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John Calvin on the Lord's Supper: Food, Rest, and Healing for Shivering Souls

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Abstract This article explores how the Lord's Supper may contribute to the healing of traumatized persons. Drawing on the 1541 French edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and on contemporary literature on trauma, I suggest that individuals who have experienced traumatic events may find in the Lord's Supper a trustworthy and nourishing relational home, a therapeutic space for truth-telling, and a life-sustaining absolutism.

Keywords John Calvin · Lord's Supper · Trauma · Relational home · Sustaining absolutisms

In my years as a minister in the Presbyterian Church of Mexico, I became increasingly interested in the pastoral function of the Lord's Supper. Two elements in my childhood contributed to this interest. The first was the experience of exclusion from the Lord's Supper emphasized by the moralistic tone associated with the ritual and the alleged symbolic nature of the sacrament, and the second was my own history of eating that was quite distinct from how I was seeing the Lord's Supper being portrayed. These experiences were disturbing and at times shameful. I recount these stories here because I am convinced that our specific sources of shame in childhood can help us discover our sense of vocation later in life (Dykstra 2007, p. 72). In this case, my call to explore the Lord's Supper as a source of healing for people who have experienced traumatic events is rooted in the shameful and perplexing experiences of my childhood.

As a child, I was not allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper because, according to my church, I was "too young to understand its meaning." Although I could not partake of the bread and wine, I was allowed to witness the celebration of the sacrament. What I saw didn't seem to match what the sacrament was meant to be; "something," I felt, wasn't quite right in those celebrations. The emphasis of the "celebrations" was usually placed on remembering the death of Jesus, and, for me as a child, this was deeply conflicting; after all, how could I remember an event that I had not witnessed? And why would we celebrate death? I was also

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perplexed by the fact that the celebration of the sacrament was permeated by a sense of lugubriousness evoked by the body language of the celebrants, their impeccable black outfits, and their tone of voice.

Another aspect of the understanding of the Lord's Supper that conflicted with my twelve-year-old's faith was the moralistic and judgmental approach to the sacrament. To this day, I remember the voice of the minister intoning 1 Corinthians 11:27–29: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and the blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."[1]

In my church context, the prevalent interpretation of this text was that to be worthy or to partake of the sacrament, one had to be "without sin." Moreover, I was deeply perplexed by the possibility of failing to "discern" (in itself quite an obscure concept for a child) the body of Christ and by the idea of eating and drinking judgment against myself if I did not behave correctly.

I also began thinking about the minister's insistence on the symbolic nature of the sacrament. The bread and the grape juice were *only symbols* of the body and blood of Christ, an emphasis that sought to differentiate the beliefs of my conservative Presbyterian church from the doctrine of transubstantiation maintained by the Roman Catholic tradition.

The second element of my early life that contributed to my deep interest in the pastoral function of the Lord's Supper is my eating history. Everyone has an eating history, and, to an extent, these histories have a significant impact on how we eat later in life and how we interpret the relationship of food to other aspects of our life, including the social, the ethical, and the spiritual. It is important to remember, however, that not everyone has access to food. According to the World Food Programme, there are 842 million hungry people in the world (WFP 2014). The eating histories of these people are marked by emptiness, malnourishment, preventable diseases, and, very often, hunger-related death. As I think of the trauma of hunger in so many lives, I am moved to recognize that it is a privilege to be able to claim and reflect on my eating history.

As a child, I was privileged to have a mother who meticulously and tirelessly sought to feed her children. She had the habit of cooking from scratch every day; she seldom offered leftovers, and she always sought to provide food that was not only nutritious but tasty. Even when she took a full-time job, she kept up those standards. I remember that every evening, while I did homework, she prepared the meal for the next day. Not surprisingly, the word "supper" for me bears connotations of abundance, nutrition, and tastiness. When, as a twelve-year-old, I began partaking of the Lord's *Supper,* the claim that the bread and the wine were *only symbols* did not match my understanding of what a supper was meant to be. Just as my mother would never have offered mere symbols at suppertime, I began to think that Jesus really meant to *feed* and *nurture* his children. This insight led me in later years to study more intentionally the theological and pastoral dimensions of the Lord's Supper. This article is a token of that reflective process.

Jesus Christ: Giver and sustainer of life

One of the core elements of pastoral theology is God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the giver and sustainer of life. Jesus' life-giving vocation is clearly expressed in John 10:10: "The thief

[1] All biblical citations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Rudolf Schnackenburg (1980) explains that abundant life does not "signify post-mortal life . . . as opposed to the life that Jesus bestows on us here; on the contrary, it stands for the last-mentioned life considered in its indestructible power that survives beyond bodily death" (p. 293). In this sense, he explains, the kind of life that Jesus offers is eschatological life (p. 293). In other words, those who receive abundant life live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet," between God's redemptive work in the present and the completion of redemption in the fullness of time.

But as all living creatures know, no life is possible without food. In several places in the Gospel of John, the fullness of life that proceeds from God is illustrated through metaphors of nurturance: a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (4:14), the bread of life that satisfies hunger forever (6:48), the pasture offered to the sheep who come in through the gate (10:9), and the true vine through which bearing fruit is made possible (15:1, 4). Of these metaphors, the most significant for the purposes of this article is the bread metaphor. The overall interpretation of the bread discourse (John 6:26–58) and its Eucharistic application throughout history has been varied and prone to change (Schnackenburg 1980, p. 65). A study of the history of interpretation of the bread discourse is beyond the purposes of this article. What is most significant for my understanding of pastoral theology and the Lord's Supper is that by referring to the "flesh" and "blood" of the Son of Man, the Johannine community was recalling "the fleshly existence and death of Jesus" and was proclaiming that although "he lives on as the heavenly Son of man," Jesus also "remains present to his community" (Schnackenburg 1980, p. 69). Schnackenburg adds: "The most important thing is the sacramental function of the meal, to make available the flesh and blood of Jesus as a food which gives life, 'real food and real drink' . . . and bring about union with himself, the giver of life who lives by the Father . . ." (p. 69).

A core element of pastoral theology is God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the giver and sustainer of life. Because in Communion the flesh and blood are given as the source of life, there is, consequently, an intimate connection between pastoral theology and the Lord's Supper. Indeed, as Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger (2011) explains, "The pastoral care of the community finds its final locus in ritual, psalm, and song, in worship and the mystery of the Lord's Supper" (p. 24). But as we participate in this final embodiment of care, we are also reminded that our souls as Christians "are indelibly stamped with the unbearable sorrow of this man, Jesus" (Hunsinger 2011, p. 1). The Lord's Supper proclaims the joy of the resurrection and the hope of Jesus' second coming, but it also affirms his crucifixion and death. In this respect, as Hunsinger explains, "Traumatic loss lies at the very heart of the Christian imagination" (p. 1).

My purpose in this article is to reflect on how the Lord's Supper may contribute to the healing of traumatized persons. "While ministry cannot replace the work of psychiatry or psychotherapy, it can nevertheless function as an indispensable part of the healing process" (Hunsinger 2011, p. 21). Drawing upon my experience as a Reformed minister, I believe that John Calvin's approach to the Lord's Supper offers an adequate theological and pastoral framework that may contribute to the healing of traumatized persons. But because Calvin knew and confessed that no human being is the owner of absolute truth, he was open to learning from the insights and discoveries not only of other theologians but of people in other fields of human knowledge. In this respect, Calvin's theology lends support to an interdisciplinary study of a human concern, in this case, the care of traumatized individuals.

Calvin and his pastoral approach to communion

In this section, I seek to develop an interpretative framework to support my argument that the Lord's Supper can significantly contribute to the healing of traumatized persons. In my approach to Calvin in this article, I will predominantly use the English translation of the 1541 French edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* According to the translator, Elsie Anne McKee, the 1541 French edition "was more than a translation of the Latin 1539; it was a text of *pastoral theology* in the language of the common people and consciously directed to them" (2009, p. x, emphasis added). Given the purpose of this article, it makes sense to choose a book whose original focus was pastoral.

Calvin knew that it was impossible to comprehend God. Human efforts to understand divine mysteries were for him mere approximations. When it came to the Lord's Supper, the young Calvin confessed his inability to understand it. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper was a mystery and always remained so:

> That is why if it is well known that the communication in question goes beyond what they say, let us deal in a few words with how far it extends —if it is permissible to grasp in words such a great mystery, which I see well that I can never comprehend in my spirit! I willingly confess that, so that no one may measure the greatness of this mystery by my words, which are so weak that they fall much below it. Rather on the contrary I exhort my readers not to confine their sense in such narrow limits, but to strive to mount higher than I can lead them. For whenever it is a question of this matter, after I have tried to say everything about it, I see well that what I say does not come anywhere close to the greatness of the subject. Although the mind has more ability to think and believe than the tongue to express, nevertheless the mind itself is overcome and crushed by such grandeur. That is why there remains to me at the end nothing but to fall down in wonder at this mystery, which the mind cannot rightly suffice to understand, as the tongue is also not able to explain it. (Calvin 2009, p. 554)

Despite his failure to "come anywhere close to the greatness of this subject," Calvin did not give up. Throughout his life, he continued to explore the mystery of the sacrament and to "fall down in wonder" as he reflected more on its greatness. But because he believed his approach was quite weak in comparison to the greatness of the mystery, he invited his readers to make an effort to go beyond his "narrow limits" and "to strive to mount higher" than he could lead them. Calvin's invitation is not a mere exercise in humility or a politically correct disclaimer. Rather, I understand his invitation as a genuine acknowledgment of every believer's Spirit-given capacity to explore the divine mysteries. This essay is a response to the invitation to continue reflecting on the greatness of the mystery of the Lord's Supper and, more specifically, on how this sacrament may be a source of healing to those who have experienced traumatic events.

In his efforts to explain the mystery of the Lord's Supper to his French readers, Calvin spoke of "two vices" against which believers must guard themselves: "One is that, in diminishing the signs too much, people separate them from the mysteries to which they are in some way joined, and consequently lower the efficacy. The other vice is that, in magnifying the signs beyond measure, they obscure the inward power" (Calvin 2009, p. 553). The first vice occurs, for example, when the bread and wine are reduced to mere symbols or representations of the Christian faith. This was the kind of approach that was prevalent in my home church and, I suspect, continues to be a frequent way of understanding the Lord's Supper, even within Reformed churches. The second "vice," of course, is an allusion to the dogma of transubstantiation, a doctrine that Calvin critiqued harshly: "We must not imagine this communication to be the way the sophists have dreamed: as if the body of Christ descended onto the table and were set there in local presence to be touched with hands, chewed with teeth, and swallowed up in the stomach" (p. 556). But although Calvin denied that the bread and the wine were literally the body and blood of Christ, he also maintained that in the Lord's Supper believers experience an authentic communication with the body of Christ.

Calvin believed that in the Lord's Supper, believers are offered not only the signs of the body and blood of Christ but also their substance: "For unless someone wants to call God a deceiver, he will not dare say that He offers a vain and empty sign of his truth. . . . For to what purpose would our Lord put in our hands the sign of His body except to make us certain of true participation in it?" (Calvin 2009, p. 557). For Calvin, then, the bread and the wine remain bread and wine, but at the same time, believers receive the body: "in taking the sign of the body, we likewise receive the body" (p. 557). How did Calvin resolve this apparent contradiction? How can the bread be *bread* and also be the *body* of Christ?

Consistent with his pneumatological understanding of the Christian faith, Calvin resolved the apparent contradiction between symbol and true participation by pointing to the work of the Holy Spirit as the one who brings together the visible sign and the invisible thing:

> Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such greatdistance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith receive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space. (Calvin 1960, p. 1370)

In this way, while the bread and wine remain bread and wine, the Holy Spirit, by means of these symbols, offers true communication with the body of Christ. According to the English translation of the French edition, the Holy Spirit "is like a channel by which all that Christ is and possesses comes down to us" (Calvin 2009, p. 556). And to illustrate his point, Calvin compared the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the function of the sun: "For if with our eyes we perceive that when the sun shines on the earth it somehow sends its substance by its rays to engender, nourish, and bring to life the earth's fruits, why would the light and brilliance of the Spirit of Jesus Christ be less able to bring us the communication of His flesh and blood?" (p. 556).

So far I have explained that for Calvin the Lord's Supper implied a true and spiritual communication with the flesh and body of Christ. But how did Calvin understand the consequences of this encounter? What was at stake for Calvin's readers in embracing the sacrament as he understood it? On this point, as in so many others in his theological work, Calvin followed the testimony of Scripture. In a direct reference to John 6:54–55, Calvin (2009) explained that in the sacrament "his flesh is truly food and His blood truly drink, and that both are the substance to nourish the faithful in eternal life" (p. 555). In other words, the Lord's Supper is truly a supper; it is a *nourishing* event. By partaking of the Lord's Supper we are nourished "in the indubitable confidence of eternal life," but we are also "assured of the immortality of our flesh, which has already been vivified by the immortal flesh of Jesus Christ and communicates in some way in His immortality" (p. 561). This is, I believe, a particularly significant affirmation for pastoral care. Although Calvin understood the Lord's Supper as a spiritual banquet, that is, as food for the soul, he explained here that the fruits of this banquet vivify not only the soul but "our flesh." "In some way," even our bodies communicate in the immortal flesh of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, what was at stake for Calvin and for his readers, and what is at stake for us as well, is not some form of post-mortal life but life in its fullness, here and now. Recognizing that "His body and blood have been made ours is to possess the whole Jesus Christ crucified and to be participants *of all His good things*" (p. 549, emphasis added).

Through the power of Holy Spirit, the Lord's Supper is a truly nourishing banquet. True participation in Christ allows for a transformative experience at many levels. Calvin (2009) explains:

> This is the exchange which He has made with us by His infinite goodness: that in receiving our poverty He has transferred to us His riches; in bearing our weakness He has confirmed us in His power; in taking our mortality, He has made His immortality ours; in coming down to earth He has opened a way to heaven; in making Himself Son of man, He has made us children of God. (p. 547)

In Christ, the poor become rich, the weak are strengthened, and death is conquered. In short, a new world order is founded upon the Lord's Table. At the core of this new order is the call to radical responsibility for the lives of our brothers and sisters: "For whenever we communicate in the sign of the body of the Lord, we mutually obligate ourselves to each other as if by contract, for all the duties of love/charity, so that none of us may do anything by which he may wound his brother, or omit anything by which he can help or assist him whenever necessity requires that" (p. 568). The Lord's Supper is a call to care for our brothers and sisters, *as if by contract*. Let us now explore some ways in which the Lord's Supper may help us fulfill this call as we seek to contribute to the healing of people who have experienced traumatic events.

Trauma and common shock

Although the Greek word for trauma refers to a physical wound, "contemporary trauma studies have extended its application to the mind and the emotions, focusing on the effects of violence on our vast interior worlds" (Jones 2009, p. 12). The word "trauma," then, is used to describe "an extremely distressing and harrowing personal or communal experience that exceeds our normal abilities to cope" (Van den Blink 2008, p. 31). Thus, a traumatic event can be defined as "one in which a person or persons perceives themselves or others as threatened by an external force that seeks to annihilate them and against which they are unable to resist and which overwhelms their capacity to hope" (Jones 2009, p. 13). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5;* American Psychiatric Association 2013), traumatic events include exposure to war, threatened or actual physical assault, threatened or actual sexual violence, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attacks, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war, natural or human-made disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents (p. 274).

It is important to underscore that not everyone responds in the same way to this kind of event. Hunsinger (2011) explains that "the nature of the triggering event in and of itself does not guarantee a traumatic reaction" (p. 12). And then she adds, "One person may experience the event as traumatic while her neighbor, friend or daughter having the exact same experience may find it stressful, but not traumatic" (p. 12). The meaning of a potentially traumatic event "will be different for each person because our way of making narrative sense of our lives is utterly unique" (p. 12). Furthermore, whether a situation is merely stressful or traumatic for a person or a group of people will also depend on factors such as age, previous history, the quality of support available, genetic makeup, and spirituality (Yoder 2005, p. 11).

Hunsinger (2011) posits that recognizing and respecting the inner constituency of each person is fundamental for effective pastoral care (p. 12). Failure to do so can lead the caregiver to dismiss or judge the person's experience and thus inflict further damage. Referring to the tendency to minimize or discount the anguish of others, Hunsinger explains:

> Wanting those they love to be whole, they try to encourage them by rationally explaining why they should not be upset by so small a thing. Yet there is little that so completely obstructs the healing process as having someone offer the free advice to "get over it" or "put it behind" them. While such mechanisms—denial and minimization—on the part of friends or caregivers are understandable as human reactions to pain in those they love, they only injure the traumatized further, perhaps to the point of shaming them into silence and truly unbearable isolation. (p. 12)

The significance of this point for competent pastoral care cannot be overestimated. Families, friends, and caregivers are called to respectfully attend to the way a person experiences a particular event in her life. Carol Yoder (2005) offers a crucial rule of thumb for caregivers: "*a traumatic reaction needs to be treated as valid, regardless of how the event that induced it appears to anyone else*" (p. 11).

Although not all people exposed to horrible events experience them as traumatic, there is a sense in which most, if not all people, are affected in one way or another by traumatic events. Kaethe Weingarten (2003) has coined the term "common shock" to refer to the pervasiveness of everyday experiences of "violence and violation": "It is common because it happens all the time, to everyone in any community. It is a shock because, regardless of our response—spaciness, distress, bravado—it affects our mind, body, and spirit" (pp. 3–4). Weingarten contends that experiences of violence and violation include not only the victim and the perpetrator but also the bystander or witness (p. 22). In witnessing violence and violation, a frequent reaction is to "respond as if coated with Teflon," but Weingarten introduces the concept of "compassionate witnessing" to describe a constructive kind of witnessing that is actively chosen and that seeks to transform everyday violence (pp. 4, 22). The eucharistic community, of course, has been called to incarnate this paradigm of compassionate witnessing.

The Lord's Supper and healing: Three insights

Based on my previous presentation of John Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper and drawing on various theorists from the field of psychology, I suggest three ways in which the Lord' Supper can contribute to the healing of traumatized persons. In Communion, a person who has experienced a traumatic event is offered (1) a trustworthy and nourishing relational home, (2) a therapeutic space for truth-telling, and (3) a life-sustaining absolutism.

A trustworthy and nourishing relational home

According to psychoanalyst and philosopher Robert D. Stolorow (2007), trauma is essentially "an experience of unbearable affect" (p. 9). However, "an affect state cannot be explained solely, or even primarily, on the basis of the quantity or intensity of the painful feelings evoked by an injurious event" (p. 10). Rather, "trauma is constituted in an intersubjective context in which severe emotional pain cannot find a *relational home* in which it can be held" (p. 10, emphasis added). Speaking of the injurious experiences of children, Stolorow emphasizes that pain per se is not pathological; rather, "it is the absence of adequate attunement and responsiveness to the child's emotional reactions that renders them unendurable and thus a source of traumatic stress and psychopathology" (p. 10).

Ministers can offer adequate attunement and responsiveness to trauma survivors. In other words, they can provide such a relational home: "Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ who are rooted and grounded in the love of God provide . . . a relational home for all those who groan for the redemption of the world. They offer a steady, sturdy, compassionate, and loving witness to all who have suffered trauma" (Hunsinger 2011, p. 23). Although the work of ministers is not confined to worship, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments often constitute the foundations of further relationships with parishioners. An idea shared from the pulpit, a prayer, or a particular way of administering the sacraments can encourage parishioners to seek a counseling relationship with the pastor.

The Lord's Supper has a unique potential to establish a relational home because it affirms in the participant that sense of trust and satisfaction that characterizes the first stages of human development. According to Erik Erikson's life-cycle theory, as a result of the experiences of the first year of life, the infant develops a sense of basic trust (1968, p. 96). "Trust," he explains, is "an essential trustfulness of others as well as a fundamental sense of one's own trustworthiness" (p. 96). The development of this sense of trust is highly dependent on the mother's attitude toward the child during her pregnancy and delivery and on her personal and her community's approach to nursing and caring (p. 98). Erikson (1963) explains that each developmental stage has "a special relation to one of the basic elements of society" (p. 250). Interestingly, according to Erikson the first stage of life has a special relation with institutionalized religion:

> The parental faith which supports the trust emerging in the newborn, has throughout history sought its institutional safeguard . . . in organized religion. Trust born of care is, in fact, the touchstone of the actuality of a given religion. All religions have in common *the periodical childlike surrender to a Provider* or providers who dispense earthly fortune as well as spiritual health. (p. 250, emphasis added)

In the case of the Christian tradition, participation in the Lord's Supper can be an expression of this "periodical childlike surrender to a Provider." But because the first stage of life is an *incorporative stage* (Erikson 1968, p. 98), eating in a religious context seems particularly relevant to the actualization of trust. It is here that I find a significant connection with John Calvin's sacramental theology. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper is more than an act of remembrance. It is a truly *nourishing* event; it is, to put it in Erikson's schema, an *incorporative* event. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, all the "good things" of Jesus Christ are incorporated into our very being. In eating bread and drinking wine, believers meet their Provider, a God who adopts but also sustains. At the Table, believers meet the mother-like Jesus who offers suppers in upper rooms and breakfasts at the shore. According to Judith Herman (1997), establishing safety is the central task of the first stage of recovering from traumatic syndromes (p. 155). The Lord's Supper, by providing a trustworthy and nourishing relational home, can contribute to meeting this core need.

I find an illustration of the sacrament as relational home in the story of the Emmaus incident. According to Luke 24, Jesus joins two disciples who are walking toward Emmaus, but they do not recognize him. Jones (2009) refers to these disciples as trauma survivors:

"Even though they were not themselves tortured and nailed to a cross, they bear in their speech and their bodies the reality of the horror that unfolded before them and forever pulled their lives into its drama" (p. 39). The disciples only recognize Jesus when he *takes*, *blesses*, and *breaks* the bread (24:30), actions that echo the Last Supper (22:19). As Jones puts it, "this is no escapist meal of commodified junk food . . . it is a meal that nourishes and strengthens" (p. 40). For Cleopas and his companion, this eucharistic meal became a nourishing relational home, a safe space where their severe emotional pain was held.

A therapeutic space for truth-telling

In addition to offering a trustworthy and nourishing relational home, I am persuaded that the Lord's Supper offers a therapeutic space for truth-telling. As Herman (1997) explains, the second stage of recovery for survivors of trauma is telling the story of the trauma (p. 175). Reconstructing the story "actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (p. 175). In this context, the work of the therapist is to become a witness "in whose presence the survivor can speak of the unspeakable" (p. 175). Speaking the unspeakable is a crucial step toward healing; as Herman puts it, "the fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling" (p. 181).

Reflecting on Herman's work and on Calvin's approach to the Psalms, Jones (2009) notes that in prayer "one tells God the tale of one's trauma, a tale that is often impossible to tell, at least initially, in the language of everyday experience" (p. 54). Jones explains that for Calvin, God becomes a witness to one's story, "in all its messy and inarticulate indeterminacy" (p. 54). Furthermore, Jones argues that Calvin (like Herman) believed that the "dynamic of testifying and witnessing" has the power to transform a person's story (p. 54).

Along with prayer, the Lord's Supper offers a therapeutic space for truth-telling. Like a parent who opens her heart to listen to the joys and sadnesses of her children during supper, the Lord's Table is an intimate and trustworthy space for truth-telling. The power of the sacrament to hold our stories rests on God's radical principle of welcoming commensality. Calvin was critical of those who invoked the concept of worthiness (1 Cor. 11:27) to exclude people from the sacrament:

> Desiring to dispose people to the seriousness of taking the sacrament, some people have troubled and tormented poor consciences and still not taught anything of what is necessary. They have said: "Those who are in a state of grace eat the sacrament worthily," and they have interpreted "being in a state of grace" as being clean and purified of every sin. By that teaching all people who have ever been and all who are now on earth are excluded from the use of this sacrament, for if it is a question of finding our worthiness in ourselves, it is all over for us! We can only have destruction and confusion in ourselves. (Calvin 2009, p. 565)

For Calvin, the Lord's Supper is a radically welcoming space precisely for those who feel confused and nearly dead. "These holy foods," he explains, "are medicine for the sick, comfort for sinners, alms for the poor" (p. 566). Communion is an invitation to remember the story of Jesus Christ, and along with that story, to remember our own stories of violence and violation; it is an invitation for truth-telling and mourning, and in the power of the resurrection, a proclamation of God's transformative power.

Jones (2009) offers an illustration of how the sacrament may become a space for truth-telling and mourning. She presents the case of Leah, a woman who had experienced different forms of violence and violation, including sexual abuse by her own father and rape by a supposed friend (p. 5). When during a worship service Leah heard the words of institution of the Lord's Supper, Leah's body grew rigid, and she finally slid out of the pew and left the sanctuary (p. 4). The idea of the brokenness of Jesus' body triggered Leah's own experiences of brokenness throughout her life. In a later meeting with Jones, Leah explained:

> It happens to me, sometimes. I'm listening to the pastor, thinking about God and love, when suddenly I hear or see something, and it's as if a button gets pushed inside of me. . . . Last week it was the part about Jesus' blood and body. There was a flash in my head, and I couldn't tell the difference between Jesus and me, and then I saw blood everywhere, and broken body parts and got so afraid I just disappeared. (p. 7)

As Jones puts it, Leah's whole self "still held within it the shock waves of the violence she had known for so many years" (p. 5). What I find most significant about this story is that Jones, having witnessed what happened in that worship service, refused to respond "as if coated with Teflon" and instead sought to become a compassionate witness to Leah. In her awareness of the situation, Jones fostered a safe space that helped Leah tell her story. In her compassionate witnessing, Jones moved "toward, not away from" the source of her distress and anxiety (Weingarten 2003, p. 167). Interestingly, in her efforts to connect with Leah at a deeper level, Jones was also able to come to a place of greater self-understanding. In listening to Leah's story, she also learned more about her own experiences of trauma and the pervasiveness of trauma in those around her. Through this experience of compassionate witnessing, Jones' own approach to worship was transformed:

> The next week I arrived at church, late again, and was happy to see Leah already sitting in our usual pew. This morning, however, the routine felt different. . . . I tried to imagine what the songs, prayers, silences, Scripture readings, and sermon might sound like to Leah. I tried to recall what I knew of traumas in my own life, what it felt like in my body to be terrified and confused. In a new way I was also aware of the people sitting in front of and behind and what they might be thinking. Scattered around us were veterans. . . . There was a mother whose son had died from driving drunk last spring, a fourteen-year-old girl who had witnessed a drive-by shooting . . . and a father who had emigrated recently from Rwanda, a place about which he seldom spoke. And there were others, I'm sure, who had suffered violent losses, some of whom had never spoken to anyone. (p. 9)

On that Sunday, Jones was able to see "a whole congregation of shivering souls" (p. 9). She underwent what Calvin might refer to as a baptism of "'mortification and vivification,' a conversion in which one descends into hell to find life" (p. 11). This is, undoubtedly, the kind of conversion that becomes necessary for those who seek to minister to "shivering souls." It was not coincidence that Jones's attunement to other people's stories occurred during worship; after all, as Hunsinger (2011) reminds us, "the pastoral care of the community finds its final locus in ritual, psalm, and song, in worship and the mystery of the Lord's Supper" (p. 24).

A life-sustaining absolutism

Finally, I want to suggest that the Lord's Supper can help traumatized people reconnect with ordinary life. Reconnection with ordinary life is, according to Herman (1997), the third stage of the recovery process (p. 155). Herman explains: "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life" (p. 52). Because of this sense of disconnection from those *systems of care and protection that sustain life*, traumatized people end up feeling closer to the dead than to the living (p. 52). Stolorow (2007) describes these sustaining systems as "the sustaining absolutisms of everyday life": "When a person says to a friend, 'I'll see you later' or a parent says to a child at bedtime, 'I'll see you in the morning,' these are statements, like delusions, whose validity is not open for discussion. Such absolutisms are the basis of a kind of naïve realism and optimism that allow one to function in the world, experienced as stable and predictable" (p. 16). "Trauma," Stolorow explains, "shatters the absolutisms of everyday life" and plunges the traumatized person "into a form of authentic Being-toward-death and into anxiety" (p. 41).

Another absolutism that engenders the child's ability to function in the world is the parent's invitation to come and eat. Most children can rest assured that the time will come when mom or dad will say: "Time to eat!" Like a loving parent calling her children to eat, in Communion the minister issues an invitation on behalf of Jesus Christ: "Take, eat; take, drink." When, due to trauma, the mechanisms of sustenance and the absolutisms of everyday life have been shattered, the Lord's Supper continues to be served and to be available to those who feel closer to the dead than to the living.

The Lord's Supper, as Calvin understood it, is a life-sustaining absolutism. The people of God can rest assured that Jesus, even in the midst of injurious events, will invite his children to come and eat, to be nourished and sustained. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper is a spiritual banquet, but this doesn't mean that eating and drinking have no consequences for the whole self. As Karl Barth (1995) explained to his students at Göttingen, "Spiritualizing for Calvin does not mean any volatilizing" (p. 176). Partaking of the Lord's Supper can have real and concrete consequences for those who are injured. In a Presbyterian congregation in Mexico City, a parishioner, herself a physician, once assured me that having struggled with a particular disease for a long time, on a Communion Sunday she prayed that the Lord would heal her. "It is real," she told me, "the Lord healed me on that day." On numerous occasions, Calvin used the language of nourishment and the idea of transference to refer to the Lord's Supper. In one of his most eloquent metaphors, Calvin compared Christ's flesh to a fountain:

> We can better explain this by a familiar example. For the water of a fountain suffices for us to drink, to water plants, and to apply to other uses, and nevertheless the fountain does not have such an abundance in itself but receives it from the source, from which the water perpetually flows to fill the fountain so that it may never dry up. In the same way Christ's flesh is like a fountain, since it receives the life flowing down from the divinity in order to transfer it to us. (Calvin 2009, p. 555)

For Calvin, divine life is transferred to believers when they communicate in Christ's flesh and blood. For those who are injured, those who feel closer to the dead than to the living, Communion represents the possibility of becoming again a Being-toward-life. This is what is at stake in partaking of the Lord's Supper. Not surprisingly, Calvin advocated weekly celebration of Communion (p. 568).

When in the midst of unspeakable suffering one has become a Being-toward-death, Christian worship remains a source of hope and a life-sustaining absolutism. Tilda Norberg (2002), a United Methodist minister and a Gestalt psychotherapist, tells the story of how she was led to develop a special ritual to help people cope with shock and grief after the 9/11 disaster. In this context, worship, including Communion, became a life-sustaining absolutism for the participants. Norberg describes some of the fruits of the ritual of healing she implemented: "Participants reported being less anxious, more peaceful, better able to pray. A few reported they stopped having 9/11 nightmares immediately afterward. Now, alongside the horrific images, they had new images of healing and hope" (p. 116).

In a similar example, I recall how significant worship became for Christians in Mexico City in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake, a disaster that killed approximately 10,000 people. The earthquake damaged the city's public infrastructure and interrupted the supply of electricity and water, "life absolutisms" that we often take for granted. The earthquake also caused severe damage to many public buildings and churches, including the building of my home church in downtown Mexico City. In the midst of so much loss, we had also lost our worship space. Although I was only a young boy back then, I recall how grateful my congregation was when another church offered to share its sanctuary with us. In the aftermath of the earthquake, prayer, Scripture, and the eucharistic fellowship of the people of God sustained our faith. Indeed, Christ was still with us, inviting us to come, eat, drink, and hope.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the Lord's Supper can contribute in several ways to the healing of people who have experienced traumatic events. As I pointed out, Communion, like other forms of ministry, cannot replace the work of psychiatry or psychotherapy. After all, from a Reformed point of view, the Spirit is present not only in the mystery of the sacraments but also in the work of therapists, counselors, and other health professionals. But insofar as this article is written from the perspective of a pastoral theologian, I will conclude by offering a few remarks on what might be necessary in order to incorporate more intentionally into the life of Christian congregations the healing power of the Lord's Supper.

First, I would insist, as Calvin did, that believers would benefit greatly from celebrating the sacrament every Sunday. According to Barth (1963), attempts to substitute the sacrament by various means become "palliative measures . . . bound to fail because they do not touch the real issue" (p. 25). For Barth, as for Calvin, what was needed was the sacrament every Sunday; "this," he said, "would indeed be '*recte administrare sacramentum et pure docere evangelium*' [the right administration of the sacraments and the pure preaching of the Gospel]" (p. 25).

Second, churches in some contexts would need to worry less about the forms and more about emphasizing the fundamental nourishing nature of the Lord's Supper. According to Ronald P. Byars (2000), one of the reasons for the infrequent celebration of Communion is a sense of anxiety about the mechanics: "Something that has to be learned all over again nearly every time requires us to pay too much attention to the details. The nourishment offered becomes obscured by fussing over the how-tos" (p. 45). Some Christian traditions have found ways of simplifying the mechanics without jeopardizing the dignity or the meaning of the sacrament. Others are discovering or rediscovering ways of affirming the centrality of the Lord's Supper to the life of the church. Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example, 1001 New Worship Communities, a movement that is seeking to develop new worshiping communities "using new and varied forms of church," seems to be reclaiming, in its definition and practice of worship, the nourishing dimension of Christ's spiritual presence in the Lord's Supper (NWC 2016. In *Come and See: Presbyterian Congregations Celebrating Weekly Communion*, Byars (2014) offers the testimonies of a few congregations that are celebrating weekly Communion. He posits that Holy Communion is the greatest among those practices in the "storehouse of treasures" of the Presbyterian tradition (p. xiv).

Finally, reclaiming the healing power of the Lord's Supper points to the need to revise and reform, when necessary, liturgical formulas in order to convey more clearly and explicitly the ways in which the Lord's Supper can bring healing to those who are suffering.[2] Calvin (2009) insisted that an important element of the administration of the Lord's Supper is declaring the promises of the sacrament: "We should offer the Supper of our Lord to the assembly of Christians at least one a week, and *the promises in the Supper which feed and nourish us spiritually ought to be declared*" (p. 568, emphasis added). Christian ministers have the incomparable privilege of declaring God's promises of nourishment, sustenance, forgiveness, healing, and providence to their congregations of shivering souls.

Ministers who are exploring liturgical formulas to declare these promises can rest in the creative presence of the Spirit in themselves and in those who have come before them. Indeed, numerous Eucharistic prayers, meditations, and hymns tell the stories of those who have found healing at the Lord's Table. This is the case, for example, with the hymn "O Living Bread from Heaven," written by the German poet Johann Rist (1606–67) and translated by Catherine Winkworth (1829–78):

O living Bread from heaven,
How well you feed your guest!
The gifts that you have given
Have filled my heart with rest.
Oh, wondrous food of blessing,
Oh, cup that heals our woes!
My heart, this gift possessing,
With praises overflows.

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[2] For an example of a Lord's Supper liturgy for survivors of trauma, see Prey-Harbaugh (2004, pp. 44–49).

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