Presbyterian Worship Questions and Answers

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The Sacraments

25 Why do Presbyterians have only two sacraments?

The classic Reformed/Presbyterian answer boils down to this: because Jesus said so. As our Directory for Worship puts it, "The Reformed tradition recognizes the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (also called Eucharist or Holy Communion) as having been instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ through the witness of the Scriptures and sustained through the history of the universal Church" (*Book of Order*, W-3.0401).

The Gospels begin with the call of John to "repent and be baptized," for the realm of God is near; this leads directly to the account of Jesus' own baptism by John in the Jordan River. As with our own baptism, it is depicted as a Trinitarian event—the Holy Spirit descends from the heavens; the voice of God says, "You are my beloved child"; and Christ is at the center of it all. At the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus institutes the sacrament of baptism through his Great Commission: "'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'" (Matt. 28:19). The theology and practice of baptism is also deeply connected with stories and themes of the Hebrew Scriptures (the creation, the flood, the exodus, e.g.) and developed in other writings of the New Testament (especially Acts and the letters of Paul).

The Gospels are similarly full of stories of Jesus sharing meals with his followers, from the feeding of the multitudes to breaking

bread with the disciples after he rose from the dead. All of these meals reveal a similar pattern of action—taking bread, blessing, breaking, and sharing it—a pattern that continues to shape our celebration of the sacrament. When it comes to the institution of the sacrament, we point to a particular meal: Jesus' Passover with the disciples in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and his call to "'Do this in remembrance of me'" (Luke 22:19). The theology and practice of the Lord's Supper is also fed by stories and themes of the Hebrew Scriptures (the bread of the Passover, manna in the wilderness, the sacrifices of the temple), and developed in other writings of the New Testament (especially Acts and 1 Corinthians).

What ties these events together as sacraments? They are visible (and tangible, taste-able) signs of the grace of God for the body of Christ, directly commended by Jesus and continued by his followers for two millennia. Other rites of the church—confirmation, ordination, weddings, rites at the time of death—have a long history in Christian worship and deep importance in pastoral care and nurture. In some other Christian churches, these are numbered among the sacraments. Indeed, we would affirm that they are closely related to the sacraments, in that confirmation, ordination, the wedding, and the funeral all ripple out from the gift, calling, and promise of our baptism. But for Presbyterians, the only two rites properly called sacraments of the church are Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

26 Why do Presbyterians baptize infants?

A sacrament is a funny thing. It is a gracious act of God, and at the same time, a human response of gratitude. Understanding this little bit of sacramental theology helps us to understand the difference between infant and believer's baptism—and, more importantly, to understand how they can still be one and the same sacrament.

We baptize infants because God chooses, claims, and calls us long before we are able to respond to God's grace. The baptism of infants thus emphasizes God's gracious action, underscoring

classic Reformed teaching about "election," how God chooses us for salvation.

We baptize believers (who have not already been baptized) upon the profession of their faith because God's gracious action calls for our grateful response. The baptism of believers thus emphasizes our response to God's grace, demonstrating the central Reformed tenet of salvation by grace through faith.

Seven words from the New Testament sum it up perfectly: "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God loves us first. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. It is a pure gift of love, unexpected and undeserved. This is why we baptize infants. But because God first loves us, we love. Because of the great love of God poured into our hearts, we are able to love God and one another. This is our grateful response to God's grace, our faithful response to God's faithfulness. And this is why we baptize believers upon profession of their faith.

Sometimes people are presented for baptism who do not fall neatly into one of these categories. Examples include children between the ages of infancy and adolescence or people with cognitive disabilities. This is when it is critical to remember that there are not really two kinds of baptism; there is but one sacrament practiced in different ways, depending on the age and situation of the one baptized. In these cases, pastors and elders must work with families and candidates for baptism to discern which practice is most appropriate—relying, as always, on the grace and love of God. Indeed, it is on this grace and love alone that our salvation truly depends.

27 What is the baptismal formula? Why those words?

According to the final words of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gave this commission to his disciples after he rose from the dead: "'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching

them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:18–20).

These are the words of institution said in the sacrament of baptism, just as we repeat Jesus' commandment "Do this in remembrance of me" at the Lord's Supper. In keeping with Jesus' great commission, when we welcome a new member into Christ's body, we do so with water and the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though there may have been exceptions to this formula in the early church, and there continue to be variations in the baptismal liturgy, this has been the predominant practice of Christian churches and probably will be "to the end of the age."

The use of this Trinitarian baptismal formula means that when we are claimed by God through the sacrament of baptism, we are marked, signed, or sealed with God's own holy, triune name. It is like the revelation of God's name to Moses at the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14). Because we are baptized, who we are is now inextricably linked to who God is. We are immersed in the eternal life and abundant love of the Trinity, one God in three persons—a "community" of mutuality, relationship, and self-giving; a communion of goodness, grace, and glory.

"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" came to have a special place as an orthodox expression of the divine name, one consistent with the imagery of Scripture and the teachings of the church. Yet there are many other ways—both ancient and contemporary—to describe and contemplate the mystery of the triune God: Speaker, Word, and Breath; Font, Water, and River; Table, Food, and Server; Mother, Child, and Womb; Giver, Gift, and Giving; Lover, Beloved, and Love. It is critical that we expand our Trinitarian vocabulary with these and other expressions, as the exclusive use of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" has reflected and contributed to the problem of oppressive patriarchy in the church and can be traumatizing for those who have been abused by men.

At the same time, significant ecumenical relationships, including the 2013 Catholic/Reformed mutual recognition of baptism, are established on this baptismal wording. Therefore, our Directory for Worship says, "As there is one body, there is one Baptism. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes all baptisms by

other Christian churches that are administered with water and performed in the name of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (*Book of Order*, W-3.0402). How can we reconcile the hope of Christian unity with the concern for more expansive language in worship? The "Riverside Formula," so named for its origin at the Riverside Church in New York City, offers a creative and graceful solution: "N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all."

28 Sprinkling, pouring, immersion . . . is there a right way to baptize?

The minimal requirements for a valid baptism are the use of water and the name of the Trinity. The water may be applied with the pastor's hand, poured out from a shell or vessel, or delivered through total immersion in a baptismal pool. Any one of these options is a legitimate form of baptism, according to the Presbyterian Directory for Worship (see *Book of Order*, W-3.0407). The question is, How do we best convey the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit?

The 1982 World Council of Churches' study *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* offered a set of five theological themes related to baptism, held in common across various Christian traditions. These themes include dying and rising with Christ; cleansing, pardon, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body; and the sign of the realm of God. Let's consider the first three of these themes as they relate to the water used in the sacrament of baptism.

If baptism is dying and rising with Christ, what use of water might reflect that experience? Certainly a dangerous amount, enough to drown in and emerge gasping with gratitude for life made new.

If baptism is cleansing, pardon, and renewal, what use of water might suggest that meaning? Certainly a healthy serving, enough to wash away the stain of sin and stench of death.

If baptism is the gift of the Holy Spirit, what use of water might

demonstrate that conviction? Certainly a generous portion, enough to fill our hearts with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

According to Scripture, the grace of God overflows for us through Christ Jesus, who "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:14–15). No amount of water will be sufficient to express this extravagant gift of grace. But a more generous use of water—whether applied through sprinkling, pouring, or immersion—will help to draw worshipers into the deeper mystery and meaning of the sacrament.

29 Can I be rebaptized?

As noted above, sacraments are both gracious acts of God and human responses to God's grace. To suggest that someone who has already been baptized might need to be baptized again is to forget or deny the first part of this premise. Baptism is God's action—and God doesn't mess up. God doesn't miss.

Even—or especially—in our weakness and wavering, our failure and fear, our struggle and sin, God's grace is sufficient for us (2 Cor. 12:9). As the Directory for Worship puts it, "God's faithfulness to us is sure, even when human faithfulness to God is not" (*Book of Order*, W-3.0402). It is true that we make promises in baptism; but in the baptismal covenant God also makes promises, and the word of God stands forever. Thus the Directory for Worship makes it plain: "Baptism is not repeated" (W-3.0402).

There are many opportunities for the reaffirmation of baptism. The profession of faith (or confirmation), ordination and installation, weddings, services of wholeness, and even the Christian funeral are pastoral occasions that "flow from the font," life passages that spring from the sacrament of baptism. This is why the oil of anointing, a repeatable part of the baptismal liturgy, is appropriately applied at such services and why they may include other elements in common with the rite of baptism, such as presentations, questions, the giving of a new garment, or the exchange of symbolic gifts. We also reaffirm our baptism

whenever we witness the baptism of another member of the body of Christ, when new people join the church, and each time we share in the Lord's Supper. All of these events are a chance to "remember your baptism and be thankful."

"But what if I don't remember my baptism?" Indeed, this is the reason some request to be rebaptized—they were baptized as infants and have no recollection of the event. The point of this common liturgical phrase is not to remember *when* you *were* baptized but to remember *that* you *are* baptized. Such requests may present good opportunities for the reaffirmation of baptism as a sign of growth in faith or for a discussion of baptismal discipleship in the context of pastoral care. The gift and grace of baptism doesn't depend on the strength of our memory, thanks be to God.

The important thing is this: God remembers. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

30 What is the difference between the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, and Communion?

Each of these terms may be appropriately applied to the church's ancient practice of sharing bread and wine in Jesus' name. However, each term highlights a different facet of the meaning of the feast and can therefore be helpful in expanding our understanding of the sacrament.

Lord's Supper, particularly prominent in Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, emphasizes Christ's institution of the sacrament and connects the meal with its celebration on the Lord's Day (Sunday). A danger of this term is that it can be easily conflated and confused with "Last Supper"—itself a misnomer since Jesus shared other meals with his followers after he rose from the dead and continues to set a table for us to this day. While we trace Christ's institution of the sacrament to his Passover with the disciples, the meaning of *Lord's Supper* is not exhausted by that event but includes Jesus'

feeding of the multitude and his resurrection meals. If *Lord's Supper* equals "Last Supper," every communion Sunday feels like Maundy Thursday—a limited experience of the sacrament indeed.

Eucharist, from a Greek word meaning "to give thanks," emphasizes the essential nature of the sacrament as an offering of thanksgiving for the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This term tends to have more currency in ecumenical and Roman Catholic discussion. A drawback of this word is that it takes some unpacking and may strike some worshipers as esoteric or obscure. The word is worth the work for us, however, as it underscores a sometimes-neglected theological theme: that of gratitude.

Holy Communion refers to a specific part of the eucharistic liturgy—the sharing of bread and wine—and a particular aspect of its theological meaning—the spiritual fellowship of the body of Christ. Over time and in some circles, however, this term has come to stand in for the sacrament as a whole. A potential hazard of this term, once again, is that it may narrow the horizons of the meal, emphasizing only one part of its theology and practice.

Small wonder, then, that the church has developed a variety of terms for this sharing in the body and blood of Christ—it truly is a feast of meaning and mystery.

31 What's the least we have to do for a valid celebration of Communion?

Instead of asking, "What's the least we have to do for the sacrament to 'count'?" why not ask, "What's the most we might do to glorify God and nourish God's people?" Instead of settling for validity, why not strive for vibrancy, search for variety, and stretch for vitality in Christian worship?

Even though the question is troubling, the impulse behind it is understandable. Pastors and congregations may be interested in celebrating the sacrament more frequently but worry that this will involve a lengthy and complicated eucharistic liturgy, perhaps because that's the only thing they have ever experienced. So let's get back to basics.

The sacraments can be said to consist of words from God, joined with actions of the church, surrounded by prayer. (This is true for baptism as well as the Lord's Supper.) All three—words, actions, and prayer—are essential elements of the eucharistic liturgy as described in the Presbyterian Directory for Worship (*Book of Order*, W-3.0411–14). We'll look briefly at each.

First, the words. The words of institution (see Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; and 1 Cor. 11) are to be used at some point in the eucharistic liturgy. The Presbyterian tradition provides three options: (1) at the invitation to the table, (2) during the Great Thanksgiving, or (3) at the breaking of the bread. The first option reflects an older Reformed tradition, explaining why we "do this." The second represents a common ecumenical practice, though one that is new to many Presbyterians. And the third seems to be the most familiar pattern in Presbyterian churches today. For a host of reasons, many churches are exploring the second option. It facilitates the celebration of a joyful feast, offers a fresh perspective on the sacrament, frames the words of institution with thankful prayer, and strengthens ecumenical relationships, among other things. Just remember that the bread is still broken (and the cup is poured) *after* the prayer, in silence or with other appropriate words of Jesus.

Second, the action. The central action is breaking bread, a phrase sometimes used as a synonym for the sacrament in the New Testament and early church. The breaking of the bread is a symbolic action with many layers of meaning. It is connected with the abundance of Jesus' life, as in the miraculous multiplication of loaves; with the agony of his death, as in the crucifixion of his body and the shedding of his blood; and with the awe of his resurrection, as in the eyes that were opened at the breaking of the bread. The act of breaking bread occurs within the fourfold action of "taking, blessing, breaking, giving" described repeatedly in the Gospels—at Jesus' feeding of the crowds, the meal in the upper room, and on the day of resurrection. This fourfold pattern corresponds to the four-part shape of the whole eucharistic liturgy: Offering (taking), Great Thanksgiving (blessing), Breaking of the Bread (breaking), and Communion (giving).

Third, the prayer. The Great Thanksgiving or eucharistic prayer has a Trinitarian shape, consisting of thanksgiving to God, remembrance of Jesus Christ, and prayer for the Holy Spirit. Within this threefold pattern, key elements include thanks and praise for the gift of God's saving love in the story of Scripture and in our own lives; self-offering to God in the name of Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and coming again to glory; and calling on the power of the Holy Spirit to nourish us in Christ's body and blood and send us out to share God's grace with others. Please take note—this prayer is called the Great Thanksgiving, not the "long thanksgiving." It is great because it is the great Table prayer of the church, our way of "saying grace" at the meal Christ prepares. It should be theologically full, including the basic elements described here, but doesn't need to be all that long. Indeed, the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* provides examples of strong and fulsome eucharistic prayers that are shorter than this paragraph.

32 What are the proper Communion elements?

Just as the sacraments are divine actions and human responses, the elements used in the Lord's Supper are gifts of God's creation refined and prepared through the work of human hands. Grain is harvested, flour is milled, leaven is added, loaves are kneaded, bread is baked. Vines are plucked, grapes are crushed, juice is strained, wine is fermented, barrels are aged. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

The eucharistic elements represent the full dimensions of our human experience. Bread is common food, simple fare, ordinary nourishment—as in "our daily bread." Wine or grape juice is a strong, sweet, or special drink—reserved for times of celebration.

When it comes to sacramental matter, cultural context matters. The bread may be made from corn, rice, wheat, or some other grain that is authentic and appropriate for a particular community of faith. The same considerations apply for the cup. The preparation and presentation of the elements offer another way to reflect

cultural context. Whatever elements are used and however they are prepared, care should be taken to connect them with Jesus' use of these symbols in saying, "'I am the bread of life'" (John 6:35) and "'I am the vine, you are the branches'" (John 15:5).

Planners and leaders of worship must also take care to provide for the full participation of all, including those who have allergies, addictions, or other dietary restrictions. Some of these concerns are easy enough to anticipate—nonalcoholic and gluten-free options, for instance. Other issues will require regular consultation and pastoral knowledge of the particular needs of the congregation and its members. The options provided for participating in Communion must be clearly identified and communicated to worshipers, including first-time or occasional visitors.

Careful consideration of all these matters will help to ensure that the elements for Communion really are gifts of God for the people of God.

33 Is there a right way to serve and receive Communion?

As with the administration of baptism, there are various options for serving Communion: plates passed through the congregation, intinction (in which a piece of bread is dipped into the cup), or the sharing of a common loaf and chalice. Furthermore, our Directory for Worship provides for various kinds of congregational participation in the sacrament: going forward to the chancel, remaining seated in the sanctuary, or gathering together around a table (*Book of Order*, W-3.0414). Whatever the manner of distribution, the important thing is that the sacrament is *gracefully* served and *gratefully* received.

Those who serve Communion (whether ruling elders or others approved by the session to do so) should be prepared to serve the elements *gracefully*. This means attending prayerfully to the congregation as members of the body of Christ—not rushing through the motions or becoming overly anxious about the logistics. It means making eye contact and connecting with those you

serve. It means adopting a peaceful and joyful demeanor and a deep sense of generosity, kindness, and humility. You don't need to wear a cheesy grin or a sorrowful grimace. You're not serving hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party or administering medicine at an infirmary. You're sharing the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

The congregation should be formed in such a way as to receive the elements *gratefully*. This means attending prayerfully to the ones serving as ministers in Christ's name—not checking your watch or grumbling about the long line to the chancel. It means making eye contact and connecting with those who are serving you. It means reflecting on the generosity of God and offering your life to the Lord as a sign of thanks and praise. You don't need to put on a spiritual show or a pious pretense. You're not getting a treat for good behavior or a vaccination at the pharmacy. You're receiving the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

In actual practice, the roles of serving and receiving often blend together. This is the case when plates are passed through the congregation or when the bread and cup are shared around a circle. In these situations, the receivers become the servers for the next person. It is especially important in these situations to model graceful serving and grateful receiving.

The act of Communion makes the most sense when we receive the bread from the hand of another person. God's grace comes to us as a gift, not something we grasp and take for ourselves like candy from a bowl. A better practice is to extend your hands to the server, palms open, one cupped in the other. The server places the bread in your hand, saying, "The bread of heaven" or "The body of Christ," and you respond, "Amen" or "Thanks be to God." (This is also a more sanitary method of distribution than having everyone in line touch the bread.)

When it is practiced prayerfully, as an act of grace and gratitude, the giving and receiving of Communion can be one of the most significant spiritual disciplines in the life of a congregation. Those serving the sacrament have the profound opportunity to embody the Lord of service and love within the community of faith. Those

receiving it are nourished by the bread of life as they learn to love and serve others in the world around us.

34 How often should we celebrate Communion?

Word and sacrament belong together in the life of the church. As our *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* affirm, the church is defined by the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, and a disciplined life in covenant community (see Scots Confession 3.18 and Form of Government F-1.0303). When we gather for worship each Sunday, we should practice these elements of our common life and show forth these signs to the world.

Contrary to popular thought, weekly Eucharist is hardly a new idea for churches of the Reformed tradition. John Calvin called for the Lord's Supper to be "set before the church very often, and at least once a week" (*Institutes* 4.17.43). Commenting on Acts 2:42, Calvin observed that among the earliest Christians "it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving" (*Institutes* 4.14.44).

Accordingly, our Directory for Worship says, "The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated as a regular part of the Service for the Lord's Day, preceded by the proclamation of the Word, in the gathering of the people of God. When local circumstances call for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated less frequently, the session may approve other schedules for celebration, in no case less than quarterly" (*Book of Order*, W-3.0409).

Many congregations currently celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of the month. While this represents a significant improvement over the quarterly services of previous generations, it is a curious pattern—one without much biblical, theological, or historical grounding. A stronger case can be made for celebrating the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day, as a feast with the risen Christ. After all, the Gospels don't tell us that Jesus rose from the dead on the first Sunday of the month but on the first day of the week.

Granted, local circumstances may make this pattern of celebration difficult. Some congregations have a hard time finding and retaining leaders who are ordained and equipped to preside at Table. Thus the Directory for Worship continues, "If the Lord's Supper is celebrated less frequently than on each Lord's Day, public notice is to be given at least one week in advance so that all may prepare to receive the Sacrament" (W-3.0409).

35 Won't weekly Communion be less special?

Yes and no.

On the one hand, seeing the Lord's Supper as something less "special"—as in occasional, unusual, or out of the ordinary—would be a good thing for many congregations. The celebration of the Eucharist is supposed to be one of the defining features of Christian life and marks of the church. For many Christians around the world and throughout much of our history this has been the case. We ought to experience the Lord's Supper as an ordinary feature of the Service for the Lord's Day, an integral part of what we do when we gather for worship in Jesus' name.

On the other hand, the practice of celebrating the Eucharist on a regular basis will help us to appreciate how truly special it is—a feast of gratitude for the grace of Jesus Christ, an offering of nourishment from the love of God, and an experience of communion in the Holy Spirit. If we really understood and appreciated what a gift Christ has given us in the Lord's Supper, we would want to gather for this meal as often as possible!

Think of the manna God showered upon the people of Israel each day as they journeyed through the wilderness. On one hand, a thing so simple, so ordinary—daily bread, a fine flaky substance as common as the morning dew; on the other, a thing so amazing, so extraordinary—bread from heaven, the life-saving, life-sustaining grace and providence of God. This is what the Lord's Supper should be, and indeed what it becomes for those who make this meal a regular part of the practice of worship.

36 Does the Communion liturgy have to be so long?

Not necessarily. With a little planning and coordination (as should be the norm in any service, right?) the liturgy for the Lord's Supper can be relatively simple and succinct.

As congregations are celebrating the Eucharist more frequently, it isn't necessary for the Great Thanksgiving to cover the whole story of salvation in every service. Eucharistic prayers may focus on the stories and themes of the texts for the day, the seasons and festivals of the Christian year, and the particular celebrations and concerns of the community of faith. Recent service books such as the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* offer many models for eucharistic prayers that have a strong Trinitarian structure, theological content, and biblical imagery—even with fewer words.

At the same time, congregations should celebrate the Eucharist in a way that is unapologetically rich and full, a feast of God's grace. Everyone has a part to play in such celebration. Musicians can lead lively, engaging congregational songs to draw worshipers into the celebration of this joyful meal. Pastors can preside at the table with gestures that embody "great thanksgiving" and fervent prayer. Communion servers can share the bread and cup in a way that conveys the deep love and humble service of Christ. Worshipers can devote themselves to the contemplation of the great mystery of our faith.

In planning for a complete and concise Service for the Lord's Day, it helps to have a clear sense of the big picture and overall flow of the order of worship. Think of the Word as the first half of the service, beginning with the gathering, and the Eucharist as the second half, concluding with the sending. Then pace and proportion the various elements of the liturgy accordingly. Worship planners might find other ways to trim time from the service—eliminating unnecessary announcements, avoiding long explanations of the liturgy, and eschewing ornamental elements that don't serve to promote the people's participation in prayer and praise.

And if the service runs a little longer than usual, what's so wrong with that? Time in the presence of God and the communion of saints—preparing for an eternity of worship around God's throne—is time well spent. Worshipers might be a little late for lunch, but they'll be a little early for the heavenly banquet to come.