

Whoever Comes to Me: Open Table, Missional Church, and the Body of Christ

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Open Table practice is often discussed in terms of what it does. For some it communicates hospitality, while others believe it chooses an easy invitation over the more life-giving possibilities of formation, commitment, discipleship. The missional paradigm provides a different starting point: identity. This paper examines the practice of Open Table through a focus on identity. First it considers the missional premise that God's activity in our world is concerned with "giving life," and more specifically, that Jesus describes that giving of life as the feeding of human hunger. The essay then turns to an examination of this question: "Does Open Table cloud or clarify the church's communication of this missional identity of the sacrament, the Christ, the church, at the heart of the eucharist?"

Introduction

"The bread of God," Jesus says in John's Gospel, "is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33). This paper examines the eucharistic practice of Open Table through the missional premise that God's activity in our world is concerned with "giving life," and more specifically, that Jesus describes that giving of life as the feeding of human hunger.

Too often, the church has used missional church language to become fixated on hospitality and inclusion. When discussing the church's activities, practices, and teachings, we want to make sure that the *All Are Welcome* sign outside is matched by similar sentiments inside. A fear of declining membership and a desire to fill our pews is potentially the underlying, and often thinly veiled, energy driving

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this expressed value. The conversation around Open Table can thus get mired in an argument for encouraging hospitality and inclusivity in the eucharist. Kevin Flynn, theology professor at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, commented in a recent conversation, “I hear the table–font argument principally as a *strategic* matter: how do we welcome and include newcomers as effectively as possible?” The use of the Open Table as a strategy to welcome new members is countered by those who hold two theological concerns. First, some believe that Open Table practice weakens the meaning of the eucharistic sacrament by divorcing it from its foundation in baptism. For example, the recent 2012 paper from The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission understands that the practice of Open Table will “undermine the ‘grammar’ of our sacramental language by explicitly contradicting the relation of baptism and communion.”¹ Second, there is a concern that the Open Table proclaims grace over commitment, hospitality over formation—a partial gospel. The Canadian report from the Primate’s Task Force on Christian Hospitality and Christian Initiation and Formation asks this question: “Does Christian hospitality not mean something more than eucharistic hospitality? After all, eucharistic hospitality demands nothing of the unbaptized participant. More to the point, it demands nothing of us.”²

Missional church, however, does not start with welcoming people. The *Mission Possible* course developed and offered for congregations in the Anglican Diocese of Toronto begins with an examination of the Genesis creation account in order to discern “the work of God in the world.” It moves to a discussion of humanity’s separation from right relationship with God and finishes with an introduction to Jesus as the one who seeks to restore this right relationship.³ Missional theology starts with a fundamental claiming of identity. In order to have anything to offer, we must first know who Jesus is, and therefore, who the church is. More than that, we must know something of human

¹ The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission, *The Huron Statement: Font to Table*, June 8, 2012, 5; http://www.associatedparishes.org/images/The_Huron_Statement.pdf.

² *The Initial Report to the House of Bishops by the Primate’s Task Force on Christian Hospitality and Christian Initiation and Formation*, Autumn 2012, in *Becoming the Story We Tell: The Primate’s Proposal*, 144; <http://www.anglican.ca/primate/files/2013/12/The-Primates-Proposal.pdf>.

³ The course outline can be found at <http://www.toronto.anglican.ca/parish-life/mission-shaped-parish/mission-learn/resources/>.

identity: what underlies the human experience—inside and outside our churches, aware of Jesus and not aware—drawing all people to the God who is already invested, who has already planted the divine image, the seeds of knowing.

In order for the practice of Open Table to carry weight in our missional context, it too must be able to answer questions of identity: Does Open Table cloud or clarify the church's communication of the *what?* and *who?* of the eucharist?⁴ In order to answer to this, I divide the question into three intimately related parts: (1) What is the body of Christ? (Jesus). (2) What is the body of Christ? (the sacrament). (3) What is the body of Christ? (the church).

Each of these questions is far too complex and multifaceted to address in an exhaustive manner here. And so I return to the missional language Jesus uses in the passage from John, quoted at the outset of this paper. God “gives life to the world” by feeding human hunger with “the bread of God.” I discuss each of these three facets of the body of Christ through a focus on the relationship between human hunger and the nourishment offered in the life of Jesus. It becomes clear, then, that Open Table does not begin with an argument for hospitality and inclusivity. Open Table is a practice that participates in, and contributes to, the church's missional reclaiming of identity.

Identity: Jesus

We are born hungry. A newborn infant, seemingly helpless in every respect—eyesight undeveloped, gross and fine motor skills at a bare minimum, not even strong enough to hold her head up on her neck—will, if left alone, follow a clear and discernible pattern of behavior which results in that newborn finding her food source—mother's breast—and initiating feeding. The baby is literally hard-wired in those first telling moments of life to do nothing other than use all five senses, every spare ounce of strength, in order to seek food.⁵ Before memory, before words or understanding, before acquiring any skills, before our neural pathways have begun to form rational thought, each of us is born hungry.

⁴ I credit the Reverend Dr. Lisa Wang, associate priest at St. James' Cathedral Toronto and Professor at the University of Trinity College, for drawing to my attention the need for this question to be examined within the context of Open Table.

⁵ Researchers from the Karolinska Institute observed in 1987 this phenomenon which they called “The Breast Crawl.”

Jesus understood and spoke to human hunger. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says (John 6:35). The words follow on the heels of having fed five thousand followers with five loaves and two fishes and are part of Jesus’ same missional description of the activity of God quoted in the opening of this paper. The four Gospel accounts and the letters of Paul are consistent in saying that Jesus identified himself with food and drink (bread, wine, water).

The apostle Simon Peter is the first of Jesus’ inner circle to recognize and confess Jesus’ identity. In the synoptic Gospels, Peter recognizes Jesus as Messiah (Mark and Luke) and “Messiah and Son of the Living God” (Matthew). In John’s Gospel, however, Jesus’ identity is confessed, not as a title, but as a recognition which Jesus elicits in Peter. Rather than renegeing on any of his more controversial statements (“I am the bread that came down from heaven, I am the bread of life”), Jesus admits that his teachings are hard. He asks the twelve if they too want to leave. In response, Peter’s words are ones of surrender, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Much has been debated about the primary character of Jesus’ proclamation and ministry. Strong cases have been made for the inclusive nature of Jesus’ relationships, for his indiscriminate table fellowship, for his provocative way of challenging our assumptions that human-made boundaries and definitions are divinely blessed. Donald Schell argues 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 . . . so the Romans would see to his death.”⁶ Regardless of the extent to which these observations do or do not define the kingdom that Jesus inaugurates, the reality that emerges from the Gospel accounts is that Jesus was able to connect so successfully with what people were actually seeking that they became willing to identify him by the extraordinary titles of Messiah, Son of God, and God. Perhaps more importantly, they, like Peter, came to say, “We have nowhere else to go.”

The faith tradition that shapes and informs Jesus provides a clue to his magnetism. We are born hungry, and in God’s wisdom, it is through hunger that the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel is initially formed. The Hebrew scriptures tell of

⁶ Donald Schell, “Discerning Open Table in Community and Mission,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 251.

a God who gathers a band of nobody slaves around lamb and unleavened bread on the bloody and violent night of Passover, who frees them from bondage and leads them on a wilderness journey, raining bread from heaven to feed them on the way (Exodus 16). This God forms the new community of Israel to be a place of hospitality, a people who will care for the stranger because “you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). God provides Israel with land, with the ability to grow food, and asks that the divine–human relationship be formed and re-formed, remembered and passed along, through harvest, the offering of the first fruits, and the celebration of a meal. When the people find their end of the bargain hard to keep, the prophets issue the stirring reminder to stop spending money on what does not satisfy and instead come to receive the good food of God, without cost (Isaiah 55:1–2).

It is in this context of hunger—played out in covenant and calling, the ongoing birth and re-birth into the identity of God’s people—that we interpret the life, the witness, the death, rising, and reign of Jesus. A broad pattern of table fellowship extends throughout Jesus’ public ministry and into his resurrection. Jesus challenges and upsets religious leadership by eating with “sinners and outcasts.” He questions the dictum “there is not enough” by empowering his followers to feed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. Again and again in his resurrection appearances, Jesus shows up just in time to eat—a sunset barbeque on the beach, bread broken at the end of a long journey, fish in a locked room. Just as Jesus’ table fellowship is so critical in enacting the kingdom of God in his life, in his new life these meals are seen as the turning points in which his sometime-followers finally understand themselves as having been made new.

Jesus’ gift in addressing human hunger affects not only followers and observers, it bears implications for Jesus too. The inclusive nature of the kingdom, so often noted by both scholars and pastors in trying to discern the way forward for our church, can be seen as a direct result of “the bread of life” Jesus offers. Jesus himself discovers that when you offer food to the hungry, you do not then choose who will show up. When Jesus enacts a kingdom in which people are fed and valued, we see that he too is challenged, that his initial understanding of how his life will renew his own covenantal people begins to break wide open. A Syrophenician woman asks that he look beyond his own preconceived notions of who matters, for whom his ministry is offered (Mark 7:24–30, Matthew 15:21–28). Jesus’ own thirst leads

him to offer “living water” to an outcast Samaritan woman at a well and to discern in her the qualities of an evangelist and apostle (John 4:5–42). Ten lepers of mixed race—apparently in the terror of contaminating illness, race and religion cease to divide—receive healing from Jesus; it is the faith of only one Samaritan man which Jesus identifies as having made him well (Luke 17:11–19).

These patterns do not define Jesus. They arise out of what defines Jesus. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,” we hear Jesus say in John’s Gospel (John 6:35). Jesus is defined, and identified, by a relationship. The body of Christ begins with the story of a perplexing rebel who embodies right relationship with hunger. The radical hospitality about which we talk in our churches is not about welcoming the stranger, it is about welcoming God. Jesus is the flesh and blood possibility that human beings are created to become aware of, create space for, our human need to be fed by the One who is capable of satisfying our hunger. In listening to the voice of the prophets, in emptying himself, “taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7), Jesus becomes himself the “good food” Isaiah proclaims we must learn again to receive. Jesus will speak those strange words on a dark and darkening night—“this is my body, this is my blood”—when he should have been packing up and skipping town, surrendering instead to the inevitable story of how ruthless power and systematic domination will win the day. For Jesus, and therefore for the body of Christ, right relationship with hunger is at the heart of creating the narrative of compassion, service, sacrifice, death, resurrection, into which we enter in eucharist.

Identity: The Sacrament

Critics of Open Table worry that the practice of inviting people to receive communion without the requirement of baptism strips the sacrament of eucharist of its core meaning and identity. Thomas Breidenthal, Bishop of the Diocese of Southern Ohio, commented in the Spring 2012 issue of the *ATR* on this disconnect:

I wonder what we think we are doing when we extend a blanket invitation to communion with no qualifier regarding a desire to draw close to Jesus, whatever the cost. . . . Receiving communion is the one action . . . that signifies our willing union with Christ, and moreover does so quite publicly. We should not expect

anyone who has not crossed that threshold to partake of his Body and Blood.⁷

The authors of the *Huron Statement* by Associated Parishes go on to worry:

What is at stake in this “grammar” is the meaning not only of the sacraments, but of discipleship, too: baptism is turning to Christ; Communion is cleaving to Christ. By undermining this sacramental “syntax” which serves as our corporate memory, we open the door to mindless revision of meaning, to commodification and fragmentation of the sacramental order. And we risk pandering to a culture of spiritual tourism.⁸

Eucharistic identity, however, is not ultimately defined by the human response it does, or does not, elicit. Whereas Breidenthal claims that “receiving communion is the one action . . . that signifies our willing union with Christ,” and the *Huron Statement* succinctly notes that “baptism is turning to Christ, Communion is cleaving to Christ,” this is not the whole story of sacramental meaning. “Our willing union,” or “our cleaving” might be what we hope either results in, or is the result of, our participation in the eucharist. The bread and wine of communion cannot be reduced, however, to a signifier of human will.

Eucharistic identity, not surprisingly, is intimately related to Jesus’ identity. As already noted, our scriptural documentation consistently speaks of Jesus aligning himself, his body and blood, with food. Although the bread and wine of the eucharist explicitly remembers the meal Jesus shares with his disciples before his death, it is within a pattern of table fellowship—both in Jesus’ own life and resurrection, and in the sacred history of Jesus’ people—that we are able to understand the identity of the sacrament the church has come to share in his name.

Jesus tells his followers that the bread and wine shared at the Passover feast with his disciples on the night of his arrest is his body and blood. The simplest way of understanding the eucharist is that the bread and wine, shared “in remembrance,” is Jesus’ presence. In

⁷ Thomas E. Breidenthal, “Following Jesus Outside: Reflections on the Open Table,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 260, 262.

⁸ *The Huron Statement*, 5.

Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist, Brant Pitre locates the events of the Last Supper within the Jewish spirituality out of which he came. It was common, Pitre reminds us, within the Jewish faith to understand bread and wine as signalling the presence of God.⁹ A piece of manna was to be kept in the Ark of the Covenant as a reminder of God's journeying with the people through the desert to the promised land. When the temple was carefully created according to God's command, the Bread of the Presence was one of three objects kept in the Holy of Holies. It was the priests' job to regularly offer, or sacrifice, fresh bread in this most sacred place. At the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, the Bread of the Presence would be brought out for everyone to see, lifted up, and these words spoken: "Behold God's love for you!"¹⁰

Jesus could have chosen other images from his faith tradition to guide and empower his followers. Jesus' followers could have picked other images from Jesus' teaching to ground our common life. But the choice to identify Jesus' life and body with bread was an astute one. Bread symbolizes God's love. It does so because of the history that has fed Jesus' people. But like all good and powerful symbols, it resonates meaningfully beyond specific knowledge of that sacred story. Bread was, and in many places still is, the adult equivalent of breast milk—the basic building block of a nourished life. Theologian Norman Wirzba writes, "In the minds of many throughout time, without bread, there simply is no life."¹¹ Bread embodies partnership: it is the result of human beings responding to the natural gift of wheat with acts of harvesting, grinding, crafting, baking.¹² The act of "breaking bread" is understood across human cultures as forging and re-forging human relationship, as much more than a necessary act of survival, but rather the basis for celebration and joy, new possibility and the nourishment of body, mind, and spirit: "The visible, aromatic, and tactile presence of a warm loaf invites sharing and companionship (a 'companion'—from the Latin *com*: 'with' + *panis*: 'bread' —is 'one who shares bread')."¹³ It is that resonance with the universals of

⁹ Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* (New York: Image, 2011), 142.

¹⁰ Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, 131.

¹¹ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 12.

¹² Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 13.

¹³ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 12.

human experience which has allowed new lives to connect with Jesus' story, lives well outside of Jesus' own people and history.

Within this context, the eucharistic meal and its meaning become clearer. Jesus' followers would have heard his bread–body words as a controversial claim. Speaking with God's authority, Jesus says that the bread now signals his own presence, that his presence embodies the mystery of God becoming present to us, the Word made flesh.¹⁴ Jesus is defining his life, and more particularly his death, as an offering, as sacrifice. And beyond that, through the sensual, richly significant symbol of bread, Jesus issues a powerful invitation to the most basic of human experiences. The hunger at the core of our human life can open us to explore relationship with the God who is already at work in the lives of all of us; food and nourishment can be found through an encounter between our hunger and the Christ who offers his life as bread. *Whoever* comes to me will never be hungry.

We know that belief and misunderstanding proved to be stumbling blocks for the disciples, and that they were, on the whole, immature in their faith when they shared that final meal with him. It takes further meals, *encounters* with Jesus, crucified and risen, for them to see that his life can be recognized and shared in this communion meal. As the disciples watch the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday unfold, as they witness the link between the bread and wine shared at that final meal and the feasts of fish and bread which heal and forgive them into Jesus' resurrection life, the eucharistic meal comes to be seen not simply as remembrance, but as participation, participation in Jesus' sacrifice, in the kingdom of God long expected,¹⁵ in the relationship Jesus shares with the Father, in Jesus' *crucified and risen life*.

The eucharist addresses human hunger, thereby making participation possible—taking into our own bodies and *becoming* the new creation, the risen life.

Identity: The Church

“Behold what you are, become what you receive.” These words, taken from St. Augustine,¹⁶ are sometimes spoken as the bread of communion, the body of Christ, is shared one to another. It makes

¹⁴ Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, 195.

¹⁵ Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, 32.

¹⁶ Augustine, Sermon 272.2.

clear the statement of identity that is also communicated through the simple words of eucharistic sharing: “The Body of Christ,” we say at the giving of the bread. When the bread is placed into our hands and the sentence spoken, it is a statement made about the bread. But because the sacrament is understood not just as receiving, but participating, it also becomes a statement about the church. The church is the body of Christ. *The Huron Statement* from Associated Parishes notes the connection between our ecclesial and sacramental identity, named so early on in our Christian teaching in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians: “We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”¹⁷

Both Augustine’s and Paul’s words are ultimately missional. We understand that we are formed by the bread into the Body, that we *become* something, for a purpose. “The church is the fruit of God’s mission,” the 2004 report *Mission-Shaped Church* from the Church of England claims, “and as such, it exists to serve, and participate in, the ongoing mission of God.”¹⁸

Within our ecclesial identity of bread, body, and mission, there is a consistent pattern. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,” Jesus wildly promises (John 6:35). This famous statement suggests that hunger is the catalyst for discipleship: it is what brings us to Jesus, it is what we in turn offer when we become part of Jesus.

Hunger and controversial table fellowship weave through the accounts of Jesus’ ministry, and the synoptic Gospels establish human need as the starting point for discipleship. Early on in each account, Jesus encounters resistance from the religious leaders. He responds with this simple parable: “Those who are well have no need of a physician” (Luke 5:31, Matthew 9:12, Mark 2:17). Jesus asks his curious listeners to look inside themselves and to identify whether or not they *need*. In a sermon, Archbishop Rowan Williams commented:

“If you don’t think you need me,” Jesus says to the strict believers, “feel free to go.” And we might think he looks each one of them in the eye and says, . . . “So, do you need me or not? Are you hungry?”

¹⁷ *The Huron Statement*, 1.

¹⁸ Mission-Shaped Church Working Group, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), xii.

Are you sick? Is your work, your life unfinished? Because, if you are whole and not hungry, and finished, go.”¹⁹

Williams hits on a pattern of discipleship which has consistently marked the moments of world-changing redirection in the story of our faith: an experience of grace then commitment; tasting then seeing; the surprising, sweet, unmerited bread of life offered and received into the heart of a being's hunger before the eyes are opened to see the God who has been there all along. Abraham and Sarah were “wandering Arameans,” making decisions based in fear and faithlessness in their treatment of one another and their closest family members. And God chose them as the human beings in whose lives a new covenant would be incarnate. Jacob, Judah, Ruth, and David—the biblical stories team with unassuming characters who become defining personalities in salvation history, not because their faithfulness led them to God, but because God's faithfulness opened their eyes to the possibility of new life. The apostle Paul, a man so far outside the body of Christ that he was one of its most passionate and dangerous enemies, changed the landscape of the Roman empire by sharing with peasant and aristocrat, man and woman, Gentile and Jew, the liberating, eye-opening, life-transforming experience of grace he received from God through Jesus. His letters have inspired and shaped the church ever since, still brimming with the new life he is so amazed to have been granted, even while having been so far away from God's truth and understanding. From Augustine to Martin Luther, Dorothy Day to Oscar Romero, and on to the far less famous men and women comprising the body of Christ throughout the centuries, that “aha!” moment rings throughout our experience again and again: *I was hungry and undeserving, and You fed me!*

And at the center of this “aha” is the person of Jesus. Jesus, who before the age of thirty had accomplished nothing of note, who had failed to distinguish himself in any way among his people. Jesus, who at the moment of his own baptism of repentance, all of our sources claim, experienced himself so finally and fully as beloved that the Good News became incarnate.

¹⁹ Rowan Williams, Sermon at the Diocesan Celebration for the 13th Meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, June 26, 2005; <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1614/sermon-at-the-diocesan-celebration-for-the-13th-meeting-of-the-anglican-consultative-council>.

In the life of Jesus we ground our ecclesial identity: “Church is what happens when people encounter the risen Christ and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with one another.”²⁰ Rowan Williams, continuing in his sermon, defines the church in this way:

Here we are then, . . . the people who have not found the nerve to walk away. And is that perhaps the best definition we could have of the Church? We are the people who have not had the nerve to walk away; who have not had the nerve to say in the face of Jesus, “All right, I’m healthy, I’m not hungry. I’ve finished, I’ve done.” . . . We’re here as hungry people, we are here because we cannot heal and complete ourselves; we’re here to eat together at the table of the Lord, as he sits at dinner in this house, and is surrounded by these disreputable, unfinished, unhealthy, hungry, sinful, but at the end of the day almost honest people, gathered with him to find renewal, to be converted, and to change.²¹

This is far from being a conventional definition of the church. Whatever the identity of the body of Christ we proclaim, it is reasonable to expect that this identity should include baptism. And certainly we can name a strong connection between this definition and the sacrament of baptism. In baptism, we ask that the triune God bless the candidate to become a new creation, “made one with Christ in his death and resurrection”²² and “sharing in his eternal priesthood.”²³ Like the eucharist, baptism is a participation in the crucified and risen life of Jesus. The truth proclaimed in our baptism is that we are not isolated individuals but relationships—we do not make ourselves, but are given life through our having been joined to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Baptism implicitly proclaims Rowan Williams’s same insight: it is a lie to say, “I’m healthy, I’m not hungry. I’ve finished. I’ve done.” What’s more, as we covenant in baptism to stay close to the story of Jesus—with God’s help, to commit to continuing in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, sharing in the breaking of bread

²⁰ *Mission-Shaped Church*, vii.

²¹ Williams, Sermon for the 13th ACC.

²² Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 1985), 157.

²³ *The Book of Alternative Services*, 161.

and prayers, proclaiming Good News, following a pattern of repentance and renewal, seeking and serving Christ is all persons, striving for justice and peace—we make clear the fact that we have been created as the Body for a purpose, that identifying our own need has implications in addressing the needs of God's world.

Baptism is central to ecclesial identity. I am not calling that into question. Whether baptism must be the starting point for participation in the body of Christ, however, can be debated. The body of Christ has come to consist of human beings who are fundamentally hungry, whose communal life is formed around a commitment to remaining acquainted with this hunger. Does the identity of the church, then, not include those who have chosen this definition and this body through the waters of baptism, *as well* as those just beginning to recognize their own hunger? Does this pattern of discipleship, woven through scripture and so central to the teaching and experience of Jesus, not uphold the importance in the life of the body of those already defined as disciples, as well as those first defined *as not belonging* but who undoubtedly participate in bringing new eyes to the reality of human hunger and the amazing possibility that God might be able to offer food to feed that hunger? It is a disturbingly messy, and even fluid, group of people drawn into the life of Jesus, and it is the variety of perspectives, the ongoing freshness of “aha!,” of insight, of that first unearned tasting of pure gift, which contributes to the church's sharing in Jesus' sacrificial life: identifying, receiving, offering, becoming the bread of life.

Missional Identity

Missional church language holds up a focus on identity so that Christians will bear witness, so that what we have received and become through God in Christ can then become an offering to the world “God so loved” and for which Jesus lived and died and was raised. The question of Open Table is first a question of identity; after identity, it becomes a question of witness. Our worship can, and must, communicate—to ourselves, and to those who happen into our churches—the *who* and the *what* of the body of Christ:

The gathering of a people to witness to and participate in this reconciling movement of God toward the world is an integral part

of God's mission. . . . There is no separation between liturgy and mission. The liturgical assembly of God's people in the midst of the world enacts and signifies the outward movement of God for the life of the world.²⁴

As we discern the way forward in the already existing practice of Open Table, our missional question can be considered in two parts: (1) What is lost in our identity by practicing Open Table? And (2) What is clarified in our identity by practicing Open Table?

1. What do we risk losing with Open Table?

As noted at the outset of this paper, the two most consistently voiced concerns around Open Table are: (1) the loss of connection between baptism and eucharist, and therefore a change in identity for both sacraments; and (2) the possibility that Open Table is misleading potential Christians by minimizing the costliness, the radical commitment, of discipleship.

To a large extent, these concerns have been addressed in the various reflections contributed from congregations practicing Open Table and from the scholarly writing taking place on the subject. The assumption that the reordering of these two sacraments necessarily means they have been disconnected is just that: an assumption. Liturgical reforms of the last few decades have called for congregations to return baptism to its public and central position in the church and have encouraged congregations to reclaim that link between font and table. The onus is on congregations who allow the variance of table preceding font to likewise commit to developing the formation and practice of the congregation so that this link is strengthened, nurtured, and continually explored. As most Christian leaders will admit, it is just as easy for baptism to be treated as an empty sacrament, divorced from "continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers," as it is for Open Table practice to be unclear that this is an invitation to bring our hunger to bear on a life of following Jesus. Missional ministry understands our Christian need to be clear in teaching, proclaiming, and offering our Easter faith—joined to Christ's death so we are then raised to his new life.

²⁴ Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 3.

In congregations taking Christian formation seriously, there is ample evidence to suggest that Open Table is bearing evangelical fruit, new Christians are being formed and baptized, and baptism continues to be defined and experienced in these congregations as a transformational event.²⁵

The question more specifically raised in this paper by the examination of sacramental, ecclesial, and christological identity is intimately related to the witness of scripture. Although there is nowhere in scripture that explicitly states that communion is for the baptized only, and although there are, in fact, numerous examples of how Jesus used table fellowship to include those previously defined as “outsiders,” the scriptural discussions around the bread and wine as the body and blood of Jesus do consistently point us to a realization. The followers of Jesus are only able to *accept* Jesus’ statements linking his body to bread by also understanding who Jesus says he is—namely, Messiah, Son of God, and furthermore, one who speaks with the authority of God. Can the bread and the wine be shared as body and blood by people who have no professed understanding or sacramental link to Jesus’ identity as Christ, Son, Voice and Flesh of God? Are we adequately proclaiming eucharist as participation in the sacrificial life of the crucified and risen Jesus if eucharist does not require an explicit commitment to that participation?

In response to this question, I again turn to the invitation to “taste and see,” and its remarkably strong resonance in our scriptural witness, as well as in the pattern of discipleship we see in the church’s saints. Although it is true to say that understanding Jesus’ identity is the key to being able to participate in what is offered in the eucharist, it is also very much the case that holy men and women have often needed to receive and taste before they understand and believe. We know that Peter had confessed Jesus’ identity prior to that Last Supper. We have no evidence that the others present at that table had done likewise; as Rowan Williams might say, they are defined by little more than being those “who didn’t have the nerve to walk away.” Furthermore, Peter’s confession was soon to be marred by his denial of Jesus. The church’s defined faithful have frequently needed to eat with Jesus for a period of time before their eyes are opened and, as

²⁵ See Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007); and Ruth A. Meyers, “Who May Be Invited to the Table?,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 234.

Luke's Gospel describes it, they recognize Jesus "in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). If "baptism is turning to Christ, Communion is cleaving to Christ," discipleship examples also abound with the pattern of cleaving to Christ before decisively turning to him.

2. *What is clarified by Open Table?*

At the same time that Open Table asks us to take seriously what might be lost in the church's witness by this practice, we are also asked to consider what might be clarified, how Open Table offers a compelling witness of christological, sacramental, and ecclesial identity.

"Behold God's love for you!" These are the words spoken over the Bread of the Presence in the Jewish temple, words which Jesus would come to equate with his own life and offering—"Take, eat this bread. It is my body"—and into which we are invited to participate. As touched on in the previous section, Open Table recognizes this same eucharistic identity. Rather than diminishing the meaning of eucharist as participation in the crucified and risen Christ, as some have worried, this practice illuminates this participation by the pattern of discipleship most consistent with the biblical witness and the lives of our saints: coming to the gracious realization of what has been offered, before understanding our lives as an offering in response.

Jesus controversially identified himself as food for human hunger. The Gospel accounts suggest the success of Jesus' ministry hinged on his ability to speak to that core human experience and concern. As Richard Rohr says, "The Eucharist is telling us that God is the food and all we have to do is provide the hunger. . . . Despite all our attempts to define who is worthy and who is not worthy to receive communion, *our only ticket or prerequisite for coming to Eucharist is hunger.*"²⁶

The eucharist, it is argued, should not be offered without any indication of what it means to receive it. Open Table actually allows the possibility of issuing the invitation to communion in a way that takes the emphasis off membership and instead makes the connection between human hunger to the life offered by Jesus more direct and immediate. Consider the effect of this invitation to communion:

²⁶ Richard Rohr, "Make Sure You Are Hungry," Meditation 13, in Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations; http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Daily-Meditations-Make-Sure-You-Are-Hungry-Transformation-August-8-2013.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=RKQqaj_20TE. Italics added.

“If you know something about what it is to hunger, to seek the things that truly feed, you are welcome to share in the bread and wine—the body, the blood, the life of Jesus.”

When you offer food, hungry people show up. In Jesus’ table fellowship, we see a feedback loop whereby Jesus’ own offering and self-understanding is continually expanding in relation to the offering and self-understanding which unfolds in those on the receiving end of the Good News. Open Table is participation in the risk of christological self-giving, participation in Jesus’ practice of offering food without controlling outcome—who would receive it or how.

Jesus’ ministry reveals that identifying our own hunger to receive God, understanding that hunger as part of our common humanity, in turn makes it easier to welcome God into our lives. He was adept at recognizing the faithful hunger of the outsider and holding it up as a call to renewal for those who had become complacent. Open Table recognizes our common human identity as hungry. It bears the potential for inviting new people to consider discipleship by connecting with this fundamental human experience, our God-given desire to be truly fed. Furthermore, it bears the potential for inner evangelism—converting the hearts of our already-defined followers once again as they see the offerings of our faith recognized and received through fresh eyes.

Conclusion

In an Easter morning sermon following the rites of baptism and eucharist which had taken place the night before, Augustine fulfills a promise “to explain the sacrament of the Lord’s table, which you can see right now, and which you shared in last night. You ought to know what you have received, what you are about to receive, what you ought to receive every day.”²⁷ Both supporters and detractors of Open Table agree with Augustine on the need for intentional and thoughtful faith formation in understanding and sharing in the church’s sacramental life. It would be helpful if further steps could be taken in this dialogue in exploring and upholding the best resources and practices with which our congregations are directing the hunger of our people toward discipleship. This paper focuses on the identity of the body

²⁷ Augustine, Sermon 227: Preached on the Holy Day of Easter to the *Infantes*, on the Sacraments; <http://david.heizman.net/sermons227-229a.html>.

of Christ particularly as it relates to eucharist; moving beyond the assumption that baptism and eucharist become disconnected by allowing a variance in their ordering, similar questions could be asked of what is confused or clarified in the identity of baptism by the practice of Open Table.

In focusing the question of sacramental practice in identity, witness, and mission rather than inclusion and hospitality, Open Table congregations can lay claim to participating in and contributing to (rather than detracting from) missional renewal in our church's worshiping life. The Passover meal began the Israelites' "baptism" through the death and life of crossing the Red Sea, then was followed by manna in the wilderness and the sacrifice of first fruits in the promised land. In John's Gospel, Jesus feeds with the loaves and fishes, then details his life as "the bread" and reveals what that "bread" looks like in washing his disciples' feet on the night of his arrest. Thomas ate with Jesus throughout his ministry, shared in the bread of the final meal, and asked that he touch that bread once again in Jesus' risen body before making his affirmation of faith, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). So too do we see in Open Table a trust that when our hunger is met by God's life poured out, our sharing in the eucharistic meal becomes—regardless of membership or outcome—participation in the offered life of Christ.