

From Pragmatism to Doctrinal Commitment: An Evangelical Megachurch Embraces “Sacrament”¹

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The corporate worship of Evangelicals serves to anchor core conceptions of Evangelicalism, even as other important aspects of the tradition serve to explain it. To be sure, Evangelical worship is plural and diverse, akin to a mosaic²—a reality that common references to the group sometimes belie. This diversity has informed my own work in that I aim to look at particular congregations and entities within Evangelical life before I aim for generalizations of the tradition. This paper stems from an effort to study a particular Evangelical megachurch that embraces the category of “sacrament,” a theological concept not typically embraced by self-identified Evangelicals. By investigating a community’s embrace of the term, this paper contributes to the growing study of Evangelicals at worship while also acknowledging the diversity sometimes discovered within their ranks.

Church of the Highlands, Birmingham, Alabama: Background

A megachurch known throughout the southeast of the US, with some national recognition as well, the Church of the Highlands constitutes the second largest church in the United States according to some surveys,³ and is by far the largest church in the Evangelical Bible-belt of Alabama. Its senior pastor, Chris Hodges, is also its founding pastor. Pastor Hodges reports that God gave him the vision to begin Highlands in 2000 during a period of prayer and fasting. At the time, Pastor Hodges was already in ministry with colleagues who expressed a strong call for church planting and had consolidated their energies toward that effort.⁴ After receiving the vision, Hodges was committed.

Pastor Hodges launched Church of the Highlands in February of 2001 with thirty-two charter members, gathering in the auditorium of Mountain Brook High School. For several months, attendance regularly numbered between two- and

three-hundred. Then, on the first Sunday following the September 11, 2001, attacks, attendance was over 1,000. The numbers kept growing so that, six months later, they were holding multiple weekend services and soon after that opening multiple branch locations, with new branches opening as recently as 2023. Now with twenty-six campuses, the church typically provides a video of Pastor Hodges preaching to all campuses, with music and other elements led live in each gathering. Attendance has grown to between 55,000 and 60,000 people weekly.

Church of the Highlands was not the first church in which Hodges held a pastoral role. Before moving to Birmingham, he had been serving Bethany World Prayer Center (now Bethany Church, in Louisiana), formerly Bethany Baptist Church. The congregation left the Southern Baptist Convention to pursue a more charismatic-influenced mission, an influence Hodges has identified as central for him.

There are three notable influences on Pastor Hodges' ministry and leadership—guiding inspirations he has shared publicly. The first is John Maxwell, leader of the Maxwell Leadership Corporation, and author of many books on the subject, most notably *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*.⁵ Hodges claims Maxwell as a friend and colleague, and Maxwell joins a group gathered by Hodges almost annually to develop the leadership culture of Highlands. The second influence is Hillsong Church and its former senior pastor, Brian Houston. Hodges has expressed appreciation for the growth emphasis of Hillsong and reportedly has a relationship with Houston, having sought to learn from Houston's approach at Hillsong. The third influence is the Association of Related Churches, or ARC.⁶ Hodges is one of six founding members of ARC, which is a loose connection of churches that are especially focused on church planting and related resourcing. The Association began in 2000 and its leadership team provided part of the motivation and much of the financial support for Hodges' founding of Church of the Highlands in 2001. Hodges remains on the leadership team of ARC today. Since 2000, ARC reports having planted more than 1,000 churches.⁷

Worship at the Church of the Highlands follow what has come to be recognized as a typical "contemporary" worship service pattern, centering especially on music composed in popular idioms and the preaching of lengthy sermons. Highlands' worship team has followed the model of other Evangelical megachurches, having released some twenty-five albums of original music over the past two decades.

How, though, does Church of the Highlands describe its theology? According to its leaders, Church of the Highlands is:

- a historic, Christian church that it sees itself as in the lineage of great tradition, "orthodox" Christianity, and not a "restoration" church.
- a Protestant church that especially emphasizes the cross, resurrection, and the Bible, along with the five *solas* of grace, faith, Christ, Scripture, and "all for God's glory alone."

- a baptistic church that affirms believer's baptism, constituting a believers' church where church members covenant with one another.
- an Evangelical church that emphasizes "Bible and gospel people," alongside Bebbington's quadrilateral emphases of Bible, cross, conversion, and activism.⁸
- a charismatic church that emphasizes the indwelling and continued filling of the Holy Spirit in believers in ways that are manifest through concrete gifts, including the miraculous healing of the sick, and one in which the Holy Spirit dwells especially with the gathered church at worship, resulting in the faithful worshipers experiencing the real presence of God.

In keeping with increasingly popular manifestations of Evangelicalism,⁹ Church of the Highlands is also known for its affirmation of conservative politics. Some of Pastor Hodges actions in the political sphere have been among the church's chief scandal-inducing controversies. For instance, in 2020, Hodges liked several social media posts from conservative personality and founder of Turning Point USA, Charlie Kirk, including the statement, "white privilege is a myth." This particular episode garnered local notoriety and resulted in Church of the Highlands losing a lease agreement with the city of Birmingham for one of its campuses. While Hodges did later apologize for his social media behavior and his engagement related to topics such as this has since diminished, his participation in this kind of politicking in public spaces is in sync with popular understandings of Evangelicalism and its political leanings and associations in the United States.

Affirmation of "Sacrament" at Highlands

Church of the Highlands exemplifies a lot of what is common in megachurch Evangelicalism. In terms of its faith and practice, its priorities and emphases, its liturgical order and ethos—there are many American Evangelical megachurches that look and feel like Church of the Highlands. A crucial exception, however, is that in its Statement of Faith, Church of the Highlands affirms its faith in and through "sacraments." This is atypical of Evangelical megachurches, especially ones that also claim to be "baptistic." Baptistic churches would more often affirm the language of "ordinance" than "sacrament"—that is if they refer at all to baptism and the Lord's table in their Statements of Faith. To be sure, the language of "sacrament" is uncommon in Evangelicalism. What's more, at Church of the Highlands the "sacraments" are three:

- water baptism of the professing believer in the name of the triune God;
- the Lord's Supper, described as "a unique time of communion in the presence of God when the elements of bread and grape juice (the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ) are taken in remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross;"¹⁰
- and marriage, described as "a covenant, a sacred bond between one man and one woman, instituted by and publicly entered into before God."¹¹

While there is a great variety across history, in recent centuries churches in the West have usually numbered sacraments as two (baptism and Lord's Supper) or seven (as in the Catholic Church). In rare instances when there are three, they have not often included marriage. What's going on at Highlands?

Since its beginning in 2001, Church of the Highlands has affirmed the language of "sacrament" in regard to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Church leaders attest to the intentionality behind using the language and category of "sacrament." According to them, it is especially the charismatic position of Church of the Highlands that makes it particularly open to sacraments and sacramentality, described by them as a theological emphasis on God's presence and agency in the rituals Christ himself ordained. That God is present in these rituals has been a consistent point in their teaching.

Marriage, though, was not included in the original 2001 list of sacraments. It was added in 2013 in reaction to what church leaders at the time perceived to be evolving views of marriage in American society—a change notably evident in the June 26, 2013, US Supreme Court ruling that deemed parts of the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act" to be unconstitutional in that the government cannot discriminate against married lesbian and gay couples regarding benefits and legal protections.

According to some of its leaders, Church of the Highlands' decision to list marriage as a "sacrament" was initially driven by a pragmatic effort to establish protections around their views on marriage, namely that it constitutes "a sacred bond between one man and one woman."¹² To reflect this view they changed not only their public-facing "Statement of Faith," but also their church bylaws, which legal experts had informed them carry more weight in a court of law. Put simply, in 2013 church leaders feared that the federal government could begin forcing churches like Church of the Highlands to recognize and/or officiate marriages they deemed unbiblical. By utilizing the language of "sacrament" for marriage, and by including this in their bylaws, they believed they were in a better legal position to continue affirming and practicing their view of marriage.

Seeing in "Sacrament" a Pathway for Theological Exploration and Renewal

At this point, it would be easy to stop the narrative, seeing in this change and its origins a highly pragmatic move—one that has had little theological impact on Church of the Highlands. If the change in regard to marriage as "sacrament" was indeed merely pragmatic, this would reinforce the critiques of some outside the Evangelical church who see in its worship practices the principles of pragmatism, consumerism, and other ideas that are seemingly a-theological and unrelated to faith, practice, and worship. However, what Church of the Highlands leaders have gone on to describe is how this pragmatic turn led to a period of reflection and subsequent intentionality regarding the Church's affirmation of "sacrament" more

generally and in its particular application to marriage. A pragmatically-inspired turn in practice led to subsequent deliberations and decisions that effectively catalyzed the engagement with a more historical, ecumenical form of Christianity—at least in terms of how the church’s leaders envision Church of the Highlands’ position in society and its relation to the broader Christian tradition.

The affirmation of marriage as a sacrament led to renewed reflection on the agency of God in the sacraments and in worship more broadly. “Sacrament” became understood as a practice in which God’s presence is active, providing grace to the participant who will, as a result, experience God’s presence and be spiritually nourished with divine grace through the act of participating in the sacrament. Church leaders called this move a “theological advantage” for the church, one in which God’s presence and agency could be more intentionally recognized as that which undergirds the entire ritual.

In broader terms, many church leaders believe the move to a more robust embrace of “sacrament” supported Highlands’s move toward charismatic worship. Indeed, queries came from some as to whether additional practices, such as “healing of the sick,” should also be categorized as “sacraments.” They saw “sacrament” as a way to name God’s presence as the key factor supporting worshipers’ spiritual growth without negating the agency and participation of the believer. As they have come to understand it, their vision of “sacrament” in no way negates the agency and full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful worshiper. The quality of reception on the part of the participant matters in that it makes the grace of the sacrament effective. Indeed, church leaders confirmed explicitly that they do not affirm the idea of *ex opere operato*.

In conversations with leaders at Highlands College, the ministerial education arm of Church of the Highlands, they indicated that they embraced the borrowed metaphor of a “sailboat” to describe the dynamic of “sacrament.” In this view, a sacrament is neither a rowboat nor a motorboat, but a sailboat. The sail depends entirely on God who, through the Holy Spirit, catalyzes, sustains, and guides the boat. But the fact that the boat is in the water sailing, and that it has a proper sail to begin with, depends on the sailors—on human agency. This dual emphasis on objectivity and subjectivity is in line with other baptistic thinkers who have adopted the terminology and category of “sacrament.”

In summary, church leaders’ reflections on their affirmation of marriage as a “sacrament” led to their deepening theological commitment to several key points:

- efficacy of the sacrament is dependent neither on the worthiness of the person officiating nor the quality or type of the elements used.
- God is always ready to meet us in sacramental rituals, and uses imperfect people to do so.

- God is the primary agent in sacramental rituals. Human participants and leaders are secondary, effecting the extent to which grace makes an impact, but not the provision of grace through Godself.
- To some extent, the rite of the sacrament, matters—a point not always emphasized among Evangelicals. In the case of marriage, the ritual should take place in a church, performed publicly before a body of believers, and officiated by a licensed pastor of Church of the Highlands in order to receive their full blessing. “A legal marriage doesn’t cut it,” church leaders iterated. This is because “marriage is not just a legal status, but a spiritual reality”—one which is ultimately only effected through Christ’s action.
- The Lord’s Supper and baptism, similarly, should be celebrated publicly, in and with a body of covenanted believers, and presided over by a licensed pastor.

Sacrament’s Effects on Ordination Status

There are two ordained offices at Church of the Highlands: church elder and senior leader. Those ordained consider applicants for ordination on a quarterly basis. In part due to Church of the Highlands’ expansion of the status and definition of “sacrament,” as well as because of the growing number of members seeking ordination, the church’s senior leadership has increasingly systematized their teaching on and process for ordination.

Licensure is the initial step toward ordination to senior leadership and in practice constitutes another office in the church. Currently, nearly all who become licensed pastors have received some training at Highlands College and have already served Church of the Highlands in some formal capacity. Those who become licensed pastors can preside at all sacraments and can occasionally preach. Regular preaching, however, is reserved to those who are fully ordained as senior leaders. Typically, a licensed pastor will only become ordained if he or she is needed for regular preaching in the church. While Pastor Hodges preaches the Sunday morning service, which is recorded and/or streamed for all campuses, there are other weekly gatherings at each campus that often include preaching and teaching.

Currently, Church of the Highlands leaders receive more applicants for licensure than they are prepared to approve, and ordination to senior pastoral leadership is quite rare. As a result, they encourage those considering this step to evaluate with others in leadership if ordination will better equip them to minister in and for the church. In some cases, church leadership does not approve candidates for licensure because their work does not clearly require licensure and/or ordination. Activities clearly requiring ordination include presiding at baptism, the Lord’s Supper, or a marriage ceremony, or offering regular preaching.

One exception to these guiding norms is the status of the senior worship leader at Church of the Highlands who is ordained as “pastor” even though he typically

does not preside at sacraments and does not preach. The senior worship pastor operates at the main campus. Others who lead in worship, even if they are primary worship leaders at their respective campuses, are not ordained or licensed.

Church leaders have related the increasingly rigid and formal process leading to ordination to the church's teaching on and practice of "sacrament." They recall an earlier time in the Church's history when licensure and ordination were more readily available to interested candidates. Now, senior leaders aim for a small number of candidates approved for licensure and subsequent ordination. The way in which ordination has become more systematized has also resulted in a more obvious and, according to church leaders, intentionally hierarchical model of leadership—one which impacts worship and sacramental practice. While those licensed can, in theory, preside over the sacraments, this responsibility is typically undertaken only by those ordained as senior leaders. Senior leaders are also the ones who make decisions about how sacramental rituals are to be performed, even if a licensed pastor is the one presiding.

This dynamic stems, in part, from Pastor Hodges' decision that he himself is to be ultimately responsible for Sunday worship at all twenty-six campuses. He is known to be particular about what goes on at the various sites, at times even including himself in song selection. This is also true of the sacramental rituals, including marriage. While Church of the Highlands has no publicly available guides or scripts for these rituals, church leaders report that Pastor Hodges has outlined particular ways in which they should be practiced at all campuses. This means that couples who will be married at Highlands will be asked to follow the ceremony as outlined by the Church, which may result in less flexibility than in other Evangelical contexts.

Acknowledging the Nuance Present at Highlands

A number of church leaders attested to the pragmatic route Church of the Highlands took to embrace marriage as a sacrament. They said that including marriage initially solved what they viewed to be an "urgent problem," that of maintaining assurances that the Church would be allowed to practice and affirm their particular view of marriage. But they also saw in this view a renewed theological embrace of "sacrament" in ways that were more tangible and relevant for worshipers at Church of the Highlands than they initially conceived—a point of both pastoral and theological significance.

At the same time, it remains apparent that this perspective is not unanimous among church leaders, some of whom have voiced objections to the church's current position. These leaders, for one, note that, while the "Statement of Faith" has actually changed little since the Church's inception, it is in theory a dynamic document. Church leaders see in it room to evolve, edit, clarify, revise, and deepen Highlands's public description of its faith. This means that they do not see current

teaching as set in stone. Others leaders have articulated that they prioritize simplicity and value clarity. Some are not comfortable with the inclusion of marriage as a “sacrament” and a few in leadership would prefer not to use the category of “sacrament” at all—not because they disagree with the teaching, but because they believe use of this terminology creates unnecessary complexity and potential confusion.

While church leaders would officially eschew the label “seeker service” and believe their gathering constitutes one for and among believers who have covenanted together as a result, in part, of their participation in the Church’s sacramental life—e.g., in believer’s baptism—in fairly typical Evangelical fashion they still aim to assimilate outsiders easily, to prioritize the salvation of those who are “lost,” and to efficiently orient worshipers toward the public worship life and culture of Highlands. Some have thus found the affirmation of “sacrament” in general and of marriage in particular (and the resultant theology) to add unnecessary complexity, detracting from efforts toward simplicity in the church’s teaching of its faith and in the process of bringing in new members.

Evidence of Growing Pains, Institutionalization, and Openings for Ecumenism

Other church leaders have read into this particular moment the inevitable growing pains of the Church of the Highlands movement, or of any such movement. With age, growth, formalization of structures, increasing professionalization, etc., has come a clear increase in institutionalization. They thus read in this reality a tension they believe will become a mainstay in the Church’s life, at least in the near future—a tension between “academic” explanations and teachings around church life, and those who want to “simply know God.” Of course, this move toward institutionalization at Church of the Highlands is not unique, nor is the presence of those suspicious of the one who may “know about God,” but not really “know God.” Still, the discussion of “sacrament” and the inclusion of marriage as a sacrament has made these underlying tensions more apparent at Highlands.

While some church leaders attest to sensing strongly the present tension, it can also be read as a sign of increasing ecumenical engagement from at least some church leaders and administrators at Church of the Highlands and Highlands College. Certainly, the College has been a driving factor. A number of faculty at the College have not been a part of the Church of the Highlands community for long, and many received their training from institutions affiliated with other denominations and theological traditions. To be sure, this ecumenical engagement is minimal when compared to the ecumenical efforts of many other Christian denominations, but in a church known for its insularity, wherein nearly all theological reflection and practice of faith is self-referential, drawing from theological traditions and thinkers outside of Church of the Highlands is noteworthy.

Church of the Highlands's ability to find in external traditions resources to interpret and guide their faith may ultimately contribute to its ability to enter ecumenical spaces. Given the influence of Church of the Highlands, not only in its own ARC network but also in the wider Evangelical world of the southeastern United States, its new openness to churchly theology has the potential to influence other Evangelical megachurches toward the same.

The affirmation of "sacrament" at Church of the Highlands and that community's subsequent journey into deeper theological reflection subverts many commonly held assumptions about Evangelicals. As evidenced here, some Evangelicals engage theology deeply and demonstrate an openness to a variety of theological and ritual traditions, even those typically eschewed by Evangelicalism, if they can be engaged in ways that support their efforts to understand their faith and worship experience. Close readings of particular Evangelical communities—this paper being an effort toward such a reading—that pay attention to the ways in which church leaders and worshipers describe their own experiences are essential and a means by which the academy can engage Evangelicalism with greater clarity and nuance.

Notes

1. This paper remains part of an ongoing effort to better understand Church of the Highlands and its educational arm, Highlands College. It should not be read as a final say on the congregation and its teachings. Information on Church of the Highlands was gathered through one-on-one conversations with church and college leaders on May 19, 2023 and November 6, 2023. Information gathered is provided here anonymously so as to adhere to ethical requirements for research.
2. See, for instance, Melanie C. Ross, *Evangelical Worship: An American Mosaic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2-4.
3. This statistic is according to "Outreach 100: 2023 Largest Participating Churches," accessed January 1, 2024, <https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america>, which centers on attendance averages (rather than membership) through surveys performed by a Lifeway-sponsored research team alongside research performed by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The 2023 report listed Church of the Highlands as the second largest church in the United States, with average weekly attendance of 60,000.
4. In a conversation with one dean at Highlands College (the ministerial education arm of Highlands) who was also a staff member at the Church for nearly fifteen years, the dean recalled how Pastor Hodges and a colleague, Pastor Billy Hornsby, a fellow leader in the Association of Related Churches (the connectional entity of which Highlands is a part) both set out to plant churches at the same time. They created a pact, of sorts, that if one of their church plants did not succeed, then that pastor would go to support the other congregation that was thriving. Both of these churches, actually, went on to become sustained, in part thanks to their cooperative and connectional efforts.
5. John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Nashville: Harper Christian Resources, 2022).
6. See "Association of Related Churches," accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.arcchurches.com/>.
7. "Our Story," Association of Related Churches, accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.arcchurches.com/about/our-story/>.
8. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).
9. See, for example, Kristen de Groot, "Nationalism, American Evangelicals, and Conservatism," *Penn Today*, May 19, 2021, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/nationalism-american-evangelicals-and-conservatism>.

10. Church of the Highlands, "Statement of Faith," accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.churchof-thehighlands.com/about/faith>.
11. Church of the Highlands, "Statement of Faith."
12. Church of the Highlands, "Statement of Faith."