**Revitalizing the Body:**

**Inviting the Triune God to Renew Adventists’ Practice of Hospitality**

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This year I have been exploring the abundant hospitality of God as a transformative source of renewal of the Body of Christ—Christ’s Church.  Daily facing deep, ever-widening divisions in both our national politics and Church politics, I have been looking for signs of transcendence that might shake us out of our stupor as a Church graced with “all that we need” to be reconciled with “ourselves, with others, and with God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

A moment of grace came last February while I was traveling to attend a family event in Northern California. On the Sabbath before this event, I made a rare visit to Doug Bachelor’s Church with my brother, who is a member there. I elected to leave early with my brother, who was picking up a friend on the way. They had met at a bible study at my brother’s palatial house. My brother’s friend lived in government sponsored housing, due to a mental disability. He needed a ride each week in order to attend church.  As we drove the half-hour to a huge converted business complex that included a large sanctuary and adjoining classrooms, I saw that my brother was not afraid to initiate a conversation about how his companion was *really doing* dealing with his mental health challenges.  Having been given permission to open up a dialogue on this topic, the man shared of his recent psycho-social struggles. Then, at the end of the trip, in the parking lot of the church, this man shared a testimony about the miraculous way in which God got his attention and saved his life.  In this simple yet dramatic story, my brother and I heard the Good News of God even before arriving at church!

The question I want to ask today is, how do we *together* receive what we need, namely, the nourishment of God’s abundant feast of grace, so that we may become the bold and resilient Body of Christ —a body empowered to witness (in part through our unity) to God’s goodness in a world seeking hope in the midst of brokenness and polarization.  In this quest I have gone back to three theological mentors, Baptist theologians James McClendon, Jr. and Elizabeth Newman, and Anglican Christian ethicist Samuel Wells. Each of these scholars attend to ways shared practices within worshiping communities prepare disciples for the primary work of the people of God, namely, receiving their own healing (salvation) in communion with others, thereby taking part in the reconciling love of God. Following the lead of these professor-scholars, in what follows I will seek to demonstrate ways these authors illuminate a path by which SDA Religion/Theology professors might equip future leaders in church, education, and healthcare ministries with an ability to “reclaim the Body”[[2]](#footnote-2) through our shared worship and service so that we are *re-membered* as a gathered people by our gracious God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

James McClendon, Jr., in his final academic project, a three-volume set entitled, *Ethics, Doctrine,* and *Witness*, set out to remind churches within the “b”aptist tradition, including Adventists, of their central practices integral their theological renewal and witness. Throughout these volumes McClendon points to the way God grants us a redeemed identity and future as we appropriate these gifts as gathered communities that practice bible-reading and worship, along with other shared practices. McClendon also gives careful attention throughout these volumes to the integral nature of the Church’s *convictions* and its social practices that witness to the saving of power of God in Christ. McClendon’s desire to illuminate ways faithful Christians demonstrate the coherence of the Church’s witness leads me to reflect on the communion service that took place a few years ago at the ASRS meeting which our La Sierra professors led. As our gathered community participating in a shared ritual, we celebrated together the liberating power of our “one foundation”—Jesus Christ our King, and His initiation of the unity we find within our Church’s theological, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. To this end, we partook of a variety of breads symbolizing the all-sufficient, sacrificial love of God in Christ, and its power to make our multi-faceted, often fragmented Body whole again. This service was revitalizing for many of us who encountered a familiar symbolic structure, and also a disrupting or unfamiliar element through which we were able to see anew the depth and reach of God’s healing power.

At the same time this “happy” act of communication[[4]](#footnote-4) might have been limited by our readiness to “discern the Body of Christ” (I Corinthians 11:29). Reflecting on this service many times since we shared in it together, I have come to wonder if our individualist culture as a Church may have formed us into worshippers who often fail to discern the corporate body as an integral part of our salvation, which I believe was offered to us in this unique communion service. This beautiful and inspiring service did indeed highlight the unifying power of the love of Jesus Christ, while modeling liturgical competency on the part of those organizing the ritual marked by careful attention to the transformative power of Christian symbols deeply embedded in our Master Narrative.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet many of us struggled to know how to enter fully into this potentially renewing rite. Lacking habituation to expect a transformative encounter with the Spirit of Christ in such a service, we may have missed receiving the gift of God’s offering, namely, the spiritual resources needed to unify us with our brothers and sisters within the room, as well as in our wider Church, particularly those represented by our counterparts at ATS.

McClendon’s aim in part was to disabuse us of the lure of our individualist cultural assumptions and practices that prevent us from recognizing the ways God empowers and renews the Church’s faithful witness to God’s saving truth through time. His theoretical perspectives and assumptions proved to be valuable tools for this task. Anglo-American philosophy, ordinary language philosophy, speech-act, and game theories informed them. Conversing with leading thinkers in these schools of thought led McClendon to characterize *primary theology* as the churches’ *lived*, or performative way of coming to know God. What McClendon calls “primary theology” is first and foremost a *communal,* or *shared experience* of, and response to the gift of God in Christ Jesus. Thus the central community-creating practices of bible-reading and worship, along with others,[[6]](#footnote-6) through which we come to understand the depth and breadth of these gifts, become vital ways the Spirit of God continually renews the Church's pilgrimage. As churches practice their faith corporately they are equipped to discern, validate and revitalize members' experiences of God and God’s saving work.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As a fellow Baptist informed by similar theoretical assumptions, Professor Elizabeth Newman shares McClendon’s concern that theologians as well as congregations attend to their social practices. In particular, she points to the centrality of Christian practices of communal worship as these prepare worshippers for participation in the hospitality of God. Like McClendon, Newman discusses the practice of worship through the lens of game theory. Equating Christian worship with “liturgical hospitality,” Newman cites the Swiss Reformed theologian Jean-Jacques von Allmen, who “characterizes the liturgy as ‘an eschatological game.’” Following Allmen, Newman notes the similarities between the practice of worship and suggestion that she is framing worship as trivial or non-serious. Like games worship proceeds according to rules that have guided the faithful over the generations while accommodating for improvisation. Worship is also constituted by a defined purpose or end, which she summarizes with the familiar formulation “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” According to Newman,

Worship is not all somber, for it involves a joyful participation in what God is doing in the world, a participation made possible through the Holy Spirit. The language of “game” is not intended to deny the rightful place of lament in worship, nor is it meant to suggest we have to put on a forced happy face. But it is to say that through this gathering and these actions (preaching, praying, baptizing, eating the body and blood) we enter more fully into God’s own past, present and future. The drama of God’s work is not finally a tragic one; it is marked by resurrection and new life in Christ—an eschatological game.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Newman sees joy and playfulness in worship in the way worship positions us to become a people who give and receive the gifts of God. Such giving is central to “festive celebration.” In the “gift exchange” in worship God extends to us the desire to gather, the desire “to call for his word and body,” and “the grace to see our sins,” all of which “He desires to give.” In response we offer “ourselves, our gifts, our needs, our wealth, our poverty.” In this way we “learn, haltingly and by fits and starts, to give ourselves to God.” Thus worship not only “constitutes our lives with God,” but equips us to participate in God’s hospitality—the life (or relational vitality) of God.

In this context Newman makes clear that Christian hospitality must be situated in “God’s own communion” through the “giving and receiving, made possible in Christ through the Holy Spirit.” By participating in the Trinitarian life of God, we are freed from the compulsion to *do* generous works. Rather, we *participate* in God’s hospitality (or generosity) where the Spirit empowers the life of God in and among us, bringing together the diverse members of our communities as the visible Body of Christ. Pointing to the way we learn to participate in the communion of God, Newman notes,

This dynamic of giving and receiving can be seen when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven. . .”   
Through this prayer, the disciples learn to enter into the communion that Jesus has with the Father. The disciples are adopted into this communion . . . . In learning to pray in this way and thus receive from Jesus, the disciples participate in the Son’s gift (offering) to the Father. In receiving from Jesus, the disciples learn to give. We know of course from scripture that this dynamic of learning to receive and give is a journey. . . .[[9]](#footnote-9)

In these reflections on what happens in worship Newman is careful to place the emphasis not on “the disciples’ strengths or even their ‘gifts’ but the grace and abundance of God.” She joins with Milbank’s view of worship were he notes,

“. . . worship gives everything back up to God, hangs onto nothing and so *disallows* any finite accumulation which will always engender conflict. Confident worships also knows that in offering it receives back, so here the temporal world is not denied, but its temporality is restored as gift and thereby rendered eternal.[[10]](#footnote-10)

So Newman goes on to encourage us to relinquish our independence and to embrace our dependency on God’s good gifts (“our lives, the church, and the created world”). In this way we find communion with God through participation in liturgical hospitality *so that* we may together become more fully the corporate body of Christ.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Like McClendon Newman goes on to “name the Powers” that often fashion with distortion our participation in church practices. As these Powers structure our broader cultural practices in the West in ways that promote autonomy and isolation, they can predispose us to miss out on full participation in the life-giving gifts of God. Newman adopts a biblically-informed conception of “the Powers”[[12]](#footnote-12) that has helped theologians to recognize the pull of our market economy and biomedical medicine (the fruit of an era where scientism dominated academic and often public discourse). While these two dominate Powers often shape in dehumanizing ways the social practices we look to for human flourishing, whether in institutions of business, learning or healing, these practices may be redeemed.[[13]](#footnote-13) Perhaps Adventists already have been given an antidote to what has ailed our corporate bodies as Westerners. If so, could we as Religion teachers reclaim God’s gracious calling to discern the life of God’s body given for us with our students, not only in our worshipping together, but also as we pursue our vocations and engage in service together? We certainly have these opportunities in our schools situated in healthcare settings. Throughout my education at SDA institutions, worshipping together with professors and fellow students was an integral part of my education and spiritual formation. Yet it would take going outside our tradition to recognize some of the skills or virtues needed to fully participate in the gifts of God in worship and service.

My chaplaincy training helps me briefly point to what was lacking. Right out of college I became a CPE intern in Loma Linda’s Medical Center’s Clinical Pastoral Education program. Many years later, I concluded my CPE units in a program led by an Episcopalian chaplain who had trained for a time with the CPE supervisor I had been under at Loma Linda. I remember vividly what I learned about worship in each program. In the program at Loma Linda we had 50% of the group who were SDA adherents, and 50% who were not. We were each assigned to prepare a worship time for the group. One of the SDA interns started her worship time with a prayer, and then introduced a biblical theme and called for the group members to discuss it, much like what we often do in a Sabbath-School setting. The non-SDA students looked baffled as the “service” concluded. Sensing the disjuncture, I made a note to myself to explore this situation with my supervisor in my next one-on-one meeting.

My introduction to learning to prepare and participate in worship as a chaplain was quite different in the program run by the Episcopalians. We were given opportunities to practice creating “multi-faith worship services” for our peers, using universal symbols such as water, stones, heart beats, or other rhythms of life. We also were invited regularly to participate in a mid-week Eucharist service to the point of our own comfort level. While the liturgy varied some from week to week, I recall the words most often used when the symbols of Christ’s body and blood were offered: “This is Christ’s Body, broken for you. May we also be broken for love’s sake,” and “this is Christ’s blood poured out for *you*.” With all the words that were spoken in that tiny chapel over the course of more than a year, these were the most powerful. It was not the creativity or eloquence that made the difference. Rather, it was the palpable Presence in the room each time we celebrated the gifts of God together. Daily we had been taught to see the Spirit of God at work in the lives of people who were broken in hospital, in part through acknowledging our own brokenness. Our job was not to fix or heal, but to follow where this Spirit was working to heal hearts and souls. Our defenses were broken regularly so that we could offer ourselves (our vulnerabilities as well as hope), thus joining with team members and patients as the Body of Christ, broken, blessed and given. As we learned together of the healing power of presence offered to one another, as others accompanied us into our darkness, we were empowered to offer God’s hospitality, so that “God With Us” was made real among us.

Samuel Wells, in his book *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With* *God*, reminds Christians eager to pursue a mission involving responding to the needs of the underserved, that in following the Way of Jesus, we must first recognize the Incarnation as *God’s* fulfillment of God’s intention to Be *with* us eternally. While this is made possible by Christ’s work of redeeming our past (forgiveness) and empowering us to participate in God’s reconciling work (spiritual healing),we may patiently and joyfully wait for God’s coming Kingdom as we continually learn to celebrate and rest (Sabbath) in God’s promise to Be *with* us. Wells wants us to consider why Jesus spent the majority of his time on earth in Nazareth, in the place of intimate family ties and familiar community. For us this kind of place is the very place where we find our greatest work of reconciliation. When it comes to living life in such relationships, reconciliation is our daily fare—our primary work. When we whine that reconciliation within a family of faith is too hard (or boring, or painful), Wells replies, “What else should we be doing? This is the whole thing!” Reconciliation is the Kingdom Come, flowing eventually into eternity.

In the Christian life, what makes this more than an arduous task? What shifts our perspective on the calling to participate in God’s reconciling love? For Wells the answer may reside in his interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan.[[14]](#footnote-14) Wells re-tells calls readers to reconsider where we fit into the story. We often read this as a charge to “be like” the Good Samaritan. This morality-fable approach is out of line with the rest of the stories Jesus tells, says Wells, because in most of Jesus’ stories, God or Jesus himself is the central character. Eager as we are to follow Jesus, we are tempted to put ourselves in the place of Jesus in this story. But it is Jesus, not us, who is meant to be seen as the Good Samaritan. We want to see ourselves as those capable to follow Jesus in his workto save the poor or disadvantaged. In the end, however, Wells makes clear that we are the ones desperately needing to be saved by our Lord who alone can offer us what we need to restore our humanity and hope. We are to take the place of the beaten, torn and broken person in the gutter, at the mercy of a passing Stranger. We hope that our help will come from someone familiar, trusted, even respected, like the Levite or the priest. But instead it comes from a Stranger who is despised and foreign to us, yet also from the same family tree. We can barely tolerate being in the same place with such a person. Yet we see now that there is no way out. We depend on the gifts this Stranger brings to recover any hope for wholeness or restoration. In this reading we recognize that learning in worship and service together, how to “welcome God and other strangers” (as Newman invites us to do) is essential to our salvation. God in Christ seeks to teach us to love one another, and has indeed provided everything we need, especially in the SDA Church. Our healthcare institutions, our social service organizations, and our education institutions provide endless avenues for encountering strangers (some of whom may be close or distant cousins)! While they may threaten at first our sensibilities or what we think brings us comfort, Jesus shows us another way. He has invited us to release our fear, and learn in worship and service together to receive all the rich and abundant gifts of God.

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1. Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joel Shuman and Briand Volck, M.E., *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, pp. 152-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McClendon studied for a short time with J. L. Austin, whose “speech-act theory” taught him to attend to the conditions for felicitous communication in which a performative element makes possible for words to become actions that change our reality, such as when a bride and groom say “I do.” See Nancey Murphy, Textual Relativism, Philosophy of Language, and the baptist Vision,” in *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp.246-252. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Susan Marie Smith, in *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 1-17, advocates that worship leaders should cultivate ritual (and ethical) competence in order to responsibly oversee meaningful and truly healing liturgies and rituals. This requires an understanding of what makes rituals powerful (for good or ill). She helps us to think about this by pointing to the way Jesus initiated the central rituals of the Christian Church, the Communion Service, or Lord’s Supper. This central Christian ritual originated when Jesus prepared to give himself over to the authorities. The Passover meal was a familiar ritual meal for the disciples of Jesus, yet he was able to re-form this rite within a singular situation filled with fear and dread, by transfiguring familiar symbols as he identified them with his soon to be broken and freely-given body, and with his invitation for them to partake in his Body. In this way Jesus invites the disciples to participate in his anticipation of the transfiguration of his sacrifice on the cross into the source of ultimate assurance of God’s salvation, so that they would be able to recognize His saving Presence *in the future* through the renewing power of God’s Spirit. From this vantage point we might say that Jesus initiated a “caring liturgy” at the Last Supper, by communicating something vitally important to his disciples about what was going to happen to him, and how they could *be with him* as often as they would ‘do this in remembrance’” of him. (p. 6)

   Elizabeth Newman follows Joachim Jeremis in understanding the Jewish use of *anamnesis* that most likely informed Jesus in his Passover celebration with the disciples. Newman holds that this way should continue to mark faithful practice of the Eucharist, in which we would see that it is *God* who *remembers us* who practice the Lord’s Supper. In this service we wait for God to remember God’s covenant faithfulness by offering the divine Presence, as we trust that God will act on our *behalf in the present* as God did in the past. See pp. 152-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. McClendon follows John Howard Yoder in identifying practices that originated with the early Church, such as “binding and loosing,” the Lord’s Supper (or “breaking bread together”), Baptism, recognizing the “complementarity of many gifts” (or “The Fullness of Christ”), and the practice of “truth-finding” or communal discernment ordered by “the Rule of Paul.” See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: five practices of the Christian community before the watching world* (Nashville, Discipleship Resources, 1992). Yoder provides another arrangement of the “marks” and practices of the faithful church, which is summarized in Michael Cartwright, “Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity: John Howard Yoder’s Vision of the Faithful Church” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical (*Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 1-49. McClendon identifies powerful, redeeming practices based in the Ten Commandments, which he discusses in *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 178-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While recognizing the limitations of language in describing or testifying to members' encounters with God through bible-reading, worship, along with other shared practices of the worshipping community, McClendon points to the ways Christian communities regulate their discourse. As they reason together they are able to identify norms or rules for engaging faithfully in theological conversation through a reflective, or secondary (or “second-order”) type of theological discourse. McClendon recognized that, since Christian communities are not insular, but interact intellectually and practically with the wider cultures in which they find themselves embedded, both primary and secondary kinds of discourse have a responsive quality, as their shape and formulations arise in interaction with the needs, demands, and opportunities brought by strangers—by those outside the familiar bounds of the worshiping community. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Newman, pp. 59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Milbank, *The* *Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997),228, in Newman, p, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Newman, p. 61. On p. 62 and following, she discusses the practices through which we engage our bodies in worship so that we might be “re-habituated” to welcome one another with God’s hospitality. Thus we may *experience* our communion by positioning our embodied selves for prayer, by using our “voice, mouth, and ears” in hymn singing, by passing the peace as we grasp each-others’ hands, or by touching each-other’s feet in foot-washing. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Newman, pp. 78-94, points to interaction with colleagues working from similar theological and philosophical perspectives on “the Powers” informed by Walter Wink and more specifically, John Howard Yoder, peers such as M. Therese Lysaught, David McCarthy, Ched Meyers, in their respective works: “Eucharist as Basic Training,” in *Theology and Lived Christianity*, *The Good Life: Christianity for the Middle Class*, and *Economics and the Gospel of Mark*. Newman’s comments also reflect a similar understanding of the Power of Medicine pursued in a book by Joel Shuman and Brian Volck, *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine.* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Newman, p. 78, reflecting on these Powers, points to that which “would have us be other than God’s hospitable people.” She contrasts these forces with the faithful path of Christians who some would describe as “inefficient exemplars and communities.” Such exemplars includes the main character in Isak Dinesen’s fictional story “Babette’s Feast,” and the real life core members and assistants who practice Christian hospitality and freedom in the L’Arche communities centered around those with intellectual disabilities, founded by Jean Vanier. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Samuel Wells, “The Stories of Jesus,” in *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God,* (The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 86-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)