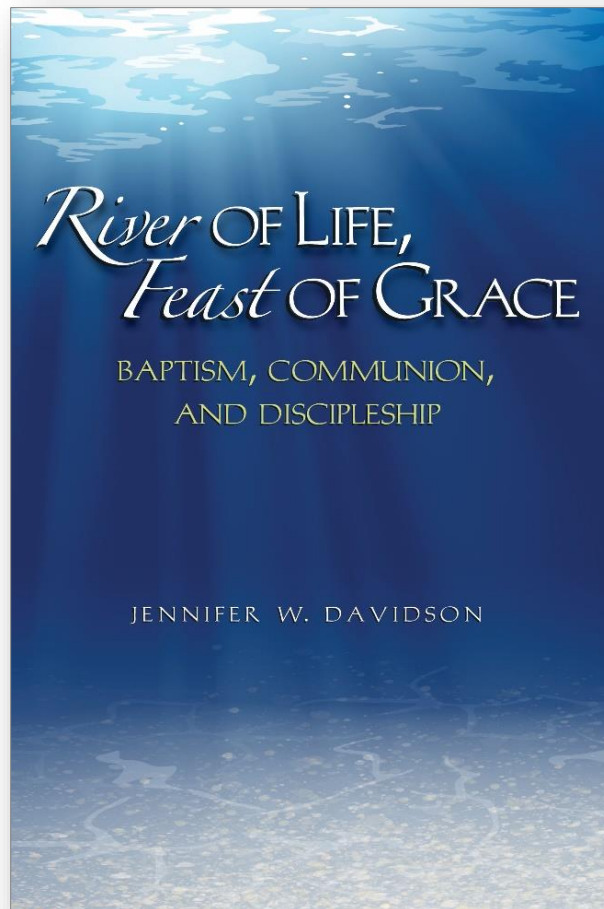


River of Life, Feast of Grace

Reflection & Study Guide for Individuals & Small Groups



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Chapter 1: Why Focus on Baptism and Communion?

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

How do you respond to the word “ritual”? Do you find that you tend to have mostly negative or mostly positive associations with that word?

Before you begin reading this book, what questions about baptism and communion do you have? Write down at least three questions at the outset. (You may find that you add more questions as you continue to read! It might be helpful to keep track of them as you go.)

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

Davidson writes: “What we do in these rituals of baptism and communion shapes how we think about and talk about God, and how we seek to embody the presence of God in a world that is beautiful but broken and heartbreaking” (3). Can you think of a time when you felt like you learned something about who God is through your participation either in baptism or communion? If so, can you describe that experience? What did you learn?

What are the most important things that happen regularly in worship at your church? How can you tell they are the most important things?

What parts of worship in your church could you stop doing, either temporarily or forever, and still have what you would see as worship? What parts are so important that if you stopped doing them, it wouldn't be worship anymore?

In your church, is there a “right way” to do baptism and communion? What parts are open to change and what parts must stay the same? How do you know? How would you know if it were done wrong? What would it feel like to have a baptism or communion that's not done the “right way”? (See pages 4-6)

How do you respond to the idea that God is present and active in baptism and communion? (See page 7)

Action for the Week

Enter worship with the intention of becoming aware of a moment when you experience God as present and active. Be prepared to share this moment with your discussion group next week.

Chapter 2: Theology Matters

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

How do you respond to the word “theology”? Do you find that you tend to have mostly negative or mostly positive associations with that word?

How do you express what you believe in your life? Do you express what you believe primarily through action, speaking, writing, relationships, or other methods? [If you are leading a group discussion, invite participants to think of one example of a way they express their belief and explore the details and depth of that example. This can be a good thing to do first in pairs then to discuss insights from those paired conversation with the larger group.]

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

Davidson talks about theology as something that isn't just about words. She says “Theology is not only what we say about and to God; *theology is also what we do*” (12). Why might it be helpful to expand a definition of theology in this way?

What are some examples from the gospels of Jesus *doing* or *enacting* theology? Thinking only of Jesus's actions (not his words), what is something you *know* about God?

How does your church express theology through its worship services?

Here are some ideas to get you started as you think about what kinds of practices happen in worship: Who do you see leading at the front of your church on a regular basis? [Who do you never see leading?] How are the pews or chairs arranged in the space? What kind of other furniture is present in the space? Why is it there? How is it located in relation to the congregation? What order do things happen in worship? Do you have the same things every week or does the service change significantly from week to week? Are children present in worship or are they in a separate space? How do people know what's happening—do you have a bulletin? Projected slides? Are verbal instructions given? What do people do with their bodies in worship? Stand, sit, kneel, lift hands, dance, move around?

After beginning to identify these practices, now see if you can write a sentence for each one, identifying what each practice demonstrates or communicates about who God is or what you believe?

Having reflected on the theology embedded in your church's practices and worship services, do you feel your own beliefs are reflected in those practices? Where you feel most in line with that theology? Where you feel the most conflict between your own theology and the theology in your church's worship services?

Davidson says Baptist theology is *provisional, collegial, and rooted in local community practices*. As a result, Baptist liturgical theology (theology that is derived from worship and gives shape to worship) happens as part of an *ongoing dialogue or conversation, includes many voices and perspectives* (and sometimes contradictory perspectives), and *talks about actual worship experiences, not idealized ones*. (See pages 12-15.) Take some time to discuss your understanding of each of these characteristics. How might they likewise shape the conversations you have in this discussion group? What might you like to add to (or subtract from) these ideas?

On pages 16 and 17, Davidson offers four ways to engage the book by paying attention to the things you would identify as your **home theology, growth theology, journey theology**, and **focus theology**. Use the Many Voices, Many Meanings Theology Worksheets 1.1 and 1.2 (included at the end of this guide) to keep track of the ideas you encounter as you read. These worksheets can also serve as discussion guides or prompt additional personal reflection and study.

Action for the Week

Try to identify one thing this week that you understand to be *doing theology*. Remember, “small and big, churchy or not—what we do and how we live out our beliefs *are theology*” (12).

Chapter 3: Baptism as Delighting, Dying, and Birthing

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

If you have been baptized, what (if anything) do you remember about your baptism? Was it your decision? Your parents' or guardians' decision? If it was your decision, why did you choose to be baptized? If someone else made that decision, what reasons do you think they had?

If you have been baptized, do you draw on the memory of your baptism as a spiritual resource? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

What stories from scripture, or what specific verses, come to mind first when you think about what baptism means to you?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

What moments, events, or activities in your life have filled you with a feeling of delight (or joy or immense happiness)? What is it like for you to consider that God takes delight in you?

Can you describe a time that you faced or conquered a fear? Have you incorporated that courage or bravery into your self-understanding? If so, how? If not, what might it look like for you to let that experience shape your identity?

What does the concept of “dying to self” mean to you? What might you need to “die to” or let go of, so that abundant life can be more present for you?

Marie Onwubuariri understands that “dying to self” can be a healthy part of intercultural negotiation. (See page 24.) What do you think she means by this? Have you ever had an intercultural experience where you had to “die” to something and “rise” to a new way of being?

If you have been baptized, were there things that were “born” into your life at the time of your baptism (or as a result of your baptism)? If you have not yet been baptized, are there things you hope might be born into your life? How might baptism connect to the biblical story of Nicodemus and Jesus' instruction that we must be “born again”?

Does baptism carry a risk—physically, theologically, psychologically?

Action for the Week

Choose one of the themes discussed in this chapter—delighting, dying, or birthing—and invite God to deepen your understanding of that theme. Look for it in conversations, scripture, prayer, worship. Be prepared to share something about what you notice when you gather again.

Chapter 4: Belonging, Flooding, Bathing, and Becoming

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

Describe a positive experience you had with baptism. Describe a negative experience. What feels important to you about each of these experiences?

What does God do in baptism?

Think about a promise you have made. How has that promise been significant to you or someone else? What has it meant to you to either keep or break that promise?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

Think about how your church celebrates baptism. Is it part of the Sunday service? Does baptism happen at special times of the year, or any time someone requests baptism? Does your church go to a special place or celebrate baptism in the usual place that you worship? What might these ways of celebrating baptism imply about baptism "belonging" to the regular worship life of the congregation?

Do you see baptism as more personal or more communal? Is it primarily about an individual's relationship with God, or is it more about belonging to a community of faith?

If there is a promise inherent in baptism, who is making that promise? What do you think is required of the person being baptized? What do you think is required of God?

Do you see baptism as connecting you to other Christians beyond your own church? beyond your own denomination? If so, how? If not, why not? Do you think these connections matter?

Does baptism seem tame and controlled or are there aspects of baptism that seem uncontrolled (like a flood)? How does this connect to your beliefs about God's power, mercy, and grace?

If your tradition practices believer's baptism, does this connect to any "washing away" of sins in your understanding? What do you believe about God's forgiveness?

Do you see baptism as the beginning of a transformation? the middle of a change? the end of a process? What if it were all of those at once?

What do you think of the statement: "When we enter the waters of baptism, we change our citizenship status"? How does baptism change your relationship with

other things you belong to or other markers of identity? Does being baptized change the way you understand your nationality? Your family? Your responsibilities to other communities?

What does it mean to say that baptism forms *and reforms* a community?

If you are baptized, how are you living a baptismal life?

Action for the Week

Choose one of the themes discussed in this chapter—belonging, flooding, bathing, becoming—and invite God to deepen your understanding of that theme. Look for it in conversations, scripture, prayer, worship. Be prepared to share something about what you notice when you gather again.

Chapter 5: Practices of Baptism

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

Can you remember when you first became aware of baptism? Was that awareness before or after your own baptism took place?

What questions do you have about how baptism is practiced, either in your congregation or in churches that you have visited or been a part of in the past?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

If your baptism happened when you were old enough to remember it, can you also remember first sensing an *invitation* to baptism? Do you remember any particular people who influenced your decision? What factors went into your decision to be baptized?

Do you know anything about anyone else's baptism story? If you are meeting in a small group, this would be a great time for each person to share their story of baptism. What commonalities or differences can you identify with your own story?

If your church practices infant baptism, how do you understand churches that don't? If your church practices believer's baptism, how do you understand churches that baptize infants? Either way, would there be any circumstances that would convince you to make an exception in your practice?

If your church practices infant baptism, how do you know that someone is old enough to decide about being baptized? What are the hallmarks of being ready to make that choice?

How do you respond to the story (pages 62-63) of being baptized three times? What emotions or reflections does this story bring up for you?

If we were to "remember our baptisms," what would you remember? In other words, what theological ideas would you like to reinforce on a regular basis, as it connects to remembering that you are baptized?

How do you think your worshiping community could incorporate remembrance and affirmation of baptism in your practices together? What difference might that make?

What suggestions offered in this chapter do you think would be possible for your church to try? What suggestions would be a stretch for your congregation? Why?

Action for the Week

Ask someone to tell you the story of when they were baptized. Practice a spirit of curiosity as you listen. What seems to still resonate for that person about their baptism? If they were old enough to decide to be baptized, what led them to their decision? How do they make meaning of their baptism now? What might you treasure from their experience?

Chapter 6: Worship Resources for Services of Baptism

At the beginning of this chapter, Davidson provides some guidelines for writing prayers, litanies, or services. Read through these suggestions and consider giving them a try. This chapter can even serve as an outline for a daylong retreat where you work through each of the steps and write a baptismal service or some portion of one.

You may also wish to choose one of the liturgies or prayers and highlight the themes you notice. What is the theological content of these prayers? What can we know about who God is and what baptism means by praying these words?

Chapter 7: Welcoming, Embodying, and Sustaining

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

What is one significant memory you have that is associated with communion? This memory can be positive or painful. Reflect on how this moment might shape your understanding of communion today.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you or someone you cared about struggled to receive communion? What caused the struggle? Was it resolved? If so, how? If not, what do you think is needed?

What scripture or stories from the Bible come to mind when you think about what communion means to you?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

What associations do you have with food? What food do you associate with celebration? What food do you associate with health and well-being? What food do you associate with satisfaction? What food do you think of as the “local specialty?” What do you love to cook? What food do you love to receive from someone else?

Have you ever thought about communion as *food* before? What does this mean to you?

What does it mean to you to say: We become what we eat; we are the Body of Christ? What ramifications might this have for the ways we live in the world and how we treat ourselves and one another?

Do you feel welcome to the table at your church? At any church? Are you welcome to preside at the table (pray over the meal, distribute it)? What makes you feel welcome or unwelcome?

How would newcomers in your church know who is welcome?

Have you ever been to communion at a different church? Thinking about that experience, what stands out as similar? different? How did you make sense of those similarities and differences?

How does taking communion change things for you? Does the worship service feel different when you have communion? How do you feel about the idea that communion should transform us?

In what ways is communion at your church like other meals you share together? What does it have in common with special meals at home? with community dinners or even coffee hour? In what ways is communion different than other meals you share?

Have you ever participated in communion with elements other than bread and juice (or wine)? What food or drink was used? How did it change communion to use other elements?

As you read through the different meanings of communion in this chapter, what did you identify as your home theology, your growth theology, and your journey theology?

Action for the Week

Choose one of the themes discussed in this chapter—welcoming, embodying, sustaining—and invite God to deepen your understanding of that theme. Look for it in conversations, scripture, prayer, worship. Be prepared to share something about what you notice when you gather again.

Chapter 8: Connecting, Hoping, Remembering, and Sending

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

Recall a time when Jesus shared a meal with someone in Scripture other than the Last Supper. What happened at this meal? Who was present? Who was not present? What is significant about this meal?

Can you think of a time when a very ordinary moment became deeply meaningful—even sacred—for you? What happened? How do you understand God to be present in ordinary moments?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

Is there a theme of communion that you read about in this chapter (or in the previous one) that you would like to learn more about? Discuss what attracts you or challenges you about that theology of communion.

How do you understand the relationship between the individual and the community in communion? In what ways do you see that relationships either made visible or obscured through your regular worship practices on communion Sundays?

As you read through the different meanings of communion, what did you identify as your home theology, your growth theology, and your journey theology?

What do you make of Khalia Jelks Williams' explanation of the community at the table as both "the space where God reminds us that we are enough" and yet also where "God allows us to see one another for who we really are—oppressors and oppressed—both made in the image of God?"

Davidson describes an experience of sharing communion in the middle of a protest. What was the most unusual place you've ever shared communion? Has that experience shaped your understanding of what communion means?

What do you think Jesus had in mind when he instructed his disciples to "do this in remembrance" of him? What do you think he was hoping people would remember? How does communion help us remember? What do you think we need to remember more? And what do you think we are remembering too much?

What does remembering have to do with hope? How do you understand the term *eschatological anamnesis*, as found on page 107?

Davidson encourages us to understand communion as a meal that is offered not only for those who are gathered, but a meal that is offered for the world. She says: "While we are always welcomed to the table, we are also compelled to

leave it. God's missional activity is unceasing!" Have you ever connected communion to mission before? How does the discussion about *missional* worship (see pages 112-114) affect your understanding of the meaning of communion?

Action for the Week

Choose one of the themes discussed in this chapter—connecting, hoping, remembering, and sending—and invite God to deepen your understanding of that theme. Look for it in conversations, scripture, prayer, worship. Be prepared to share something about what you notice when you gather again.

Chapter 9: Preparing the Table

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

Can you remember when you first became aware of communion? Was that awareness before or after you were allowed to receive communion yourself?

What questions do you have about how communion is practiced, either in your congregation or in churches that you have visited or been a part of in the past?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

Who can take communion in your church? Can any visitor receive communion, or do people have to be initiated in some way? Must you be baptized in order to receive communion? If you feel strongly about this, is there any circumstance that would change your mind about it?

Do you think there is anything that should prevent someone from receiving communion? If so, what would it be? How would it be communicated?

How often do you have communion? Does communion happen at the very end of the service? Who celebrates communion—that is, who stands at the table, prays over the meal, and distributes it?

Who eats first at your church's communion service? Who eats last? Why do you think that is?

When your church has communion, does the rest of the service make reference to the meal? Or does communion feel like an occasional "add-on" to the regular worship service?

Can children receive communion at your church? How does this reflect your church's theology of children?

Does your church have people of more than one gender presiding at the communion table? What can you learn about your church's theology of leadership by looking at who stands at the table?

What would it be like to receive communion more often? What do you think it would change for you? What do you think it would change for your church?

What would it be like to receive communion less often? What do you think would change for you? What do you think it would change for your church?

Is the food your church uses at communion typical of what people normally eat, or is it different? Do you use food that represents the cultures present in your worshiping community? Why do you think that is? What do you think that communicates about your church's theology?

Does your church offer elements of communion for people with food allergies or intolerances? Why or why not? How do you think this communicates the church's theology? [If you have a food allergy or intolerance, have you ever felt excluded from taking communion? What was that like for you? What would you want people to know about that experience?]

Action for the Week

Ask someone to tell you about an experience of communion that was especially meaningful for them. Practice a spirit of curiosity as you listen. What seems to still resonate for that person about this experience of communion? How do they make meaning of that experience now? What might you treasure from their experience?

Chapter 10: Worship Resources for Services of Communion

Review the beginning of chapter 6 again where Davidson provides some guidelines for writing prayers, litanies, or services. Read through these suggestions and consider giving them a try. This chapter can even serve as an outline for a daylong retreat where you work through each of the steps and write a communion service or some portion of one.

You may also wish to choose one of the liturgies or prayers and highlight the themes you notice. What is the theological content of these prayers? What can we know about who God is and what communion means by praying these words?

Conclusion: The Call to Discipleship

Questions for reflection *before* you read this chapter:

What associations do you have with the word “discipleship?” Consider not only what the word means to you, but also whether you think of discipleship as something that is demanding (or demanded of you). What does discipleship look like in an everyday sense?

The subtitle of this chapter is “Baptism and Communion as Resources for Faithful Living.” Now that you’ve read the book, can you write at least one sentence each for how baptism can serve as a resource for faithful living and how communion can serve as a resource for faithful living?

What does *grace* have to do with *discipleship*?

Questions for discussion *after* you read this chapter:

What has been the most important idea in this book for you? What has been the most difficult idea?

When you reflect on your church’s practices of baptism and communion, in light of the ideas you’ve encountered here, what do you most cherish? What means the most to you? What would you like to let go of? What might you like to change?

Davidson describes both baptism and communion as *gifts* given to us. (See page 153.) How might this shape your understanding of these moments in worship as you continue to experience them in the future?

While the book is divided into two parts (baptism and communion), Davidson reminds us in her conclusion that we need to understand these two rituals together—each sheds light on the other. In what ways do you understand baptism and communion working together?

The final section of the conclusion pairs themes from baptism and communion together: delighting and sustaining; dying and hoping; birthing and sending; belonging and welcoming; flooding and connecting; bathing and remembering; becoming and embodying. Which of these pairs speaks most deeply to you? Do you understand them differently now that you see them paired together? How might you try pairing the themes in a different way—and in what ways would that reshape their meaning?

Which of the theological themes in this chapter brings you the most comfort? which brings you the most discomfort? Why? Is there an invitation in both experiences of comfort and discomfort?

Davidson writes: "What we do in worship matters. It helps us know who God is, who we are, and how we can be more faithful disciples of Jesus in God's world." In what ways have you come to understand worship differently through your encounters with this book and in your discussions with others? What is one thing you most want to take with you after reading this book?

What might you pray for, in light of what you have read and discussed together?

Many Voices, Many Meanings

Theologies of Baptism

As you read chapters three and four of River of Life, Feast of Grace, keep track of how you respond to, resonate with, and are challenged by the ideas you encounter. If you are talking about the book with a group, use these worksheets to help shape your discussion time. You can also use this worksheet to shape your continuing reflections on these ideas. Include page numbers so you can refer to the book later.

Home Theology

*Pay attention to what resonates for you the most. Which theological theme or idea(s) just makes sense to you? When do you find yourself saying, "Oh, of course!" This is your **home theology**—the place where you feel most comfortable and at ease.*

How does this idea connect with something in your experience?

Growth Theology

Pay attention to what troubles or disturbs you the most. Where do you experience a sense of resistance or even anxiety? What ideas do you feel you might be holding at arm's length?

What invitation for you to expand your thinking might you discern in this idea?

Journey Theology

Look for what has been most meaningful to you over different times in your faith journey. What themes speak to you as you reflect back over time? Are there themes that you used to draw on quite a bit, but no longer carry quite the same power for you?

What does this tell you about how God has spoken to you through the years?

Focus Theology

Choose a theme that you want to explore more deeply for a season. Maybe choose one of the ideas that you wrote down under your Growth Theology, but you don't need to feel restricted to that. Maybe you want to deepen your understanding of your home theology—or reflect more on what has been meaningful to you over your lifetime through your journey theology. Or maybe there isn't an idea that especially shimmers attractively to you or that repels—but you just would like to know more about it.

How does this idea connect with something in your experience?

What scriptures come to mind that relate to this theme?

What is one thing you can do to begin to deepen your understanding of this idea? Be as specific as you can.

Many Voices, Many Meanings

Theologies of Communion

As you read chapters seven and eight of *River of Life, Feast of Grace*, keep track of how you respond to, resonate with, and are challenged by the ideas you encounter. If you are talking about the book with a group, use these worksheets to help shape your discussion time. You can also use this worksheet to shape your continuing reflections on these ideas. Include page numbers so you can refer to the book later.

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