

HOW THE MEAL
JESUS GAVE
TRANSFORMS LIVES

*The Hunger
Inside*



BRAD ROTH



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The Hunger Inside: How the Meal Jesus Gave Transforms Lives

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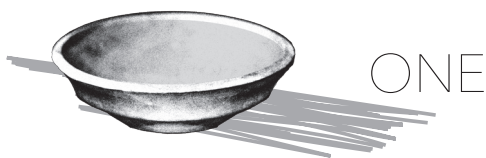
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Contents

ONE	<i>We Who Are Nothingness Can Never Be Filled</i>	5
TWO	<i>Rediscovering the Sacramental Universe</i>	24
THREE	<i>Reclaiming the Sacrifice of the Lord's Table</i>	44
FOUR	<i>Encountering the Real Presence of Christ</i>	65
FIVE	<i>Eating with God</i>	86
SIX	<i>Breaking Bread in the Storm</i>	108
SEVEN	<i>Remembering Jesus</i>	125
EIGHT	<i>The Nature of Christian Communion</i>	144
NINE	<i>Anticipating the Marriage Supper of the Lamb</i>	166
TEN	<i>Ite Missa Est</i>	185
	Acknowledgments	208
	Notes	209



We Who Are Nothingness Can Never Be Filled

I've been hungry my whole life.

I didn't know what I was hungry for at first. It was a restlessness, a desire, a longing. I was hungry for the usual goods: success, love, non-shaky finances. Sugar, salt, and fat pushed all my buttons.

And yet, I knew that what I hungered for wasn't food. I've mostly enjoyed three square meals a day—five during my teenage years. Something else gnawed on me. Like Augustine of Hippo, I discovered somewhere along the way that my “real hunger was inside me.”¹

Mine was a hunger for Jesus, the risen Lord of the Gospels who found me when I was a child, tugged me through the waters of baptism when I was sixteen, and after a few unoriginal bumps along the way through college, hooked me on service to his people.

My first call to ministry was in a little town in eastern Washington State. A lot of the folks who lived in our community were originally from Mexico. Once, when quizzing my Peruvian wife about her traditional foods, they were shocked to learn that tortillas weren't a staple. “You don't eat tortillas in Peru?” they asked. “Then how do you get filled?”

That's been my question: How do I get filled? The evangelical Mennonite church of my youth had a nice, neat answer: quiet time. Study the Bible and spend time quietly praying. It's not a bad answer. I love the Scripture, and prayer is vital to me. But like a lot of things we turn to in the Protestant/Anabaptist/Evangelical world, it's a bit of a spiritual kludge, a make-do that we come up with because we're missing a spiritual category. Discipleship never quite adds up. It's like we're doing math without the concept of a zero.

Somewhere along the way I discovered that what I longed for was the Lord's Supper. Communion. Eucharist. I wanted to "eat this bread and drink the cup," share the "bread of life" that leaves no one hungry (1 Corinthians 11:26; John 6:35). I hankered for the "living bread that came down from heaven," the "hidden manna" that only Jesus gives (John 6:51; Revelation 2:17). But since I had been reared on a diet of just-a-symbol cracker breads and grape juice cuplets, I didn't know that this is what I was looking for.

My tale of unsated longing would have sounded familiar to Augustine of Hippo, that examiner of human desire who found his own meandering way to Jesus and his table. Augustine the pre-teen punk famously joined his band of friends to steal his neighbor's pears—just for the savored *something* of possessing them—and then tossed those pears to the pigs.² It was Augustine's hunger that led him to Jesus. Like me—sort of. Unlike Augustine, I didn't have to make the journey from Roman paganism to Christian faith. I knew Jesus. What I hungered for was an embodied encounter with him.

Just as the disciples had on the road to Emmaus, I began to meet Jesus in "the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). No one could have been more surprised by this turn of events than me.

I completely embraced the teaching of my childhood church: the bread and cup were symbols, no more. In that last supper in that upper room, Jesus had meant to say “this bread is *like* my body. This cup is *like* my blood.” When a friend once waxed poetic about the peace he experienced when receiving the communion wafer in the Catholic Mass, I was incredulous. “What do you mean?” I asked. “It doesn’t *do* anything.”

But this isn’t a story of critique. It’s a story of discovery. My childhood church taught me to love the Bible and to love Jesus, and it was through studying the Bible that I discovered the profound centrality of the Lord’s table and began to see the bread and cup as a precious doorway to Jesus. For me, the journey has been about meeting Jesus, and I’ve met him again and again in the breaking of the bread.

Once, I had the good fortune of showing up for worship at the Anglican Cathedral in Lima, Peru, during a convention of high churchmen. They stood up front in their stoles and chasubles, with their miters and staves, and we shuffled out of the wooden pews in lines to receive the Eucharist. My line took me to the Primate of Panama, a man who brimmed with love and the Holy Spirit. “The body of Christ!” he said, placing the host on my tongue in what for me was an unfamiliar gesture. In that moment the Spirit of Jesus washed over me. I felt as if someone had blown a white dandelion puff in my face. But it wasn’t dandelion, and it was more than bread and wine. It was mercy and love. It was Jesus.

That experience in the cathedral was not the beginning or culmination of my encounter with Jesus at his table. It was a breadcrumb along the trail leading me beyond knowing about Jesus to knowing him.^{3*} Now, I want to leave that breadcrumb trail to the Lord’s table for others to discover. That’s what this book is about.

I'm convinced that we need to reclaim the centrality of the Lord's table for Christian worship and life. I'm writing because I want to lead us into a deepening understanding of the meaning of the Lord's table. I intend to do that by taking a fresh look at how God is at work through the material universe and then interacting with the abiding themes of sacrifice, communion, hospitality, thanksgiving, remembrance, real presence, marriage supper, and mission. Just as Jesus brought 5,000 loaves out of the stunning abundance of his mercy and power, so I'm convinced that the Lord's Supper continues to unfold with meaning that touches uncountable human stories (Matthew 14:13–21).

I suppose this is where, depending on where you fall on the liturgical register, you either roll your eyes or shrug. If you're a low-church type, accustomed to thinking of the bread and cup as symbols, something we celebrate because Jesus commanded it, then you may be wondering what all the fuss is about. Isn't communion just a nice visual representation of the salvation message, hardly "worthy of any more study than a Sunday School flannelgraph?"³ What more is there to say?

However, if you're accustomed to sitting in a pew with kneelers where the host is elevated to the ringing of bells after singing the *Sanctus*, then it's no stretch to claim that the eucharistic bread and cup are the "fount and apex of the whole Christian life."⁴ Tell me something I don't know.

But hear me out. I'm convinced that all of us as followers of Jesus could do well to broaden and deepen our understanding and practice of communion. Broaden through expanded teaching, preaching, and celebration of communion. Deepen through a renewed appreciation of what it means to encounter the living Christ in the elements of bread and cup. Do these two things, and I believe we'll deepen and broaden our experience of life with

Christ. We'll begin to discover God's response to our heart's truest hungers.

Hungering to Hunger, Loving to Love

In his poem "Prayer," poet John Frederick Nims writes, "We who are nothingness can never be filled." His poem reads like an indictment of human nature. We cannot be filled by conquest or treasure or surfeit of projects or love or food.⁵ History is a stumbling string of looking for fullness in all the wrong places.

Nims's sentiment would have made sense to Augustine, who wrote in the *City of God* that because God spoke creation into being from nothingness, human beings cannot find happiness within themselves or within the broader created-from-nothingness order. God is the only possible Good, and "in attaining this good they find their happiness; in losing it, they are sunk in misery."⁶ In the words of a biblical writer, human pursuits without God are merely "vanity and chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

The late, great Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann wrote that "Behind all the hunger of our life is God. All desire is finally a desire for him."⁷ Human beings are hungry beings. *Homo esuriens*. Hungry man. You can forget the *sapiens* if we haven't had breakfast.

Unmet hunger is a scandalous thing. It makes itself known. Take the Conscientious Objectors in World War II who volunteered for the famous "Minnesota Starvation Experiment." The men endured a semi-starvation diet for one year to test the effects on victims of famine. They experienced depression, apathy, and anger toward those who had enough to eat. One participant satisfied his hunger vicariously by entering a donut shop and buying dozens of donuts to hand out to children and watch them savor the treat. On concluding the study, one man had to go to

the hospital to have his stomach pumped because he had eaten too much. Others reported difficulties in feeling full.⁸

We claim our hungers. We define ourselves by our hungers. I'm a guy who likes black coffee and fried seafood and wedges of thick-crustured wheat bread sweating butter and honey. I can do without bananas. We call these things our "tastes," and I suppose that most of the time claiming our hungers like this is perfectly harmless. After all, God created the world good and all foods received in thanksgiving to the Creator are good and holy, what Schmemann called "divine love made food."⁹

But sometimes too, our hungers are disordered and lead us astray. There are the usual bugaboos—life's broad screen flickering violence and mammon, eating and drinking and being merry for tomorrow we die. Define ourselves by these hungers, and we become fanged and vampiric. Our hungers end up leading us down dangerous back alleys, and we become dangerous too, destroying and dehumanizing.

Where does such a disordered life lead? The consequences are predictable enough. Paul said simply, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Everything will be sucked into the black hole. But oh, the varied paths! Each unhappy person is unhappy in his or her own way.

Once, I visited the local Mexican grocery store in the community where I served as minister. Between the avocados and hibiscus flowers, I spotted a plexiglass case of desiccated shrimp. They were leggy, curled, and annatto-orange. I was feeling adventurous, so I bought a little bag full. At home, I popped a few in my mouth and crunched them down with a grimace. Their taste was salt. So much for my cross-palette adventuring.

Later on, a Mexican friend dropped by and spied the shrimp on our counter. "Pastor, why would you buy those?" she asked.

“Those are what guys munch on to make themselves thirstier so that they can drink more beer!”

We thirst to thirst. We hunger to hunger. We love to love. Augustine wrote, “I was in love with love. . . . My soul was in rotten health. In an ulcerous condition it thrust itself to outward things, miserably avid to be scratched by contact with the world of the senses.”¹⁰ We’ve all been there. We’ve all felt our hungers take on a life of their own and exist as their own end. We’re always at risk of becoming this ravenous thing, shaggy in our unsated hungers, avid to be scratched by contact with the world of the senses.

But if hunger can lead us astray and dehumanize us, so too hunger can draw us back to God and become the starting place for leading a more fully human life. Think of Jesus’s story in Luke 15. Misguided hungers led the prodigal out to the far country. There, he frittered away his money until he hit pig-pod bottom. He was alone, without identity or place or funds, scrounging for a future and finding only a curled, annatto-orange hunger within him. But then it was hunger that brought the prodigal son to his senses. Jesus said he “came to himself,” and the memory of the abundance of his father’s table spurred him onto the road back home (Luke 15:17).

If we can recognize the way that our hungers always point beyond themselves, beyond the supposed objects of our immediate desire, then like the prodigal we’ll start to hanker for home. We’ll look to the horizon and realize that we have been hungry for something—someone—beyond ourselves. C. S. Lewis writes, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”¹¹ And so it is. We hunger for the Father’s house and the Father’s table, but above all else we are longing for the embrace of the Father. This is why St. John Paul II wrote, “It is Jesus in fact

that you seek when you dream of happiness; He is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; He is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is He who provoked you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise.”¹²

Here’s the thing. It’s not enough to simply claim that above all else human beings hunger for God. Yes, we long for Father and far country, but it could so easily be an unrequited longing, a desire for something that is simply beyond what’s available to us. Or we could imagine that we have within ourselves the capacity to sate our hunger. Just reach out and grasp what we desire.

But that was the sin of Eden. For while we may be able to recognize our truest hunger, we cannot meet it on our own terms. What we need is never taken, only received as gift. And Jesus in his love has given humanity a means to fulfill our longings: his table.

When Jesus gave his sacred meal to his disciples, he instructed them, “Do this in memory of me.” He was granting the gift of his hunger-sating body and blood until he comes again. It was a priestly act, a moment when Jesus dusted off the priestly rights that had previously been granted to all Israelite men in the sacrifice of the Passover.¹³ Here was a new Passover, a meal fit for the Messianic age when the curtain of the Jerusalem temple would be torn (Matthew 27:51) and the bread of the presence would be available to all God’s people wherever they gathered in his name.¹⁴ In ancient days, the priests in the Temple used to bring out the bread of the presence during festivals, lift it on the golden table before the pilgrim crowd, and say, “Behold, God’s love for you!”¹⁵

And here we have Jesus, lifting that bread before his disciples in the upper room, lifting it before all people in all places and all times. *Behold, God’s love for you!* But now the bread of the presence has escaped from the genetic and geographic markers

that had brought it safe thus far. It was more than Jewish and more than Jerusalem. On that night when he was betrayed, the bread of the presence went viral.

That, of course, was Jesus's intent. The bread that he gives is the bread for the life of the world (John 6:33). Jesus took great care to design the meal so that it might bear the freight of all that came before—Passover and presence, sacrifice and sign, the covenant past tethered to the future-present promise of the fullness of the kingdom. His is a meal precision blended to feed and sustain the church. The supper would give the church its distinctive form—a form baked right into the form of the supper.

The Seal that Seals

In ancient times, bread was impressed with symbols and words using weighted clay, wood, or metal stamps. These were baker's marks, a way for local magistrates to know the loaf's provenance—and thus exercise some control over its quality and distribution.¹⁶ In Eastern Orthodox traditions, the *prosphora* bread used in the Divine Liturgy (the Orthodox equivalent of Mass or service) is still stamped today with holy words and designs that play a special role in how the bread is carved and offered in worship.¹⁷ Prosphora designs can include crosses, the names of Jesus and Mary, and engraved images of Jesus.

And so it is that like the baker's mark and the prosphora, the bread that we share at the Lord's table is sealed with the image of Christ—symbolically, if not always literally. In consuming the bread “in memory of me” we take that mark into ourselves. The bread marks us. It marks the church.

But in this case, the mark that seals the bread is the very life of Jesus. It's his cross that orients our lives toward his sacrifice. It's his resurrection that marks us out with the hope of new life.

It's his presence that imbues our hearts with the sense that "the Lord is near" (Philippians 4:5). The bread, marked with Jesus's life and taken into our bodies, marks us, setting us apart from the unbelieving world and reorienting our thoughts and wills and loves and desires toward him.

This is why Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith describes the sacred movements of Christian worship with the Lord's table at their summit—the ancient word for these movements is *liturgy*—as “pedagogies of ultimate desire.”¹⁸ The words, gestures, symbols, and spiritual presence of the Lord's table constitute potent “recalibration technologies” that serve to harness our hungers toward Jesus's good ends.¹⁹ Quite simply, as Smith puts it (and titles one of his books): “You are what you love.” It's through worship at the Lord's table that we begin to order our loves toward God. Communion makes the gospel “come alive and wriggle into our imaginations.”²⁰

This may all sound like the work of an overactive imagination. Isn't it just bread? Isn't it just a bit of grape juice? Can it really do all that?

But consider the Exodus, that foundational moment when God jailbroke his centuries-enslaved people. Their salvation began with a meal—the Passover—in which each family slaughtered a lamb and painted the lintels of their houses with its blood. And in many ways it culminated in a second meal in Exodus 24 where Moses and the leaders of Israel celebrated the newly minted covenant, tablets carried fresh from the cloud of God's mystery, by eating together on Mt. Sinai. “They beheld God, and they ate and drank” (24:11). God had prepared them for this moment, gradually weaning the people off the fleshpots of Egypt, by feeding them with coriander crusty manna (Exodus 16:3). Later writers would call that manna the “bread of angels” (Psalm 78:25). And

it was this bread of angels that did the work of reorienting God's people away from Egypt and toward God.

God still deploys this power when he feeds his people at his table. A friend tells the story of how, in her younger years, she woke up one morning in a cold sweat and with a puzzling desire to change her life. Among other things, she found herself drawn to attend church. She describes her surprise at the cumulative effect of regularly receiving communion. "This is healing me!" she realized. "It's healing me from the inside out!" Not long afterward, she married her boyfriend, who she was living with. Her life was transformed to become something of an offering to God, not least by her launching a career in social work. It was her regular and unexpectedly powerful encounter with Christ in the communion bread and cup, effusive with Jesus's presence and laden with his love, that catalyzed her life reorientation.

Just as the Lord's table has the power to recalibrate our loves toward God, so too it orients us away from certain things, choices, and paths in life. Writes Paul: "You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:21).

Thus it is that while the Lord's table has served to unite followers of Christ to one another and to Christ throughout the ages, it's also been the fission point of countless controversies. There's no getting around the fact that the unity Christians encounter at the table is a unity over-and-against.

In the scriptural understanding, to be for Christ is necessarily to take a stance against other ways of living and being in the world. It's God or mammon, light or darkness, the path that sinners tread or the Law of the Lord (Matthew 6:24; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Psalm 1:1–2). The church has understood from the beginning that if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar or the political Powers That Be or our own wayward heart *isn't*. The Lord's table encodes that

stance in myriad nonverbal ways. We might as well be honest about it.

This is why the host of convictions we're enacting at the Lord's table cannot be blithely dismissed by making reference to open versus bounded sets or thin talk of hospitality. The unitive power of the table also divides.

Division is built into the very concept of the covenant, and Jesus frames communion as a covenant meal. In the ancient biblical understanding, covenants aren't made, they're cut: *carat b'rit* "cut the covenant" in Hebrew (Genesis 15:18). What's more, the mark of the primordial Old Testament covenant, circumcision, rather pointedly requires cutting (Genesis 17:14). Making the covenant with Abram involved cutting a heifer and a goat and a ram in two (Genesis 15:9). And the consequence for turning away from the ordinances governing the covenant is to be "cut off from Israel" (Exodus 12:15).

This divine fusional/fissile power is reflected in the Old Testament Law, especially the laws around purity. Who eats with whom, and what they eat, powerfully mark the people of Israel off from the surrounding nations. This is why Paul's Gentile-inclusive angle on the gospel seemed—at least as far as the Powers That Be in Jerusalem were concerned—less like a legitimate development of the interpretation of the Law and more like a karate chop (Acts 21:28).

The early church struggled to get the balance right, and it was around the table that the battles raged fiercest. Peter ate with Gentiles. And then he didn't. And then he did again (Galatians 2:12ff). It took a meeting of the early church's brightest lights to figure out how believing Gentiles who did not obey the food laws could be brought in on the promises of a covenant determined by obedience to the food laws. Eating was a sticking point.

Witness the fact that three of the four stipulations laid down by the council—each stipulation playing a sort of recapitulative role of the Law—had to do with food (Acts 15:29). Something like the apostle Paul’s theological approach (or close enough) prevailed, and he was all too happy to broadcast the news (Acts 15:25).

Paul would go on to set the terms of the discussion for all time in 1 Corinthians 10:16–22. The cup is a sharing in Christ’s blood. The bread is a sharing in Christ’s body. That sharing is *koinonia*, a word that is translated elsewhere in the New Testament as “communion” with one another in the church (Acts 2:42). Not only that, but to share in the bread and cup is to share—as the Israelites of old—in the altar of the Lord. It’s an exclusive sharing that brooks no compromise between good and evil. For Paul, the Lord’s table orients us toward Christ, toward one another in the church, and away from the forces of evil at work within ourselves and in the world.

Paul has more to say, particularly about the sacrificial dimension of the Lord’s table. In a few short verses at the heart of 1 Corinthians he lays out a positive theology of communion that informs his responses to the varied conflicts experienced in the Corinthian church. Any of those conflicts—the role of women in leadership, the exercise of moral discernment and church discipline, economic stratification, marriage and sexuality—trace back in at least a subsidiary way to the table of the Lord.

Paul recognized that communion really is that powerful. What happens in the bread broken and the cup shared at the Lord’s table determines our allegiances, our understanding of the body, our approach to worship. That’s why it was the apostle’s lever for addressing the disparate issues in play in the Corinthian church. The Lord’s Supper is a microcosm of the church’s beliefs

and practices. Where else would he seek to deal with those issues than at the Lord's table? The renewal of the Corinthian church would begin with the renewal of their communion practices. Paul knew his business. It was a pattern that would be repeated down through the ages. Some of history's most consequential renewal movements began at the Lord's table.

Why the Next Reformation Will Be about the Table

The medieval people's renewal moment that came to be known as Anabaptism had one of its origins in a gathering at Schleithem, Switzerland. It was a lay gathering, big on commitment to Christ and dissatisfaction with the Christendom status quo, but with limited theological chops. Ex-monk Michael Sattler was the group's intellectual heavyweight. Under his guidance, the gathering generated and signed off on a terse statement of faith that became known as the "Schleithem Confession."

Formulating a confession of faith, even if it made no attempt to supplant or approach anything as comprehensive as the Apostles or Nicene Creeds, pushed the envelope for the day. They would burn you for that. And, indeed, over the course of the next several years the participants were rounded up and put to death for their theological deviance. Sattler was burned at the stake—after having his tongue cut out.

But what is often forgotten is that they kicked off their people's synod by breaking bread together. Without the aid of service books or Latin or vestments or priest, but no doubt following a lifetime of ritual muscle-memory, the group shared communion. It was a people's Mass, celebrated without any bishop's authority, but nonetheless a solemn gathering at the table of the Lord. They would burn you for that, too.

The early sacramental potential of the Anabaptist movement was quickly shed in favor of a staunch and dour commitment to church discipline and the holiness of the local gathering. Aided and abetted by Menno Simon's halfway-heretical teaching on the "pure flesh of Christ" in which Jesus came into the world by passing through Mary's womb but without taking on her humanity, the body of Christ that was the church became radically *other* in the world. Jesus was not quite incarnate, and neither was the church. In a kind of collateral damage, the body of Christ that was the bread lost its incarnational function and became instead a locus for discipline intended to create the pure church. Throw into the theological mix Reformed leader Ulrich Zwingli's insistence—which Anabaptists strangely adopted, though Zwingli did his best to kill them—that Christ was not present in the bread and cup, and the diminution of the Lord's table in Anabaptist circles was complete.

We see this in the fact that unlike Martin Luther or Thomas Cranmer, no attempt was made to revise the Mass in an Anabaptist direction. Balthasar Hubmaier, who as a former Catholic priest turned Anabaptist star would have been intimately familiar with the Mass, prepared several simple orders for the Lord's table.²¹ However, Hubmaier's orders scarcely resemble the Mass and contain none of the traditional, liturgically rich set pieces, like the *Sursum Corda* ("lift up your hearts"), *Sanctus* ("Holy, holy, holy"), or epiclesis (prayer for the Holy Spirit). Perhaps early Anabaptist leaders imagined they would take up ritual reform in their congregations once the atmosphere of persecution settled down—though Menno, also a former Catholic priest—managed to survive into old age and never did take it upon himself to write any sort of communion liturgy.

Maybe Anabaptist leaders thought the Mass was part of the problem. If the Lord's Supper can be defined along horizontal and vertical axes, with the horizontal representing the communal dimension and the vertical tracing the presence of the divine, then the spiritual descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists—including my own Mennonite tradition—inherited a view of the Lord's Supper that largely focused on maintenance of horizontal relationships within the congregation while taking a dim, sometimes even mildly dismissive, view of the presence of Christ in the ritual.²² We lost much of the vertical axis.

Many evangelical churches on the North American scene arrived at the same place by different paths. Despite the fact that the modern evangelical movement famously sprung from a massive communion service—The Cane Ridge Communion—that jump-started the Second Great Awakening, and although some streams of evangelicalism flow from traditions with a historically deep commitment to the centrality of the Lord's table (like Wesleyanism from Anglicanism), congregations in the contemporary praise and worship movement usually reject anything that smacks of formal liturgy and that might seem alien to North American culture.²³ That rejection comes from theological convictions about the nature of church, worship, and especially the Lord's table, but more importantly it has arisen out of a missionary impulse to lower boundaries to newcomers' participation.

Within evangelicalism, the Stone-Campbell or "Restoration Movement" arose out of the Second Great Awakening, and stands as a counterexample. Out of it came the Churches of God, Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Christian Church. The movement emphasized a return to the Lord's table as the ground of Christian unity. Descendants of the Stone-Campbell

revival celebrate communion weekly, though with a decidedly “low church” tone.²⁴

So too, some churches—including numerous church plants—many of them springing from the Anglican tradition, are pairing ancient liturgy with guitar-driven praise music and charismatic expressions in what is often called the “convergence movement.”²⁵ Robert Webber, the great historian of worship, famously spoke of “ancient-future worship” to describe this pairing of old and new.²⁶ Scholar Winfield Bevins has documented the growth of “neo-liturgical” churches among millennials. Writes Bevins: “What was flashy and new a generation ago feels stale and tired today. And the search for the newer and better version of Christianity is a never-ending merry-go-round.”²⁷

We may be witnessing something of a revival of attention to the Lord’s table. Weary of the deracinated and vaguely corporate ethos that sometimes prevails in large evangelical congregations, some have sought to incorporate more ancient elements into worship, like reciting the Nicene Creed and weekly communion.²⁸ Maybe we’re on the cusp of a back-to-the-roots moment in which churches that have dominated the religious marketplace are looking for ancient words and gestures to pair with the guitar band and the smoke machine. Maybe it’s the start of the next Reformation, and if the first Reformation was about claiming the primacy of the word, then maybe this new Reformation will be about restoring the centrality of the table.

Or maybe not.

Like the psalmist of old, “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me” (Psalm 131:1). Whatever may be going on in the church in this strange new world we find ourselves in, I have but two ambitions, and they are modest. Wherever you’re at, the purpose of this book is to encourage you

to go deep and go wide in your understanding and practice of communion. That's it.

I recognize that even these modest goals may be asking too much, because our various practices of communion are siloed from one another by history and reactivity. We might be open to borrowing from other traditions when it comes to ancient forms of prayer or approaches to the Scriptures—witness the ecumenical popularity of the Ignatian examen and the practice of *lectio divina*. But borrow from the communion theology or rites of another tradition and you'll find yourself in hot water.

There's a tension that's unique to communion, and it tracks even into the words that we use to speak of the rite: "Eucharist" (after the Greek word *eucharistia*, "thanksgiving"—from Jesus's words at the Last Supper, 1 Corinthians 11:24), or "Lord's Supper" (1 Corinthians 11:20), or "communion" (from *koinonia*, 1 Corinthians 10:16; Acts 2:42). Eucharist is the preferred term in "high church" traditions (Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran), while Lord's Supper prevails among more freeform worship settings (Baptists and Anabaptists and Evangelicals). Communion seems to work across the board. I'll deploy all three terms in the book, with a slight tilt toward Lord's Supper and communion. I'll also use the term "sacrament," which is a broader term that describes how God is present in and through the material world (more on that in chapter 2).

So I get it. There's not much room to maneuver.

But I'll take whatever small opening I can find to convince you that there's more to communion than you may have believed and that it's worth broadening and deepening your practice and understanding. My hope is that by hearing stories of how communion has challenged and formed and changed the lives of others you can start to see the deep power Jesus's meal holds—and perhaps be open to some of its varied and ancient expressions.

Because I think you're like me. I think you're hungry. And I think that what you're hungry for is an encounter with the living Christ.

Augustine warned that it's human nature to be confused as to the true source of happiness and the ultimate horizon of our longings. It's like not knowing the difference between a picture of bread and the loaf itself. Asks Augustine, "Could a man escape starvation by licking the painted picture of a loaf, instead of begging real bread from someone who had it to give?"²⁹ Jesus has the real bread we need to satisfy our deepest hungers. Do we believe this? I do, because meeting Jesus in my hunger at his table changed my life.