When politicians take this approach, the purpose of institutions shifts. We move, 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.” There is nothing liberal or conservative about this. It is a completely bipartisan cultural shift.

“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” (Levin). Churches are not immune to this kind of shift. Church members are increasingly drawn to leaders who have a big stage: think of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert, Joel Osteen or Paula White. They blur they blur the line between the person and the Gospel message. The result, sadly, is that the institutional church loses the trust of the people it seeks to serve.

The book of Exodus makes clear that Moses was not looking for a big stage. When God appears to Moses in the burning bush and proposes that Moses liberate the Israelites from slavery, Moses asks, “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 or to take center stage. Going a step further, 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 for Moses.

After God sends rescues the people, God gives Moses 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” (Exodus 12:14). Passover is an institution that is formative for the Jewish people, shaping their lives from the time of Moses to today. They do not need Moses to perform for them, because they have something else to form them: the Passover.

During Passover, Jews eat a piece of meat, “roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (Exodus 12:8). They remember that their ancestors ate hurriedly, because they had to flee 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” (Exodus 12:13).

Passover is about freedom, 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” (Lind, *Vox).*

Passover shapes the Jewish people by reminding them how God worked powerfully to liberate their ancestors from slavery and connecting them to this important history. Passover also awakens their compassion toward people who are oppressed today: migrants traveling toward freedom; people trapped in poverty or ethnic strife; political dissidents oppressed for holding different views. Passover shapes a certain kind of moral and ethical person. It is *formative,* not performative.

There are institutions that can be formative for Christians, too. More important than any preacher on a platform are the traditions that form us as followers of Christ. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both of which have roots in Passover, shape us as a distinctive community and make the institutional church more trustworthy. During Passover, there is a ritual of handwashing so the participant may be ritually clean before God. In baptism, our sins are washed away, and we stand fresh and new before God. Baptism forms us and our theology, establishing our righteousness before God thanks to Christ’s redeeming work at the cross.

When Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples, he took a loaf of bread, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28). The Lord’s supper forms us and feeds us as followers of Christ. We eat the bread, the body of Christ, so that we can become the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus in the world today. We are strengthened to be the hands and feet of Jesus, showing his love and advancing his mission and ministry. The blood of the covenant reminds 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 liberated from sin and freed to be Christ’s agents of transforming love in the world. 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.

Christian community is another institution that shapes us. I had a seminary professor who reminded us that the church is full of sinners, and as pastors we are chief among them. Churches are filled with fallible people, and no congregation is flawless; but 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 novel, *City of Peace*, a Methodist minister named Harley Camden suffers the devastating loss of his wife and daughter in a terrorist attack. Sent by his bishop to a tiny congregation in a small town, he begins his ministry as a bitter man. But then the Holy Spirit starts to work, primarily through the people around him. One day, as he is trying to finish a sermon, he has a conversation with a neighbor name Tawnya.

“We Methodists are probably not as tuned into the Spirit as we should be,” admits Harley. “The Spirit is wild and unpredictable, and that makes us uncomfortable. Reminds us of faith-healing and speaking in tongues.”

“But that’s not all the Spirit does,” says Tawnya.

“You’re right,” says Harley. “I have felt the Spirit. It has calmed me and guided me.”

“Sounds like a healing power to me,” Tawnya says. “The Spirit is active in the community, the church, the Body of Christ.”

Talking with Tawnya, Harley experiences a sudden sense of relief that he doesn’t have to be alone in his grief and anger and frustration, because the Spirit is with him, really with him. He realizes that he needs to switch boats. Instead of doing the exhausting work of rowing all by himself, it is time for him to jump into a sailboat and allow the wind of the Spirit to push him forward.

Moses knew that no performance could be as powerful as the institution of Passover. In similar manner, no pastor on a platform can shape people like the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s supper in a Spirit-filled community. Our challenge, as we begin this new church school year, is to be formative Christians, being shaped by the sacraments and the community of believers and the Holy Spirit of God, as we build a church community that people trust.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we begin this new school year, we gather as a community of believers, a family of your children. We thank you for the renewal of the past months and our safe return to this place. We thank you for the promise of the days ahead and for the blessing of your presence. Be with us this year. Open our hearts to be people with and for others. Help us to be purposeful, open to growth, faithful to you, loving one another, and committed to doing justice. Keep us safe in body and spirit. Let us be gentle with ourselves while striving to serve your greater glory. In and for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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**No Stage for Moses**

Sunday, September 8, 2024  [Exodus 12:1-14](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+12%3a1-14&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

What do Senator Ted Cruz and Representative 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. So yes, they have their differences. But consider this: Both are performers. Cruz hosts a podcast called “Verdict,” which looks at the important news stories of the day. Ocasio-Cortez (aka AOC) appears frequently in magazine and television interviews. Both have identifiable brands, and both use their elected positions as platforms from which to comment on culture and politics. Cruz and Ocasio-Cortez are performers on the congressional stage.

Which is not necessarily a bad thing. We might argue that it is important for our elected leaders to have high profiles. If we support them, we want them to have influence. But problems arise when a person takes the stage. Yuval Levin authored a book, *A Time to Build*, in which he claims 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 at the same time provides an ethic that shapes the people within it.” Did you get that? We trust institutions that positively shape people.

Think of the military. Or schools. Or our family. Or the church. Each institution performs an important social function and an ethic that shapes us. In years past, Congress was a formative institution, shaping people in such a way that they could fight for their positions but also build consensus. An example might be Bob Dole and George McGovern, leaders at opposite ends of the political spectrum who worked in the U.S. Senate to build a broad, nonpartisan consensus in support of anti-hunger programs.

Unfortunately, institutions are now less formative and more *performative*. Performer politicians “want to be seen as outsiders overturning a discredited establishment,” writes Michael Gerson in *The Washington Post.* Whether they want to “drain the swamp” or clean up corruption in Washington D.C., for many politicians, “public office is not so much a place to serve and achieve but a means to raise the profile of their activism.”