

Justice and Mercy contending for Shalom: A Eucharistic, Sacramental Theological Reflection  
Bill Walker

I really do want to say how honored and humbled I am to get to share with this group. You all are an inspiration to me, and I wish I was more like you -- those of you who are practitioners and organizers and activists in the trenches. For the longest time, I thought that kind of work was my primary calling.

It was not my plan to become a pastor, go to seminary, and certainly not to become a professor. I wanted to go to law school, practice public interest or non-profit law and do human rights work in Latin America. A job at International Justice Mission would have been a dream for if you had asked me in college to envision my future.

But as it turns out, I liked the idea of that kind of work a lot more than I was actually cut out for it. Of course, we're all called to be involved in mercy and justice initiatives in the world in Jesus's name and for the advancement of the kingdom at some level. I just had to realize that my strength was more in the area of teaching, thinking, and writing first.

So what I'd like to do here is just underscore three things that the Eucharist in particular teaches us about how and why we contend for shalom in an unjust and merciless world. In other words, **what is the relationship between the work of seeking justice and shalom, and a specifically Eucharistic understanding of God's mission in the world to redeem and restore all things?**

I want to try to answer this question about Eucharistic Shalom, let's call it, by just saying a little bit more about how I got here -- because I think it will help to illustrate the first part of what I have to say.

Like many younger folks who have found themselves drawn to liturgical worship, I did not start out in this place. I was raised in a Baptist and broadly evangelical church setting. During my senior year of college, I went on a spring break mission trip with my church to Juarez, Mexico. My experience at this church taught me some very important new lessons about the Christian life, one of which had to do with the role of the Holy Spirit not only in worship but also in mission. I had certainly been taught to revere God's Word as inspired and authoritative for my life, and I knew what it meant to be an evangelical Christian, but the charismatic stream was unfamiliar. So you could say this was the season in my life when I discovered two of the three streams of Christian identity, the evangelical and the charismatic, but not yet the sacramental/catholic.

But it was on this mission trip that God would also teach me something else. One day in the city of Juarez, the team I was part of went on an outreach into a public park. We had just performed a street theater-style drama that enacted that enacted the gospel story. Afterwards, we passed out gospel tracts in Spanish. I was one of the translators for our team because I could speak the best Spanish, which wasn't saying much, and two men came up to us after the drama.

We thought they were wanting to talk about what they had just seen and heard from us, but instead, they kept trying to tell us about some of the struggles they were facing in life at the border of Mexico and the United States -- the difficulties of finding good jobs, the poverty in the city, the politics of immigration, the safety issues and the crime problem in that part of the country created by drug cartels and the trafficking of narcotics, and so on. **To us, this all seems**

**mostly unrelated to the message we needed to share with them about salvation, which was spiritual -- not material, not economic, and above all not political. In our minds at the time, those two dimensions, the temporal and the spiritual, needed to be kept separate and unconfused.**

And so as a result of this kind of dualism in our theology, we kept talking past each other. We missed an opportunity to connect, and to share the good news of the gospel with these two men -- how it could impact their life then and there, in the present, in the mundane, material, political and economic details of their life. I did not yet grasp what was going on and what was being overlooked in this exchange until probably several years later, but I never forgot it because, I knew even then that something was wrong or at least very incomplete in what we were doing.

It wasn't even so much though that our church then didn't care about the material needs of people. We did service projects on that trip, to show our love and God's love for the vulnerable in Juarez. **But even acts of service, with the paradigm we were working with then, were being carried out, I think, as *means to an end* -- the end of evangelism and conversion -- rather than as an ends in themselves that could testify and actually *be* gospel work, just as much as the preaching and street theater.**

All of this to say, taking place more than ten years ago, I've been on quite a spiritual and theological journey ever since. And it stems from this story. I watched the talks from last year's Matthew 25 Gathering, and at the beginning then and this time as well, I was particularly struck by Christine's **call for the holding together of the contemplative and the activist, or reflective and practitioner sides of our faith.**

This has my been my same lesson and goal. It's why I work in spiritual formation, as a spiritual director in training, on the one hand, and write and think about how to live out my political theology, on the other hand -- and see no disconnection, no contradiction between the two.

**For most of my life, though, even though I came to value both the spiritual and social dimensions of the Christian life, I didn't have an ecclesiology that was able to empower both of these dimensions at the same time.** Which is to say, I didn't appreciate the church's role and calling, and therefore my role and calling in the face of injustice, in the right way. *I didn't have a concrete, corporate worship practice that regularly drew me in, grounded and centered me in the rhythm and reality of God's presence.*

Once I got "converted" to the gospel of the kingdom of God, *in addition to the gospel of the forgiveness of sins*, I just kind of assumed that churches should allocate more and more of their resources toward justice efforts until there was only a minimal amount left for anything else. No need for buildings or full-time pastors. Let's just put the money toward community development and meet in homes practicing contemplative prayer! Which I still don't think is a terrible idea :) But I judged church in my naive zeal on this basis, and **I lacked a sacramental imagination for how the church participates in extending God's justice in the world and contending for shalom.**

In fact I wrote my whole dissertation without yet discovering the role of the sacraments in developing a truly counter-cultural and counter-political movement that would contend for shalom. Part of my subtitle for my work was a political theology of neighborliness and resistance (or, contending), and these practices are vital, but what I really needed, in addition, was a

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theology, or more specifically an *ecclesiology* of Eucharistic contending, which I learned especially from a Catholic theologian and economic ethicist named William Cavanaugh in his book *Torture and the Eucharist*.

**And so my main message to you all today, is that it is the Eucharist that is at the Center between the two sides of our faith, the inward and the outward, the eternal and the temporal, the spiritual and the social.** There is some distinction between each of these dimensions, but there is no separation between them, and there certainly no conflict between them.

So the first thing the Eucharist does is give us a different ecclesiology. And this ecclesiology could be the subject of an entire conference to itself, but let me just put this way: **A Eucharistic ecclesiology understands that God does the heavy lifting, not us.** I know this is an obvious point that might even sound cliché, but many churches in North America still struggle to trust that it's true. It's one of the reasons why we've seen, for example, the explosion of the mega-church, at the same time that we've seen stagnation and even steady decline in overall church participation.

And to ironically borrow business language here, we've gotten better at packaging the Christian faith, on the one hand -- we've reduced the cost, we've monetized our sermons and our songs -- but we've done this largely while at the same time not seeing an increase in our "market share" or tapping into new markets. And we've done this at the same time that our churches, again, in general, remain as segregated as ever.

Both evangelical and Mainline churches have done this. Many have developed a utilitarian ecclesiology with regard to numerical church growth within the Seeker Church Movement, and some have even become utilitarian with regard works of justice (dating back to as long ago as the Social Gospel movement at the turn of the 20th Century). *In either case, the church is an instrument more than a body, used to have a greater impact on society.*

**But it is not the job of the church, I submit to you, and therefore it is not the job of Christians, first and foremost, to change the world.** This is my Anabaptist -- my Anglo-anabaptist theology coming out, if I may. Yeah, no: changing the world, that is God's job. Our job instead is something more like this -- to witness to the change of the world. Though as soon as I say this, I realize it sounds a lot like Ghandi's "Be the change you want to see in the world." Which is kind of embarrassing if God has to use a Hindu to tell the church its job description! But I think it's ok, because I'm pretty sure Ghandi at least partially got this from Jesus (and of course, other Christians have said this too :)

There's a show called *Narcos* on Netflix, and it's not very wholesome. There's violence and sexually explicit content at times. And it's great TV! Whitney and I like watching it together because it helps us with our Spanish and because I'm fascinated with history of the drug war in Latin America... The main character in the third season is Pena, and he is one of the famed DEA agents who helped take down Pablo Escobar. During the first episode, he's on leave from his job and back in Laredo, TX, where's from. And he's trying to get settled but feeling restless. Pena attempts to rekindle an old relationship with his former girlfriend but finds out that she's married and has kids so he's all depressed about this and sharing his frustrating with his dad.

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In this conversation, his dad says: "Son, when you were young, you couldn't wait to get out and see the world, but then you did, and you didn't like what you saw. So you wanted to change it. But I warned you not to do this, because more than likely, it would end up changing you." And in fact it did change Pena. He couldn't rest, and he ended up going back to work long before he was supposed to because he was addicted to it. **I know this is an extreme example, but I think it's still part of what happens when we don't have a Eucharistic Ecclesiology.**

So what does the Eucharist say about ecclesiology? Well, part of what it says – and if you'll permit me to take a couple of verses out of context (which theologians love to do because we're not exegetes, except for when it helps our systematic cause -- is the comfortable words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11). Jesus says this to his disciples right after John the Baptist is beheaded and he has given the woes to the unrepentant cities of Galilee. Or how about John 16, where Jesus says, I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world." These words Jesus offers after warning the disciples about the injustice and persecution they're going to face for his name's sake.

**So the Eucharist is good news to us -- we know this. It offers us rest, it receives us in peace, and it gives comfort.** When we receive it, it restores us, fill us up, and reminds us of our true identity, and therefore our first purpose, which is that we are children of God called to sit at the feet of God. Hans Urs von Balthasar, says that the Eucharist is contemplation in love and the communion of love with love; and it only from such a celebration that a Christian mission goes out into the world" (*Love Alone is Credible*).

**The Eucharist is a love feast, the agape meal, in other words, where we are nourished, fed, strengthened, enlivened, awakened, by Christ's real presence in the bread and the wine. It is an encounter with the love of God made known to us in Christ.**

I seriously didn't used to think that this mattered, because the church I grew up in didn't think it did either. If we took communion, it was passed down the isle to us on a tray! It's amazing how much the Sacrament of the Eucharist has come to mean to me now, though, just the very practice of coming forward every Sunday. During worship to the Lord's table to receive something participate with everyone else in more than just sitting, standing, singing and listening. Our bodies get much more involved this way, which again blurs an perception of a disconnection between the spiritual and the physical.

**So we start with good news. It's like Creation and the whole story of the Bible -- to begin with, the Eucharist is closely tied to the Sabbath rest of God's communion with us (this is kind of like the upward movement).**

And look, I probably don't even need to say this, but I'm painfully aware that there's nothing automatic about this -- I'm not suggesting, for instance, that my taking communion, somehow people are just going to become better disciples every week. Sadly, the history of the church just shows that's not true. We need many other things in the practice of our faith beyond Sunday worship.

But that's what makes the next aspect of the Eucharist I'm going to talk about so important. The Scripture that's going to help us, I think, is Corinthians 11:17-34. **If the first thing the**

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**Eucharist does is draw us "upward," secondly, it turns us inward.** Because at a conference on justice and shalom, we tend to want to look outside of ourselves at the world to point out everything that's wrong with it, and then ask what can be done? But God doesn't let us do that just yet:

*17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!*

*23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

*27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. 32 Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.*

*33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. 34 Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.*

The extent and nature of the relationship between the Eucharist and the more general breaking of bread together that's being referenced here is not entirely clear, but it's safe to say that the two were more connected than we are used to today. And the close association with worship and eating was familiar to the pagan context of Corinth already.

The problem that Paul is addressing in v. 21 may have either been that 1) wealthier believers were eating together in the official dining room of a Roman villa, whereas second-class citizens were relegated to the atrium; or that 2) wealthier believers came earlier to the house church gathering and ate the best food they brought without waiting to share it with the hungry poorer classes and the slaves, who arrived later.

If we can also hold Acts 2 and 4 in our minds, we might say that **one major goal of this worship event in the early Church was a sharing in equal standing before God, regardless of social or economic status.** Those who had more brought more so that those who had less got enough.

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Jesus tells the disciples in Luke 22:15-18, "I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the Kingdom of God." **This meal is intended to be a genuine foretaste of the great eschatological love feast, or what I think we can simply call at this gathering, Shalom.**

To partake in this meal, therefore, while there is unjust treatment of one another on the basis of social or economic standing is taking place, is in fact unworthy of and displeasing to God, rendering one guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ (v. 27). This is a big deal.

And now we come back to Matthew 25 – those actions make one culpable for the death of Christ himself, for what we do to the least of these, we do to him. Examine yourself, therefore! Is the exhortation, lest you eat and drink condemnation on yourself! Taking communion unadvisedly could apparently kill you!

**But not only are we supposed to examine ourselves. This is the first warning. The second instruction is about discerning the body.** White churches (and here I'm talking just as much to myself and my own church): the black churches in your city, the Hispanic churches, the Asian churches -- are you in communion with them? Are you eating before they get there? In the Roman villas? Have they been relegated to the atrium? How is it with the body of Christ in your city? Do you even know them? Are you listening to them? Do you think you're part of the same body of Christ?

**I almost wonder if the segregation of our neighborhoods and the segregation in our churches, isn't basically the same thing as wealthy, and mostly white people taking communion first, keeping the best food for ourselves (schools, real estate, the police force, healthcare, the environment, etc.).**

*Before the Reformation (on this 500 year anniversary), salvation used to depend in part on one's relationship to the body.* I think we've lost something by moving away from that. We corrected a corruption, but we also left behind something essential. Of course, then Jon Sobrino came along 500 years later and restated it: **Not just no salvation outside the church -- outside the Eucharist, in other words -- this became no salvation outside the poor, because the poor are part of our body, the very body of Christ.**

But we have to be careful not to romanticize the poor, as you all know. And we also have to watch out for turning the Eucharist into something that romanticizes church, or makes it into what Jurgen Moltmann calls an "unbloody repetition of the event that took place on Golgotha on the altar of the church." Moltmann also has this, moreover, to say as a warning about what he calls "the cult of the cross":

*"[The Eucharist] points to the God who was crucified not between two candles on an altar, but between two [rebels] in the place of the skull, where the outcasts belong, outside the gates of the city. It does not invite thought but a change of mind. It is a [sacrament] which therefore leads out of the church and out of religious longing into the fellowship of the oppressed and abandoned."*

*"On the other hand, it is a [sacrament] which calls the oppressed and godless into the church and through the church into the fellowship of the crucified God. Where this contradiction in the [Eucharist], and its revolution in religious values, is forgotten, it*

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*ceases to be a [sacrament] and become an idol, and no longer invites a revolution in thought, but the end of thought in self-affirmation."*

**So the Eucharist, is visible sign of God's unconditional, invisible grace, granting us peace and rest, but the Eucharist also judges us, as we just saw. And thirdly, the Eucharist commissions us with a task. As we consume the elements and become Christ's mystical body, we are then entrusted with the mission of extending that body through our presence among the exploited and suffering bodies of the world -- reclaiming them as Christ's own.**

Alexander Schmemmann talks about the Eucharist as a procession that the church goes on to enter the Kingdom of God. This is helpful, but I think we need to add to that that the way the church makes this procession, is precisely through what J.M.R. Tillard describes as the flesh of the church becoming the flesh of Christ, in his interpretation of Ephesians 5:29-32, which is another familiar passage talking about the great mystery of who husband and wife become one flesh just as Christ's body and his bride's body become one flesh. **We are Christ's presence. God realizes Christ's body through our presence.**

*Whereas injustice and violence in our world and society is an anti-liturgy concocted by state and market forces to oppress vulnerable bodies, the Eucharistic liturgy extends Christ's own broken, sacrificed and resurrected body into the members of the church to become martyrs, that is witnesses, in the world.*

**St. Cyprian speaks of the individual body as a microcosm of Christ's body, and therefore stresses the importance of resisting the attempts by the powers of this world -- in his case, Rome -- to use Christian bodies for their own purposes.** Cyprian would of course ultimately join the witness of the martyrs themselves, refusing to let bodily pain intimidate him and weaken his allegiance to Christ. The Eucharist creates in ecclesial community the kind of corporate body that can resist capitulation to sexual, political, economic and cultural cooptation.

**Y'all know the Didache talks about the three years that candidates for baptism spent in catechesis before they were admitted to the Eucharist. Three years.** Questions such as these are asked: Have they honored widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of labor? The president would literally say to the congregation, "Whoever is holy, let them approach. Whoso is not, let them repent."

**That is what prepares the Church as counter-body and counter-performance to the liturgies of the dominant culture, state and economy.** Christendom ecclesiology, by contrast, indefinitely defers the Kingdom of God, spiritualizes it, tell the poor to wait, and is content with superficial unity that hovers above the political plane of our lives, "setting aside differences," (that is, by not acknowledging or dealing with them, or just worshipping in our own silos). *Eucharistic ecclesiology, however -- properly understood -- has the kingdom irrupting into time and confusing the eternal and the temporal and thereby resisting the principalities and powers, spiritual and physical.*

**Many Christians still misunderstand this distinction between flesh and blood on the one hand, and the principalities and power on the other.** You see, by contrasting these two realms, Paul is not inserting a chasm between the spiritual and the physical. Rather, he's making a claim about who is actually in power. Flesh and blood are still enslaved to sin, and so they act like it, and they fight like it. But if all authority on heaven and earth has been given to Christ,

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then our struggle is no longer with sin, for it has been overcome. The question is, are we giving our allegiance to the one who is already on the throne and who will have the ultimate victory over all contenders. If we tap into that power, the immanence of Christ's eschatological reign will be at our disposal, so that flesh and blood, that is, sin and violence, are no longer weapons with which we wage war, but temporal lies that we resist because we serve and obey the one who's already conquered them. But this does not mean the battle is not material. It still will be, and we will probably have to suffer.

**Eucharistic liturgy and Eucharistic imagination disrupts the imagination of injustice and violence, because it invokes a politics of forgiveness, and repentance and enemy love.**

One of the biggest lies that the church has come to believe in the modern period, somehow, and especially in the United States, is that worship is some kind of apolitical space. **The Eucharist is a political act, friends -- it's eschatological subversion of the status quo.**

We can't be fooled by the promise of a cheap unity at the Eucharist that floats above or glosses over the real conflict between the oppressed and their oppressors. **Let's not forget that the Eucharist is at least a memorial of Christ's death at the hands of worldly authorities. And therefore a dangerous memory.**

Now, again, it's important to admit, the body of Christ is liturgically enacted, but not institutionally guaranteed. Anyone who's part of a church knows that. Anyone studying church history knows that. But that is no reason to shrink back from tapping into the power of the Eucharist. Rather, I believe, this gap between the ideal and real is all the more cause for an urgent reclaiming of that power for precisely such a time as this.

**So, our ecclesiology must become reconnected with our eschatology, which is that the Kingdom of God is at hand -- not indefinitely deferred as in Christendom -- and the touchdown point that holds together our doctrines of ecclesiology and our eschatology, again, is the Eucharist.**