When politicians take this approach, the purpose of institutions undergoes a shift. “We have moved,” writes Levin, “from thinking of institutions as molds that shape people’s characters and habits toward seeing them as platforms that allow people to be themselves and to display themselves.” According to Levin, “We see people using institutions as stages, as a way to raise their profile or build their brand. And those kinds of institutions become much harder to trust.”

The book of Exodus makes clear that Moses was not looking for a big stage to enhance his brand. After God appears to Moses in the burning bush and says he will send him to liberate the Israelites, Moses says, “*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*” (3:11). Moses is clearly not looking for a platform. Then Moses says, “*O my Lord, I have never been eloquent…I am slow of speech and slow of tongue*” (4:10). He knows that he is not a good performer. So, God allows Moses’ brother, Aaron, to speak to the people for Moses.

After God sends plagues on the land of Egypt, God gives Moses and Aaron instructions about the celebration of the Passover. This sacred meal “*shall be a day of remembrance for you*,” says God. “*You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance*” (12:14). Passover is an institution that is formative for the Jewish people, shaping their lives from the time of Moses until today. They do not need Moses to perform for them, because they have the Passover to form them.

During Passover, Jews remember how their ancestors ate hurriedly to escape after the Lord passed over the land and killed the firstborn of the Egyptian families. The institution is called Passover because God said, “*I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt*” (12:13). “Passover is a holiday about freedom,” writes Dara Lind, “because it celebrates the Jews’ liberation from slavery in Egypt.” The traditional Passover dinner “is organized around telling the Passover story, it’s an opportunity for Jews to connect themselves with their history; to think more consciously about those who are still oppressed today; and to hope that people today will know freedom.”

So how does Passover shape the Jewish people? It reminds them that God worked powerfully to liberate their ancestors from slavery, and it connects them with this important history. It also awakens their compassion toward people who are oppressed today: migrants who are traveling toward freedom, as well as people who are trapped in poverty or ethnic strife. Passover shapes a certain kind of moral and ethical person. It is formative, not performative.

So, what are the institutions that can be formative for Christians? What traditions form us as followers of Christ, shape us as a distinctive community, and make the institutional church more trustworthy. The first comes out of Passover itself: The Lord’s Supper. This sacrament is an institution that forms us and feeds us as followers of Christ. We eat the bread so that we can become the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus in the world today. Nourished by this bread, we are strengthened to be the hands and feet of Jesus, showing his love, and advancing his mission and ministry.

In the Lord’s Supper, the blood of the covenant is not used to mark doorways and escape death; instead it has saving power, reminding us that the blood of Christ was “*poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matthew 26:28). When we drink the cup, we are freed from our sins, set free to be Christ’s people in and for the world. The sacrament of the Lord’s supper is formative, not performative. Its power comes from the Holy Spirit of God, not from a pastor on a platform. In every time and place, the sacrament can be trusted.

Another institution that shapes us is the Christian community itself. While it is true that churches are full of fallible people and no congregation is flawless, the apostle Paul is right to say that the church is the one body of Christ, and “*in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*” (1 Corinthians 12:13). No leader on a stage can be as supportive or inspiring as a community that is open to the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the book, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community*, Tim Chester and Steve Timmis claim that: “The prevailing view of life today is that of an individual standing on his or her own, heroically juggling various responsibilities – family, friendships, career, leisure, chores, decisions, and money.” They propose an alternative model in which we “view our various activities and responsibilities as spokes of a wheel. At the center or hub is not me as an individual but us as members of the Christian community.”

This description resonates with me. I often feel like that lone ranger attempting to juggle all of life’s roles and responsibilities. But as I read scripture, I rediscover that community is at the heart of the Christian life. In Acts 2:42-47, we learn that Christian community is at least three things: spiritual, sacrificial, and spreading.

**Spiritual**. Verse 42 says that the early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. These four elements are spiritual elements. Beware of counterfeit communities: there is no substitute for Christian community because no other community is bound together by the Holy Spirit of God.

**Sacrificial**. Verses 44-45 speak of how the early Christian community cared for one another, meeting each person’s need, and giving everything they had to support one another. They were generous to the point of being sacrificial.

**Spreading**. Verse 47 shows that Christian community is contagious. Every day the joys and benefits of living in Christian community attracted others to join. Outsiders saw how they lived and served one another, and they wanted to be part of this transformative community.

Moses knew that no performance could be as powerful as the tradition of Passover. No pastor on a platform can shape people like the sacrament of the Lord’s supper. No earthly organization can be as transformative as a Spirit-filled community. The challenge for us is to turn away from performers and focus on building a church we and others can trust.

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**Transformative, Not Performative**

Sunday, September 6, 2020 Exodus 12:1-14

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

What do Sen. Ted Cruz and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have in common? At first glance, you might think: Nothing. He is a Republican and she is a Democrat, on opposite ends of the political spectrum. But consider this: Both are performers. Cruz hosts a podcast called “Verdict,” which looks at the important news stories of the day. Ocasio-Cortez (known as AOC) appears frequently in magazine and television interviews. Both have identifiable brands, and they use their elected positions as platforms from which to comment on culture and politics. Cruz and AOC are performers on the stage called Congress.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. It is important for our leaders to have high profiles. If you support them, you certainly want them to have influence. The problem arises when a person uses their position as a stage. Yuval Levin, in his book, A Time to Build, writes that when institutions are used as stages, people lose trust. “We trust an institution when we think that it forms the people within it to be trustworthy,” says Levin, “so that not only does it perform an important social function…but it also…provides an ethic that shapes the people within it.”

Think of how the armed forces forms a person’s character. Or how the church informs a person’s ethics. In the past, Congress was this kind of formative institution, shaping people to promote their views and build consensus for the common good. Think of how Bob Dole and George McGovern, leaders at opposite ends of the political spectrum, worked together in the Senate to build a broad, nonpartisan support for anti-hunger programs.

Sadly, institutions are becoming less formative and more performative. Performer politicians “want to be seen as outsiders overturning a discredited establishment,” writes Michael Gerson in The Washington Post. For them, “public office is not so much a place to serve and achieve but a means to raise the profile of their activism.”