

## Who May Be Invited to the Table?

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For three decades the Church of St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco has had a custom of inviting all present at the liturgy to receive communion.<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory's may be the first congregation of the Episcopal Church to make this explicit invitation,<sup>2</sup> although it is difficult to make a definitive statement about the origins of a practice that has arisen at the grassroots level. Certainly the practice has become more widespread in the decades since Schell and St. Gregory's co-rector, Richard Fabian, first issued the invitation.

When I began teaching in a seminary in 1995, the possibility of intentionally permitting communion before baptism was not widely discussed among students. Today, it is a hot topic in my liturgics courses. While I include it on my syllabus in the required senior sacramental theology class, it comes up almost as soon as we begin studying the meaning and historical development of baptism and confirmation. Moreover, I can count on it coming up in the introductory class for first-year students. I can now assign substantive articles for students to read, whereas fifteen years ago the only published materials were brief articles in *Open*, the journal of Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission, including Fabian's *apologia* "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Schell, "Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission: *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 251–252.

<sup>2</sup> Clayton L. Morris implies this when he says that "St. Gregory's position has launched an international discussion on the topic" in *Holy Hospitality: Worship and the Baptismal Covenant* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005), 103.

<sup>3</sup> In chronological order, articles from the perspective of the Episcopal Church include: Richard Fabian, "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ," *Open* (Fall 1994): 1–4; Leonel L. Mitchell, "Should the Unbaptized Be Welcomed to the Lord's Table?" *Open* (Fall 1994): 5–6; Paul Gibson, "Who May Eat and Drink?" *Open* (Fall 1997): 6–8; Andrew Waldo, "Baptism and Eucharist: Challenges," *Open* (Summer 2000): 1–4; Stephen Reynolds, "Baptism and Communion," *Open* (Winter-Spring 2001):

The rather rapid spread of this new practice in the Episcopal Church,<sup>4</sup> followed by theological reflection in published articles, is not unusual in Christian history. Theology often develops after new practices become widespread, and legislation may not be far behind. The 2006 General Convention reaffirmed the canonical requirement that only those baptized are eligible to receive communion and called for a study of the relationship of baptism and eucharistic practice.<sup>5</sup> At the 2009 General Convention the House of Bishops rejected a resolution requesting a review of the canon.<sup>6</sup>

Like many liturgical scholars, I am reluctant to embrace enthusiastically a significant change in the sacramental norm of baptism completed by participation in the eucharist. Yet the rapid spread of this practice of an open invitation to communion and the testimony of individuals who have been led to Christian faith and baptism through participation in the eucharist lead me to wonder what is stirring in the

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1–9; Donald Schell, “Breaking Barriers: Rethinking Our Theology of Baptism,” *Open* (October 10, 2002): <http://www.associatedparishes.org/articles/Article.aspx?id=41>; James Farwell, “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion,’” *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 215–238; Kathryn Tanner, “In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell,” *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 473–485; James Farwell, “A Brief Reflection on Kathryn Tanner’s Response to ‘Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus,’” *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 303–310; J. Barrington Bates, “Giving What Is Sacred to Dogs? Welcoming All to the Eucharistic Feast,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2005): 53–74; Stephen Edmondson, “Opening the Table: The Body of Christ and God’s Prodigal Grace,” *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 213–234.

<sup>4</sup> An open table, that is, communion for all present, whether baptized or not, is common practice in United Methodist churches today. In a historical and theological study of the practice, United Methodist scholar Mark Stamm concludes that “the Wesleyan concept of the Eucharist as a converting ordinance is known and believed by many United Methodists,” although Stamm does not attribute to John Wesley an explicit description of the eucharist as a “converting ordinance”; see his *Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2006), 118.

<sup>5</sup> Resolution 2006-D084, [http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_resolution.pl?resolution=2006-D084](http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2006-D084). The Theology Committee of the House of Bishops completed work on a report in May 2009, “Reflections on Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist: A Response to Resolution D084 of the 75th General Convention,” [http://anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/articles/House\\_of\\_Bishops\\_on\\_Open\\_Table.pdf](http://anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/articles/House_of_Bishops_on_Open_Table.pdf). At the October 2011 forum in Southern Ohio, Bishop Thomas Breidenthal, a member of the Theology Committee, stated that the committee is continuing its work on the subject.

<sup>6</sup> Resolution 2009-D089, [http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_resolution.pl?resolution=2009-D089](http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2009-D089)

Episcopal Church and how the Holy Spirit might be at work in this grassroots movement.

### *Changing Sacramental Norms*

A half-century ago, the question was not communion before baptism, but whether individuals could receive communion before confirmation. Prior to the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, prayer books of the Episcopal Church included the so-called “confirmation rubric”: “And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.”<sup>7</sup> To move from that boundary to our current debate in just a few decades is an enormous transition.<sup>8</sup> Therein lies part of the difficulty, from my perspective.

The 1979 Prayer Book fundamentally reshaped our practice of baptism, and this renewed practice is gradually reorienting our understanding of baptism. Increasingly, baptism is seen as foundational for our understanding of the church. That is, our ecclesial identity is rooted in baptism. No longer is baptism primarily an individual transaction, typically administered to infants soon after birth. Rather, baptism is communal, a core practice of the community of faith. It is not just a moment in a person’s life, but a way of life that pledges us to follow Jesus and draws us into the life of the triune God, a dance of love given and love received, as Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook and Fredrica Harris Thompsett explain: “Baptismal theology has shifted from an emphasis upon the stain of original sin to the promise of new life in Christ. We no longer ask, as we did in the past, ‘What happens if the infant dies?’ Today we might rephrase the question to ask, ‘What happens if the infant lives?’”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928), 299; hereafter cited as *BCP 1928*. The confirmation rubric was also included in the 1789 and 1892 Prayer Books, and in the Prayer Books of the Church of England. The phrase “ready and desirous to be confirmed” was introduced in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England, addressing, among other situations, the context of the American colonies where there were no bishops. Texts are available online at <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/>.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the shift to communion of all the baptized, see Ruth A. Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), 87–103, 132–161.

<sup>9</sup> Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Fredrica Harris Thompsett, *Born of Water, Born of Spirit: Supporting the Ministry of the Baptized in Small Congregations* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2010), 5.

Soon after the 1979 Prayer Book was adopted, Theodore Eastman, then Bishop of Maryland, wrote a book entitled *The Baptizing Community*. In his introduction, Bishop Eastman confessed to some uneasiness about the title. After all, it is God who baptizes, God who bestows the forgiveness of sin and raises Christians to a new life of grace. But, Eastman explained,

the church lags and wanders in its mission in direct proportion to the distance that baptism is allowed to stray from the center of ecclesial life. The Matthean formula for mission clearly places baptism at the heart of the matter, for the church is seen as the community that evangelizes, baptizes, and teaches. That vision, that sense of priority, needs to be recaptured today. Other titles for this work were considered and discarded, for none of them seemed to describe the church adequately as the body that understands baptism to be the keystone sacrament around which life and mission are built.<sup>10</sup>

The 1979 Prayer Book did far more than reshape the theology and practice of baptism in the Episcopal Church. Another important factor in the current debate about the sequence of baptism and communion is the shift to weekly celebration of the eucharist as the principal Sunday service. While the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* gave equal significance to Morning and Evening Prayer, the Litany, and Holy Communion as the regular services of the church,<sup>11</sup> the 1979 Prayer Book describes the Holy Eucharist as “the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day and other major Feasts.”<sup>12</sup> This is more than a rhetorical change. The grassroots liturgical movement that swept through the Episcopal Church during the 1950s and 1960s not only set the stage for Prayer Book revision, it also fostered a return to the patristic norm of weekly celebration of the eucharist.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A. Theodore Eastman, *The Baptizing Community: Christian Initiation and the Local Congregation*, second edition (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 1991), 4; the first edition was published in 1982, and the introduction cited here was written for that edition.

<sup>11</sup> “The Order for Holy Communion, the Order for Morning Prayer, the Order for Evening Prayer, and the Litany, as set forth in this Book, are the regular Services appointed for Public Worship in this Church.” “Concerning the Service of the Church,” *BCP 1928*, vii.

<sup>12</sup> “Concerning the Service of the Church,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 13; hereafter cited as *BCP 1979*.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion, see Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 20–47.

During the same period that these changes in sacramental practice took root in the Episcopal Church, the United States experienced major changes in religious affiliation. A 2008 Gallup poll found that 77 percent of Americans claimed to identify with some form of Christian religion, a drop of 14 percent from 1948, the first year that Gallup began measuring religious affiliation in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 78.4 percent of respondents identified themselves as Christian, while 16.1 percent said that they were unaffiliated with any religion. Moreover, the Pew survey found that “young adults ages 18–29 are much more likely than those age 70 and older to say that they are not affiliated with any particular religion (25% vs. 8%).”<sup>15</sup> The statistics do not indicate how many of those who are unaffiliated have not been baptized. However, in view of the overall decline in religious affiliation over the past six decades, it seems likely that a growing percentage of the United States population is not baptized.

Together, these two momentous changes—decline in religious affiliation and celebration of the eucharist as the principal Sunday service every week—have created a new context for the Episcopal Church. It is possible and perhaps even likely that a visitor to Sunday worship in the Episcopal Church today will not have been baptized. Moreover, that visitor will most likely experience a celebration of the Holy Eucharist rather than Morning Prayer. Visitors who are not baptized are thus faced at their very first visit with the question of whether to receive communion, and congregations must decide what to say to their visitors. What invitation, if any, is printed in the worship leaflet (or projected on a screen)? What verbal invitation, if any, is offered beyond “The Gifts of God for the People of God”?

The pragmatic question of how to welcome unbaptized visitors to the eucharist prompts the further question of whether to change the canonical requirement for baptism prior to communion.<sup>16</sup> Anglican

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Newport, “This Easter, Smaller Percentage of Americans Are Christian” (April 10, 2009), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/117409/easter-smaller-percentage-americans-christian.aspx>.

<sup>15</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Report 1: Religious Affiliation,” <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.

<sup>16</sup> Canon I.17.7 states: “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.” The Episcopal Church, *Constitution and Canons* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), <https://www.churchpublishing.org/media/custom/general%20convention/Constitution%20and%20Canons%202009%20final%20pages.pdf>.

theological method calls for consideration of the witness of Scripture and Christian tradition, so it is to these that we now turn.

*The Witness of Scripture and Tradition*

Richard Fabian, founding rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, describes the congregation's practice as "patterning the sacraments after Christ." He explains:

Whereas John the Baptist called errant Jews to wash themselves and prepare for God's advancing kingdom, Jesus abandoned baptizing . . . and welcomed and dined with the unwashed and unqualified, the unprepared, as a prophetic sign for his own more radical message. Such dinner company was politically scandalous for a rabbi, and above all the actions ascribed to Jesus, this one led to his death. . . .

At St. Gregory's sacramental practice stands on the evidence of modern biblical scholarship, that the presence of unqualified people at the Lord's table was no anomaly, but an essential aspect of his chosen sign. This sign affords Christians little ground for distinguishing among disqualifications by allowing baptized and shriven sinners to attend, but not the rest. . . . Though historical certainty about Jesus still eludes us, and will elude us, the Church must follow Jesus' teaching and example as biblical study discloses these in our time, and shows them to the world by our common life.<sup>17</sup>

As Donald Schell explains, the "modern biblical scholarship" that was so influential for St. Gregory's was Norman Perrin's *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*.<sup>18</sup>

However, Perrin's work is now over forty years old. More recently, liturgical scholar Andrew McGowan has questioned both the claims made about Jesus' meal practice and the effort to base contemporary sacramental practice upon what is presumed to be the practice of the historical Jesus. McGowan acknowledges that Jesus frequently dined with those who were marginalized, but he points out that Jesus did so as a guest and not as a host:

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Fabian, "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ," *Open* 40, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 1–2.

<sup>18</sup> Schell, "Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission," 251–252.

What is perhaps more distinctive is Jesus' willingness to be welcomed, to sit at sinners' own tables, and to be in company at table with others whose status is dubious. This means that this aspect of Jesus' meal practice constitutes not so much the formation of a distinctive meal tradition, but chosen participation in the general tradition of meals known in his milieu.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, McGowan points out, stories of Jesus' meals are handed down in Scripture through the lenses of early Christian communities and their eucharistic meal practices. He concludes, "The inclusive Jesus of history and the gospels does not provide a clear or compelling model of communal meal practice without the matrix of the well-defined community that succeeded him."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps, then, we should look to the practice of the early church to help us determine whether to open communion to all without regard to baptism. The *Didache*, a church order usually dated to the late first or early second century, sets a clear demarcation: "But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'"<sup>21</sup> However, such proscriptions are often better evidence of what they purport to forbid than the practice they require.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the statement in the *Didache* suggests that some first-century Christian communities were giving communion to those who were not yet baptized. This practice may have been a point of controversy for that community. Evidence of such a dispute may also be inferred from the conclusion of the parable of the wedding banquet as recounted in Matthew's Gospel, where a man not wearing a wedding robe is cast into the outer darkness (Matthew 22:11–13), as Geoffrey Wainwright has argued: "In sacramental terms this means that only the baptized . . . are to be admitted to the

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew McGowan, "The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church: Eucharistic Origins and Admission to Communion," in *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Essays in Honor of Paul F. Bradshaw*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips (Portland, Ore.: Pastoral Press, 2004), 101–115, 107.

<sup>20</sup> McGowan, "The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church," 114.

<sup>21</sup> *Didache* 9, trans. Roberts and Donaldson, in *Early Christian Writings*, ed. Peter Kirby (2001), <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Bradshaw urges a hermeneutics of suspicion when interpreting ancient liturgical documents, including liturgical legislation. See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–20.



Lord's supper. . . . If Matthew needed to state this in such grave terms, it is highly likely that the question was controversial."<sup>23</sup>

Thus it is possible that in the first century some entered the Christian community by joining in their ritual meals and subsequently being baptized. However, scholars generally agree that by the second century, only those who had been baptized could be admitted to communion, as Justin Martyr writes in his First Apology: "And we call this food 'thanksgiving'; and no one may partake of it unless he is convinced of the truth of our teaching, and has been cleansed with the washing for forgiveness of sins and regeneration."<sup>24</sup> But baptism was much more than a mere ritual preliminary to participation in eucharistic fellowship. Christian initiation became a rich communal celebration in which the incorporation of the newly baptized was enacted not only in their welcome at the table for the first time but also in their participation in the exchange of the peace and in the prayers of the faithful, the priestly work of the body of Christ.

The practice of the early church (and the predominance of Christian tradition since then) thus points toward a sacramental norm of baptism culminating in reception of communion for the first time, even if this norm emerged gradually over the course of the first century and cannot be defended solely on the basis of Scripture. The significance of baptism is, however, well attested in Scripture. In the Book of Acts, as Christianity spreads from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), new believers are added through baptism. Emphasizing the significance of Jesus' "baptism" through his death on the cross, Donald Schell proposes that this baptism "completed [Jesus'] communion with the unprepared," and further implies that Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan was insignificant by comparison.<sup>25</sup> I suggest that this is a false dichotomy. Early Christian communities found rich meaning in baptism: participation in Jesus' death (Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:12), but also, for example, spiritual rebirth (John 3:1–8; Titus 3:5), conversion and pardon (Acts 2:38), adoption (Gal. 3:26), clothing

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<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, third edition (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 2002), 165. Wainwright cites several patristic references that suggest such an interpretation of the parable, that is, that only the baptized may participate in the eucharist.

<sup>24</sup> Justin Martyr, I Apology 66.1, in *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, ed. R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, third edition (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Schell, "Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission," 254.



with Christ (Gal. 3:27), enlightenment (John 9:1–11; Acts 9:1–19). To these theological interpretations must be added the baptism of Jesus, reported in each of the synoptic gospels, which became an important model for early Christian understanding and practice of baptism.<sup>26</sup>

Like the stories of Jesus' meal practice, the biblical accounts of Jesus' baptism, both his baptism in the Jordan and the baptism of his death on the cross, are accessible to us only through the perspectives of the early Christian communities that practiced baptism and eucharist. They give us great insight into the meaning and significance of Jesus' practices, but they cannot offer us a definitive answer to the question of sacramental norms for the church today, as Louis Weil points out:

The New Testament offers a witness to Christ Jesus to which all later generations that would call themselves Christian must be accountable. Yet that accountability is not based upon a rigid reenactment of some authorized text, but upon responding with faith to the realities of that community's life in the world. . . . The question for us is always, "How can we, assembled here in the name of Christ, best celebrate the signs of our shared baptismal faith? How can we be most faithful in our response to the love of God that is revealed in Jesus?"<sup>27</sup>

### *Baptism and Eucharist Today*

As the practice of the early church makes clear, baptism and eucharist are not separate sacraments but are inextricably linked. For the first time in centuries, the 1979 Prayer Book makes that connection explicit. In the book itself, eucharist follows baptism, an order that was fiercely debated as the book was being completed.<sup>28</sup> The decision to put baptism before eucharist was not so much about the sequence of

<sup>26</sup> For further discussion of the significance of Jesus' baptism for pre-Nicene theology and practice of baptism, see Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, second edition (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 41–114, and Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 14–37.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, The New Church's Teaching Series, vol. 12 (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2002), 138.

<sup>28</sup> Previous Prayer Books, beginning with the first English *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549, placed baptism after eucharist, at the beginning of a series of life-cycle rites that included confirmation, marriage, visitation of the sick, and burial. On the debate

two distinct rites as it was an effort to connect the two, since baptism now normatively concludes with the celebration of the eucharist. The eucharist then becomes the repeatable portion of baptism, as suggested in the postcommunion prayers: “dost assure us thereby . . . that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son”; “you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ”; “that we are living members of the Body of your Son.”<sup>29</sup>

Together, baptism and eucharist encode and enact different aspects of Christian faith and life—God’s gift of grace, conversion and transformation, the building up of community, a call to radical discipleship. Baptism is an experience of abundant grace as well as a commitment of one’s life to Christ; indeed, one can only make this commitment in response to God’s grace—“I will, with God’s help,” we say in response to the last five questions of the Baptismal Covenant.<sup>30</sup> Eucharist is about conversion and transformation and commitment as well as divine hospitality and grace. “Send us out to do the work you have given us to do,” we pray.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the eucharist itself is an enactment of our participation in God’s mission, as we are reconciled with one another and pour out our intercession for the needs of the world and the church.

Some of those who invite anyone to the table emphasize radical welcome and hospitality, the transforming experience of grace through the sacrament. They suggest that baptism then is the sacrament of commitment, where we align ourselves with Christ and the community of faith.<sup>32</sup> But this approach to the sacraments diminishes both sacraments by emphasizing just one dimension of each sacrament.

Donald Schell explains that in St. Gregory’s “evangelical practice in our mission setting it was not our intention to lessen baptism’s value or importance, and our congregation was regularly baptizing adults who were moved to conversion and commitment *because* they

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about the sequence of the rites in the 1979 *BCP*, see Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 184.

<sup>29</sup> *BCP* 1979, 339, 365, 366.

<sup>30</sup> *BCP* 1979, 304–305.

<sup>31</sup> *BCP* 1979, 366.

<sup>32</sup> “The church can welcome all to the Lord’s table following Jesus’ prophetic example, and when fully welcomed sinners show readiness for commitment, baptize them powerfully into Christ’s mission of service to the world.” Fabian, “Patterning the Sacraments after Christ,” 4.

had begun receiving communion.”<sup>33</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that adults in a number of congregations in the Episcopal Church have been drawn to baptism through their experience of eucharist. Yet many of the invitations to communion that I have heard and the accompanying pastoral practices emphasize welcome to the eucharist without an equal emphasis on baptism.<sup>34</sup> How do we invite people not only to be fed with the Body and Blood of Christ, but also to be washed with the waters of baptism, to die with Christ and be raised to new life? Might we welcome to communion those who are drawn to Jesus *and* encourage them to seek baptism if they are not already baptized?

United Methodist scholar Mark Stamm proposes that an open invitation to the communion table be understood in Methodist tradition as a sacramental exception to the classical order of Christian initiation. He explains, “Sacramental and liturgical exceptions are prophetic in nature. . . . An exception will highlight meanings of the Eucharist that may be obscured by the normative pattern itself.”<sup>35</sup> But, Stamm continues,

For this Methodist exception to make its deepest sense, it must exist in creative tension with a regular *praxis* of the church’s baptismal norm. . . . An open communion is permitted but the ancient baptismal norm is maintained. The norm and the exception exist in creative tension and the church can learn the wisdom of each.<sup>36</sup>

What might the Episcopal Church learn from our Methodist sisters and brothers as we seek to discern how the Spirit is at work in the growing practice of welcoming all to the table? How might we explore the creative tension between the open invitation to communion being practiced in many congregations and the renewed understanding of

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<sup>33</sup> Schell, “Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission,” 246.

<sup>34</sup> One of my students reported this semester that in congregations in different dioceses, he had seen practices of confirmation before baptism. The open invitation to the table in these congregations meant that parents were not bringing their children for baptism, and only when a group of teenagers was confirmed did the clergy realize that some had not yet been baptized. It is impossible to know whether these are isolated instances or evidence of a more widespread diminishment of baptism as a principal sacrament of the church.

<sup>35</sup> Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest*, 39.

baptism as a core sacrament that unfolds in a lifetime of Christian faith and practice?

With the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, the Episcopal Church adopted significant changes to its baptismal and eucharistic practices. Both sacraments are core practices that shape Christian faith and life and enact God's mission of reconciling love for the world. Strong arguments can be made for welcoming all to partake of the eucharistic feast. Equally strong arguments can be made for inviting those who are drawn to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ to come to the saving waters of baptism if they have not already been baptized.

But the sacramental norms of nearly two thousand years should not be set aside quickly. I suggest that in this time of discernment we practice generosity and seek to learn from congregations, including St. Gregory of Nyssa, that respond to their mission setting with open invitations to partake of the sacrament.<sup>37</sup> Of these same congregations, however, we should expect a vigorous practice of adult baptism and of the baptism of the children of believers, and we should encourage their theological reflection on their experience. We ought also to encourage all congregations to respond to the mission setting of the contemporary United States with robust practices of Christian formation, including catechumenal processes that introduce new believers to Christian faith and practices.

I believe that we are just beginning to comprehend the implications of the baptismal theology of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, including the integral relation of baptism, eucharist, and mission. Rather than changing our sacramental norms, let us continue to ponder how best to celebrate the fundamental sacraments of baptism and eucharist in a manner that is consistent with the teaching of Scripture and responsive to our contemporary realities. Such celebrations ought to make effusive use of the primary symbols of water, bread, and wine, used for sacramental bathing and eating in the context of the community of faith. Such celebrations ought to enable communities to receive and respond to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Edmondson develops a theology of the open table based upon conversations with members of four parishes engaged in the practice in his "Opening the Table: The Body of Christ and God's Prodigal Grace," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 213–234.

## Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission

DONALD SCHELL\*

### 1. “Open Communion”: What Are We Talking About?

Typical conversations about open communion invoke “inclusion” or “hospitality” as an assumed rationale and then offer additional rationale or rebuttal from Scripture, theology, and ecclesiology, each discipline received and offered as a kind of given. But when the Book of Acts describes how the church’s mission opened to include uncircumcised Gentiles and circumcised Jews who did not observe kosher diet regulation, a startling change in ancient, biblically-based traditions, Luke seems more determined to show us the Holy Spirit at work in unexpected change than to offer any single rationale. Of course, the Spirit is not always present in divergent practice, but moving from divergent practice to theology rather than from new theology to unprecedented practice has remained the typical pattern of discovery and change throughout the church’s history, and attending to how the divergent practice emerged (as Luke does in Acts) seems essential to the discernment of whether the work is of the Spirit or not. Theological discoveries follow in the wake of the discernment, whether the discernment of the church finally comes to a consensus that the Spirit is at work or not.

In this paper I will speak as a witness of a practice change. Rick Fabian and I were the founding presbyters of St. Gregory of Nyssa, San Francisco, the mission-driven experimental Episcopal congregation

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that pioneered open communion in 1981. In this account of how St. Gregory's church came to explicitly welcome all to receive communion, please listen for our attempts to be faithful to Scripture and tradition and to discoveries in mission.

I focus these remarks on describing the pastoral circumstances and choices in our mission work that eventually brought us to make an explicit open invitation to communion in the liturgy. As Episcopal parishes around the United States began adopting the practice, some presbyters, theologians, and church leaders have offered biblical, theological, ecclesiological, and canonical rationale for this change, while others have offered biblical, theological, ecclesiological, and canonical arguments against the practice. I will not add new arguments here to those already offered. Rather, because open communion, like other divergent practices in the church's history, raises questions for liturgical or sacramental theology, I offer the account of our finding our way to the practice. I believe it is a story of an inspired and providential discovery from a cluster of accidental and deliberate practices among lay people and clergy in a specific praying community; those opposed to the practice might take this as an account of a perfect storm. Either way, theological reflection emerges from a divergent practice.

A note on language. There is some disagreement about how to describe the divergent practice that we are now calling "open communion." Typically, as St. Gregory's began inviting all to receive communion, we simply described what we were doing as "inviting all to receive." I do not know when or where the term "open communion" became associated with this practice.

Some have insisted the term "open communion" properly refers to an ecumenically inspired invitation to *all baptized Christians* to receive, and have called the practice at St. Gregory's "communion without baptism." Yet "communion without baptism" does not describe our evangelical practice in our mission setting. It was not our intention to lessen baptism's value or importance, and our congregation was regularly baptizing adults who were moved to conversion and commitment *because* they had begun receiving communion. I also note that many who practice a traditional non-discriminatory offering of communion to all who present themselves at the altar rail acknowledge the sacrament's power of conversion, but distinguish their practice from "open communion" as we are using the term here. I do believe that those who prefer the older ecumenical use (meaning "all

baptized Christians”) are correct that “open communion” was originally used in that sense. Nonetheless, in what follows I will use “open communion” or “open table” to refer to our practice of making an *explicit* invitation to all present to receive communion, because as I hear it, common usage has shifted to this understanding of the term.

Here is the invitation we were making at St. Gregory’s: “Jesus welcomes everyone to his Table, so we offer communion, Christ’s Body and Blood, to everyone and to everyone by name.”

I will explain in a moment how a discovery in contemporary gospel scholarship moved St. Gregory’s to say “Jesus welcomes everyone to his table,” making Jesus the present tense host inviting all to his table. But first notice our phrase “to everyone by name,” which speaks to our decision to follow the typical Eastern Church liturgical practice of communicating everyone by name. Why had we combined a traditional practice with a seemingly untraditional innovation?

In 1978 the Episcopal Diocese of California welcomed a newly organized St. Gregory’s to convention as a congregation with voice, vote, and an annual assessment. St. Gregory’s was admitted as an experimental congregation that would report directly to the bishop and keep him informed as it synthesized fresh liturgical practice from continuing research into Christian tradition, from the richest and most provocative discoveries of scriptural scholarship, and from scientific discoveries in areas like human behavior, group life, and neurology. St. Gregory’s emerged in the liturgical era of experimentation and “Trial Use” (1967–1979), and throughout its history, steadily and in many areas, the congregation has worked to find and join together fresh, innovative scholarship and ancient Christian traditions. St. Gregory’s came to open communion in the creative tension of intentionally synthesizing ancient practice with contemporary scholarship and experience.

## 2. *The Episcopal Church at Yale, 1970–1976*

Open communion at St. Gregory’s began about eleven years after Rick Fabian’s and my work at the Episcopal Church at Yale, where Rick was the Episcopal chaplain (1970–1976) and I was associate chaplain (1972–1976). Congregants at Yale remember us practicing open communion, though as pastors, we do not remember ever making an explicit invitation. Our church’s Trial Use process was just



beginning, and as we joined others in re-visioning the *Book of Common Prayer*, we were simply grateful for our church's new ecumenical practice of sharing communion with all baptized Christians.

But while the Standing Commission on Liturgy's reform was text-driven, we (and some others) focused our experimental implementation on the *doing* side of liturgical reform, and for us that was in a missional or evangelical daily liturgy. Our attention was more on the experience we offered one another than on the meaning of the texts. Shaping a maximized congregational participation led us to practices such as a litany form that prompted people to speak their free prayers for all to affirm in a shared "Lord, have mercy," and gathering the whole congregation around the Holy Table for the Eucharistic Prayer.<sup>1</sup> Gathering all with nothing between the Holy Table and us allowed everyone to receive and administer communion in turn. Our intention was to offer congregants the experience of sharing eucharist with one another, but one choice contained another.

Circumstantially, we, as clergy, had given away a degree of control of the sacrament (as planning for congregational participation will). Our congregants one by one made discernments of who would receive communion. When first-time visitors and strangers to our missionary congregation joined the circle, because a student next to them offered them communion, they received and offered communion to the next person. There was no explicit invitation to all to receive but we did see students who had visited and returned for several liturgies asking for baptism after they had been both receiving and administering communion, and we recognized grace in this accidental sharing and trusted the Holy Spirit was at work converting people. In fact when someone asked to be baptized, we might only then learn that they had been communicating before baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Our inspiration was monastic, and in fact both Rick and I were making regular retreats at the Society of Saint John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and counting on Father Paul Wessinger there for monthly spiritual direction. So our practice included adapting traditional tunes to sing the new International Consultation on English Texts in the Liturgy (ICEL) and Standing Commission on Liturgy (SCL) texts. Six days a week we sang liturgy with a congregation that numbered about twenty students (mostly undergraduates) on Monday through Friday and fifty or so students (graduate and undergraduate) on Sunday evening. We sang substantial amounts of psalmody daily. We introduced silences after the liturgical readings. Boone Porter documented our use of An Order of Worship for the Evening to argue for keeping that office in the proposed *Book of Common Prayer*.

In hindsight, I see the congregation together making an implicit discernment that the body of Christ included visitors willing to receive communion and share it with someone else, and I would offer that person-by-person discernment in response to anyone echoing St. Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians that discerning the body was essential for a holy receiving of the sacrament. The gathered assembly discerned itself integrally as the body of Christ to include all present, though no one claimed that at the time.

### 3. *Pastoral Mission in Idaho, 1976–1980*

After our work at Yale, I served as mission vicar of a small town congregation in Idaho from 1976 to 1980, where my work was introducing the 1976 proposed *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>2</sup> Along with the new Prayer Book, I also introduced two other practices that were new to that congregation: weekly communion, and including baptized children in the receiving of communion.

During my years as vicar of the congregation in Idaho I baptized people who had already presented themselves to receive communion. Episcopal clergy who are trained to offer communion to all who present themselves “at the rail” will continue to experience the Eucharist’s converting power for at least some who receive. Methodists assure us that John Wesley, evangelizing England’s industrialized poor who had felt excluded from the established church, called the Eucharist a “converting sacrament.” Most Episcopal clergy have stories confirming Wesley’s experience, so again, our question and controversy is not about the power of receiving the Eucharist, but about explicit, liturgical invitation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My conservative predecessor as vicar had retired having denied St. David’s any exposure to Trial Use. When I arrived there was a letter from the bishop on my desk informing me that he had ordered copies of the 1976 proposed *Book of Common Prayer* to replace our 1928 Prayer Books, and instructing me to remove the old books from the pews as soon as the new 1976/1979 books arrived.

<sup>3</sup> The two young adults I recall baptizing there had first presented themselves at the rail for communion as visitors, whom I certainly would have communicated. Clergy colleagues who remain strongly opposed to inviting all to communion on canonical grounds or out of respect for long Christian tradition do regularly tell stories identical to these. I do not recall that we were making any communion announcement, though had we made one, I would have explicitly invited “all baptized Christians” to receive. I believe it is important to remember that at that time, when such announcements were made they were taking down a barrier.

4. *Changing Our Direction in 1981*

Rick Fabian's references to baptism in his 1977 "Plan for the Mission of St. Gregory of Nyssa" assume a practice of communicating "all baptized Christians": "The service of St. Gregory's Mission will be open to *all baptized Christians* [italics added], but the Mission will have a clearly defined membership."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, "*All baptized children* will communicate with their families, and will consume the bread remaining after the Eucharist, following ancient custom." The specifics of the plan in terms of team leadership, broadly congregational governance, and continuing innovation in music and liturgy declared our intention to explore beyond received and familiar Episcopal practice. But when it came to envisioning baptism and eucharist, St. Gregory's founding document accepted without question the Episcopal Church's newly generous consensus (since the 1970 General Convention) that baptism was the full and complete *entré* to communion.

Continuing the practice Rick and I had begun at Yale, St. Gregory's liturgies did gather everyone around the Holy Table for the Eucharistic Prayer and communion, and as at Yale each person in the circle was offered communion, whether they received the sacrament or not, but unless they had deliberately stepped out of the circle, everyone administered the sacrament to someone else. As at Yale, person by person, St. Gregory's lay people were making their own choice to offer to all.

Our mission in San Francisco to one of the least "churched" urban settings in the United States brought us young adult visitors weekly. We regularly experienced people administering communion to or receiving communion from a Jewish spouse or a homeless person. And, as at Yale, people seeking baptism often spoke of their grateful surprise at being asked to read a passage from Scripture in church or at being offered communion and entrusted with offering it sacramentally to the person next to them.

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<sup>4</sup> "Membership" in the plan does not mean "membership in the body of Christ." It appears as an organizational term and the plan says "membership" would be defined by an explicit consensus among the members, addressing commitments of regular participation in liturgy, work time, and financial support, so all members would acknowledge being on a common footing with other members. Explicitly the congregation's "service," including sacramental offerings, pastoral care, and participation in classes, would be equally extended to *all baptized Christians*, committed members or not.

Meanwhile, outside the liturgy, in our more discursive formational work, we were teaching contemporary gospel scholarship, drawing largely on Norman Perrin's *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (1967), where Perrin argued, we believe compellingly, that Jesus' prophetic sign of enacting God's feast and welcoming all—especially unprepared sinners—was the scandal and offense that finally provoked some religious leaders to denounce him to Roman authorities as a revolutionary so the Romans would see to his death.

Perrin also prompted us to notice a startling practice shift from John the Baptist to Jesus. The gospels do not present Jesus as continuing John's prophetic sign of baptism; instead, he chooses to enact Isaiah 25:6–8:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

Following on John the Baptist's proclamation of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom was *present* among those gathered in his hearing, so he embodied a wholly realized eschatology in the feasts he kept with "all peoples."

The Isaiah passage envisions the Lord of hosts making a feast, and so, to shift the words' meaning, a feast where God hosts all. Except for the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand and the Last Supper, in the gospels Jesus appears as a guest at meals in the homes of others—Simon the Pharisee, Simon the Leper, Zacchaeus, and so on. But Jesus the guest consistently usurps the host's place and claims authority to define the feast, teaching the host what godly hospitality looks like. This same witness coaches us when we gather in his name and at his table.

So at the Last Supper we hear in Jesus' "Do this" his new, fuller interpretation of the whole meal practice the disciples knew well, and, as if to make the point of feasting in the company of sinners as clear as possible, the synoptic gospels specifically mention Judas at table in the Last Supper while John's gospel, without an institution narrative,

includes Judas among the twelve when Jesus washed their feet. The words Jesus speaks at the Last Supper, as they are recounted in Paul's letters and in the synoptic gospels, unite all the prophetic meals Jesus chose to enact, the death he willingly accepts, and our doing/enacting of his life among us from that point forward. In reading the gospels in the light of Perrin's conclusions about feasting with sinners, we at St. Gregory's came to see that those feasts were fulfilled in the interpretation of Jesus' offering his body and blood in bread and wine. He paid for practicing Isaiah's prophetic sign literally with his lifeblood.

In our second group study on Perrin's *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, over several weeks of reflective conversation, clergy and lay leaders at St. Gregory's concluded that we would enact Christ's presence with us or follow Jesus' command to "Do this" more clearly if we made an explicit communion invitation to all. We intended to follow Jesus' pattern in the meals and believed we were acknowledging what we had already seen the Spirit doing among us.

Rather than encouraging us to be hospitable, we heard *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* challenging us to follow Jesus' lead in identifying ourselves wholly with the unqualified, unprepared sinners, the socially and religiously marginalized people Jesus feasted with. In Jesus' table fellowship, he deliberately made himself unclean by association, giving up his own claim to righteous privilege. And he would fulfill that communion in the "baptism" he suffers on the cross, dying as one accursed, communing in death outside the city gates with the condemned criminals, the most scorned and outcast people of the land.

Jesus' pattern did not guide us to hospitality, but to "doing this," in offering his reconciling prophetic sign of indiscriminate sharing in which we ourselves acknowledged that we would only be welcome as we identified with and kept company with Jesus who was known as "a glutton, drunkard, and friend of sinners."

Our enacting of Jesus' pattern did not move us to embrace Vatican II language to describe ourselves as "the People of God." And we did not imagine it was our task as holy ones to welcome unprepared sinners into *our* circle of holiness. Instead, identifying with the unprepared, we could claim (as the ancient mystics did) that we were the chief of sinners, and following our patron Gregory of Nyssa, we would rejoice to find the image of God and body of Christ in all humankind. We could imitate Christ, do and be Christ together with any who would join us, if we acknowledged our undifferentiated, unrighteous

shared claim on Jesus' presence and blessing. It is no surprise that Simone Weil is among the saints dancing on the wall in St. Gregory's icon mural.

### *5. What Questions Did Our Change in Practice Raise?*

Theology follows (and sometimes corrects) practice. I have offered a sequential and circumstantial narrative with a single governing logic for making a change in received ancient practice. What large questions were raised by our change in practice?

- How do we pattern sacraments after Christ if our best understanding of who he was and what he did grows or changes?
- How do we make certain we experience and share in God's embrace of unprepared sinners in the way we shape our liturgy?
- In Scripture and in history, what has moved the church to acknowledge the Spirit at work in changes of practice or teaching?
- What responsibility may (or must) we take for shaping or re-shaping the sacraments in any given time or cultural setting?
- How is the Spirit present in our church's legislative process and how is the Spirit present in common law practices beyond legislation?
- What holds the church together?
- What do we lose or gain in our established understanding of baptism if most of the adults we baptize have been evangelized by the reception of communion?

These were our questions. There may be more. As we continue to address them in ongoing conversation, I believe we must also listen to the theological discoveries and fresh insights into Scripture coming from the ongoing practice of open communion. For example, since 1979 the Episcopal Church has found its way to a distinctive emphasis on "the baptized" and our formation by the promises of the Baptismal Covenant. But when we read the gospels, what do we learn there about the meaning of "baptism"?

St. Gregory's practice of open communion appears wholly consistent with Jesus' baptism on the cross, no longer the sinless one fulfilling the law as portrayed in his Jordan River baptism by John, but the

one hanging on a tree “accursed,” taken for a sinner and dying with sinners. The Good News of Jesus, as Gregory of Nyssa announces it, is that “the Body of Christ is all humanity.” Baptism into Jesus’ suffering and death does not make us different from others; if we follow Jesus to his final baptism, we embrace our likeness in all. Jesus’ “baptism” was with convicted criminals, dying as one “accursed” hanging on a tree. So the baptism of his death completed his communion with the unprepared and his contrarian declaration of a fully realized kingdom of God, with the blessing of the poorest of the poor, the hungry ones, those most scorned. Is this practice of open communion thus innovation or the recovery of tradition?

And what do we mean by “hospitality” or “inclusion”? Consider this familiar poem of George Herbert:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
 Guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
 If I lack'd anything.  
 “A guest,” I answer'd, “worthy to be here”:  
 Love said, “You shall be he.”  
 “I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
 I cannot look on Thee.”  
 Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
 “Who made the eyes but I?”  
 “Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
 Go where it doth deserve.”  
 “And know you not,” says Love, “Who bore the blame?”  
 “My dear, then I will serve.”  
 “You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”  
 So I did sit and eat.<sup>5</sup>

Herbert invites *us* to hear that Jesus is forcefully including each of *us* in his indiscriminate welcome to his table. Any facile inclusiveness or welcoming on our part makes the eucharistic feast ours and claims as our own the authority to welcome or exclude. If we believe

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<sup>5</sup> George Herbert, “Love (III),” in *George Herbert: The Country Parson and the Temple*, ed. John Mason Wall (Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1981), 316.



it is up to us, we can be generous (or condescending) in welcoming strangers and visitors. If it is up to us, inclusion and hospitality are our privileges. Instead, our task is to see Christ in the stranger (particularly in the one we may be inclined to fear or judge). In Christ, that stranger outside our comfortable boundary is us. When we claim we are “a guest worthy to be here,” we step outside the circle of people whom Christ himself chose, embraced, dined with, and died with, and so only with that stranger will we discover ourselves drawn into Christ’s body, the holy People of God that is all humanity.

