

Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission

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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.¹ 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.

¹ 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*.² 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.³

² 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.

³ 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."⁴ 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.

⁴ "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.⁵

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

⁵ 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.

