

Perhaps even more, though, filled the baptistry of the second Baptist church that my parents selected when — or because — I was still unbaptized at 15, 16. Still hesitating. Even though this new baptistry stretched wide, inviting. Light blue glass panels revealing three of its five sides. Underwater bulbs illuminating its nonslip floor. And above, a mural of the cross beamed rays of light down into the pool.

But at the sight, my eyes averted. And my throat swallowed, closed. Still scared.

Embarrassed, also. For when the monthly trays of communion wafers and grape juice glasses were passed down the pews, anyone unbaptized, anyone living in unconfessed sin — the former just a category of the latter — was to let the sacrament pass by.

Was to try to find a neutral destination for the eyes, a nonchalant position for the mouth, a casual composure for the hands. While all the other fingers were bringing the cracker to the lips. All the other heads were tilting back with the plastic cup of juice, like a tiny, bloody baptism of the tongue.

“Are You Washed in the Blood?” the congregation sang in between the wafer and the imitation wine. The hymns’ metaphors gross, broken, like the body of Christ. Attempting a futile cleansing with the staining agent — the potentially infectious fluid — of blood. But we sang on: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.”

And, of course, the compulsion for coverage culminated in one final chorus: “Calvary Covers It All.”

I could no longer join in the music, though, at our previous Baptist church.