person would purchase the bread and juice, cut up the bread into squares and pour the juice into individual serving cups. These pieces of bread and cups of juice were then distributed to the congregation by ruling elders in trays also given as a memorial gift by another church family. The patten and chalice were only used by the minister of word and sacrament to act out the breaking of the bread and pouring of the juice during the words of institution. During the COVID pandemic communion was still observed

¹⁷ Exact date unknown

quarterly, however the congregation did not gather in the sanctuary to eat the meal and drink the cup together. Instead, the services were pre-recorded, and the congregation was invited to take and eat of the bread and juice in their own home. The congregation was apart in body but united in spirit when they participated in the sacrament. However, even in the pre-recordings the patten and chalice were used. The pastor would still break the bread and drink from the cup. This gave a sense of continuity and consistency in a time of upheaval and uncertainty.

Now that the congregation is regathering for worship the patten and chalice are still used. Individual pieces of bread and individual cups are distributed to the congregation. There have been discussions about moving to an intinction style of communion. That would mean the congregation would come and eat of the one bread and one cup used by the minister of word and sacrament in the words of institution. If the congregation eventually moves to intinction the patten and chalice given in memory of William and Georgie Leland Lord will still be used, until otherwise decided. Therefore, this gift given in memory is not simply for show, it is a well-used and well meaningful gift that contributes to the life of the congregation past, present, and future.

On the night before he died, Jesus took bread and wine and told his disciples to eat and drink of it, for it was his body and blood given for them. Jesus told his disciples to continue taking the bread and wine to eat and drink in remembrance of him. This sacrament continues to this day. Orange Presbyterian Church remembers the last supper of Jesus of Nazareth. The patten and chalice given in memory of William and Georgie Leland Lord participate in this remembrance and this sacrament.

Theological Assessment

Communion is a sacrament that unites past, present, and future. It is an act of God that moves throughout time and space. It is an act that reveals God's movement in the world. This patten and chalice given in memory of William and Georgie Leland Lord can be viewed as a symbol of all of this. This patten and chalice were given by their daughter in 1962. This was a point in history, a specific date, that at the time was the present. However, in 1962, William had already died. Therefore, this gift represents the past through a person who had passed. This gift was used in the present as the patten and chalice of Orange Presbyterian Church and continues to be used well into the future. This patten and chalice represent the movement of communion throughout history. However, the act of communion is also a way for humanity to interpret something that is divine. As this paper has established, human interpretation, by definition, will fall short of the divine act that is happening at the table. However, by having a tangible item that represents past, present, and future, humans can get a glimpse at God's work past, present and future. So often humans turn to tangible items to try to understand God's work in the world.

Historically, tokens have been used to interpret who is worthy of the table. While this patten and chalice are not meant to decide who is worthy, they are items that represent humans interpreting God's movement throughout history in communion. God did not ordain this particular plate and cup to be used for communion, rather the congregation of Orange Presbyterian decided that these items would be used in this sacrament. Therefore, this patten and chalice are a human interpretation of the divine act of communion.

Since they are a human interpretation, they do fall short. One way this happens is by fencing the table. This patten and chalice are given in memory of specific people and a worship service was held to memorialize these gifts. While these two people have died and no longer

have direct influence in the congregation, their memory lives on. Each time this patten and chalice are used, their memory is present. This potentially limits what is happening at the communion table. Instead of God holding the body and blood of Christ, offering it to all who trust in Jesus, it is William and Georgie Leland Lord who do so. Perhaps the Leland Lords would not be as welcoming of folks to the table as God is. Perhaps the memory of the Leland Lords is not as fond for all folks. While reformed tradition calls for a re-evaluation of who is welcome to participate in communion, by setting a specific person from a specific time-period on the communion table, that re-evaluation could be limited. Of course, this is all up to human interpretation. This is also not limited to the patten and chalice. Each communion Sunday there are specific people who set the table. There are specific people who purchase the bread and juice. There is a specific person, a minister of word and sacrament, who speaks the words of institution and serves the elements to the people. Communion is meant to be a divine act, but human intervention automatically limits that act. Therefore, in order to avoid the patten and chalice becoming about the Leland Lords rather than about the work of God through Jesus Christ, there should be an awareness of that human limitation. This patten and chalice were given a whole service of dedication. Perhaps this put too much emphasis on the people and took away from the act of God. In the future, if other gifts are given for the communion table in honor or memory of a specific person, it would be best to simply use the items for their intended purpose and give glory to God through their use instead of memorializing the people and items in a worship service.

That being said, it is God who is moving in communion. As limiting as human interpretation is, nothing that humans do can limit what God is doing. Communion is a gift of God for the people of God. We, as God's children, are invited into this sign and seal of the

covenant. We, as children of God, purchase bread and juice, or oranges and mangos. We, as children of God, set the table, follow the call to ordained ministry so that we may speak the words of institution. We, as children of God, give gifts in memory of others who also loved and served the Lord throughout their lives to be used at communion. While historically human interpretation has fallen short of the inclusion God calls us to, human interpretation cannot limit God's love and inclusion of all people. This patten and chalice has been part of this congregation since 1962. In the years since they have been part of the installation service of the first female minister of word and sacrament of the congregation. They have been present during the Civil Rights Movement and they have served folks who are LGBTQ. These items are but items. They are stamped with names of specific folks from a specific time-period. They are limited. They have the potential to be seen as the Leland Lord communion set instead of God's gifts. However, despite all that, God is present still. God is moving throughout the world and throughout the act of communion. It is Jesus who calls us to the table to remember his saving act. It is Jesus who feeds us and sustains us and sends us out into the world. These items are but items, human made, and human given. Like anything human, they have the potential to be harmful. Yet, they also have the potential to reveal to humanity the divine act that is God moving through this sacrament.

In Conclusion

Communion, being one of two sacraments of the reformed tradition, is to be held in reverence. It is a sign and seal of the covenant between God and all of humanity. Each congregation that participates in communion is responsible for interpreting the act within the world, and therefore falls short of the fullness of the act. That does not mean that God is not

present still. It is God who turns a common loaf of bread and an ordinary cup of the vine into a sacrament. It is God who invites all who trust in Jesus Christ to come and take of the meal that has been prepared.

This paper dealt with many of the ways humanity has fallen short of the fullness of communion, such as fencing the table, and making communion about the people rather than about God. This paper looked specifically at how a particular patten, and chalice used in Orange Presbyterian Church could potentially do those things. However, this paper concludes that there is nothing humans can do to limit God's movement during the sacrament of communion. The act of communion is a time when past, present, and future merge together to show that God is working throughout time and space. Communion sends the people out into the world to be the body of Christ. The act of communion is so much more than any one particular patten and chalice, loaf of bread or cup of the vine. Humanity does participate in communion, including providing the elements and serving dishes. Yet it is God who turns communion into a holy sacrament.

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