

# ENGAGING THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN EXPLORING THE WESLEYAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE EUCHARIST AS A MEANS OF GRACE

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## *Introduction*

From New Testament times to the present the Church has recognized and affirmed the importance of the sacraments in the life of both the Church and the individual Christian. Although the specifics of degree and causation with regard to efficacy are matters of debate within theological traditions, the Church, overall, agrees that the sacraments contribute in some part to spiritual formation. That being stated, the recognition of the formative value of the sacraments is oftentimes more implied than expressed. The basis of the formative character of the sacraments – an understanding of how they contribute to one’s spiritual development – is an issue that often lacks address, particularly in the Evangelical Protestant arena.

The focus of educational efforts with regard to the sacraments is typically aimed more toward knowing *about* the individual sacraments rather than developing an understanding as to *how* they work. In many Protestant churches teaching about the sacraments is either highly intentional and often catechetical in nature, or is viewed as not particularly relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian and therefore largely ignored. Anderson (1997) notes that writers on the subject either “resist the explicit catechetical power of liturgical practice” or “mute such claims by reserving catechesis to the preparation for and reflection on liturgical practice” (p. 351).

The purpose of the study which underlies this paper is toward meeting the urgent need to abolish the dichotomy between worship and education. If the Church better understands “how” worship, and specifically the celebration of the Eucharist, offers transformation, then educational ministers of the Church can teach congregants to more critically engage the liturgy and more beneficially appropriate sacramental effect. Ultimately the goal of sacramental participation is not mere comprehension of the doctrine of sacraments, but the apprehension or capture of the effect. This exploratory study attempted to address the issue of meaningful participation by examining foundational issues regarding the interaction of the sacraments and the educational ministries of the church.

## *Overview of the Study*

This study occurred in the context of the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition. From the Wesleyan component of this tradition comes the understanding that the Eucharist is more than a memorial event, but is a channel or means of receiving from God sustaining grace. The Pentecostal component of this faith tradition provides a familiarity and comfort with experiencing the presence of God during acts of worship. Although many Pentecostals would not describe themselves as sacramental, some contend that familiarity with encountering God in worship lends itself to an appreciation of the sacramental life (Archer, 2004; Bidy, 2006; Macchia, 1993). Bidy (2006), for example, posits that Pentecostals are accustomed to transformative encounters with the Spirit of God, and when the Eucharist is explained as a transformative encounter with God (i.e. a means of grace), the leap to sacramentalism is greatly lessened. Two churches within this faith tradition, and more specifically, members of four Christian education classes in those churches, formed the sample of the study. Both churches

were located in eastern Tennessee and were similar in size. Church A typically celebrates the Eucharist once a month, while Church B celebrates on a more sporadic basis, usually two to three times a year.

Preceding a more detailed explanation of the field study in these two churches and the report of the results of the study is a brief overview of the theological and sociological underpinnings of the study. This overview begins with foundational theological presupposition of Eucharistic effect in the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition – the Eucharist as a means of grace. This is followed by short treatise on Eucharistic effect within a biblical understanding of Christian formation. The foundational overview concludes with a summary of the interaction of the Eucharist within the social science fields of religious ritual and active learning.

### *Foundation Overview*

#### *Means of Grace*

An exploration of the Eucharist as affecting transformation is based upon an understanding that the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist, are not merely acts of obedience or remembrance. Rather, they are agents of God’s transformative work in humankind, an idea best expressed by John Wesley’s concept of “means of grace.” Grace is essential to Wesley’s theology. His was a theology of transformation and that transformation was viewed, in essence, as an outpouring of grace in an individual’s life. Wesley understood grace as underlying all other theological tenets, in that grace “creates, redeems, sustains, sanctifies, and glorifies” (Langford, 1983, p. 24).

The centrality of grace in Wesley’s theology leaves little wonder at his frequent appropriation of the term “means of grace.” In a sermon entitled “The Means of Grace” Wesley (1984) attempts to explain and defend this concept, beginning with a definition of the term. “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words or actions ordained of God and appointed for this end – to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace” (p. 381). The primary means of grace, according to Wesley, are prayer, searching the Scriptures and participation in the Eucharist.

Wesley (1984) further expounds that the means of grace are not ends unto themselves, but find their value only when they result in an experience of the presence of God and a subsequent outpouring of the grace of God. He denies any inherent power or merit in the means of grace themselves. A means, he explains, “is in itself a poor, dead empty thing; separate from God, it is a dry leaf, a shadow” (p. 396). The means of grace, he explains, are the way of attaining an increase of the grace of God; one waits for grace, not by remaining idle, but by utilizing the means of grace. This idea is demonstrated in Wesley’s depiction of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace: “...all who desire an increase in the grace of God are to wait for it in partaking of the Lord’s Supper” (p. 389).

Knight (1992) offers further insight into the Eucharist as a means of grace. He depicts the reception of grace in the Eucharist as transformative in that two aspects of Christian affections are shaped in the Eucharistic celebration. The first of these he describes as “humility, repentance, and remorse” (p. 140) as one becomes aware yet again of one’s own sinfulness and the consequences of that sinfulness. The Eucharist, he posits, serves as an “invitation to evaluate critically one’s own life” (p. 140). The second set of affections that are transformed by the

Eucharist is love – love for God and for others. As one participates in the Eucharist and is reminded of God’s great love for humankind, the response is a renewal of love for God. The natural outcome of renewed love for God is love for others. This understanding of the transformation inherent in the Eucharist, a chief means of grace, is reflective of a biblical understanding of Christian formation.

### *The Eucharist and the Biblical Goal of Christian Formation*

The biblical goal of Christian formation is, quite simply, the full reflection of the image of Christ in the entire life of the follower of Christ. Such an understanding is founded upon Paul’s repeated injunctions to Christians to be continually transformed into the image or glory of God (e.g. Rom 8:29, 12:1-2; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10) and finds support in a myriad of writings by experts in the field of Christian spiritual formation. Steele (1998) describes Christian formation as the process of returning to the image of God in which humankind was created. Wilkins (1997) argues that “the overarching goal of the entire Christian life” is to become like Christ, to reflect the image of Christ (p. 25). Dettoni (1994) explains this transformation as Christ being formed within the Christian so that they may mature as his disciples. Boa (2001) describes biblical spirituality as “a Christ-centered orientation to every component of life through the mediating power of the indwelling Holy Spirit” (p. 19). Medley (2003) contends that “the practice of the Eucharist repeatedly expresses the movement toward perfecting, or re-creating, our humanity in the image and likeness of God” (p. 397). Khoo (2005) posits that the transforming or drawing (i.e. prevenient) grace of God experienced during Eucharistic participation, “rekindles a deep desire for the restoration of the *imago Dei* within oneself” (p. 60).

Not only is this desire ignited, but participation in the act of remembrance also reveals exactly what that image of God, revealed in Christ, is – an image full of grace, love, mercy, sacrifice, justice, compassion, equality, and relationship. Cross (2007) posits that an encounter with the grace of God results in a response reflective of the transformation resident in the grace-filled encounter. Understanding the Eucharist as a means of encountering the grace of God, therefore, infers that the participant will respond in a way that reflects the grace revealed in the Eucharist. If the Eucharist reveals the image of Christ as being filled with grace, love, mercy, sacrifice, justice, compassion, equality, and relationship, then the participant’s day-to-day life should also reflect those qualities. This idea is also clearly articulated in Wesleyan Eucharistic theology. Khoo (2005) explains that “Wesleyan spirituality laid on all who came to the Table a sense of responsibility to live Christ’s life of loving service to all in need” (p. 201-2). She elaborates that when “one partakes constantly of the sacrament, one’s values and life are shaped” and one begins “imitating his loving attitude and acts towards the poor and towards society” (p. 202).

A biblical understanding of Eucharistic effect may be summed up by stating that the goal of participation in the Eucharist is transformation. Eucharistic participation reveals the image of Christ, the standard to which Christian formation strives. As one encounters, through the grace of God, the revealed image of Christ in the Eucharist, one must respond accordingly. That response may be a more clear recognition of God or self; it may include a commitment to an improved relationship with God and others; it should reflect a change in behavior toward a more true reflection of the image of Christ.

## *The Eucharist and the Social Sciences*

*Religious Ritual Domain.* Religious ritual is perhaps the most obvious domain of study relating to the formative aspect of the Eucharist. Ritual theorists generally categorize the Eucharist as a type of religious ritual, frequently depicting the Eucharist as a quintessential example of religious ritual. Such an extensive perception of the Eucharist as religious ritual clearly denotes this as a relevant domain of review. Perhaps due in part to the consensus regarding the Eucharist as a religious ritual, little empirical study has been done on the Eucharist, indeed, on any of the sacraments, as religious rituals. This lack precipitates a conceptual overview of religious ritual rather than an analysis of empirical studies of the Eucharist as a religious ritual.

Participation in ritual is integral to humanity. Shorter (1996) contends that ritual serves to satisfy humankind's "natural quest" for "power, place, significance and individuality" and that ritual is "part and parcel of being human" (p. 120). Driver (1998) also expounds on the deep inner longing for ritual that is resident within humankind: "...it is difficult, perhaps impossible, and certainly unwise for human beings to attempt to engage in social and political life, or establish intimate relations, or educate the young, or have a religious life, or to make and enjoy artistic things without also making and performing rituals. Rituals belong to us, and we to them, as surely as do our language and culture. The human choice is not *whether* to ritualize but when, how, where, and why" (p. 6).

*The Eucharist as ritual.* There are likely as many definitions of the term "ritual" as there are writers on the subject, each subtly nuanced in a reflection of the underlying theoretical approach or the perceived overarching purpose of ritual. Cooke and Macy (2005) offer a simple definition: "... ritual is a symbol that is acted out" (p. 14). Rothenbuhler (1998) defines ritual as "the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the seriousness of life" (p. 27). Other definitions focus on the efficacy of ritual, exemplified by Driver's (1998) contention that "ritual is an efficacious performance that invokes the presence and actions of power which, without the ritual, would not be present or active at that time and place, or would be so in a different way" (p. 97). It is this definition of ritual, with the emphasis on efficacious performance, that most resonates with the Wesleyan understanding of the Eucharist as a means of grace.

Contributing to an understanding of the term "ritual" is the issue of genre or categorization. Parker and Horton (1996) designate three categories of ritual: liberation, transformation, and celebration or commemoration. They depict the final category as the one wherein most religious rituals are positioned in that commemoration rituals preserve or honor the worth or value of something through acts of remembrance or celebration. An understanding of the Eucharist as only being commemorative would seat it in this genre of ritual. However, the view of the Eucharist as effecting change, i.e. as a means of grace, would not be fully compatible with this position. Such a view would, instead, categorize the Eucharist as a transformation ritual, described by Parker and Horton as "rituals of formation or rites of passage" through which "something new is birthed, affirmed, blessed, and empowered" ("Transformation Rituals section).

Bell (1997) unequivocally locates the Eucharist in the genre of exchange and communion. Her explanation of the genre does not clearly provide for efficacy or transformation, but rather focuses on a coming together, or communion, between the human and the divine. For Bell, however, it is not the issue of genre that best describes the efficacy of ritual,

but rather the underlying theory of the ritual. Contemporary ritual theory, she explains, is concerned with the communicative aspects of ritual, in that it seeks to determine what the symbols and symbolic actions of ritual communicate to the culture in which they occur. Bell categorizes contemporary ritual theory based on the theory's understanding of how ritual communicates. These sub-groupings include symbol, linguistics, practice, and performance.

The Wesleyan understanding of the sacraments as a means of grace resounds most soundly with the fourth approach to understanding ritual efficacy – performance. The performance approach turns the focus not on the symbol or the culture, but on the participant. Bell (1997) posits that “performance models suggest active rather than passive roles for ritual participants who reinterpret value-laden symbols as they communicate them” (p. 73). Not only does this approach expect the active participation of the individual, it also anticipates that the participant will be changed as a result of that participation. “Ritual is an event, a set of activities that does not simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts but actually effects changes in people's perceptions and interpretations” (p. 74), and “most performance theorists imply that an effective or successful ritual performance is one in which a type of transformation is achieved” (p. 75).

*Summary of religious ritual domain.* This conceptual exploration of ritual has examined the ways in which the Eucharist, as a sacrament, is recognized as a ritual. After investigation of a number of definitions, a definition was chosen that concentrates on ritual as an efficacious performance that invites the presence of transforming power into the ritual activity. Further, the performance approach to contemporary ritual theory was determined to best describe both a Wesleyan and New Testament understanding of the Eucharist as a means of transformation that requires active participation in a symbol-laden event.

Murphy (2004) would likely support this understanding of the Eucharist as performative and transforming ritual. She contends that corporate worship, and especially the Eucharist as the keystone of corporate worship, is the primary means of Christian formation, noting that “the liturgy itself is a kind of script to be performed for the shaping of the self” (p. 16). She elaborates, with a repeated emphasis on doing: “What we *do*, how we *act*, in the liturgical assembly shapes us in particular and powerful ways” (p. 103), and continues “Worship requires our bodily presence and the engagement of our bodies in the actions and gestures that make the liturgy what it is. And ... our bodies are habituated into the practices that would shape us as cruciform followers of Christ...” (p. 135). This notion of “doing” or “action” resident within the understanding of the Eucharist as religious ritual is the basis for the second relevant social science domain.

*Active Learning Domain* Participation in the Eucharist requires action on the part of the participant. To participate, one cannot simply think about the Eucharist, the biblical passages or the theological presuppositions, one must actually consume the bread and wine and remember the sacrifice of Christ. It is in this resident requirement of doing that an important educational tenet of Eucharistic efficacy may be found: active learning.

Active learning has long been accepted in the realm of education as a vital means of enhancing student learning. Indeed, it could be argued that active learning has been prominent for centuries. Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) reference the apprenticeships of the medieval period as early forms of active learning. Modern incarnations of the tradition span a period of almost two centuries (McKeachie & Svinicke, 2006). It continues to find favor, quite simply,

because it is deemed effective. Halsall and Cockett (1998) succinctly state: “the argument is that people learn best when they become personally involved in the subject matter, when material has real meaning for the learner” (p. 301), an opinion shared by vast numbers of active learning proponents.

Active learning is a generic term that covers a multiplicity of subtly nuanced theories and a variety of pedagogical methods and strategies. The primary underlying assumptions of the term are that people generally learn better when they are actively engaged in the teaching-learning process (Glennon, 2004), and that learning is most likely to be significant when the activities or experiences are personally relevant (Yorks & Marsick, 2002). Silberman (1996) elaborates: “To learn something well, it helps to hear it, see it, ask questions about it, and discuss it with others. Above all, students need to ‘do it’ ... We know that students learn best by doing” (p. ix).

Active learning encompasses a number of specific approaches and an almost unlimited variety of methods. Amid the diversity, however, commonality is found in “the integration of knowing and doing ... an ongoing interactive process in which both knowledge and experience are repeatedly transformed” (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1998, p. 7). As a result of the transformation of knowledge and experience, the learner is also transformed. Active learning may be described as learner-centered rather than content-centered, seeking to engage learners in the experience in order to facilitate transformation.

*Defining the term “active learning.”* Defining the term “active learning” is, seemingly, no easy task. Bonwell and Eison (1991) in their classic and oft-quoted work on active learning posit that the term “seems to lack an identifiable origin or a common definition” (p. 1), and that use of the term by educators tends to rely on intuition rather than precise definition. Frequently the literature turns to descriptions rather than strict definitions, exemplified by Marienau’s and Fiddler’s (2002) picturesque description of active learning as a “word palette of ... concepts” (p. 8).

Perhaps a wise beginning in the attempt to understand this nebulous term is to define the term “learning,” and more specifically, learning in the context of Christian formation. Knight (1998) defines learning as “the process that produces the capability of exhibiting new or changed human behavior ... provided that the new behavior or behavior change cannot be explained on the basis of some other process” (p. 9). Jarvis (2004) and Pazmiño (1992) share the notions of process and change found in Knight’s definition, but also add the element of experience, along with enumeration of domains or realms that may be transformed. Jarvis defines learning as “the combination of processes by which individuals construct and transform experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions, and the senses” (p. 138). Similarly, Pazmiño states: “I define learning as the process of change in one’s knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings, skills, or behaviors as a result of experience with the natural or supernatural environment” (p. 122). It is in the definition by Issler and Habermas (1994) wherein all the above-mentioned elements converge with the work of the Holy Spirit toward a goal of Christ-likeness that best defines the transformative component of active learning in the realm of Christian education and, specifically, with regard to the Eucharist as a form of active learning: “Learning for Christians is change that is facilitated through deliberate or incidental experience, under the supervision of the Holy Spirit, in which they acquire and regularly integrate developmentally appropriate knowledge, attitudes, values, emotions, skills, habits, and dispositions into an increasingly Christ-like life” (p. 23).

The definitions of “learning” expressed above contain inferences of action or experience that facilitate change. In the vast array of definitions of the term “active learning” the inference becomes explicit, as exemplified by the following representative sample of definitions. Bonwell and Eison (1991) proffer a basic definition of active learning “as anything that ‘involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing’” (p. 2). A slightly more elaborate description that incorporates the application of knowledge is offered by Silberman (1996) who describes active learning as learning in which the student is active, when “students do most of the work ... studying ideas, solving problems, and applying what they learn” (p. ix). Weinstein (2002) fine-tunes the application focus: “So action learning is about learning about oneself by resolving a work-focused project, and reflecting on that action – and on oneself – in the company of others similarly engaged” (p. 6). Lowman (1995) provides a definition of active learning that centers on pedagogical methods or techniques that allow the learner to personalize learning wherein “the goal is always to promote involvement in their learning in a manner that reflects their individual learning styles and preferences” (p. 204).

The preceding definitions or descriptions of active learning tend to focus on a classroom setting and, as such, do not seem particularly applicable to the Eucharist. However, there are elements in those depictions that are found in Eucharistic participation. Certainly, the “learners” are actively involved rather than passive recipients of the elements. Hopefully, personalized application is made as the participants think about the ritual in which they are involved. While the liturgy in its classic form does not specifically cater to individualized learning preferences, the Eucharistic liturgy is a multi-sensory event, rich in word, touch, taste, smell, and movement, thereby appealing to a number of learning preferences. In less traditional settings, changes in Eucharistic liturgy may offer additional sensory stimuli and may even offer the possibility of selectivity by participants.

Having examined these numerous definitions and descriptions, it seems that the most appropriate definition of active learning in the context of the Eucharist is an adaptation of Weinstein. Action learning within the Eucharist, then, is concerned with learning about oneself by receiving the symbolic elements, remembering the sacrifice of Christ, proclaiming the gospel and one’s own need of forgiveness and sustenance, reflecting on those actions, and thereby reflecting on how oneself is changed, all done in the company or communion of those who are similarly engaged.

*The functions of active learning.* Transformation of action and/or attitude is, without doubt, the ultimate function of active learning; however, there are a number of additional functions that lead to or support this transformation. Active learning engages a variety of learners, not merely those who learn via traditional content- or teacher- driven methods (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Lambert, 2000). It promotes higher level thinking and deeper understanding of concepts, facilitates the integration of learning and life application, and leads to long-lasting learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Huang, 2006; Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1998; Kane, 2004; Lambert, 2000; Salemi, 2002). Further, active learning returns responsibility of learning to the students rather than depositing all responsibility with the teacher or institution and requires that students become independent thinkers (Huang, 2006; Kane, 2004). Allowing the experience of learners to contribute to the teaching-learning process affirms the value of the learner and her or his life experiences, a particularly noteworthy function with adult learners (Spinger-Littles & Anderson, 1999). Finally, learning that relies upon experience offers authority and validation to

ideas. “What might otherwise seem to be arbitrary, abstract rules can be made into concrete personal knowledge with the authority of lived experience behind it” (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988, p. 11).

Ideally, participation in the Eucharist would accomplish these same functions, each of which could be subsumed under the notion of personal appropriation of effect. Indeed, it is desirable that the Eucharist appeals to a variety of celebrants. A desired outcome, certainly, is that participants would not only take responsibility for their own formation, but also progress beyond mere reception of the leader’s thoughts regarding the Eucharist and the sacrifice it symbolizes and critically reflect on a personal level. Without doubt, it is hoped that the celebrants will integrate the experience of sacrifice and communion into their daily lives, and that this transformation will be long-lasting. Deeper understanding and personal authentication of the Eucharistic celebration, the teachings of Christ, and the doctrines of the Church are clearly desired outcomes of Eucharistic participation. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is the knowledge of God and self that results from Eucharistic participation. Murphy (2004) contends that in the communal experience of the Eucharist Christians most fully know the triune God, the body of Christ, and themselves, and by that knowing their attitudes and actions are transformed.

*Summary of active learning domain.* Issler and Habermas (1994) denote four levels of learning: “Affective (emotions and attitudes) ... Behavioral (physical skills and habits) ... Cognitive (knowledge and intellectual skills) ... Dispositional (values and tendencies to act)” (p. 32). A review of eighteen empirical studies<sup>1</sup> of the effect of active learning offers evidence that it is effective and impacts learners in each of these levels.

The most evidenced positive impact was at the *cognitive level* of learning, most notably in the improvement in learners’ abilities to comprehend information. Additional active learning impact at the cognitive level was revealed in the learners’ increase in critical thinking. Impact at the *affective level* was seen in changes in attitudes and emotions of the participants. Changes in attitude toward the subject matter, toward relations to others, and toward feelings about self were evidenced in multiple studies. Active learning was indicated to impact the *behavioral level* of learning in the development and application of skills. Impact at the *dispositional level* was revealed in changes of values and beliefs, as well as in learners’ intention to change.

Learning at the four levels delineated is certainly desirable. Christians should be able to understand matters of theology and doctrine. It is desired that they critically reflect not only upon theology and doctrine, but also on their experiences. Doing so will undoubtedly bring about change in values and beliefs, as well as change in habit or practice. Certainly change in attitude toward self and others is a goal of formation as Christians seek to become whole and to enjoy healthy relationships with others. Distinct from the four levels addressed above, active learning was also evidenced to impact *spiritual growth*. It is this aspect of effect that is most relevant to this study. Perhaps each of the four levels of growth – cognitive, affective, behavioral and dispositional - could be subsumed under spiritual growth, recognizing that spiritual growth affects every arena of one’s life. Certainly, evidence of spiritual growth is reflective of the kind of transformation expected in Eucharistic participation, that striving toward greater reflection of the image of Christ that is evidence of Christian formation.

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<sup>1</sup> For the complete literature review of empirical studies of active learning, see Long (2007).

## *Summary of Foundations Overview*

Dewey (1916) states: “When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences” (p. 139). Celebration of the Eucharist is something we experience, and as a result of our participation in that experience we undergo the consequences, we are changed, transformed toward a more clear reflection of the image of Christ. From the purview of the social sciences, this might best be explained by exploring religious ritual and active learning. From the purview of Wesleyan theology, this transforming power of the Eucharist is explained as a means of grace. This explanation is more satisfying than that of the social sciences; however, there remains something inherently inexplicable about the transforming power of the Eucharist.

### *Report from Phenomenological Empirical Study*

#### *Study Design*

Using a phenomenological qualitative study I sought to better understand how participants in the Eucharistic event perceived Eucharistic effect. The purpose of a qualitative study is increased understanding of individuals and/or events within a natural and relevant context (Borg, Gall & Gall), while the goal of a phenomenological study is to understand a concept or event – a phenomenon – from the perspective of the individual participants (Cresswell, 1998). Secondly, the study utilized a quasi-experiment to assess the impact of a Christian education event on Eucharistic effect.

Prior to beginning the observation of the phenomenon and the quasi-experiment, two churches, and two Christian education classes in each of those churches, were selected to participate in the study. Phase One of the study occurred on a Sunday evening. It consisted of an open-ended survey regarding Eucharistic experiences and doctrine. Additionally, a test group in each participating church participated in a prescribed lesson on the Eucharist. Phase Two involved participation in the celebration of the Eucharist the following Sunday morning. The pastors were asked to practice the Eucharistic celebration following their standard manner of practice in order to avoid any novel effect on the participants’ perceptions of the experience. Phase Three of the study occurred on the Sunday evening immediately following the Sunday morning Eucharistic experience. Both the test group and the control group participated in a follow-up survey, similar in design and scope to the initial survey. Phase Four occurred immediately following the completion of the survey. Five participants in each test group were interviewed to further ascertain their perceptions of the Eucharistic event.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis for the quasi-experiment involved comparisons of survey responses and interview responses. Comparisons were made between the pre-test surveys of the test group and those of the control group in each church in an attempt to establish a common baseline between groups. Comparisons were made between the pre-test and post-test surveys within each test group in an attempt to determine any possible effect of the lesson upon personal appropriation of Eucharistic effect and understanding of Eucharistic doctrine. The interviews, while not compared with pre-test findings, were utilized to support the findings of the survey comparisons.

The major emphasis of the study, however, was the phenomenological component. The use of interviews and surveys allowed the participants to voice their perceptions of the Eucharistic event. The questions in both, but particularly in the interviews, were designed to extract a detailed description of the event and were open-ended, with the exception of a few preliminary background questions. The primary analysis for all surveys and interviews was a matter of coding and categorizing the responses in a search for descriptive themes. The final categories were used to describe the respondents' perceptions of the following: understanding of Eucharistic doctrine (meaning and effect); sources of knowledge of Eucharistic doctrine; Eucharistic experiences (description of memorable experiences, the studied experience, and accompanying emotions); impact of prescribed lesson; differences/similarities between usual Eucharistic celebration and most previous Eucharistic celebration; reasons for differences (if any).

### *Conclusions from the Study*

The conclusions from the study begin with the findings of the study as they relate to three key components: the research questions posited at the outset of the study; Christian worldview integration; relevant social science domains of religious ritual and active learning.

*Findings in Relation to Research Questions.* This study began by posing three research questions. These questions were:

1. What are the participants' understandings of the doctrine of the Eucharist?
2. How do the participants describe the effect of participation in the Eucharist celebration?
3. How do the participants' perceive that the educational ministries of the church, (i.e., Christian education) contribute, either positively or negatively, to the Eucharist celebration?

*Research Question 1.* The findings of the qualitative data collected from both Church A and Church B revealed similar understandings of the doctrine of the Eucharist. The participants in the study tended to express their perception of the meaning of the Eucharist in terms reflective of a commemorative event. The Eucharist, according to the participants, is a time to remember the sacrificial work of Christ, utilizing certain symbols to aid in that remembrance. This act of remembrance precipitates both gratitude and repentance; gratitude for the gift of salvation exemplified in the remembrance and repentance as one takes part in the time of self-examination that frequently accompanies the celebration of the Eucharist.

*Research Question 2.* When asked to describe the emotional response of participation in the Eucharist, participants articulated a number of emotions or feelings. Certainly, in light of the participants' understanding of the Eucharist, gratitude and remorse were often mentioned. Humility and joy were also commonly expressed emotional responses. Additional emotional responses included feelings of being loved, of peace, cleansing, strengthening, and renewal. The overall tone of the participants' descriptions of their emotional response to the celebration of the Eucharist was positive, indicating that one aspect of effect, what could be described as the immediate felt effect, was perceived by the participants to be of personal benefit.

With regard to the transformative aspect of Eucharistic effect, or “what happens spiritually” as one participates in the Eucharist, many participants tended to perceive this in terms of providing an opportunity for self-examination which resulted in forgiveness or renewal. Some participants expressed that they felt united with Christ as they participated in the Eucharist. A few participants articulated their perception of Eucharistic effect in terms reflective of spiritual growth. This was both explicitly indicated (e.g. “we grow in spirit,” and “allows us to grow in holiness”) and implicitly indicated (e.g. ideas of recommitment and a corresponding desire to live a life that is pleasing to God, and the interviewees’ affirmation that change should occur).

The in-depth interviews provided greater insight into this question than did the surveys. The interviewees first expressed notions of Eucharistic effect similar to those found in the surveys, however, when pressed to think more deeply about the question or to clarify their responses, all articulated the perception that participation in the Eucharist should result in change and that the change should be reflected in one’s life. This expression reflects an understanding of the transformative aspect of Eucharistic effect.

*Research Question 3.* Participants, when asked to name the sources of their understanding of Eucharistic doctrine, included in these responses the educational ministries of the church; some of these clearly articulated the impact of teaching by referencing teachers and classes. Activities of the educational ministries of the church were also evidenced in descriptions of memorable Eucharistic events, although these references were implied versus the explicit articulation noted above. When asked directly about the relation of the educational ministries of the church and the celebration of the Eucharist, interview participants of Church B unanimously opined that there was a vital connection between the two. They noted that teaching about the Eucharist was needed for all ages, or, as Silas<sup>2</sup> explained, the church will eventually not understand the meaning or the reason of the celebration. The lack of formal or intentional instruction regarding the Eucharist was a concern of the interviewees of Church B.

The quasi-experiment was designed to evaluate the impact of a specific teaching event with regard to understanding of Eucharistic doctrine and apprehension of Eucharistic effect. There was some indication, exemplified by changes in vocabulary and thematic changes, of impact from the lesson in the area of Eucharistic doctrine. There seemed to be, however, no indication that the lesson impacted any participant’s experience of the Eucharist. There were no clear indications in the follow-up survey responses that the studied Eucharistic event was particularly special or different from the normal Eucharistic experience. That finding was made even clearer in the in-depth responses when the interviewees were asked directly if the event was similar to or different from their usual experience, and why. No interviewee described the studied events as “special” (other than because of the presence of the children in Church B). Since the events were not special, I deemed it unlikely that the lesson impacted the experience.

### *Findings in Relation to Christian Worldview Integration*

Two areas of Christian worldview integration were expounded earlier in this paper: the Wesleyan teaching of the Eucharist as a means of grace and the transformative aspect of the Eucharist related to the biblical goal of spiritual formation. The first, the understanding of the Eucharist as a means of grace, presented rather troubling findings. Although responses of

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<sup>2</sup> All interviewees were provided a biblical pseudonym to protect anonymity. All references throughout to a first name can be understood as a reference to an interviewee.

participants offered implications of the transformative effect of the Eucharist, there was little indication of an understanding of the Eucharist that was explicitly Wesleyan in nature. There was no clear indication that participants in either church understood the Eucharist as a means of grace. There was, in the follow-up survey responses of Church A, some language redolent of grace, but the overall tone of all responses was commemorative rather than as a means of grace. While there were connotations of benefit and even of transformation in the participants' expressions of effect, most especially in the in-depth responses of the interviews, there was a surprising lack of the depth of Wesleyan theology expected in churches of this theological tradition.

Although Eucharistic effect was not articulated with the strength of the Wesleyan understanding of the Eucharist as a means of grace, the findings did support what was earlier determined to be the biblical goal of participation in the Eucharist – transformation toward a more authentic reflection of the image of Christ. Nowhere was this more prominent than in the interviews. The interview participants in both churches were unanimous in their articulation that if change occurs during participation in the Eucharist, that change should be reflected in one's everyday life. In both the interview and survey responses, there were repeated expressions that celebration of the Eucharist enabled one to more clearly know and understand Christ, which often resulted in a desire to live a life more reflective of the image of Christ. The notion of remembrance was prominent in the responses on the surveys and in the interviews. As explained earlier, there is an aspect of remembrance in conjunction with the Eucharist that infers living one's life in remembrance of all that is demonstrated in the Eucharist and the sacrifice it represents. There were, in the participants' responses, indications of that, typically expressed as when the participant remembers all Christ did, they are motivated to please Christ with the entirety of their life. Again, there was much evidence in the collected data that demonstrated the participants' understanding that participation in the Eucharist should result in spiritual formation, even if their responses were not explicitly reflective of a detailed understanding of Wesleyan theology.

### *Findings in Relation to Current Literature*

Ritual was earlier depicted to be an efficacious performance that invites the presence of transforming power into the ritual activity. Certainly, the celebration of the Eucharist fits within the confines of that definition, but did the findings of the research support that definition? Many participants described the celebration of the Eucharist as a time of experiencing the presence of God. They described this as a sacred or reverent encounter with God, a sense of closeness with Christ, or an increased awareness of the presence of God. Andrew explained that it is not the presence of God that is different, but it is the participant's awareness of the presence of God, an awareness invoked by the performance of the ritual. Silas and Phillip also described the celebration of the Eucharist as a time when they are more aware of the presence of God. The responses of the participants in the surveys and the interviews indicate that participation in the ritual known as the Eucharist invites the presence of God to the forefront of one's awareness, a state which could be described as an encounter with God. The participants' descriptions of Eucharistic effect indicated that not only did one encounter God, but that change, or transformation, could be a result of that encounter. Therefore, the findings of this study support the depiction of the Eucharist as a transforming ritual.

Active learning, in conjunction with the Eucharist, was earlier defined as learning about oneself by receiving the symbolic elements, remembering the sacrifice of Christ, proclaiming the

gospel and one's own need of forgiveness and sustenance, reflecting on those actions, and thereby reflecting on how oneself is changed, all done in the company or communion of those who are similarly engaged. Each of the components of this definition of active learning was present in the collected data from Church A and Church B. Remembrance was a theme expressed by respondents of both churches. The idea of communion or union with other believers was also often expressed. There was also frequent expression of the notion of self-reflection, or learning about oneself in relation to God, that resulted in repentance and change. There were, in the responses of both churches, numerous references to the proclamation of the gospel as an aspect of the celebration of the Eucharist. This was evidenced most strongly than in those responses that described conversion experiences in direct conjunction with the celebration of the Eucharist.

Beyond providing a definition of active learning, the review of literature on the topic revealed that active learning was evidenced to have impact on affect, behavior, cognition, and disposition. Although cognitive effect was the least evidenced, the responses of interview participants in both churches evidenced impact in each of these areas. Certainly, the responses to the surveys and the interviews support the idea that participation in the Eucharist, as a type of active learning, is effective. No response more typifies this than Matthias' avowal that the way one best learns about the Eucharist is by participating in the Eucharist.

#### *Implications and Recommendations for Ministry*

Participants in the study overwhelmingly voiced the value and benefit of the celebration of the Eucharist. While this is a recognized trend within the broader scope of Evangelical Protestantism, it was a pleasant surprise to find this sentiment articulated with such passion in a faith tradition that is not typically deemed to be sacramental. The implications from this finding are twofold.

First, since the congregants value and appreciate the celebration of the Eucharist, that same valuing should be expressed by the church leadership. Only one study participant, Priscilla, explicitly expressed that her pastor valued the celebration of the Eucharist. Certainly both pastors and probably most leaders in churches in the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition do value the Eucharist as a ritual of church life, as something instituted by Christ and ordained that Christ's followers continue to do, and some likely value it as transformational. However, the value that church leaders place on the Eucharist is often unexpressed by either word or action. When the "sacrament of sacraments" (Chan, 2006, p. 71), the "central act of ecclesial life" (Murphy, 2004, p. 176) is presented casually or as something that must be done on occasion to fulfill a command of Christ, that sense of value fails to be adequately communicated. It is my hope that this study will remind church leaders within the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition of the value of Eucharist and, at the same time, impel them toward openly expressing the import of this holy encounter with God.

Second, in light of the overwhelming appreciation expressed for the celebration of the Eucharist, church leaders in the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition should closely examine the frequency of the celebration. Church A participants voiced their appreciation for the frequency and regularity (once a month) of the celebration in their church, while participants in Church B, particularly those who were interviewed, expressed a longing for more frequent celebration. This is a faith tradition that is highly experiential, yet those experiences are often limited to certain realms or activities while avoiding those activities considered "liturgical" or

“sacramental.” It is my hope that the findings of this study will encourage church leaders to embrace the sacramental as closely as they embrace what might be referred to as experiences with the Holy Spirit. As a beginning, church leaders can more frequently and regularly offer their congregants the opportunity to enter into the experience of the presence of Christ through the celebration of the Eucharist. As Lydia said, “How often is too often to remember what Jesus did for us?”

The findings of this study reveal a lack of interaction between the educational ministries of the church and the practice of the Eucharist. In both Church A and Church B, any religious instruction provided to adult congregants on the topic of the Eucharist came from the pastor during the celebration of the Eucharist. Neither church had, in recent history, offered any type of formalized educative effort regarding the meaning or practice of the Eucharist, with the exception of a unit of instruction given to the children (grades K through sixth) in Church B.

The lack of intentional education regarding the Eucharist was evidenced not only in the self-report of the church leaders, but also in the responses of the study participants. While some participants were able to articulate in detail the meaning of the Eucharist, most proffered a rather simple or surface understanding, i.e. “a time to remember Jesus,” or a cursory explanation of the symbolism of the bread and wine, often a simplified repetition of the phrases repeated during the celebration of the Eucharist. As noted previously, an additional matter of concern is the considerable dearth of understanding of the Eucharist in Wesleyan terms within two churches in the Wesleyan Pentecostal tradition. Even among those responses with veiled references to Wesleyanism, that was typically not a dominant aspect of the participant’s perception of the Eucharist. The implications regarding these findings are fourfold, but interrelated.

First, churches in this faith tradition must find ways to incorporate the topic of the Eucharist, indeed all of the sacraments, into their program of formalized education. Simply addressing the topic one Sunday a year (typical within Sunday school curriculum), is not effective. The quasi-experiment of this study attests to the lack of impact delivered with a one-time, stand-alone lesson. The impact of the lesson was determined to be minimal in both Church A and Church B. In my opinion, that was less likely related to the choice of lesson, the ability the instructor or the interest of the students, than to the insufficiency of one lesson to impact a change in understanding of Eucharistic doctrine and practice. Therefore, I contend that more intensive training should be provided.

The second implication is that the instruction provided should be reflective of the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition. If the rather minimal instruction being provided presents Eucharistic doctrine from a different faith tradition, it would be difficult if not impossible for congregants to develop an understanding within their tradition. This implication requires that educational leaders and pastors recognize the differences in Eucharistic doctrine, that they train their teachers in Wesleyan Pentecostal Eucharistic doctrine, and that they provide lesson materials on the Eucharist that are written from a Wesleyan Pentecostal perspective. This in no way is meant to denigrate other traditions within Christendom, but is simply a call for churches in the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition to provide instruction that is within their tradition.

The third implication is that adequate curriculum needs to be developed to facilitate the previous implications. When searching for a lesson to use in the quasi-experiment, I found nothing specifically within the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition. There is curriculum available within the broader Wesleyan tradition. However, it would be of benefit to have

curriculum that explores not only the Wesleyan understanding of the Eucharist, but also how the Pentecostal faith tradition interacts with and supports that view. Certainly, in light of the social science review associated with this study, the developed curriculum should incorporate active learning strategies.

The fourth and final educational implication relates to the celebration of the Eucharist itself. As pastors lead their congregants in the celebration of the Eucharist, they have an opportunity to educate the congregants regarding Eucharistic doctrine. Because the “lessons” provided can be immediately applied through active participation, the potential for educational impact is tremendous. However, for the celebration of the Eucharist to be a successful educational event, pastors must be intentional in the instructions they provide, a requirement that necessitates the availability of training and resources for pastors. Perhaps more than any other, this implication offers the best opportunity to eliminate the dichotomy between worship and educational ministry.

### *Summary*

The goal of this research was to better understand how the celebration of the Eucharist offers transformation, so that Christian educators might effectively teach congregants to critically engage the liturgy and more beneficially apprehend sacramental effect. The intention was to initiate conversation regarding the interaction of Christian education and the apprehension of Eucharistic effect, and I determined that the best way to initiate that conversation was by listening to those who would be most affected by the desired integration of Christian education and liturgy. The study attempted to give voice to the congregants, to hear from them their understanding of Eucharistic doctrine, with regard to both meaning and effect, and to allow the participants to describe their experiences of Eucharistic celebration.

This study was successful in that it allowed the congregants to express their understanding of the Eucharist and to describe their Eucharistic experiences. The voices of the congregants were overwhelmingly positive with regard to the benefit of the Eucharist experience for their personal spiritual wellbeing. The voices of the congregants also revealed that Christian education in the Wesleyan Pentecostal faith tradition, as exemplified by two churches in that tradition, offers little interaction with the celebration of the Eucharist. This void was demonstrated in the rather simplistic explanations of Eucharistic doctrine, and in understandings of Eucharistic doctrine that do not truly reflect Wesleyan Pentecostal theology. The voices of the congregants expressed the importance of understanding Eucharistic doctrine. Not only did they describe a need to know so that the knowledge itself might be retained within the tradition, but also expressed that understanding contributed to the appropriation of effect. Several participants, in describing particularly memorable Eucharistic events, related those events to times when “I realized what it really meant,” when “I felt like I truly understood” and “understanding the meaning of it all.” Finally, the voices of the congregants affirmed that the celebration of the Eucharist is something they look forward to, enjoy, and value deeply, something that provides tremendous personal and corporate benefit. May the voices be heard and may the conversation continue.

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