

WORSHIP AND THE SACRAMENTS IN THE CHURCH

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Where are we headed? This is the question that has guided our latest reflections within the framework of the third Global Theology Conference of the Church of the Nazarene, held at Africa Nazarene University in Kenya on March 26-29 in 2014.

It is with gratitude to the Church and to God for this opportunity that I embark on this challenging journey to discuss the theme of worship and sacraments. We hope that the reflection on these practices in the Church will serve to recover and secure a theological foundation that must become the standard for everything that the Church seeks to accomplish.

We make a small contribution in this area recognizing that our input stems from a local context. Being located in a city and in a country in the Andean portion of the continent¹ leaves us with only a partial perspective. Thus, these contributions and reflections will be more valuable for those of us who reside in this area. However, they also hold value for the rest of the world, since our input will add to a global understanding of what takes place in the Church.

We have intentionally focused on the theological perspective that the Apostle Paul held regarding the aforementioned themes. We know that the existential and missionary practices of the Church find their reason for existence in the theological understanding that holds them together. An essay of this nature, limited by space, cannot include every thought, let alone the thought of the entire New Testament.

“Jesus Christ is Lord!” is the most important statement about God’s divine revelation towards His people and the entire human race. This truth, which represents the hope for the world, is the foundation of our salvation and the mission of our church; the highest reason for our worship.

In the name of God we experience an outburst of opportunities by which we express our adoration, not only on Sundays but also on any given day of the week. This takes place inside churches, in homes, and above all through mass media communication systems such as the radio, the television and finally, though with limited access, through the Internet.

¹ We write from Quito, Ecuador, in the northeastern sector of South America.

We do not face obstacles to meet together as religious communities. The freedom of worship in our countries guarantees the right of meeting together and carrying out religious activities, both public and private, without any objections.

What is more, through technology, any person in his or her house, with or without a legal permit, can access a variety of religious presentations. They can tune into one of several radio or television channels and select from among a range of service presentations and sermons that are offered live or have been previously recorded. The variety of options is broad in order to gain access to the many recorded programs that are uploaded on the Internet either by famous individuals or by those who are less recognized.

The worship services in the evangelical church contain a diversity of presentations, formats and styles. This variety of presentations is not differentiated by doctrinal preferences but rather by the capacity of available resources: type of preacher, type of singers and instrumentalists, type of worship leader, properties either owned or rented, sound systems, video, and lighting, among many others.

There is a freedom that excites us but, because it is so large, it is also worrisome. Who is not pleased when others respect their beliefs and has access to a faith experience without hindrance? At the same time one must ask, what does this freedom mean, a freedom that respects all beliefs, both faith-based and faithless experiences, in a society in which the Christian faith is a minority?²

From a Western cultural perspective marked by a materialistic vision of life in which the law of supply and demand reigns and consumerism is the norm, it is easy to see that much of what is done in the name of God has become a religious product sold under marketing and commercial laws.

This behavior has exacerbated the fulfillment of what the Apostle Peter anticipated when he announced that by their greed false prophets would exploit us with fabricated stories (2 Peter 2:1-3). Although Peter saw this in his own time, and the history of the church confirms it, it is in our context that we notice these patterns more clearly and openly.

The church has been strongly attacked by this commercialization of its faith. The most well-known and publicly documented case is that of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. It all began with the amount of money that they were handling in order to

² See “Hacia dónde va la iglesia en América Latina” (*Where the Church in Latin America is headed*) where historian Pablo Dieros reflects about the failure of five centuries that the Catholic and Evangelical church in Latin America faced by attempting to present the gospel of Christ in a way that it would transform the continent. p.20

build a chapel that was worth ten million dollars in the city of Guayaquil.³ Becerra-Padilla affirms, “The great growth of religious congregations caused the IRS to revise the law of worship, beginning in 2009, forcing non-profit organizations to present statements about their monetary funds.”⁴ Other cases are not as well-documented, but this does not indicate that they are untruthful. Many types of hidden interests are involved in order to conceal what truly takes place.

When criticism occurs, people do not distinguish between this lack of authenticity and the true practices of the Church. “Christian” services in which one supposedly worships God are confused with true worship services due to their similar format and because they are advertised as events of the evangelical church. From within the church, we know that there are those who consciously sell their faith just like any other good that seeks to satisfy a human need, primarily because this is good business. There are others, however, who unknowingly participate in this system in good faith.

The opportunity to sell one’s faith for personal gain is a phenomenon that is both presently available and rapidly growing due to several driving forces. Among these forces are the strong presence of true believers seeking a place of worship. The church building, though still in use, has ceased to be the only place of worship. The variety of options made available to people have opened up new possibilities that fulfill expectations and particular interests; powerful motivational speakers who effectively attract great crowds. This is clearly seen by the large numbers that attend concerts,⁵ “miracle” campaigns, and the presentations of famous preachers in stadiums, coliseums, and, of course, through the power of technology, in the comfort of their own homes.

In addition to this, we cannot overlook the influence of the spirituality that has brought postmodernism. The best-selling literature, the most popular programs, and the

³ See Vistazo publicación, 2009 or the link:

<http://www.protestantedigital.com/ES/Internacional/articulo/4599/Iurd-invierte-10-millones-de-dolares-en-una-nueva>

⁴ Becerra-Padilla, 2013. “Comercialización de las creencias en entidades evangélicas quiteñas” (*Commercialization of beliefs in evangelical entities in Quito*) Journalism Research Thesis: Preliminary Report.

⁵ Tito Paredes at the end of his book, *Con permiso para danzar* (p122), after having written about the testimony of several contemporary Christian singers makes the following clarification regarding the people that attend his concerts: “*What takes place in the audience is a little bit harder to determine. How many are raising their hands, dancing, and praying with a sincere heart? Only God knows. How many come to simply participate in a social-religious party, where they can dance in a “Christian way” without the reproach of certain evangelical churches? Only God knows.*”

public opinion of common people indicate a growing tendency to seek something that transcends our present reality. Faith in miracles and satanic powers, testimonies of those who have gone to hell or heaven and returned, paranormal experiences, spiritual powers, Eastern spiritual practices such as yoga, and transcendental meditation, among others, clearly point to this continual search for that which lies beyond the physical world.

It is in this search for the transcendental that religion in general and the Christian church and its gospel in particular, appear as an interesting alternative. To be a Christian has become fashionable. It is not rare to hear on television that people say good-bye to each other with “God bless you.” Television presenters and public people like singers and politicians use the name of God as a normal thing.

Finally, the religious market feeds the great needs and deprivations of the poorest people, which is very common in this part of the world. In 2012, 29% of the population in Latin America was under the poverty line. If we add to this amount those who were in extreme poverty, we come close to 40% of the total population⁶, almost half of the population of the entire continent. This situation is even worse when we consider that countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have governments that have implemented political systems filled with socialist overtones, focused on the poorest members of society.

Let us also consider the great social problems that have affected these individuals. These problems range from insecurity to domestic violence, white slavery, drugs, car accidents and so many others that add to the feelings of helplessness that the great majority experience.

This social, economic, and political situation of need has created a venue so that the people, whether Christians or not, in their helplessness, may find in religion an answer to their problems. In these circumstances, the attractive theologies of liberation and prosperity have found an appropriate breeding ground. “Religious” movements that promise material prosperity have seen an influx of new followers in their worship services and meetings. Sadly, some of the main leaders of these movements receive financial gain from these new members.

Religious people, the increase of postmodern spirituality, and the great needs and deprivation of the people feed this religious system with the aforementioned implications.

⁶ See the CEPAL report at, <http://www.eclac.org/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/prensa/noticias/comunicados/8/48458/P48458.xml&xsl=/prensa/tpl/p6f.xsl&base=/tpl/top-bottom.xsl>

It is within this setting that the “church” worships. There is a loss in the meaning of what is being done. Religion is commercialized and when this happens the believer becomes a client and the worship service becomes a show. The gospel is reduced to mere promises. The church is administered like a business. A “respectable ministry” orbits around ideas of competency, image, advertising, growth, technology, and programs, concepts that become essential for the management of such a ministry.

The church and its practices have been deprived of the solid theological foundation that will sustain it. Specifically, public worship is seen as simply one aspect of the service because it is a part of religion. As such, worship is nothing more than just another element, though perhaps the most attractive element, of the show.

People go to a “worship service” to feel good. One must leave one’s problems outside of the church doors and then pick them back up at the end of the service and nothing changes after the “experiencing the service” one had ~~has~~ inside. The person remains the same although there is a feeling of catharsis that allows him or her to continue to go on in the midst of trying circumstances for one more week.

It would be unfair to generalize this situation and make it applicable to all believers, all churches, and the entire evangelical population. In fact, there are believers, churches, and services that are indeed genuine. However, it is important to note that once we begin to lose our reason for existence, that is, the theological foundation of who we are and what we do, we are no longer a part of a faith community but a part of a religious system that is influenced by a religious market. Thus, the Church of God is continually affected by the influence of cultural and commercial factors that seeks to distort its purpose.

The church is facing a very difficult time. It is a time of confusion that brings about fear and reservations. It is very difficult to find a truly genuine church with holy motives and authentic ministries. It is undeniable that there is a great longing for the Word of God and to truly find a community of love and a space of worship that focuses on God and His mighty work.

Our times are quite different from the times when the Apostle Paul spontaneously worshipped God when he experienced and meditated on His works. The wisdom of God that was revealed to him, the testimonies of what had happened, the hand of God guiding him and the church were all reasons for expressing the most important patterns of worship in his letters. They were true statements filled with emotion, reverence, and exultation.

Paul meditates upon God’s mercies, the main reason for His adoration. Among them we find that Paul blesses God for His good and eternal plan for humanity. He worships Him

for the plan God has that we would be found in His presence, be redeemed and have an eternal inheritance with Him (Ephesians 1:3-14). Paul marvels at the wisdom of God and asks that glory be given to Him forever when he meditates upon the way in which God has placed both Jews and Gentiles under His grace (Romans 11:33-36). He asks directly that a rational act of worship be offered, which consists in surrendering our beings to Him. This, Paul expresses, must be done in view of God's mercies to save us as he reflects in the chapters written to the church in Rome (Romans 12:1-2).

Paul also worships the Lord for His mighty works of redemption and for guiding him, others, and the church. He brings back to memory the comfort received from God (2 Cor. 1:3-5), the transformative work in Philemon (Phil. 1:4-7), and the strength that God gave the Thessalonians who dared to stand strong in the midst of great tribulation and persecution (1 Thess. 1:2-10, 2 Thess. 1:3-5). When Paul prayed with confidence for the fulfillment of God's entire plan to be carried out in the believers within the Ephesian church, he concludes by saying: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory (adoration) in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Above all, Paul proclaims the Lordship of Christ as the supreme reality that demands worship. Jesus Christ has been exalted. He has been given the name that is above all names that at His name every knee should bow (symbol of worship). He is the Lord and every tongue must confess Him for the glory (adoration) of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

The Christological hymn coined by the primitive church reminds us that Jesus Christ possesses all the authority above everything that exists so that in everything He might have the supremacy (Colossians 1:15-20). For Paul, the intervention of God in human history through Christ is the reason and motive for all worship.

Without this truth of the gospel, fully embraced and consciously expressed, what we call "worship" will simply continue to be a religious activity lacking credibility.

It is in the midst of this contrast of realities that the Church of the Nazarene has to live in this part of the world. Where is our worship headed as a church? What do we understand by true worship? How should we worship? Why should we do it? These are all questions that must be answered. To a certain extent, in this brief reflection, we will attempt to answer them in light of significant biblical texts ~~that reveal the importance of~~ on this subject matter.

First, the apostle, sharing his understanding of the church, makes a fundamental declaration in I Cor. 12:3c when he says: "And no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." Paul begins by correcting the misuse of the spiritual gifts in public worship.

Only those who are guided by the Holy Spirit are able to recognize Jesus as Lord and express it genuinely with their mouths, through their gifts, and in their lives. Thus, the correct use of spiritual gifts and the authenticity of worship depend upon a right relationship between the Church and the Holy Spirit.

What is said about spiritual gifts can also be said about worship. Worship in the Church (both public and private) is genuine to the extent that the Holy Spirit allows, promotes, and encourages believers to surrender their lives to the only Lord and to manifest this surrender through acts of worship.⁷

Worship, understood in this sense, is a spiritual fruit. It emerges spontaneously by the presence and action of the Holy Spirit who reveals God's mercies and His redemptive work in us. Worship is an act of thanksgiving to God for who He is and for all that He has done for us in Christ.

Worship testifies to the recognition and experience of God's grace that works Sovereignty in the life of the believer. Chronologically, we find that God's presence and work must be manifested first and then expressions of worship, surrender, and adoration follow. If there is no testimony there is no worship, but if worship is present then it is worship without a solid foundation, and it becomes repetitive, monotonous, religious, and devalued.

Worship does not originate with the people and it does not focus on satisfying their needs. It is not out of force of habit and it does not come about by external pressure or by a mere recognition of God's providence for the entire world. Worship, is a spiritual fruit and, therefore, it is neither a human product nor a human activity in which both Christians and non-Christians are able to participate.

Second, it is important to analyze Romans 12:1. After Paul has finished his exposition about God's plan to justify both Jews and Gentiles in the letter he wrote to the church in Rome, he turns to the practical aspects of life, as he tends to do in all his letters.

In light of all that Paul has previously mentioned, which is nothing but the mercies of God gotten by our Lord and given to the entire human race, Paul says that the only acceptable reaction from our part is to offer our worship to God.

⁷ The exhortation that Paul gives to the church in Ephesus to 'be filled with the Holy Spirit' automatically results in speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing and making music from the heart to the Lord and always giving thanks to God for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18-20).

This act of adoration or rational worship to God is required of those who have received the mercies of God: those who have been justified freely by His grace and who have died and risen with Christ and no longer walk according to the flesh but who are guided by the Holy Spirit, who have become children of God and are overcomers, and those who have been freed from the powers of this dark world and have been given an imperishable kingdom where they can enjoy fellowship with God.

The only true and proper act of worship is to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. Paul uses the body as a symbol of the whole,⁸ which refers to the consecration of the entire life to God. Paul had mentioned before that because we live under grace we can offer ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and, therefore, offer every part of ourselves as an instrument of righteousness (Romans 6:12-14). Worship not only includes the initial act of consecration, but also a life where righteousness is made evident through all practical and daily aspects of life in obedience to God.

Furthermore, the verbal tense that Paul uses to describe the verb “to offer” points to completeness.⁹ The offer covers the entire self and only a life that has been entirely consecrated, in all its details and aspects in a radical way, may come to be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

We can see examples of concrete manifestations of this consecration and adoration to God in his other letters, such as the new man that results from the Lordship of Christ and His work (Ephesians 4:22-32, Colossians 3:1-14), the contribution to the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 9:12-13), the love offerings that Paul himself had received (Phil. 4:10-18), the holy hands that are raised during the time of prayer, without anger or dispute (1 Timothy 2:8), and his service (worship) to God¹⁰ (Romans 1:9; Phil. 3:3; 2 Timothy 1:3). These constitute concrete expressions of worship, which Paul refers to as “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Phil. 4:18), a daily lifestyle that recognizes the Lordship of Christ and honors God in everything. Therefore, besides being a spiritual fruit, worship is a lifestyle.

Now, as a public common act, worship becomes a testimony of proclamation of the Church to the world. The simple act of worshipping together as a community is a message of

⁸ We call this literary device ‘synecdoche’, in which a term for a part of something is used to refer to the whole of something.

⁹ Aorist tense.

¹⁰ The word that is translated as “to serve” in these texts is the Greek word *λατρευω* which can also be translated as “worship” according to Strong G3000 and the translation of the Bible of Jerusalem

testimony. gives witness to this message since Obviously the content of that message is Christ the Lord, His salvation and His kingdom.

The church's worship presupposes the acknowledgment of who Christ is and what He has done for us. It is important to notice the declarations that Paul makes about Jesus and his works, the reason for our worship to God. Christ must have the supremacy in all. It pleased God to make Christ the center of the created order, not just the original creation but of the new creation as well. He is the firstborn of the new race, the beginning, the first fruit, the New Adam, and that to which the church gives living witness as His body (Colossians 1:15-20).

Christ has the authority over the created order since He is Lord. All the principalities and authorities of this century and all the centuries are under his feet. He is the head (authority) over everything, including his body, the Church, the fullness of him who fills all things (Ephesians 1:22-23). His Lordship does not only require our obedience, but also constitutes a fundamental pillar of hope for today and tomorrow.

This is the Lord that is coming (1 Corinthians 16:22) and is coming with power. He is coming to bring the fullness of His kingdom. He has overcome all principalities and powers through His victory on the cross (Col. 2:15), and is placing His enemies under His feet.; the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor. 15:25-27). He is coming to restore all things. Our perfect fellowship as His children, the redemption of our bodies and the entire creation as well as our inheritance, will be completed at that time (Romans 8:17-23).

The Church, those who have united themselves with Christ, testify to His presence, providence, and redemptive work in advance and that is why they worship Him. The unbelievers can be convicted from their sin by the prophetic testimony of the church. They have the opportunity to worship God: "They will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you'" (1Cor. 14:24-25). All Gentiles who have been converted by the word of the Gospel worship God with their lives because they have become "an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:16).

The powerful intervention of God in human history through His son, who was incarnate and gave Himself up for us, the Lordship of Christ, His present reign and future kingdom, the manifestation of the new creation which we are now enjoying, His love, wisdom, and faithfulness to His word and to each one of us despite our own unfaithfulness, enable us to recognize how little we are indeed, how unworthy, and undeserving of His grace, while at the same time, how privileged, loved, and valued by our own Father.

Against this backdrop Paul exhorts us to hold firmly to God's word (I Cor. 15:2). This is the truth to be followed individually and collectively. We are encouraged to pray, and sing hymns and psalms and all spiritual songs as natural expressions that flow from a real experience. They must not only be a testimony to the world, but they should edify the church. (Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:19-20, I Cor. 14:26, 15-17).

From these texts we can conclude that worship is a spiritual fruit being manifested individually through a lifestyle and collectively through the witness and proclamation of the church to the world. This testimony is about Christ, his kingdom, and his salvation. The result is grace, edification for the people, and honor, worship, and glory to God through Christ.

I believe that the Church of the Nazarene, in accordance with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, must focus more on preaching Christ as Lord. It should utilize the public worship service as a means to proclaim Christ's Lordship and, based on this reality, proclaim the presence of His kingdom, where salvation is offered to every human being.

I believe that the Church of the Nazarene should be more concerned with the lifestyle of its members. As Latin Americans, we like to celebrate and host events. We have become specialists, or at least we would like to think we are, in setting the stage, providing the best resources, and organizing community celebrations.¹¹ We can almost say that our guide is David's own declaration: "In His temple all cry, 'Glory!'" (Psalm 29:9b). But we have forgotten that "all" should include mainly their lifestyle, which is the most important element of worship to God that proclaims His glory.

I believe that the Church of the Nazarene should seek even more that the Holy Spirit revive the work of God in our midst to the extent that as a Church we may be able to respond naturally through genuine worship to God. May it not be said about the Church: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8).

I believe that the Church of the Nazarene would do well by trying to better understand the purposes of God in our times during conferences such as these. If we do not do it, we could be like the scribes and Pharisees who discarded the purposes that God had for them.

Luke narrates the story when Jesus declares that "the Pharisees and the experts of the law rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Luke 7:30). Jesus went on to say, "To what shall I compare the people of this generation? What are they like?" (Luke 7:31) When it was time to dance, they did not dance; when it was time to weep, they did not weep. When John came

¹¹ There is a constant concern and investment in the churches to have better buildings, musicians, technological equipment, etc. emphasizing more the external aspect of church than the condition of its people.

with his message of judgment they did not accept him and neither did they accept Christ when He came with His message of grace.

After these words, Luke tells how a Pharisee invited Jesus to go to his house. It is interesting to find this story right after Jesus has described the way the Pharisees had rejected Him. A sinful woman shows up at the house of the Pharisee and touches Jesus' feet. The Pharisee thinks to himself that Jesus is not a true prophet because He allowed her to touch Him. What a contrast between his thoughts and those of the people who had seen how Jesus healed the servant of the centurion (7:1-10), resurrected the widow's son in Nain (7:11-15), and "were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people'" (7:16).

At the end of the narration, after Jesus confronted the Pharisee and forgave the sins of the woman, people began to ask: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ... In this story we see how people treated Jesus differently.

The Pharisee shows us the first way to treat Jesus. He asks Him to come to his house, but treats Him like a normal person. Jesus comes in and the Pharisee does not give Him any special attention. He just simple came and sat by the table.

The way to honor a guest was very different from this.¹² This is the way that Jesus makes reference to in the story, which the Pharisee fails to do. Jesus, knowing that the Pharisee did not follow the customary practices, points out that he did not give Him water for His feet, or a kiss on His cheeks (showing equality), nor did he anoint Him with oil.¹³ Evidently, the Pharisee did not see Jesus as a person worthy to be honored.

In contrast, we find the way in which the sinful woman treats Jesus. It is interesting to note, in our time, that she is behind Him. Crying, she cleaned Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. She kissed His feet and anointed Him with her perfume. Evidently, she thought of Jesus as someone who was so worthy that she could only humble herself, and give her tears, hair, and perfume (just to clean His feet), someone to revere in a true act of worship. What a difference! ... What a difference exists between the treatment of the religious man and that of this woman!

Once again, this Pharisee demonstrates what Jesus says about them. They failed to recognize Him and treat Him the way he deserved and, therefore, rejected the purpose of God for their lives. Paul makes reference to this inability to recognize the wisdom of God when he

¹² John Wesley's explanatory notes

¹³ Is it possible that during the anointing he who anoints is above the one being anointed?

affirms, “None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8).

Fortunately, Paul reminds the church that we are not like the Pharisees for we have the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth. Speaking about understanding the purposes of God, Paul says: “These are the things God has revealed to us by His Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:10). The Holy Spirit fulfills His ministry when He reveals Jesus to us and helps us to not lose sight of His Lordship.

The way we perceive Christ is the way we treat Him. The Church must ask the same question, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Is it someone we have just simply invited to come to our house?... It would sound important to say that we have had amongst us someone who is famous and be able to use His name for our personal gain. Is He an important person whom we have treated like we treat guests of honor?... There is always the risk of treating Him like any other person for whom we also give a special place. Or maybe we should ask, have we recognized Him as Lord, someone worthy to whom we bow down and humbly offer the best of us and the best that we have as a true act of worship?... If we fail to worship Him this way we will lose sight of who He is, who we are before Him, and what the purpose of God is for the Church of the Nazarene today.

How are we treating Jesus? How are we using His name? These are questions we should reflect upon. May the Holy Spirit reveal Christ to us! May the Holy Spirit enable us to reflect upon our worship as a church! Jesus Christ is not only a great prophet, He is not only the testimony of God that has come to visit His people, He is the Lord and His work is the work of God, the center of all human history and all creation. “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:21).

It is against this backdrop of adoration that we must also consider the sacraments that we officiate in the church: baptism and communion, which have been ordained by the Lord. In my opinion, the Church in this part of the world does not know the value of these means of grace, which are the sacraments.

Communion has become one more ritual element in public worship. Generally, it is a moment to ask for forgiveness, to sing another song or to watch a video clip alluding to the Eucharist, and some even just take this time to talk to the person next to them. The instruction that is given turns around the duty of giving account to God for what we have done and it is rare to ask people to get out of their seat to ask for someone’s forgiveness in the congregation.

Regarding baptism, it is a sacrament done from time to time where those who have initiated the Christian life participate as a way to give witness to their conversion. Some brothers and sisters believe it constitutes a more real commitment with the Lord. When I asked a sister in the church why she did not want to get baptized she said that she was not ready yet, even though she had been saved many years ago and had been attending church for several years.

There are not many passages in the Pauline letters that are able to guide us to understand these sacraments adequately. This lack of information is what causes certain speculation. There are several topics that could be brought up, but considering our experience and reality what I would like to highlight are some aspects that remain absent in our understanding of the sacraments.

Regarding baptism, it is important to remember that this has always been a symbol of initiation or union. In our case, it represents our union with Christ. We do it once, and it carries the decision to belong to Christ with all the implications that this decision brings about.

The Jewish people were baptized into Moses (1 Cor. 10:1-4), which is to say that they, being part of the Jewish people (are united to him) and therefore participated in the old covenant with their rights and responsibilities. Unfortunately, most of them did not please God because of their greed, idolatry, immorality, and attempt to play with God.

With this same understanding, Paul says that those who are baptized in Christ are united with Him and participate in the new covenant with its rights and responsibilities. When we are baptized into Christ we are united with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection: “All of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death...in order that... we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:3-4; Col. 2:11-12). “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27). This union with the Lord and with His body, the church, has eternal implications with regard to our salvation and temporal implications with regard to our way of life.

What I would like to highlight with these thoughts is that we need to recover through baptism the encounter and union with Him who is Lord above all. Baptism does not only give witness to a personal decision, but about the reality of a union that must be permanent and that should be lived with certain implications. To be in Christ and to have Christ in us (a union) represents nothing but our hope of life, the mystery that has been hidden for centuries and that has been revealed through the gospel and became the foundation of Paul’s mission as well as the Church’s mission (Col. 1:26-29).

As to the Eucharist, it must be carried out frequently in the church and it is of importance here to highlight its testimonial value. To the Corinthians, Paul says: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

The Lord’s Supper is a celebration as well as an announcement of the death of Christ. It is not simply remembering His unique death, but the deep meaning it has, the reconciliation between God and man in Christ. Through this death God’s new covenant of grace is sealed with humanity.

On the other hand, it specifically announces the death of the Lord. Every time we come to the table of the Lord and partake of the elements we announce His death, or saying better, we announce the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross on our behalf.

To consciously participate in the Lord’s Supper is to testify to what God has done through the death of Christ. We confirm that we understand, accept, and live the benefits of the Lord’s given grace, fruit of His sacrifice. But what is more, we testify to the grace that is available to us and that is effective in every human being that comes to Christ through faith.

This testimonial aspect of the Lord’s Supper is in accordance with the central message of the gospel, which is Christ and, particularly, His work on the cross. When we consciously come to the Lord’s Table and encounter Him there, it will prove to be a holy moment, filled with joy and grace.

In reality, the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist are means of grace. It enables us to encounter the presence of Christ, which constitutes these sacraments into sources of grace for all those who partake of them. It is exciting to think about each one of our churches worshipping and experiencing this union with the Lord, who has prepared it for each one of us.

I believe that the Church of the Nazarene must recover the meaning of baptism and the Eucharist as dramatized symbols of union and communion with the Lord. It is all about consciously incorporating the testimonial aspect of these sacraments both inside and outside the Church.

Finally, I believe that the Church of the Nazarene must strengthen the centrality of the Word of God in all of their meetings, whether private or public. The Word of God is the foundation of who we are and all we do as a church and we must avoid being distracted by models and ornaments (including technology), which although they impact people, they are superficial and lose meaning. We do not need more models or attractional models for our

practice in mission; we need more and solid theology of worship and sacraments as well as a theology of mission.

Maranatha! The Lord is coming. May the coming of His presence motivate us to encounter ourselves anew as a Church. May we set our faces to go, just like Christ did, in order to fulfill our Christian witness and our mission in a world that is constantly seeking to drown us with its materialistic values and move us away from the purposes of God for our lives at this time.