



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion



Final Report and Resources
2013-2015

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Final Report and Resources 2013-2015

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An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Introduction

All members and congregations of the ELCA are invited and encouraged to engage an important study and conversation that will officially begin this fall. Now is the time to build this into your planning for education and formation.

For most Christians through many centuries, Holy Baptism has been considered the sacrament of initiation or entrance into the church, while Holy Communion is the sacrament that nourishes and sustains Christians week by week. This remains the recommended practice in the ELCA. Our church's statement on the practice of word and sacrament, "[The Use of the Means of Grace](#)" / "[Uso de los Medios de Gracia](#)," states:

Principle 37

Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.

Increasingly, in many congregations of this church and our ecumenical partners, the invitation to receive communion is for everyone, not only for those who have been baptized. For some, it is a simple matter of hospitality. If this is Christ's table, then all are welcome. Period. For others, the initiatory nature of baptism into the body of Christ is critical. Becoming a baptized and communing Christian involves serious commitment and even risk. The invitation, therefore, must be gracious yet clear: Holy Communion is for the baptized; the call to Holy Baptism is for all. Still others find some middle ground in this important conversation.

A generation or two ago, the question was about whether other Christians were welcome to receive Holy Communion in Lutheran congregations. There was also serious concern over the implications if a non-baptized person received communion. These questions have long since received consensus in this church and are not a part of the current conversations. "The Use of the Means of Grace" states:

Principle 49

Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.

Application 37G

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.

The conversation and study that our church is about to engage in is about the invitation to Holy Communion. Especially important is the relationship between communion and baptism, as well as the relation between the sacraments and the proclamation of God's word, the worship space, music, prayers and the whole of the liturgy. Congregations are encouraged to make this an opportunity to once again discover the richness of "The Use of the Means of Grace" and its value for a congregation. The document is not prescriptive. Rather, it describes normative practices – practices rich in diversity and open to varied interpretation in various contexts. Studying and discussing it together can be a renewing experience. It might result in the consideration of changing some current practices in a congregation's worship life. Such considerations should always be done carefully and with pastoral sensitivity, valuing important and treasured traditions of a congregation.

To assist these conversations, a collection of resources will be available on the worship website (<http://www.ELCA.org/worship>) by mid-August in time for your fall programming. Anyone who engages in this study is encouraged to offer feedback. We are interested to learn the thoughts, ideas and concerns of all. The website will include suggestions on how to offer your feedback.

For Lutherans, the church is defined as "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). Therefore, this is a vitally important conversation for our church. We hope you will engage in it seriously with gracious and open hearts and minds.



August 2014

Dear friend in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! We are writing about an important conversation that we need your help to facilitate across our church. The question we have been invited to consider is: Who is welcome and invited to receive Holy Communion in ELCA congregations?

The recommended practice in our church is that people who are baptized are invited to receive Holy Communion. Though this is the practice set out in the ELCA's statement, "The Use of the Means of Grace," there is wide variety of practice in this church.

Now the ELCA Church Council is calling all ELCA members into a conversation about "The Use of the Means of Grace," particularly on this matter of invitation to Holy Communion. Your leadership in engaging your faith community and fellow Lutherans in this conversation will be critical to our church as we seek to be faithful and grounded, yet hospitable and mission-minded in administering Holy Communion.

The recommendation also suggests that this matter not be studied in isolation from the rest of the statement, but rather we take this opportunity to encourage a renewed study of and conversation about "The Use of the Means of Grace" in our congregations.

As you plan for the upcoming church year, we hope you will find ways to engage in this important conversation in your setting. Perhaps you'll facilitate a small group study, workshop or adult education series. Resources to guide your discussion are now available at www.ELCA.org/worship. The study guide is flexible and may be adapted for use within different contexts. You may focus on the one issue or you may delve into the richness of many.

Your feedback is critical to our work, and it will be reviewed by the churchwide organization's worship team and shared with the ELCA Church Council for future direction. Your feedback may include:

- + Brief description of the nature of the conversation (Who was involved? In what setting? Over what period of time?)
- + Short summary of the conversations (What issues were discussed? What was affirmed? What was a surprise?)
- + Suggestions for future consideration
- + Anything else you would like to share

Please share thoughts, ideas and concerns that emerge from conversation with the churchwide organization's worship team by emailing worship@elca.org by May 2015.

Thank you for your faithful service and for the ways you will help members of this church to prayerfully consider the question of whom we invite and welcome to receive Holy Communion.

Peace,

Elizabeth A, Eaton, Presiding Bishop

Kevin L. Strickland, Director for Worship

Introduction

Part 1: Hospitality and
Holy Communion

Part 2: Welcome, nurture
and the Christian faith

Sharing your feedback



This study guide was developed for congregations and small groups as part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's conversation on who is invited to receive Holy Communion in ELCA congregations. It is meant to accompany "The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament."

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We are a church whose unity is in Jesus, who gathers us around word and water, wine and bread.

Who is welcome and invited to receive Holy Communion? This question, sometimes described as a matter of “eucharistic hospitality,” is answered in a variety of ways by Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations. A generation ago the question focused primarily on the invitation of all Christians to the table. Today the question has broadened, asking whether those who have not been baptized may be invited to receive Holy Communion. The Church Council of the ELCA has invited members, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization into conversation and study regarding this question. This conversation also presents an opportunity for congregations to reflect on “The Use of the Means of Grace,” the ELCA’s statement on the practice of word and sacrament, in its entirety.

Questions about the meaning and practice of eucharistic hospitality have arisen out of the ordinary experience of ELCA pastors and members. Congregations regularly welcome worshipers who belong to congregations of other denominations. In addition, people who were not baptized and have no church affiliation worship in ELCA congregations. They come for a variety of reasons. Perhaps they have begun a spiritual journey following a major shift in their lives, such as marrying a longtime Lutheran, moving to a new community, going through a divorce, or beginning an addiction recovery program. Or maybe the family of an ELCA member has gathered to celebrate a milestone birthday or anniversary and attending church is part of the festivities. In these and other situations, ELCA members and both baptized and unbaptized guests ask, “Is going to communion OK? Who is invited?” Pastors themselves wonder, “Should I welcome everyone to the table?”

ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

This guide is a tool to facilitate reflection on this issue in your congregation or small group. Part 1, “Hospitality and Holy Communion,” focuses on Principles 37 and 49 of “The Use of the Means of Grace,” which speak most directly to eucharistic hospitality. Some conversations will focus on only the question of hospitality. Other conversations will address the relationship between baptism and eucharist. Part 2 of this guide, “Welcome, nurture, and the Christian faith,” supports that broader reflection.

Still others will choose to examine worship as a whole. Planners and leaders should refer to the study guide included in “The Use of the Means of Grace” (pages 60 to 63), a process for surveying the entire statement. Group leaders planning even one or two hours of informal discussion may find the guide useful and are encouraged to review it.

The discussion questions in this guide are suitable for a large-group forum, a small study group, and other venues, such as a congregation council planning retreat. They might also be helpful to worship or education committees that want to explore implications of eucharistic hospitality for the ministries they oversee.

These materials are prepared for use in a congregation. However, conversations among pastors, between a bishop and rostered leaders, and in other settings may also be fruitful. With minor adjustments, these study materials may be useful in those contexts as well.

SHARING YOUR FEEDBACK

After you've completed this study, please share your congregation or small group's feedback with the churchwide organization's worship team. You can send your thoughts to worship@elca.org.

PREPARATION

As you begin planning for your congregation's conversation, you first need to determine what you will focus on — eucharistic hospitality, baptism and eucharist, or worship as a whole. Each part of this guide supports a one-hour session. The study guide at the end of “The Use of the Means of Grace” might also be used to plan as many as six sessions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to this study guide, the churchwide organization's worship team has assembled more resources that you can draw on for your study. These materials include:

- An essay about why “The Use of the Means of Grace” is valuable for congregations
- An essay exploring implications of the Lutheran Confessions and the ELCA constitution for eucharistic hospitality
- Examples of communion invitations among congregation of the ELCA, showing the varied practices of this church
- Fifteen brief articles* by a variety of Lutheran seminary professors, pastors and other ELCA leaders offering perspectives on the topic of inviting people to communion

**These articles can be easily downloaded from the dropdown menu of the Table and Font widget on the right-hand side of www.ELCA.org/worship.*

Select resources that are most relevant to the practices and issues in your setting. For the deepest learning, choose a mix of materials — some that support and others that challenge your current practices. These additional resources will most likely be helpful in the second part of the sessions, titled “Engaging ‘The Use of the Means of Grace’,” in this guide.

Distribute selected print materials before the session, so participants have sufficient time to read and reflect on them. You might include a guide for readers similar to the following:

Reflection guide

- In your own words and in one sentence, summarize the author's argument.
- What one or two ideas seem most important to you?
- What most surprised you?
- What ideas can we apply to our congregation?
- What would you like to talk about more?

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Consider including in your study experiences participants might share before you begin this conversation or between sessions. Participants might, for example:

- Visit other congregations and observe their Communion practices, especially regarding eucharistic hospitality.
- Collect worship folders, pew cards or other materials that are relevant to this conversation from other congregations.
- Interview children, youth or new members who have recently begun communing in your congregation about what sharing in Holy Communion means to them.
- Talk to friends and family who belong to other denominations about Communion practices in their congregation.

All adult learners draw on experience as they process new information. Conversation is enriched, however, when participants have common bases for exploration. Experiences that involve not only our minds but our bodies and emotions further stimulate discovery and enhance learners' understanding and integration. Well-chosen experiences will help conversation partners take ownership of and apply their learning from these sessions.

MATERIALS NEEDED

When groups assemble for this conversation, ensure that each participant has a copy of the following materials:

- Portions of "The Use of the Means of Grace" that will be discussed — Principles 37 and 49 (with applications and background) or the entire statement
- Statements about your congregation's understanding of Communion and invitations to the Lord's Supper that your congregation includes in its worship folder, flyers and other print or web-based documents
- Sample statements and invitations gathered from a wide range of ELCA congregations available among the other resources prepared for this conversation
- Other print or web-based resources to be explored
- Any other materials you will be discussing

If your congregation does not have a printed Communion statement or invitation but regularly offers an oral invitation to the Lord's Supper, write down a typical version of that invitation and distribute a copy with the other study materials. If your congregation does not usually extend an invitation to communion or you are planning a conversation outside a congregation, use the samples among the other resources prepared for this conversation (for a comprehensive guide, see the Introduction, p. 5).

Hospitality and Holy Communion

FOCUSING ACTIVITY (10 MINUTES)

Invite group members to recall a time when they worshiped with another congregation, perhaps one of a denomination or faith tradition different from their own. Guide the conversation with the questions such as the following.

1. What about the experience was comfortable or uncomfortable for you? What aspects of worship spoke to your mind? Your heart or spirit?
2. To what extent did you participate in worship, and to what extent did you simply observe? How did you choose the ways you would participate?
3. Did you commune in that congregation? How did you feel about not knowing exactly how communion would be done? Were you instructed and welcomed?
4. What thoughts and feelings did you have after worship concluded? Would you look forward to worshiping with that congregation again? Why or why not?
5. Do you recall a time when you were told — explicitly or implicitly — that you were not welcome to commune in a Christian gathering? If so, what rationale, if any, was offered? What did you think and how did you feel about the experience?

ENGAGING “THE USE OF THE MEANS OF GRACE” (25 MINUTES)

1. Reflect on your congregation's statement about its understanding of Holy Communion and who is invited to the table.
 - Read your congregation's statement.
 - Put the statement in your own words, or write a paraphrase and share it.
 - Determine whether the statement invites only the baptized to commune, invites all people, or does not specify who is welcome.

2. Read Principle 49, Applications 49A and 49B, and Application 37G. Discuss questions such as:
 - What does “hospitality” mean? Why might you as an individual practice hospitality? Why would your congregation as a community strive to be hospitable?
 - In what ways does your congregation exercise hospitality, both in worship and in other settings? What do these practices communicate about the importance of hospitality for your congregation?
 - In what ways is your congregation’s announcement about Holy Communion consistent or inconsistent with your congregation’s practice of hospitality in other aspects of your life together?
 - Is your statement consistent with the guidance offered in Principle 49 and the three applications? If not, how do your statement and the guidance differ? What thoughts do you have about why they might differ?

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING (25 MINUTES)

Practicing generous hospitality is a value — a belief we think is important and endeavor to express in our behavior and attitudes. Upholding conformity with Scripture and Lutheran teaching, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism or as reflected in “The Use of the Means of Grace,” is another value, one that ELCA congregations are expected to uphold.

1. Imagine you are looking at a snapshot of your congregation. Identify the three or four values most visible in your congregation’s life together.
2. Explore the implications of practicing those values.
 - For each value, list several ways living out that value might:
 - enrich individuals’ faith journey
 - support your congregation’s mission and ministry
 - strengthen the church (both the ELCA and the body of Christ throughout the world) as it carries out the Great Commission
 - List several ways practicing the value might impede or harm faithfulness to these callings.
 - Reflect on whether your analysis suggests some values should be given higher priority than others, practiced in a different way, or not practiced at all.
3. Identify the values you think your congregation’s Communion statement conveys to worshipers. What additional values might be expressed in such an announcement?

4. Discuss ways your congregation's Communion practices might better reflect the values you identified in your snapshot or concluded in item 2 that your congregation wants to emphasize.
5. List the specific values and practices of your congregation that your Communion statement might better capture.
6. If you think your congregation's Communion statement could be revised to better reflect your understanding of hospitality and the Lord's Supper, write a draft of an invitation, or ask for volunteers to work on a new version. (If your group will be using part 2 of this study guide to explore the relationship between Baptism and the Lord's Supper, complete this exercise at the end of the second session.)
 - Gather a group of three to five people, if possible including both new and longtime, and younger and older members. Keep in mind who would most benefit from this conversation.
 - Refer to your notes from your discussion.
 - Review sample statements from this study guide.
 - Decide whether your group will write as a team or group members will work alone and pool their efforts, and proceed accordingly.
 - Share your draft with the larger group.
 - Talk with a pastor, your study leader, or another appropriate leader about how these draft statements might be used to inform the practice of eucharistic hospitality in your congregation.

Welcome, nurture and the Christian faith

FOCUSING ACTIVITY (10 MINUTES)

Ask group members to form pairs, and guide them in the following reflection.

1. If you commune and can remember the first time you participated in the eucharist, briefly tell your conversation partner about that experience.
2. If you remember a time when you did not commune, or if you do not commune now, what thoughts and feelings did you have, or do you have now, about not participating?
3. If you received some type of instruction before you communed, what did that consist of?
4. How have you been nurtured and instructed in the faith throughout your life—in the congregations you have belonged to? In your home? In school or other settings?

ENGAGING “THE USE OF THE MEANS OF GRACE” (25 MINUTES)

1. Read Principle 37, Application 37E, and Background 37F. Discuss questions as the following.
 - What does “catechesis” mean? Why might it be important to your congregation?
 - How are children and youth nurtured in the Christian faith in your congregation?
 - How are new members instructed?
 - How does their instruction connect with Baptism? Holy Communion?
2. Reflect on the role of instruction and nurture in the Christian faith in your congregation.
 - In your congregation, how are preparations for Baptism and for Holy Communion the same? How do they differ?
 - Why might preparation for both sacraments be valuable? Why might it be required?

- Why might preparation for either sacrament be unnecessary, even if it is beneficial?
3. Read Application 37G, and discuss questions such as:
 - For what reasons might a person who has not been baptized seek to commune? Why might a person not have been baptized?
 - Why might ministers commune a person who has not been baptized?
 - How does the application suggest communicants and ministers respond in such situations?
 - How does this recommendation compare with your congregation's current practices, in both its worship and education programs?

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING (25 MINUTES)

1. Examine your congregation's Communion statement.
 - What does your statement express or imply about the meaning of the Lord's Supper? The meaning of Baptism?
 - Does the statement specify who is invited to commune? If so, who is welcomed?
 - Does it suggest that those who are not baptized explore the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?
2. Discuss why it is important that Holy Communion be open to all baptized people. What does that openness say about one's understanding of Communion?
3. Discuss why a congregation might welcome all people to the Lord's table. What does that invitation say about one's understanding of Communion?
4. Explore how your congregation could better provide for the instruction and nurture in the Christian faith for people of all ages, baptized and unbaptized.
5. Briefly review our group's discussion in part 1 of this study guide about your congregation's values, Communion practices, and invitation to commune.
 - If you think your congregation's Communion statement could be revised to better reflect your understanding and practice of hospitality, Holy Communion, and Baptism, write a draft of an invitation, or ask for volunteers to work on a new version.
 - Gather a group of three to five people, if possible including both new and longtime, and younger and older members. Keep in mind who would most benefit from this conversation.

- Refer to your notes from your discussion.
- Review sample statements from this study guide.
- Decide whether your group will write as a team or individual group members will work alone and then pool their efforts, and proceed accordingly.
- Share your draft with the larger group.
- Talk with a pastor, your study leader, or another appropriate leader about how these draft statements might be used to inform the practice of eucharistic hospitality in your congregation.

SHARING YOUR FEEDBACK

Everyone engaging this conversation in any way is encouraged to provide feedback from their experience which will help inform potential future action for this church. Send your comments to worship@elca.org by May 2015. Your feedback may include:

- brief description of the nature of the conversation (who was involved? in what setting? over what period of time?)
- a short summary of the conversations (what issues were discussed? what was affirmed? what was a surprise?)
- suggestions for future consideration?
- anything else you would like to share?

Get involved yourself. Find ways, within your own ministry, to engage this question with others. Publicize it. Widen the dialogue. Encourage study. Encourage feedback. Thank you for your faithful service and for the ways you will help members of this church to study and discuss together “The Use of the Means of Grace” and prayerfully consider the question of whom we invite and welcome to receive Holy Communion.

TO SHARE YOUR CONGREGATION'S OR SMALL GROUP'S FEEDBACK

Send thoughts and comments to worship@elca.org by **May 2015**.



Report to the ELCA Church Council, November 2015

This report is in response to the 2012 Memorial and subsequent CWA action in 2013 and Church Council action in 2014.

A survey was fielded to a random sample of 1,000 ELCA congregations asking about the communion practices and welcome statements used in their Sunday worship folder(s). Forty-eight percent of the congregations responded. There was a good distribution by region and by congregational size. (See Figures 3 and 4 below).

Each of the statements was coded into one of several categories which ranged from explicitly stating that Holy Communion is the meal of the baptized and to receive it, one must accept the real presence of Christ; to Holy Communion is God's meal and all are welcome regardless if you are baptized or what you believe. The responses show there is considerable diversity in communion practices and welcome statements. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Percent of Congregations by Type of Communion Practice Statements

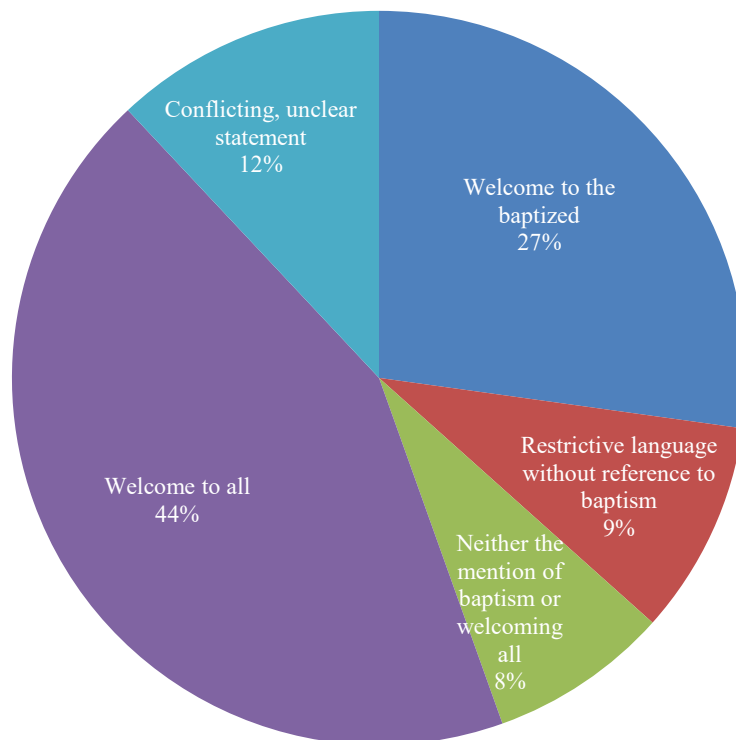
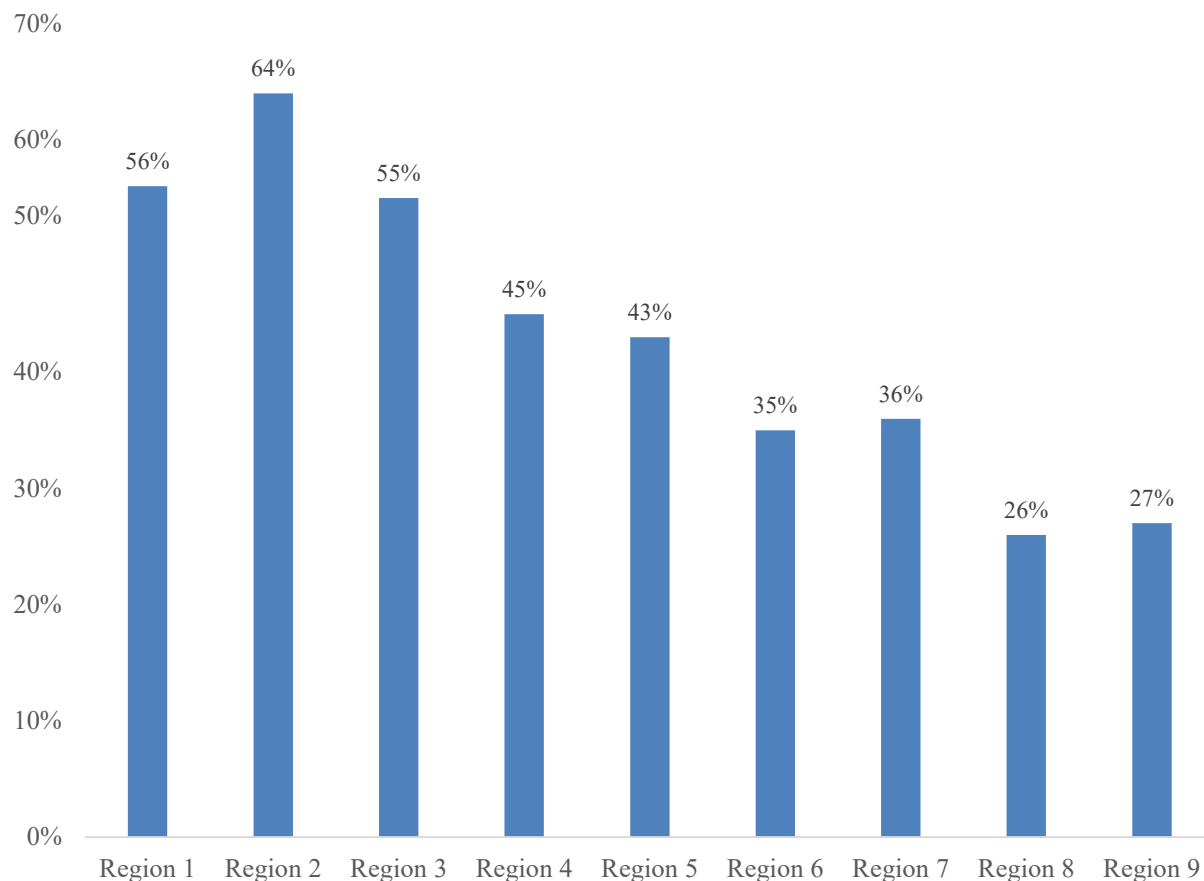


Figure 2 shows the differences by region. Congregations in the West (Regions 1 and 2) are most likely to welcome all. Regions in the East and South (Regions 8 and 9) are most likely extend the welcome to baptized.

Report to the ELCA Church Council, November 2015

Figure 2: Percent of Congregations Using Welcome All in Their Communion Practice by Region



Following the survey, a study guide, “Table and Font: Who is welcome?” was created. Responses were received from 134 individuals and 138 congregations or groups (As of the deadline of June 30, 2015). We also received a letter from Lutheran Core and approximately 30 responses after the deadline. In addition to these formal responses, there have been multiple threads of conversation occurring on the ELCA Clergy Facebook page and other social media.

There is a diversity of practice from, “The consensus of our discussion was that our theology should shape our worship practices. Traditional Lutheran theology understands Holy Baptism as the entrance rite into the church. Holy Communion follows this entrance into the family of faith. Therefore, we feel that the current practice of the ELCA concerning Communion practices as outlined in The Use of the Means of Grace, should continue to be the practice of the ELCA going forward. The Use of the Means of Grace states that there occasionally may be times when a person who has not been baptized may receive communion, but this should be the exception and not the rule. Our hope is that the current practices of the ELCA Font and Table (in that order) will continue.”

To, “Thank you involving local churches in this study. We see a more inclusive approach now than attitudes were in Martin Luther’s time, when many aspects of life and culture and worship practice were more legalistic. Today’s more global world view is more inclusive and accepting of everyone. Christ invites everyone to the banquet. The Use of the Means of Grace is almost twenty years old. It is encouraging that the ELCA continues to move forward as people of God, with dividing walls coming down and with more ecumenical flexibility and cross-pollination.”

Report to the ELCA Church Council, November 2015

To, *“We believe that it is our responsibility as faithful stewards of the Sacraments to emphasize to all communicants (baptized or un-baptized) the centrality to our shared Christian faith of both Sacraments, and to proactively engage any of God’s children who commune with us and are not already baptized (or who are unsure about their baptismal status) in a loving conversation about the importance of their sharing with us fully, through Baptism, in a life joined to Christ in mission. We also believe that Holy Communion should never be received flippantly, disrespectfully, or without some level of appreciation for the gift that God so graciously offers us in the marvelous body and blood of Christ, coupled with the living Holy Spirit.”*

In reflecting on all the responses, I made two observations: One, there seems to be a sense of anxiety that the discussion itself will cause divisions in the church and produce a divisive “vote” on the sacraments of the church.

Second, many (even those who faithfully did the study) have asked why are we having this conversation and what is the goal. On the other hand, about as many have said how thankful they were for the opportunity to have this conversation within their congregations and even synods.

The ELCA has been guided by “The Use of the Means of Grace,” since 1997. This document set out the sacramental practices of our church and addressed good stewardship for the care and fidelity of God’s gifts of grace. “The Use of the Means of Grace,” while describing preferred practices, noted this “statement grows out of the church’s concern for healthy pastoral action and strong congregational mission. It does not address our practice of Word and Sacrament out of antiquarian or legalistic interests but rather to ground the practice of our church in the Gospel and to encourage good order within our church.” (Background 4a)

We are a church that centers itself on the central things of our faith—Water, Word, and Meal; central things that point us to Christ who is our center. We remember that, “In every celebration of the means of grace, God acts to show forth both the need of the world and the truth of the Gospel. In every gathering of Christians around the proclaimed Word and the holy sacraments, God acts to empower the Church for mission. Jesus Christ, who is God’s living bread come from heaven, has given his flesh to be the life of the world. This very flesh, given for the life of all, is encountered in the Word and Sacraments.” (Principle 51)

The ELCA Worship staff sees no further need to research the practices of congregations with respect to “The Use of the Means of Grace” and sees this report as the conclusion of its work related to the 2021 Memorial and the subsequent actions by the 2013 CWA and the 2014 Church Council.

Respectfully submitted,

The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland,
Assistant to the Presiding Bishop/Executive for Worship

Report to the ELCA Church Council, November 2015

Figure 3: Percent of Responding Congregations by Region Compared to the ELCA as a Whole

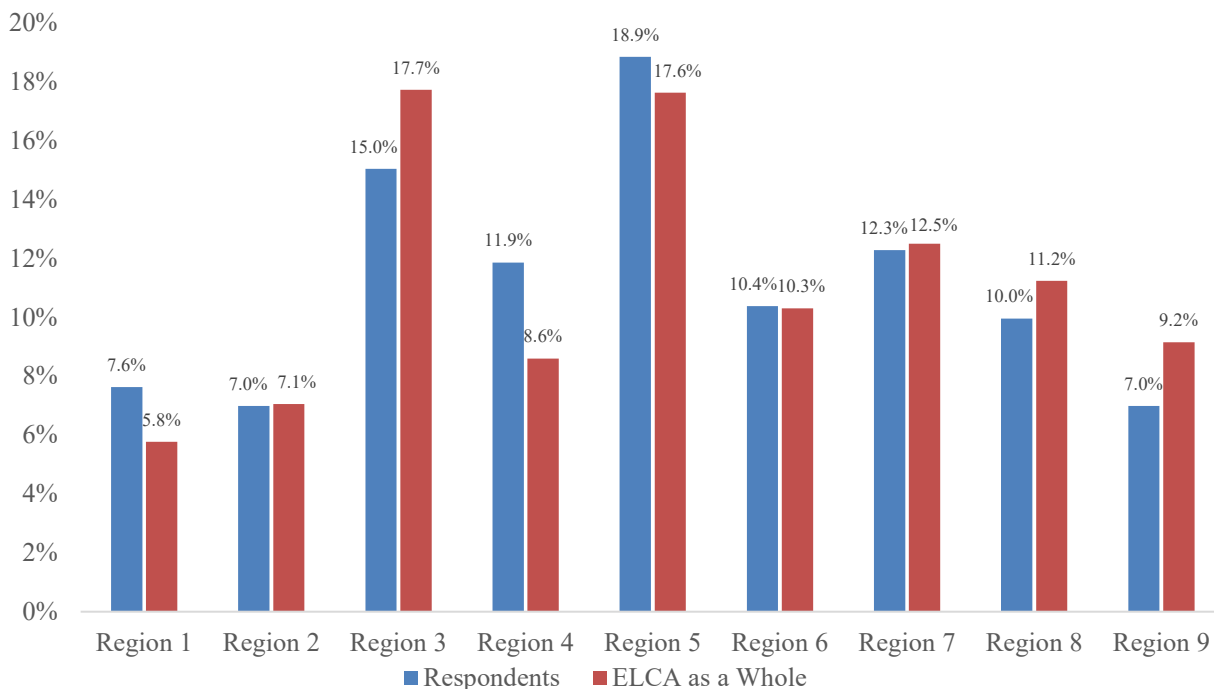


Figure 4: Percent of Responding Congregations by Worship Size Compared to the ELCA as a Whole

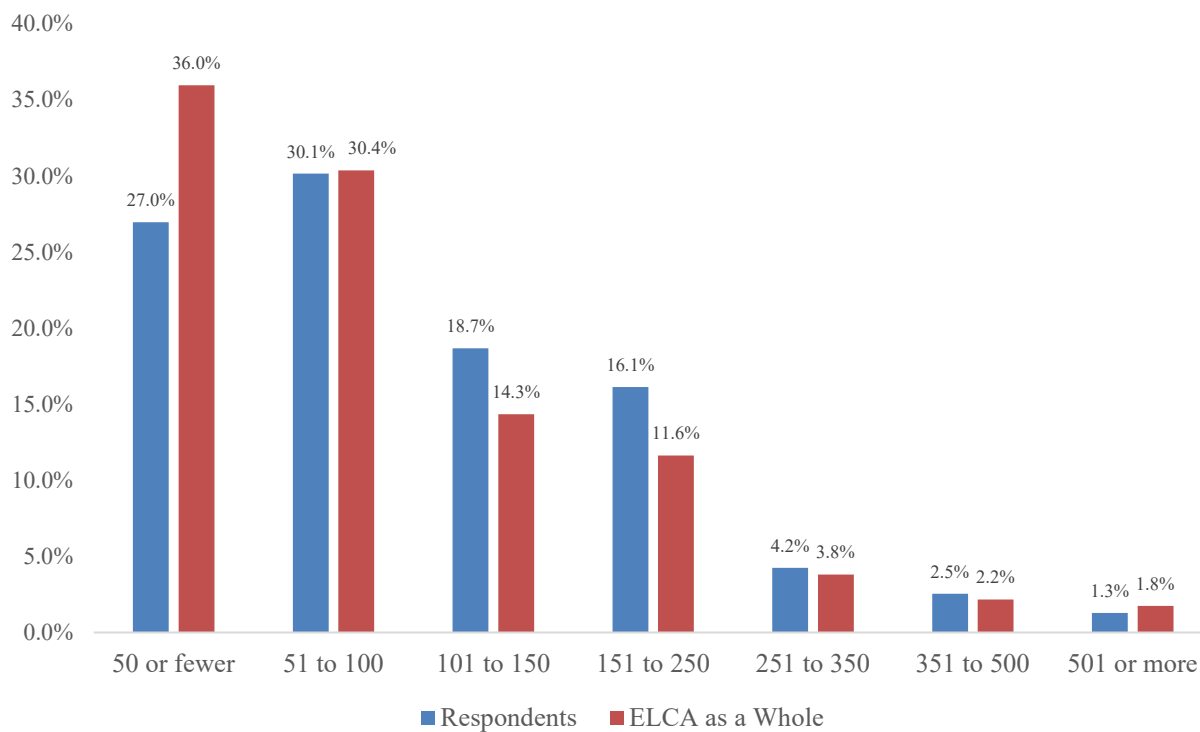


TABLE AND FONT CONVERSATION

(Agenda II.F.3.; *Reference:* Table and Font Communion Practices Report)

Background:

The 2013 Northern Illinois Synod Assembly memorialized the 2013 Churchwide Assembly “to institute a process necessary to review and possibly revise the ELCA’s guiding documents concerning admission to the Sacrament of Holy Communion.”

The 2013 Churchwide Assembly voted [CA13.03.10]:

To receive with gratitude the memorial of the Northern Illinois Synod requesting a process to review the ELCA’s guiding documents on communion practices;

To invite members, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization into conversation and study regarding the *Use of the Means of Grace*;

To request the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, in consultation with the Office of the Presiding Bishop and the Conference of Bishops, to establish a process to review current documents concerning administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion; and

To request the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit to bring a report and possible recommendations to the April 2014 meeting of the ELCA Church Council.

In response to a report from the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit in April 2014, the Church Council voted [CC14.04.13i]:

To take seriously the invitation to engage one another in conversation and study of *The Use of the Means of Grace*;

To request the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit to provide resources that will help facilitate that conversation;

To encourage others to develop and share resources more locally, while guiding people to *The Use of the Means of Grace* with the invitation to read and share it;

To let the conversation regarding *The Use of the Means of Grace* serve as the initial step in a process of review, but to delay any further development or implementation of a process until research is done to assess the nature and extent of changing practices, and until a director for worship formation and liturgical resources at the ELCA churchwide organization is in place and prepared to oversee the design of such a process, both in scope and hoped-for outcomes; and

To request that the secretary of this church inform the synod of this action.

Responsibility for this work was transferred to the Office of the Presiding Bishop. The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland, assistant to the presiding bishop for worship, provided periodic reports to the Conference of Bishops and the Church Council regarding the development of resources and the results of a survey on communion practices. At this meeting, the council received the final “Table and Font Communion Practices Report.”

Church Council action:

Mr. Paul G. Archer, chair of the Program and Services Committee, provided the background information and the report of the Office of the Presiding Bishop regarding communion practices of ELCA congregations. He made the following motion on behalf of the Program and Services Committee.

Moved;

Seconded:

To receive the report from the Office of the Presiding Bishop in response to the 2013 Churchwide Assembly action related to the matter of reviewing the ELCA’s guiding documents on communion practices;

To thank the members, congregations, synods and churchwide organization for their conversation and study regarding “The Use of the Means of Grace”; and

To request that the secretary of this church inform the synod of this action.

Participants discussed the audience of the report and the reliability of the survey data, considering the survey's response rate. They also talked about the report's ecumenical implications, as well as its response to the memorial of the Northern Illinois Synod and the action of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly.

There being no further discussion, the chair invited the Rev. Vicki T. Garber to lead the Church Council in prayer. Vice President Peña called for the vote.

VOTED:

CC15.11.38 **To receive the report from the Office of the Presiding Bishop [Appendix] in response to the 2013 Churchwide Assembly action related to the matter of reviewing the ELCA's guiding documents on communion practices;**
 To thank the members, congregations, synods and churchwide organization for their conversation and study regarding "The Use of the Means of Grace"; and
 To request that the secretary of this church inform the synod of this action.

Vice President Peña declared the motion was adopted.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Biblical and confessional resources for communion practices conversation

Marcus Kunz

This short essay identifies some key starting points in the Scriptures and Lutheran confessional writings for conversation about communion practices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is not an argument for or against any of the practices or changes being proposed or suggested, either explicitly or implicitly.

God's word

1. Jesus' own words and actions are the starting point for discussion of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament writings and in the 16th-century Lutheran Confessions, whose authors desired only to give a Christian witness that faithfully interpreted the Scriptures.

These words and actions are recorded in several places in the New Testament writings, first in Paul's correspondence with Christians at Corinth and later in the synoptic Gospels (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; and Luke 22:14-20). The Small Catechism combines all four into a single "conflated" version.

Our LORD Jesus Christ, on the night in which he was betrayed, took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take; eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he also took the cup after the supper, gave thanks, and gave it to them and said, "Take, and drink of it, all of you. This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (Small Catechism V.4)ⁱ

With these words and actions Christ instituted the Lord's Supper and is fully present (that is, bodily, not just "spiritually" or metaphorically) whenever the Lord's Supper is observed according to Christ's command and promise. The Confessions give particular emphasis to Christ's words. "The chief thing is God's Word and ordinance or command. It was not dreamed up or invented by some mere human being but was instituted by Christ without anyone's counsel or deliberation" (Large Catechism VI.4).

In other words, the Lord's Table is what Christ's word says it is: his new covenant, his word of forgiveness, a promise in his body and blood that faith can trust confidently in any circumstance, regardless of the supposed unworthiness or misuse of any participant. "For as Christ's lips speak and say, so it is" (LC V.14). As Martin Luther memorably wrote on one occasion:

"Where his Word is torn away from the Supper and mere bread and wine are made of it, then I grant that they may make a parish fair or carnival of it. ... We know, however, that it is the Lord's Supper, in name and reality, not the supper of Christians. For the Lord not only instituted it, but also prepares and gives it himself, and is himself cook, butler, food, and drink."ⁱⁱ

Benefits and recipients

2. "To know Christ is to know his benefits," Philip Melanchthon once wrote.ⁱⁱⁱ The New Testament and the Confessions give focused attention both to the benefit itself and to those who receive it in the Lord's Supper.
 - a. "*For the forgiveness of sins*" The New Testament writings teach that the Lord's Supper is participation in Christ's own life, a partaking or communion (*koinōnia*; 1 Corinthians 10:16) that bestows the forgiveness of sin, and in that, God's fullest mercy. The Small Catechism similarly unpacks what is implicit in the words Jesus used. "Forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation" (SC VI.6).
 - b. "*For you*" The Confessions give particular emphasis to the words "given and shed *for you*" precisely because questions and doubts about eligibility or worthiness can be so bedeviling. "This is difficult, however, for we always have this obstacle and hindrance to contend with, that we concentrate more upon ourselves than upon the words that come from Christ's lips" (LC V.63). Jesus' simple words "for you" speak directly to everyone who hears them.

“What the words say and what they give ... are not spoken or preached to stone and wood but to those who hear them, those to whom he says, “Take and eat,” etc. ... All those who let these words be addressed to them and believe that they are true have what the words declare. ... The treasure is opened and placed at everyone's door, yes, upon the table” (LC V.33-35)

Theological foundations

3. The particular way that the Lutheran confessional writings attend to Jesus' words in Scripture illustrates their fundamental theological convictions about God's word addressing faith as command and promise.

The Confessions assert that the Lord's Supper “is not founded on human holiness but on the Word of God. ... For the Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual's unworthiness or unbelief” (LC V.16-17). These words that Jesus speaks are God's word, and they come to human ears as command and promise or law and gospel. As words, they do not merely describe. These words are also actions.

The command “Do this often in remembrance of me” urges Jesus' hearers not simply to partake of what is promised, but especially to receive it confidently trusting the promise and the one who is making the promise. The promise attached to the commandment actually gives what it promises. Jesus “offers us all the treasures he brought from heaven for us.” The Large Catechism compares the benefit of the Lord's Supper to a remedy that heals sin's disease. It is “a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body is helped as well” (LC V. 66, 68).

Questions of practice

4. Both the New Testament and the Lutheran confessional writings address matters of practice by building directly on Jesus' words.
 - a. In writing to the Corinthians Paul reminds them that it is Christ who makes both the bread and cup and the gathered assembly what they are: the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper is the “contempt for God's church” demonstrated in the exclusionary practices of the Corinthian congregation that do not discern the body of Christ where Jesus says it is present. Where Christ's word is not believed, God's judgment results (1 Corinthians 11:17-32).

- b. Similarly the Lutheran confessions insist that unbelief in Christ's word of promise compromises neither the reality of the sacrament nor the validity of its administration. Rather, unbelief becomes a judgment on those who do not trust God and God's word (for example, LC V.15-19). Consequently, questions of "unworthiness" to participate are answered on the basis of faith's trusting God's word, and not on the basis of other factors (for example, LC V.53-63).

In both historical contexts the questions of practice are decided in relation to the command and promise given by Jesus in the Supper itself.

Relationship to Baptism

5. The New Testament writings do not make any direct connections between the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Whatever connection exists is on the basis of common points of reference. Three points are especially prominent. Foremost is God's word spoken by Jesus, both the promise of forgiveness and the command to administer these two sacraments (see Matthew 28:18-20 in addition to the Scriptures cited above). Second is the benefit received by faith in God's word (Mark 16:16 in addition to the Scriptures cited above). Third is the explicit reference to Jesus' death and its benefit for those addressed by God's word (Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:26).

In two places in the section on the Lord's Supper the Large Catechism expresses the assumption that Baptism will have occurred previously in the experience of Christians (LC V. 23-24, 87). In both instances the main point is the benefit in Christ that is common to both sacraments: the life of a new creation within the community of believers. In a third instance the Large Catechism explains that the Lord's Supper is to be considered in the same way as Baptism, namely, on the basis of Jesus' words under three headings — what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. This third instance concludes saying, "we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (LC V.2). In all three instances in the Large Catechism the relationship between the two sacraments is parallel. That is, baptism is mentioned because, like the Lord's Supper, its institution, benefits and recipients all arise from the command and promise spoken by Jesus.

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Endnotes

- i. Small Catechism, part V, paragraph 4. References to the “Book of Concord” are by writing, part, and paragraph (hereafter in abbreviated form; for example, SC V.4). The Lutheran confessional writings are available in several modern translations. The one used here is “The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

The Lutheran Confessions are notably restrained in their use of Jesus' discourse in John 6 as a basis for teaching about the Lord's Supper (unlike many other Christian writings, including much modern theology and hymnody). The Confessions use the John 6 discourse only to describe the “spiritual eating” of faith. “This spiritual eating, however, is nothing other than faith—namely, hearkening to, accepting with faith, and applying to ourselves God's Word, which presents Christ to us as true God and a true human being along with all his benefits (God's grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life).” (FC SD, VII.62) Similarly, the Confessions do not rely significantly on either the various feeding narratives or the feast parables in the Gospels for elaborating their teaching about the Lord's Supper.

- ii. Martin Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This Is My Body,’ Etc. Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics” (1527) in “Luther's Works, American Edition,” vol. 37, p. 142.
- iii. Philip Melanchthon, “Loci communes theologici” (1521) in “Melanchthon and Bucer,” ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 21. See also Ap IV.101.



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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Examples of communion invitations among ELCA congregations

Baptism required or, at least, expected:

United in our shared baptism, our communion table is open to all Christians.

Participation in Holy Communion is open to baptized members of this and other Christian congregations.

Some emphasize faith or beliefs:

We invite everyone who believes in the saving power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to share with us today the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Everyone who believes in Jesus is welcome at Christ's table.

Some include a description of benefits received in the sacrament:

All who believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is truly present in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, bringing to us the gift of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life, are welcome to gather at the Lord's table.

Some emphasize instruction or preparation:

All baptized believers who have been instructed in the Christian faith are welcomed to receive Christ's body and blood in this meal.

All baptized Christians who have been instructed in the sacrament and believe Christ is present for the forgiveness of sins are invited to commune.

Some emphasize desire or need:

All who hunger to know the love of God are welcome to commune with us.

The table of our Lord is now set for all those who need grace, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom for ministry and mission to the world.

Some have completely open invitations:

This is the Lord's table. He is the host. We are his guests. He welcomes everyone to come and eat and be nourished, fed and forgiven. Come and eat and live!

The only people excluded from our communion table are those that Jesus himself would exclude and that is nobody. All are welcome.

“Open table” and “eucharistic hospitality” mean differing things to different congregations:

Our table is an open table. This is to say that all baptized Christians, trusting that Christ is present in with and under the bread and wine, are welcome to receive.

We believe this meal is for all. We practice open communion. Please know this is God's meal for all people. Please come as you desire.

Some subtle discrepancies between what is printed/projected and what is spoken:

Printed: All are welcome to join us at the altar to receive the body and blood of our risen Lord.

Verbal: All baptized Christians are welcome to receive our Lord's Body and Blood. If you are not baptized, please come up for a blessing.

Sometimes a subtle discrepancy is evident within a single invitation.

All are invited to the Lord's Table. Baptized persons, who believe Jesus is revealed in bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins are invited to receive the sacrament.

The lack of clarity on this matter has led some congregations to be knowingly inconsistent.

Some congregations say nothing at all.



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Who Is Welcome at the Lord's Table?

Roger V. Asplund

Primary Questions

Does the announcement, written or verbal, used in your congregation as to who is welcome at the Lord's Table reflect the ELCA's understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Communion?

Does it include a reference to baptism as a prerequisite for Holy Communion?

Does it affirm the real presence of Christ in the sacrament?

Does it acknowledge God's new covenant of grace in which we receive the gifts of "forgiveness, life and salvation"?

Does it suggest that this meal is a "foretaste of the feast to come?"

Is it consistent with the *Communion Practices Statement* adopted by the ELCA in 1989?

Is it consistent with *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* adopted by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly?

Is it consistent with *Principles for Worship, Renewing Worship 2*, published in 2002 by the ELCA? (It includes the 1997 statement on the *Use of the Means of Grace* as an appendix and makes reference to the 1989 *Communion Practices Statement*.)

Given the current trend toward becoming a more welcoming church, is there a need to revisit the current stated policy of the ELCA with regard to who is welcome at the Lord's Table? If so, a resolution memorializing the ELCA to do so would be appropriate. Do we wish to initiate such a conversation?

What is the stated policy of the ELCA with regard to who is welcome at the Lord's Table?

Two principles from *The Use of the Means of Grace* seem pertinent to this conversation.

Principle 37

Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.

The Applications and Background sections which follow highlights such items as when adults and older children received into membership by baptism may be communed; various ages for communing children who have been baptized; the communion of infants; and on-going catechesis. Application 37G seems pertinent to this conversation:

Application 37G

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.

Principle 49

Believing in the real presence of Christ, this church practices Eucharistic hospitality. All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.

Note again the emphasis on baptism. Application 49A also makes reference to the *Statement on Communion Practices*: "Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, through the Church to those who are baptized."

Two additional comments from *Principles for Worship*:

Principle S-10

The table of our Lord Jesus Christ is set in the midst of the assembly.

While this principle has to do with worship space and the Christian Assembly, Application S-10C indicates that:

Application S-10C

The meal is prepared and the table is set for the baptized people of God.

And, Principle S-3 includes this quote from *With One Voice*: "Sunday is the primary day on which the Church assembles...The baptized (my emphasis) gather to hear the word, to pray for those in need, to offer thanks to God for the gift of salvation, to receive the bread of life and the cup of blessing, and to be renewed for the daily witness of faith, hope, and love." (WOV, page 8)

Reflections on recent worship experiences

My wife and I recently had the opportunity to worship in four very diverse settings. We attended Ash Wednesday services at a Roman Catholic basilica in Santa Fe, N.M. The church was nearly filled for the 12:10 mass. A large number were probably government employees, since Santa Fe is New Mexico's capital city. Santa Fe also has a sizable Spanish-speaking population, as well as American Indians, many of whom are Catholic. There were also a number of worshippers of African descent, and some of Asian descent. Those present spanned the age spectrum from the very young to the aged, some with walkers and some in wheelchairs. The service was a blend of English and Spanish.

We received the ashes, as well as communion. No verbal or written announcement suggested that we were not welcome. The only "glitch" was when my wife received the host and was about to dip it in the chalice. She was informed politely to consume the host and receive the wine from the chalice.

Three days later, we attended the installation service for the new pastor of an ELCA mission congregation. The mission is located in the heart of an area with Spanish-speaking residents and offers a wide variety of programs serving the needs of the community. The service was a blend of English and Spanish, contemporary and traditional, with two Praise Bands from nearby congregations, an impromptu Bell Choir, a piano and a harp solo during the offertory.

The synod bishop was the preacher and presiding minister for the Rite of Installation. Following the sharing of the peace, the new pastor announced (and I am paraphrasing): "This is God's Table and everyone is welcome, even if you have not been in church for a long time or even if this is the first time you have ever been to church. Jesus is the host at this table and all are welcome."

On Sunday morning we worshipped at another ELCA congregation. A typical Lutheran congregation in a residential area of the city, its roots are in the Augustana tradition. A praise band led the prelude songs and the hymns during communion. Setting One from ELW was used for the service, and the organ postlude was Handel's "Prelude and Fugue in E Minor." One line of the pastor's sermon struck me as both significant as to why we gather for worship, and what message it conveys to the stranger in our midst: "We have all been baptized and marked with the cross of Christ forever." (Underlining for emphasis.)

The following was printed in the bulletin:

When it is time to receive Holy Communion all are invited to gather at the Lord's Table. You need not be a Lutheran or a member of this

congregation to receive God's food here. Whether it is at a potluck, or the coffee cart in the Fellowship Hall or here in the Sanctuary on Sunday morning, all our tables are open. We only ask of you what God asks of all of us – that you come to His table recognizing your need for Him, accepting Christ's sacrifice for you by faith, and sincerely seeking His forgiveness and renewal in your life.

The worship attendance card included the following comment concerning communion:

I believe Jesus Christ is personally present in Holy Communion. I need His forgiveness and will strive to live for Him.

The following Sunday we worshipped at another Catholic basilica in Denver, Colo. The service was fairly traditional and the congregation was primarily white middle class, with some of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Only the bread was distributed during communion.

When it came time for communion, my wife was in front me and the priest asked if she was Catholic. When she replied, "no", she was told she could not receive. The priest offered a pastoral blessing instead. It may have been the manner in which she held out her hand to receive the bread that tipped him off to the fact that she was not Catholic. Instead of a cupped palm in which to receive the host, she held out her hand to receive, as she usually does, with her thumb and forefinger. I simply indicated that I could not receive and received a pastoral blessing as well.

I have not worshipped in many Catholic parishes except for funerals and weddings. I have received the sacrament on at least four occasions. This is the first time I have gone forward and been refused.

Some concluding thoughts

I believe I understand the rationale for wanting to be more inclusive and welcoming. Yet, I firmly believe that until the stated policy of the ELCA with regard to who is welcome at the Lord's Table is changed, we have a responsibility to act accordingly. I know some will take exception to that.

Another ELCA pastor has a different take on this question. He tells the story of an 82-year-old lady who had never been baptized (*Seeds for the Parish, Summer 2011, page 4*). She apparently had, however, been receiving Holy Communion for some time. One day she said to him: "Pastor, I am ready to be baptized." When asked why she had never been baptized, her response was simple: "No one has ever invited me before."

This pastor uses the story to address his concern about hospitality at the table and other aspects of the church's ministry. "I preach God's unconditional love from the pulpit. How then is it possible to move from the pulpit to the communion rail and place a condition (i.e. a rule of the church) on God's love?"

My second thought has to do with the ELCA's understanding of "The Nature of the Church". "The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service." (*Model Constitution for Congregations of the ELCA*, *C3.02.) This was further expanded in 2011 by the addition of *C3.03. to the *Model Constitution*: "... 'this church' as used herein refers in general references to this whole church, including its three expressions: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. ..."

I believe this chapter of the constitution affirms the interdependent nature of the church, as we understand it. What happens in the life of the synod and/or ELCA is an expression of a partnership congregations share within this church. And congregations are visible signs of this church's presence in the local community. Consistency, therefore, in how we worship and teach, witness and serve, is of great significance. While congregations are given wide latitude in how their ministries are developed and shaped, there are matters on which we need to be consistent. Among them are our teachings and practices regarding the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

It is for that reason that the *Statement on the Means of Grace* was developed and adopted by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. It replaced the 1989 *Statement on Communion Practices*. That statement was essentially the same as statements adopted previously in 1978 by both the former Lutheran Church in America and the former American Lutheran Church.

The question is before us: Where do we, as a denomination, wish to go from here?

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Welcome to Communion

Kristine Carlson

In the congregation where I serve as pastor, during the weekly Welcome, the presiding minister says to the gathered assembly, "All are welcome to the Table. It's the Lord's Table, and he invites you to come."

This is not the invitation I have always extended, or heard, in the Lutheran church. Brought to the font by my parents in Sunday worship when I was one month old, I did not commune (or even come forward for a blessing—that was not a practice in my home congregation) until I was confirmed at 15. Communion was once a month. At that time, in the late 1960s in Brooklyn, N.Y., where I was living, the Table was opening up in remarkable ways. Around the time I was confirmed, I remember my parents' surprised joy when they were invited to commune at a service they attended at the local Roman Catholic parish: Vatican II was encouraging new ecumenical hospitality at the Table. And I remember my congregation's gladness when Roman Catholics married to Lutheran members began to commune at our church; when they decided to have communion twice a month; when women could be ordained and preside at the Table.

During my 32 years of ordained ministry, the welcome to the Table has continued to expand. When I arrived at my first call, the congregation was having a conversation about lowering the age of communion to fifth grade and voted overwhelmingly to do that. In the next congregation I served, the age of first communion was third grade. My current congregation welcomes all the baptized—all ages, even infants—to the Table. In addition, communion is celebrated at many of our weddings and funerals, where the invitation is the same as on Sunday morning—"All are welcome to the Table"—and where I am often moved by the stories I hear from family members and friends who have not communed in years but are moved by the welcome to come, and experience a sort of "awakening" of faith, of yearning for God and for Christian

community. And, we have rejoiced that ordained gay and lesbian clergy can be partnered and preside at communion.

All in all, I would say that the main response I have heard over the years to this opening up of the communion table has been joy. The times I have heard sorrow expressed about the Table is when it is restricted or closed. My current congregation, for instance, is former Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and I hear such sadness from members over not being able to commune in that denomination's congregations of their family and friends.

+ + +

I first encountered the issue of the relation of baptism and eucharist when I was serving as campus pastor at Oak Grove Lutheran School in Fargo, N.D. In the fall of 1996, 18 high school students came from mainland China for the year living in the dormitory, attending classes and participating in the life of the school. Their English was poor. None were Christian or familiar with Christianity. But daily chapel was required, so they came, including on Wednesdays when there was a weekly communion service. They sat, watching. I met with the students in a special religion class. In the early days of the first semester, we were getting to know each other. As the granddaughter of missionaries, I was grateful for this experience. But I was quite unprepared when, on the third Wednesday of the semester, serving bread in the weekly communion service, I looked up to see Violet, one of the Chinese students, with her hand held out to me. Behind her in the communion line were many of the other Chinese students. She said to me, "Please." So I served her and the others with joy and wonder and confusion on my part.

Afterward I talked with them, trying to explain our practices of baptism and communion. My inability with Chinese language, and their poor English, made this difficult. They came to religion classes all year; I took them to a neighboring congregation for Sunday worship so they could see baptisms. Only Violet was baptized. But they all kept coming to the Table. I didn't have the heart to refuse them, nor did the school. They loved sharing in the Meal; they weren't so sure about being baptized. They wanted to participate in communion, in part, to be not different from the rest of the students, teachers, and staff: they were different enough being Chinese in the Red River Valley. They talked movingly, with conviction, about feeling more a part of the community because of communion. They also gradually talked about feeling a sense of God—and even about coming to a relationship with God and a desire for being with God's people—in the Meal.

I left after that year and soon moved away from the Red River Valley. I have continued to ponder what happened, and the missionary character of the communion table we experienced together.

+ + +

Since that time and the publication in 1997 of *The Use of the Means of Grace*, there has also been an expansion of the gift and role of baptism in the congregations I have served—with a growing sense that baptism takes place in corporate worship and is central for us, along with practices that incorporate baptism more and more in our worship and lives. It's hard to imagine leading the Confession and Forgiveness from any place other than the font now, and the presiding minister often sprinkles the assembly in remembrance of baptism. We use Thanksgiving for Baptism during certain seasons. Water is in the font every Sunday, so that young and old can return to their Baptisms. Children are invited to the font when there is a baptism, and have spontaneously started helping the presider—holding the pitcher of water, the napkin, oil, and candle—and joining the procession of the newly baptized into the congregation. The language of our intercessory prayers turns to baptism. And in my preaching—both in children's sermons and regular sermons—I draw increasingly on baptismal theology in the proclamation of the gospel.

As the welcome to the Table has expanded in the congregations I have served, so has the sense of the gift of baptism and practices informed by that—a flourishing of both sacraments which gives me heart for this time when there is diversity among congregations concerning eucharistic hospitality. It seems to me we are in a robust place, sacramentally, to address the relation of baptism and eucharist. At Christ Church Lutheran, we keep saying “All are welcome to the Table.” This seems to us to be the Table invitation of our Lord, who came eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. At the same time, as a congregation, we want to stir up a desire for Baptism—for entry into the community through baptism, and for the baptized life. And with people coming to faith, we seek to be patient in the journey; it is a process, not always in our control—but we keep seeking to be in as full a conversation as possible, and to keep giving ourselves away for the sake of the world, including the treasures of Word and Sacrament.

Kristine Carlson is senior pastor of Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis.



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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

The Invitation to Holy Communion

Joanne Elise Engquist

Often I am welcomed as a guest at the tables of others. Many of my hosts share backgrounds similar to mine, so our meals together have a kind of familiarity to the patterns of gathering, sharing and leave-taking. When my spouse and I host meals in our home, we delight in a diversity of guests whose meal practices sometimes differ from ours. While much is left unspoken among those with similar experiences, when we notice differences, hosts and guests happily seek to learn from one another about the intentions underlying what is done; we deepen relationships through stories that explore the details of our practices. In turn, I am more deeply aware of the potential power for encounter at table both with those I know best *and* with those strangers whose questions or differences send me to seek deeper understanding.

In the church, I experience something similar in the increasingly diverse community of people in worship. Long-term congregation members ('the baptized'), frequently are joined by those responding to modern-day Philips (John 1:46) who invite them to "come and see." Others are drawn by something within, their hearts urging as one woman recently said: "to find out what God is doing here." Even in Seattle, erstwhile capital city of the 'none zone' (when asked their religious identification, more people answer "none" in the Pacific Northwest than in any other region of the United States), people continue to enter worship services hungering for something to satisfy even vaguely recognized desires, wondering what the congregation might offer in response. I believe the church appropriately responds not by reserving the meal for the baptized, but by welcoming to the table all who are hungry in order that they may encounter Christ, tasting and seeing God's goodness in the meal of Jesus re-membered.

When the church speaks instead of "inadvertently" communing an unbaptized person who "comes to the table seeking Christ's presence" (UMG 37G), one readily infers that communion is a meal to which one gains access because of some prior action (in this case, presenting oneself or having been presented, for baptism). And even though the

guideline draws from a desire to strengthen a person's connection to Christian community and deepen her or his understanding of what happens in communion, this emphasis seems to make baptism into a means to an end—as admission to the meal—rather than focusing on baptism solely *as a means of grace*.

To keep from this misinterpretation, I wonder what could happen if the church attended less to the order of baptism and meal and, instead, leaned-in and more fully lived-into the sacraments as the gifts of grace they are. After all, the story of Jesus' last supper does not convey a spirit of cautious discernment about who should receive the bread and cup; rather it reveals a deep intention that Jesus' followers would gather repeatedly around this ritual meal to remember him both in the sense of calling him to mind *and* in the joining of all as members of this body newly put together (remembered).

As such, I seldom focus on the question, "Whom shall the church commune?" More helpful to ministry (and more connected to the Jesus 'event') would be to ask instead: "Who is invited to do all this, to remember Jesus, eating and drinking together at the table of the Lord?" Thus framed, stories in Scripture press us beyond fears that might otherwise constrict the circle. I think of Jesus' companions of old. I see Jesus welcoming sinners and dining with them (Matthew 11, Mark 2, Luke 15). I recall the radical hospitality shown in his encounters with the marginalized of the time: the lepers and demon-possessed, folks in collusion with Rome such as tax collectors and imperial officers, and women—even of Samaria. Further, I think of those whom I have met, those who have come to the table seeking Jesus who often express a greater passion than my long-baptized self generally musters. In our worship, sometimes for the very first time in their lives, they hear words of invitation to taste and see God's goodness. Hearing the call to remember Jesus, they stretch out their hands ready: Not to be "given communion" but to receive a gift of God's mercy through a morsel of bread, a sip of wine and those precious words, "for you."

Such hunger stirs in the hearts of many, who are not yet baptized and spiritual pangs often are missing in those brought to the font as early as the eighth day. Both instances (as well as the million mixes between) yield room for growth. And if we join in the kind of community Jesus intends, we may dwell with one another in such ways as deepen understandings of our life together. We will wrestle, not simply with questions about whom to commune or baptize, but how those sacraments nourish us for daily life. We will deepen our words of welcome to both bath and table, flooding ourselves with the grace God speaks in the Living Word, Jesus the Christ.

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Washed AND Fed: Pastoral Consideration in the Exercise of Eucharistic Hospitality

Michael D. Fick

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.

Use of the Means of Grace Application 37G

In the teaching and practice of congregations, the missional intention for the means of grace needs to be recalled. By God's gift, the Word and the sacraments are set in the midst of the world, for the life of the world.

Use of the Means of Grace Application 51B

Ebenezer is a place of Sacraments

We celebrate Holy Communion weekly. Baptism generally precedes communion, but please know you are welcome at the calling of the Spirit. Children are welcome to commune as soon as the parent(s) and pastor agree to begin that practice; this may occur as early as when a child can receive solid food. Instruction about communion is offered at least annually for children of any age.

From the Ebenezer Lutheran Church website

Set together, the above excerpts describe the congregational commitments and practice at Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Chicago. These statements also describe the blessed tension of being a growing, neighborhood congregation that is attracting more and more people whose experience of faith in community is limited or has been challenged by previous experiences of exclusion. It is therefore pastorally understandable that tension exists between the accepted practice of baptism

preceding communion and the missional (I would prefer the term *evangelical*) character of the sacraments lived out in our midst.

Baptism and the eucharist are interwoven. This reality has sometimes been obscured by practices in the Lutheran traditions that emphasized a greater level of instruction, preparation or intellectual assent to faithful reception of Holy Communion than to baptism. The practice of this congregation is moving toward a less bifurcated understanding: Younger and younger baptized children are regularly receiving the eucharist, and catechetical preaching is employed more and more to instruct the assembly on the meaning of the sacrament regardless of age. It seems to me that the *ideal* set of practices will reunite baptism and eucharistic participation in a more seamless sacramental practice. Infants and adults alike will be eagerly and regularly baptized with lavish invitation, and be shepherded to the table without delay.

Ebenezer's practice, and my own shepherding of the sacraments in this place, therefore, seeks to maintain the ecumenical and historic practice of baptism as initiation to Christian community while being pastorally sensitive to visitors having experienced exclusion from the table or having a generally suspicious orientation toward the purported welcome of the church. Baptism before reception of the eucharist remains *normative* in this community, but we also recognize that non-normative exceptions will occasionally be evangelically preferable to making an unbaptized communicant feel ashamed of their participation. In some cases, these exceptions have in fact facilitated the baptism of adults and the encouragement of faith. Pastorally, I cannot deny the power of the table to, for some, lead to the font. And that in some cases, I have continued to commune an unbaptized person for whom faith leading to baptism was emerging by the Spirit's power.

When the sacraments are truly set in the midst of a pluralistic world, Christ's gifts of love and mercy are indeed to be praised. This does not, to me, indicate the need to abandon the normative practices wisely given by the church to us. Nor does it mean that there will be pastoral instances where the Spirit is working in a direction different than our normative practices. Thus it has always been.

Is that a doctrinal hedge? I rather believe it is simply the reality of sacramental life in communities where baptism is not assumed or even the norm for infants. Pastoral practice does well to operate with integrity within normative practice, while leaving open the possibility that faith can be cultivated in non-normative experience. I believe that faith always emerges and is built up at the sometimes messy intersection of doctrine and practice.

Michael D. Fick serves as Pastor at Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Chicago.



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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Communion and baptismal practices in the (ELCA Lutheran) Church

Francisco Javier Goitía Padilla

Church is a grace-filled space where the One and Triune God creates, strengthens and nourishes our lives and faith as we are gathered and sent to expand God's love and work throughout creation. The Spirit blows and presents God's Word in the midst of our gathering as we sing, pray and hope embraced and marked by the means of grace: the font, the table and the pulpit. *Real presence* is affirmed in, around and under the elements, the words proclaimed, and the mutual consolation of the faithful. We live in the pendulum movement from church to life and from life to church being God's people justified by grace through faith and within the reality of *simul iustus et peccator*. Church *happens* here. How our baptismal and communion practices proclaim all these and educate us to we better understand how faith works in, within and through us? I will use three words to identify a possible way to affirm and improve our baptismal and communion practices as part of the church's ministry of word and sacrament: the vernacular, *catechesis*, and thanksgiving.

The vernacular

To worship in the vernacular was one of Martin Luther's most impressive contributions to worship reform. To worship in the vernacular is more than to sing in a different language; it is to bring life-as-it-is to the grace-filled space where God finds us. It is to bring the contingencies and blessings of our geographies, cultures and zip codes to church. It is an incarnational affirmation proclaiming God's *pro nobis* to our historical and existential selves. To my Hispanic/Latino communities this means that our worshipping practices and festivals – *quinceañeros*, *posadas*, *5 de mayo*, *Hispanic heritage month*, *la virgen de la Guadalupe*, and the like – are affirmed as part of the church's liturgical tradition. We need to appropriate our worshipping practices both in affirmative and critical ways

so that invitation, participation and efficaciousness are proclaimed as God's work and as Christological wells. Our baptismal and communion practices must embrace the Hispanic/Latino vernacular sustained by our doctrinal and theological affirmations.

Catechesis

Infants, toddlers and children broaden and deepen the table as they participate, as part of a faithful baptismal affirmation, in the eucharist. This participation, without a solid *catechesis*, may be seen as *ex opere operato* or as *hocus pocus* (*pun intended!*). As pastor I find myself without resources that take into account this communion practice, which reverses the order *catechesis-participation*. We also need inclusive liturgical resources – music, prayers, ordos, etc. – that affirm this new communion chiasmus of participation-*catechesis*. This is especially important in Hispanic/Latino communities with both strong Roman Catholic and Evangelical backgrounds. We need to develop resources to equip pastors, leaders, and families. A contemporary *vernacular* commentary on Luther's Catechisms is in order!

Thanksgiving

Worship is God's graceful and efficacious work for us and the people of God's thanksgiving to this unmerited gift. There is no *quid pro quo*. These *pro nobis* and thanksgiving qualities of Lutheran worship resonate with our Hispanic/Latino understandings of *familia* and *fiesta*. We need resources to relate our baptismal and communion practices with our historical and existential selves capturing our understanding of *familia* and *fiesta* and incorporating them to our doctrinal understanding and everyday lives (This includes our understanding of *real presence*). As I said above, our communities have a strong Roman Catholic and Evangelical backgrounds. These two expressions of the Christian tradition are an integral part of our neighborhoods, families and locations. Our understandings of *familia* and *fiesta*, I believe, will help our Lutheran confessional tradition to deepen its appropriation of *communio sanctorum*, the mutual consolation of the faithful, and the thanksgiving dimension of our worship experience. *Community* and *joy* are important cultural identity traits in our cultures. Our baptismal and communion practices can be articulated and experienced in a more incarnational way as we incorporate these Hispanic/Latino emphases in our normative teachings.

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Font to table or table to font

Bryon Hansen

*This paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of
The North American Association of the Catechumenate.*

Holy Communion is the meal for the baptized. The normative pattern is that baptism leads to eucharist or bath leads to table. This is the tradition we have inherited and it is the normative pattern in most, if not all the official denominations represented in the North American Association of the Catechumenate. However, there is what many people describe as a “quiet revolution” going on within congregations where this pattern is being reversed. In many communities the meal leads to the bath! This trend has sparked debate and today I want to look at the issues involved in this debate and what implications this might have for the catechumenate process.

Bath to meal is the classic pattern of the ancient catechumenate and reflected in its rites and practice. The Eucharist is the completion of the sacraments of initiation. The baptismal liturgy itself reflects the restored rites of initiation – bath, chrismation (confirmation), and meal. Vatican II and subsequent liturgical renewal restored this ancient order. Whereas the rites of initiation were disintegrated and separated over the years, the liturgical reforms again brought to the fore the unified rites of initiation. So, one is baptized and signed and then goes to the table to participate in the community and life in Christ in the fullest sense.

In the earliest centuries of the church, Hippolytus described baptism as crossing over into the promised land flowing with milk and honey. Once the newly initiated came to the table they had arrived in to fullness of joy and life to be one with Christ and the community that bears his name. To arrive at the table was to be fully initiated. This is the tradition we have inherited and this tradition is reflected in our liturgical rites. The grace of baptism leads directly and inevitably to the reception of the gifts of the Eucharist, the fullest expression of unity with Christ and each other. The Eucharist keeps alive the gifts

given to us in baptism. It is the on-going gift of our assimilation to the crucified and risen Lord. Each time we participate in the meal our identity as disciples is renewed.

The catechumenate is the process leading to this full initiation. The process itself is seen as a kind of deepening of what is already present. In other words, the journey to the font and then to the table presumes that God is actively involved and present and alive in the people undergoing formation. So, beginning with the Rite of Welcome, a person is already joined to Christ. The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults in the Roman Catholic Church says as much in its official documents. Prior to baptism, a catechumen is, in a very real sense, understood to be a Christian. Catechumens participate in the Liturgy of the Word, the various blessings and rites that are part of the catechumenal process and if those in the process are married before their baptism they may be given a Christian marriage or should they die before baptism, a catechumen is given a Christian burial. So, what is baptism for? It is understood to be a welcoming into the eucharistic fellowship of the church. *This is seen as the fullest expression of Christian community and mission.* Once crossed over, the newly baptized enjoy life in the land of milk and honey. From that time onward, the newly baptized regularly participate in the Eucharist and it functions as an echo of the grace they first fully experienced at their baptism. God willingly feeds those to whom God has given life. There is grace here. Those who come to the table do not do so out of sincerity, devoutness and earnestness of repentance but because God has drawn them into life through baptism.

Once they have come to this full expression they find it to be the place where they are renewed in their faith and commitment as disciples of Christ. From this meal they are empowered to move out into wider ministries of evangelism and service. Thus, those who regularly participate in the Eucharist embody a commitment to the rule of God. Our official practice and our liturgical rites and prayers reflect this ancient pattern. The meal is for the baptized. What happens, then, when an unbaptized person communes?

The sacramental practices statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "The Use of the Means of Grace," states: "When an unbaptized person comes to the Table seeking Christ's' presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministry of the church need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's' gift of love and mercy to all is promised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion."

In a similar statement from the United Methodist Church, "By Water and the Spirit," we read: "Non-baptized persons responding in faith ... welcomed at the Table should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism as soon as possible."

These two statements are indicative of how churches recognize the pastoral reality of

unforeseen circumstances while upholding the ancient pattern as normative. In each instance they emphasize the need for catechumenal formation.

Where practiced this ancient pattern has great power. I remember Shannon, a young adult in my first parish. She did not receive communion while preparing for baptism. All through the process she said how she looked forward to that time when she would gather at the table with others who claimed the faith of Jesus. She was not yet there but valued the process and looked forward to a time when she could cross over to the land of milk and honey.

If any of you have seen "This is the Night," that amazing video presentation about the catechumenal process at a Roman Catholic parish in Texas, you may recall the testimony of those before and after their baptism that included their first Eucharist. The testimony to both the "before and after" experience of full initiation was part of what made that film so moving.

Having said all of this, there is another practice afoot. This ancient pattern, it seems, is no longer normative in many Christian communities. There is now a strong practice of "open communion," referring to the reality of welcoming and inviting all people, including the unbaptized to the meal. This is the movement of table to font. What's behind this practice?

Well, the reasoning goes something like this: Jesus came announcing God's reign. It was present in him and he enacted this reign of God in signs and symbols, which were accessible to all, not just those who adhered to purity codes. No one was excluded. Read the Gospels and you will discover that Jesus loved to dine with sinners and outcasts, not just those in the "inner circle." Jesus shared table with clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, inviting them to God's invitation to a restored relationship of wholeness, love and peace. This is what Jesus did and this is what Jesus does, still, through the community that bears his name. Since the Eucharist is where we meet the Risen Christ in the most profound sense, then this meal practice of Jesus is to be continued.

Open communion announces God's favor to all; those who advocate for it stress that the Christian community is a community of grace not a community bound by rules where we draw lines in the sand. Seen this way, the meal isn't just for the initiated who have gotten there through a process of formation. Rather, the Eucharist is a means of evangelism. In many of our current circumstances it is highly likely that unbaptized people will come to the table and the hospitality inherent in the meal demands that no one be turned away.

This is not entirely new. There is some historical precedent. John Wesley promoted open

communion. Now, the circumstances in which he did so are different than our own, but nonetheless Wesley understood the Eucharist as a “converting ordinance.” This has led many United Methodists to practice open communion. One scholar calls it the “United Methodist Exception.” It is an exception to the normative pattern not because of disrespect for that pattern (United Methodists clearly respect and uphold the ancient pattern) but an exception that is a kind of prophetic stance, highlighting aspects of the Eucharist that may have been obscured by the ancient pattern.

In this way, then, Holy Communion becomes an evangelical opportunity to bring people into a fuller, living relationship with the body of Christ. Many have described Wesley's theology as a kind of union of a sacramental and evangelical vision. Here the Eucharist is a means of God's grace before and after conversion. In fact, it is the occasion in which some are converted, the occasion that forms people toward conversion and may also serve those already converted as a way of sustenance in a life of holiness.

Those critical of open communion say that by tilting to the divine gift nature of the meal, reflected in the open invitation to all people, other aspects of communion might be ignored. Those raising objections to open communion will affirm that the meal is a free gift but they rightly point to the missional aspect of the meal and rightly wonder if this is being ignored. They point to our eucharistic prayers, our rites and practices, all of which assume the baptismal call of discipleship. They rightly remind us that baptism commits one to the mission of Christ and the Eucharist nourishes that commitment. Listen to these words from Eucharistic Prayer C in the Book of Common Prayer: “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”

Could the missional aspect of the Lord's Supper be lost or might we embrace it while at the same time, understand, much in the spirit of Wesley, that the supper is also a means of bringing people to faith?

Other critics of open communion observe that perhaps our modern inclination to not stand in criticism of what an individual desires or wants might motivate this practice more than the Gospel. It is a serious charge but one worth pondering especially if we view the supper Jesus instituted with his disciples to be the very means through which they might practice the same meal fellowship and inclusive ministry practiced by Jesus. From this point of view, the Eucharist and Jesus' many other meals are different meals. The Eucharist is to empower those already committed while Jesus' meal fellowship on a broad scale is the kind of evangelical and missional ministry expected from all those committed to the way of Jesus.

Advocates of open communion respond to this reasoning by reminding us that the disciples at the Last Supper were sinners too and their commitment wasn't exactly pure. Peter and Judas are rather vivid examples! Did the inner circle of disciples display the commitment necessary to make them proper participants? Hardly. So, actually the Lord's Supper takes on same quality of Jesus' prior meals with sinners and outcasts.

Advocates of open communion also point to the eucharistic theology of John as it is laid out for us in chapter six. John does not give us a Last Supper narrative. Instead we have a lengthy discourse on the Bread of Life. What precedes the discourse? The feeding of the multitudes. This presumes something different than the meal being for only those committed. This eucharistic theology arises from an inclusive feedings for *all people*.

Within this debate it behooves us to look at the reality of church life. As I reflect on eucharistic practice in my own parish setting, I wonder about the degree to which baptized Christians who regularly come to the table are committed and informed. Many, baptized or unbaptized, come to the meal not because they so committed but because they are not. They need strength and encouragement and regardless of the degree of commitment to the vision of God's kingdom, the Eucharist does hold the capacity to shape character. In a real sense we need the gift of a new shape of life realized in the Eucharist before we can commit ourselves to living it out through the covenant of baptism. Communion preceding baptism stresses the place of baptism as completion of that full initiation process. Unconditional forgiveness and acceptance at table provides one with wherewithal to want to begin a new life.

So the ancient pattern of font to table becomes table to font. A celebrated example of this is Sara Miles, author of "Take This Bread." This story recounts her journey of communing at St. Gregory of Nyssa parish in San Francisco. For her the table became the place of her conversion (ala John Wesley) and the means of her formation, which eventually led to her baptism. This is quite consistent with the official theology and teaching of the parish.

Paul Fromberg, Rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa, argues for the table as the necessary starting place before coming to the font. In fact, the font at St. Gregory's is outdoors. Fromberg says that baptism cannot be placed within the church walls. The call to daily living out of the new life of love and service is out in the world. Those who come to baptism usually come as a result of their experience at the table. In his language, there are no entrance requirements only "entrance gifts."

Sara Miles writes of her experience: "The first time I came to the Table at St. Gregory's, I was a hungry stranger. Each week since then, I've shown up – undeserving and

needy -- and each week, someone's hands have broken bread and brought me into communion. Because of how I've been welcomed and fed in the eucharist, I see starting food pantry at church not as an act of 'outreach' but one of gratitude. To feed others means acknowledging our own hunger and at the same time acknowledging the amazing abundance we're fed with by God." Her experience led to a ministry and mission of opening a food pantry at St. Gregory's. All of this was prelude to her baptism because the meal took her there. Miles writes: "And so I kept taking communion, unprepared and unreformed. I figured communion would take me, too -- wherever I was going."

One more contemporary example is worth noting. It is called the "Open Table" Project. This is a project of four parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D. C., sponsored by the "Practicing our Faith" initiative out of Valparaiso University. Coming from the conviction that liturgy is primary theology, those in this project concluded that experience informs practice and that liturgical shifts occur out of the "almost chaotic encounter of meeting God in the liturgy." The open communion phenomenon might just be one of those shifts.

Those participating in the Open Table project understand that God's grace transcends mere hospitality. Jesus dining with sinners and those with little or no understanding of the kingdom of God proclaims God's grace before, during and after anyone's response. The meal is not a prize for faith but a gift that might produce faith. Baptism follows as a response of commitment. This is all quite consistent with the experience of the four congregations.

The paradigm for their practice is the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke, chapter 15. The father watches for the younger son to return, gives his son unconditional embrace and throws him a feast! The true elder son is Christ who understands and enacts the will of the Father. Baptism joins us to the mission of the true Son. We are remade in his image. The guests at the eucharistic table are all those whom the Father seeks out and welcomes so that a multitude of siblings might return.

The Open Table project offers these insights:

- Grace is understood as a renewal of relationships more than an infused quality of the soul. Christ is experienced richly and deeply in the community gathered around the table in the gift of reconciliation. Here the barriers of rejection, failure and unworthiness are broken down. Those most profoundly affected by the invitation are those who have been alienated from the church and have seen it as an exclusionary or judgmental community.
- The full reality of initiation occurs at baptism and the meal offers a glimpse of what this transformation may look like. The unbaptized get to glimpse a community shaped by the paschal mystery filled with love and service.

- Repentance is a real and a necessary part of the Christian life but repentance comes out of first being embraced by God and beginning to allow ourselves to be transformed by God's grace. In this way, participation in the Eucharist leads to repentance.
- The Eucharist itself is formational. Christian formation is not primarily intellectual. It is under girded and informed by ritual and symbol. This is quite consistent with catechumenal formation and process.
- The younger son finds a secure place at the table. Over time, he begins to grow into the elder son's life – the life of one who shares the life of the Father.
- The fullness of baptism is defined by a response to grace, not by privilege taken from grace. Best practices might look like this: the baptized are recognized not by their admission to the table but by their service at the table.

Questions for discussion and further reflection:

- Does a reversal of the ancient order – table to font instead of font to table – disallow, compromise or significantly alter contemporary manifestations of the catechumenate?
- If the Eucharist is no longer the culmination of Christian initiation, what is there to replace it?
- Perhaps you are part of a community practicing open communion. How has this changed the flavor of our catechumenate process?
- How might the eucharistic liturgy of the rites throughout the catechumenal process be revised to reflect table to font? (e.g., the Rite of Welcomes prays for those who will, at Easter, arrive at the water of life and the bread and cup of blessing.)
- Assuming the pattern of formation has been table to font, what are the ritual marks of identity for the newly baptized uniting with the Christian community?

Many in the emergent church, including the musicians at this conference, have articulated the needs of the postmodern generation. Their problem isn't so much sin but displacement. They aren't looking so much for redemption but community. Since the Eucharist is a meal of the kingdom then radical welcome and inclusion of all is a sign of God's kingdom. Open communion is quite consistent with the needs of modern seekers. At the same time, the mystery of the Eucharist empowers and brings life to those committed to carrying out the vision of the kingdom. Perhaps we need not choose one or the other but embrace both and continue to pray and find creative ways implement eucharistic formation as a most vital component of catechumenal formation both before and after the font.

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Communion and Baptism

Stephen Herr

God's Word and the holy sacraments continue to be tremendous gifts to God's people. Through these means, we receive God's grace and the gift of faith "when and where the Spirit pleases." The Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit together generate faith that is the power to apprehend the grace and mercy the Triune God offers us through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, God links us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are reborn, renewed and reformed. We receive a new identity and through the gift of faith we enter into a life of new obedience marked by the cross of Christ. This is a life in which we die to sin and rise to newness of life. It is a life where we die to the old self and live in service to others. It is a life of faithful discipleship and stewardship. It is a life marked by the Word and water of Christ. It is a life as the children of God distinguished, but not separate from others. It is not a separation of exclusivity marked by arrogance. Rather it is a way of life in faith that is distinctive and closely tied to one who was crucified and raised to new life. This faith in Christ creates a boundary that demarcates, but is not a barrier with non-believers.

While worship bulletins often address the issue of eucharistic hospitality, seldom do I see an announcement or invitation to explore what baptism and the baptismal life is or an invitation to be baptized. Likewise, we might ask ourselves if we should not with more frequently extend an explicit invitation to the unbaptized to come and hear God's Word proclaimed. As we continue to move forward in an increasingly secularized society and culture, the church can look to its past and the era of the apostles and the pre-Constantine church to find inspiration. The church existed then within a society often hostile to its message, yet it practiced hospitality by inviting all to hear God's Word of forgiveness and new life. It invited non-believers into a baptismal life centered on the good news of Christ's death and resurrection.

The traditional and normative practice of the church catholic has been to welcome the baptized, those who have heard the Word and been joined through grace with Christ's death and resurrection, to the holy supper. Martin Luther reminds us of the benefits and the significance of the sacrament of the altar is for the fellowship of all the saints.¹ In this meal, God incorporates us into the Body of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and connects the recipient with all the saints. This connection presupposes faith and this sacrament like baptism is a means of God's grace to be received in the new obedience of faith. Melancthon emphasized this connection between faith and the sacrament in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* noting that communion is "useless unless faith, which confirms that the forgiveness of sins is being offered here, is added."

The Christian liturgy invites all to come and hear the Word of God. This is an open invitation for all to come and experience the liberating word of good news and truth. The church invites all into the relationship with Christ through the proclamation of the Word and the visible word of baptism. We believe this Word and Sacrament of Baptism in the power of the Spirit have the power to confirm faith in those who hear it. It is this faith that helps us apprehend and receive the grace imparted in the sacraments.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is instituted for the sake of the baptized as the adopted children of God. We invite the baptized to the eucharistic table as an affirmation that the sacrament of the altar is more than a meal of hospitality or nourishment. The crucified and risen Christ is the host and present in the meal to forgive sins and bring life to all who partake of His body and blood in faith.

In this changing cultural context where fewer persons are connected to Christ and Christ's Church, the church absolutely needs to extend hospitality and invitation. I would encourage the church to increase its hospitality and witness through its invitations for all to come and hear God's proclaimed Word and to be baptized. For through these things one enters into a life with Jesus Christ, a life marked by both newness of life, forgiveness and sacrifice. The Word and water bring us into a relationship with Christ and through faith we live into the promise of grace. Subsequently, the sacrament of Holy Communion sustains us on this journey of faith and the sanctified life through its gifts of fellowship with Christ and all the saints, the forgiveness of our sins, new life and God's abundant grace and hope.

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¹¹ Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* edited by Timothy J. Lull, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989), 243.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Catholic Faith and Local Practice

Kurt Kusserow

A reflection paper written for the ELCA Conference of Bishops' structured conversation on the question of whether or not to welcome to the table people who are not baptized.

The question

As I understand it, the question that lies behind this reflection paper arises out of a particular context: The experience of people who gather for the Eucharist in communities where there are frequently some in the assembly who are not baptized. I believe it is fair to say that the question is being raised by pastors presiding in such contexts, and by the baptized communicants, as well as by those who are not baptized and who may or may not be communing.

It also seems that the question is typically framed in such a way as to ask whether or not baptism *must be* the gate to communion. Put this way, the question naturally calls on those in authority to determine whether to open the gate as a sign of hospitality or tend to the gate as a matter of orthodoxy. I do not think this is a helpful frame in which to ask the question or a helpful response to use because both the frame and the resulting response have the tendency to set the authority of the institutional church over against the practice of the local community of faith in a relationship that is either adversarial or disconnected.

It does not serve the church well to place the institutional authority of the church and the local practice of the faith in contention with each other as though they were alternative and competing claims on authenticity, or to separate them from each other as though they can exist apart from each other. Instead, we may seek to frame the question in such way that these two expressions of the church are affirmed as poles of a kind of paradox. If we can do this, we may provide a response from that classic

Lutheran place of tension within the paradox that blesses the life of the church with a helpful and authentic answer to a genuine question.

To say this compactly: catholicity and contextuality are both necessary for the church's faith to be authentic. The church must teach the catholic and apostolic faith. She can do no other and remain the church. And also, the church must practice the faith contextually. After all, the faith cannot be practiced in the abstract. When the values of catholicity and contextuality are held together in creative tension, the Body of Christ may be built up rather than be further divided over questions like this. It is the goal of this paper to engage that possibility.

I would first like to demonstrate that the catholic faith has within it both the clear expectation that those who come to the table are first baptized, *but also* a strong tradition of accommodation for those who are in unique life situations. And I would like to demonstrate that the local practice of the faith has within it both the contextual and personal dimension of pastoral discernment and discretion *but also* a strong tradition of leaning on or appealing to an authority wider or older than its own on which its ministry is based.

The catholic faith

It is far beyond the scope of this short paper to provide a comprehensive review of the catholic faith and its teaching on baptism as preparation for receiving the sacrament of the altar. Instead I will assume that those reading will be able to test for themselves whether these few examples seem enough to represent fairly that expression of the church that is the wider, older, received tradition.

- At the Last Supper our Lord Jesus said to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me." The Last Supper seems clearly to have been a meal for those joined to Christ, and not a public event.
But also, the thief on the cross (presumably never baptized) was promised his share in paradise.
- Similarly, in the parable of the wedding banquet, the one without a garment was abruptly removed from the meal.
But also, the faith of the (uncredentialed) Canaanite woman was enough to give her access to "the children's bread."
- We are aware of the ancient practice of dismissing the catechumens from the liturgy before the Eucharist.
But also, the one leper who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan.
- The apostles' first and spontaneous direction to those who heard the gospel and responded in faith was that they be baptized.

But also, the “mixed crowd” that went with the children of Israel through the sea into the wilderness shared in the gift of manna.

A hundred more examples could be given. The last captures my interest. In their case, the mixed crowd did clearly experience along with the bona fide heirs the walk through the sea, a *kind* of baptism, but without the prescribed formal marks of the covenant (child of Abraham, circumcision, etc.) I will come back to this point.

Local practice of the faith

In the local practice of the faith, we are certainly aware of the great variety of life experiences that pertain to those who come to the table. Some are baptized and consciously live out their baptism. Some are baptized but seem to have no evidence of or interest in a sanctified life. Others may have participated fully in the life of the congregation for years only to discover later that they had never been baptized.

The reality of the local practice of the faith teaches us that there is still a “mixed crowd” among the children of our Heavenly Father, and some “Canaanite women” whose grasp of the gospel seems to trump their lack of credentials. It is this group of people, whom every parish pastor knows, that gives rise to the question before us, *precisely because* these pastors understand that the ministry of their congregations must be part of the larger, older catholic and apostolic church to be authentic. If there is a positive shadow to the habitual cry, “We’ve always done it this way,” it is the sense that the local congregation’s practice is authenticated by some relationship to the received tradition. It is the presence of this “mixed crowd” within the local practice of the catholic faith that captures my interest in thinking about how best to respond to the question.

Proposal

Let me propose a way of putting the question that reaches for the creative tension within catholicity and contextuality:

Is it authentic to the catholic faith and to the local practice of our church to say that we welcome to the table those whom we know to have been joined to Christ in a death like his?

The catholic and apostolic faith teaches that people are joined to Christ in a death like his through the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and that the result of this union is salvation, resurrection, a new life. Romans 6:1-11 is a foundational scriptural passage in this regard. In Philippians 3 Paul writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection by becoming like him in his death.” Similarly, the Lutheran Confessions claim that baptism is necessary for salvation. It is authentic to the catholic faith to

welcome to the table in the local context those who have been joined to Christ through Holy Baptism, because we recognize as a matter of catholic faith that baptism confers a death like his.

But the catholic faith counts among its "mixed crowd" of saints the Holy Innocents and the thief on the cross. Clearly there are other ways to be joined to Christ in a death like his besides the normative sacrament of baptism. It may then also be authentic to the catholic faith to welcome to the table in the local context those who are known locally to have been joined to Christ in a death like his.

Living in the paradox

How do we live in this paradox? We understand baptism to provide a sacramental death for those who have not yet died. This sacramental death is necessary because only the dead can be raised with Christ. Baptism is the church's normative authority of recognizing those who have been joined to Christ in a death like his. The catholic faith also teaches us that some have died with Christ in other ways. By what authority do we recognize them? The pastoral office may bear within it the necessary discretionary authority to answer this question faithfully.

If so, it is because the pastoral authority is grounded in the efficacy of the spoken word of Christ. I think of the thief on the cross to whom Jesus spoke a direct word of promise, and of the Canaanite woman, to whom Jesus also spoke a direct and efficacious word affirming her faith. There is in the pastoral office a trust given by the whole church to speak the words of Christ in the local context. May not this authority be practiced in such a way as to recognize in an individual who is not yet baptized one who has nevertheless been joined to Christ in a death like his? If so, then it would be authentic to the catholic faith to welcome to the table in the local context an unbaptized person who is known to the pastor there to have been joined to Christ in a death like his.

The other side of this office of authentic declaration is the spoken word of rebuke to those who spurn the gift of baptism that is available to them. The witness of scripture includes the one who would follow Jesus but asked first to go and bury his father, and those who say, "Lord, Lord," but whom the Lord says he does not know. If union with Christ is obtained by joining him in a death like his, it cannot be appropriate to welcome to the table those who are unwilling to be joined to Christ in his death.

The sacrament of the altar is not the private possession of the local community of faith or of its pastor, and the meal is not appropriately extended to those who have not died with Christ. The pastoral office bears within it both the contextual responsibility to care for the local community in all its specific reality, and the catholic responsibility to teach

the faith of the whole church. It is not authentic to the catholic faith to set aside in local practice Christ's invitation to be united with him in a death like his.

Summary

I believe the question before us is best approached from within the tension of the catholicity and contextuality of the Church. Baptism is the church's normative recognition of those who have been joined with Christ in a death like his. The church's narrative includes those who have been joined to Christ in a death like his by other means. The pastoral office exercises the authority of the catholic church's faith in the local community, perhaps including recognition of those who have been joined to Christ's death by other means than baptism. If so, it would be authentic to the faith of the catholic church and the practice of the local community to welcome to the table "those who are known to have been joined to Christ in a death like his."

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord

Gordon W. Lathrop

A widespread discussion has been taking place in the churches of North America about the relationship of baptism to Holy Communion. This discussion commonly involves one question and its many implications: Must one be baptized in order to be welcomed to communion? If one answers yes, then has the congregation thereby become significantly inhospitable, quite unlike the stories of Jesus himself welcoming outsiders and sinners to common eating? On the other hand, if one answers no, has the congregation then simply become a carrier of current cultural values, given to the immediate satisfaction of individual choices and to the idea that nothing ought to ever be denied to anybody? In either case, what does baptism mean?

Lutherans can find help in this discussion by seeking deeper grounding in a biblical, liturgical and confessional theology of the means of grace. Indeed, the document of the ELCA titled, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*¹ may be one of our best resources for this discussion. Principles found there — that document's consideration of the things that unite us in our worship practice amid all of our continuing diversities — can anchor the conversation and help us join with other Christians throughout the *oikumene* in thinking about these important questions. That document still comes to ELCA congregations with good proposals for local practice. What follows here is one person's reflections on these issues and that document.²

¹ Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997; in what follows references are made to UMG.

² This paper was originally written as "Twelve Theses on Eucharistic Hospitality" and presented to the Lutheran scholars of liturgy who regularly gather prior to the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, in their January 2013 meeting held in Albuquerque, NM.

We might state the matter in this way: Baptism and the holy supper are the gospel of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit made into a continually recalled initiatory bath and a regularly recurring communal meal. Through them God identifies us with the death and resurrection of Jesus, gathers us together with Jesus into the astonishing new age, brings us again and again to faith, makes of us a community witnessing to God's mercy for the life of the world, continually renews and forgives us, and constantly turns us together toward our neighbors and the earth itself. Baptism and Holy Communion are thus essentially communal events, things that happen to us together. Along with the read, preached and sung word of God, they continually create and mark the church.³

When we then see how these events work together, it is not wise for us to spend too much energy enumerating or distinguishing them. In many ways, Baptism and Holy Communion make up a single sacrament or a single sacramental economy. Described by the human material out of which they are created — thus, the “element” to which the word comes, to use terms drawn from St. Augustine's definition of a sacrament⁴ — they are like washing up before a festal meal and then the meal itself. Because these things bear witness to the arriving new age, the “washing up” occurs once-for-all⁵ and involves an immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus, an introduction into the community around him, and an identification with those — the outsiders, the needy, the sinful, the dying and the earth itself — with whom he identifies. Baptism is thus a “new birth.” The meal is continually repeated,⁶ the end-time banquet available now in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the food for the new-born, turning them also toward the hungry world. Catechesis, the echoing and deepening word that accompanies baptism, is also continually repeated in age-appropriate form.⁷ One could say that the baptismal process — call the whole thing, say, by the name *baptisma* — is the basic sacrament. It is as if the holy supper is one extended and repeatable part of the baptismal process. The word that accompanies baptism and the announcement of the forgiveness of sins — absolution — are yet other parts that extend into our whole life. And the preached word of God in the assembly must constantly be announcing to us, in the terms of the texts of the day, what this *baptisma* means.

In truth, the basic sacrament is Jesus Christ, God in the flesh and in the material of our world, immersed in our alienation and death, changing everything. This is what we mean by “new age.” The word of God in assembly, baptism as the introduction to that assembly, and the supper as the assembly's meal are faithfully seen as concrete means

³ See UMG 2 and 3.

⁴ “The word comes to the element and so there is a sacrament, as if it is itself a kind of visible word.” In *Johannem*, 80:3. This definition was beloved by Luther.

⁵ UMG 16.

⁶ UMG 35.

⁷ See UMG 19 and 37E, F.

whereby the Spirit of God draws us into that one sacrament and so into the life of the Holy Trinity. As *The Use of the Means of Grace* says:

Jesus Christ is the living and abiding Word of God. By the power of the Spirit, this very Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in the Holy Communion, and encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community. By the power of the Spirit active in Holy Baptism, this Word washes a people to be Christ's own Body in the world. We have called this gift of Word and Sacrament by the name 'the means of grace.' The living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father.⁸

The understanding and practice of this profound sacramental economy can be minimized and endangered in our times. Such minimizing occurs both by a kind of religious consumerism and by a certain sacramental legalism. The reception of communion ought not be seen as the reception of an individual religious product, implying no communal involvement and no continuing commitment. Such reception is not a "right" or a religious "work." It is not an occasionally nice thing for an individual to do. Similarly, having baptism "done" ought not be seen as the satisfaction of a divine demand or the meeting of a vague social or religious requirement, also without ongoing communal significance other than familial interest in a ceremony. On the other hand, the sacraments ought not be protected, as if they were religious rituals meted out only under the control of our leaders, without reference to the heart of the sacraments, the basic sacrament that is Jesus Christ, nor to his gracious identification with outsiders and sinners. Both of these misuses call upon our assemblies to teach the meaning of the sacraments and continually renew the practice of the sacramental economy — of *baptisma* — in all of our contexts.

For example, Paul's admonitions to the Corinthian congregation about the Lord's Supper⁹ have been misunderstood and misused when they have been taken to mean that only those with a certain level of religious knowledge and "discernment" should be admitted to the table. On the contrary, Paul urges the current participants in the meal at Corinth to "discern the body," that is to see the poor members of the community, whom they are excluding by their practice, as members of the Body of Christ. By this act of exclusion, they risk sickness and death. It is toward the stopping of exclusion that Paul urges the participants to "examine themselves." Still, the excluded here were most likely baptized members of the community. And the goal of Paul included the establishment of a truly communal meal: not "each of you goes ahead with your own

⁸ UMG 1. See also *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 6.

⁹ 1 Cor. 11:17-34.

supper," but "wait for one another." More: for Paul, the ground of this inclusion was that the meal is to proclaim the cross, Jesus' identification with all in their need.

On the other hand, Jesus' meals with outsiders have also been misinterpreted when they have been taken to imply that baptism is not needed or that participation in the supper has no consequences. To read the stories of Jesus without thinking of the context of the churches in which they were told is naive and misleading. The stories of Jesus' meals were probably indeed recounted in the Gospels with the intention of reforming the meal-practice of the communities of the late first and early second century, among other things the intention of urging the inclusion of Gentiles and other outsiders. But, for example, the Markan Jesus has compassion on the crowd and urges the disciples to feed them after "they have been with me now for three days" (Mark 8:2), an old symbolic shorthand for being with Christ in his death and resurrection, the very content of baptism. In the time of the church, these outsiders and Gentiles are of course to be baptized and so gathered into the community of the cross and resurrection, so brought to be with Jesus for "the three days." Just so, the young man who is stripped at the outset of the passion in Mark (14:51-52) — stripped like an ancient candidate for baptism — three days later appears as witness to the resurrection for the community, clothed in a white robe (16:5). It is as if he has been immersed in the cross of Jesus and so clothed with the gospel. The very meaning of baptism is so symbolized. And throughout Mark, Jesus being with the sinners and outsiders is a down payment on and image of the cross¹⁰ as well as a promise of the resurrection, of his continued presence with these same people.

Just so, the Lukan Jesus finds the outsiders included in both a kind of eucharist, with the widow at Zarephath, and a kind of baptism, with Naaman at the Jordan (Luke 4:25-27), and for saying this the Lukan Jesus is threatened with another down payment on the cross (4:29). Then too, the Markan Jesus says to the disciples, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). Both cup and baptism are to be full of the cross, and they belong together. Similarly, the Johannine Jesus says, in the foot washing that stands for both baptism and supper, "Do you know what I have done to you? . . . you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:12-14). Participation in the meal has consequences, draws us into the way of the cross, raises us up with the resurrection, and turns us toward the needs of our neighbor, even when we do not initially see those consequences, even when we easily say with James and John, "We are able" (Mark 10:39). Baptisma always intends to make clear those meanings and those consequences in our lives. The holy supper is always intended as grace, never a work. But it is not cheap grace. Nor is "grace" easily understood in our culture without profound catechesis. Anyone who eats and drinks

¹⁰ E.g., see 3:6 at the end of the stories in chapters 1 and 2 of Mark.

Christ's meal inevitably belongs to the way of baptisma. They need to have that way made continually available to them. This is true for all of us. All of us need the catechesis and the way of baptisma.

"Holy things" are indeed for "holy people," as the old Eastern Christian text before communion says, warning the participants and warning us. But "only one is holy," as the people wonderfully respond in that same text. That one is Jesus Christ, and he welcomes sinners. While the Markan Jesus calls the Gentile woman a "dog" (Mark 7:27), she willingly becomes the dog under the table who eats the children's crumbs. While the Matthean Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs" (Matt. 7:6) and the Didache uses that very passage to warn the unbaptized and the unrepentant against participation in the eucharist,¹¹ the liturgies of the Christian East have legitimately developed the response that is not unlike that of the Syrophoenician woman, now in the mouth of the assembly: "Only one is holy, Jesus Christ." Admission to communion is always a paradoxical matter of warning and contradictory welcome. Pastors, teachers and liturgical leaders have a responsibility to guard and heighten this paradox, not flatten it into either legalistic refusal or easy, consumerist admission. The practice of the church should say something like this: "Yes, you are welcome. Absolutely. But also, it will cost you your life." "Yes, this is for you. Absolutely. But also, this will turn you toward your neighbor's and the earth's need." "Here is the food of the great and free new banquet. It is the body and blood of the crucified, risen one."

The Use of the Means of Grace has it right and should be taught and practiced in our churches:

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.¹²

Sometimes, it is indeed true that someone comes first to the single sacrament that is Jesus Christ through the means of the eucharist. That may be increasingly so in our congregations as eucharist continues to become the principal service of every congregation, every Sunday, as good eucharistic preaching occurs, and as our congregations practice "strong center and open door" in a mission land, amid many people who have known nothing of authentic Christianity. Pastors know this. Eucharist

¹¹ "But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'" Didache 9:5. The Didache is most likely a late first century text with roots earlier in the century.

¹² UMG 37G. The one word in UMG 37G that I wish was different is the word "inadvertently." No one ought ever be communed "inadvertently." In the mercy of God, I think no one ever is. I would prefer that the text read ". . . and is communed outside of the normal order in which baptism precedes communion . . ."

does indeed proclaim the gospel. People who hear and eat and drink the gospel first in this way ought to not be presented with baptism as if baptism were a requirement or a demand rather than a gift, a thing to shame people by its absence. As Kent Knutson, former professor of theology and former president of the American Lutheran Church, said, "Baptism is always gospel, never law." But one who eats and drinks with the community, even once, is bound to the community and the community to her or to him. The way of baptism must be made available, even if it is approached first in this way. The community cannot simply let such a person go, unconnected, as a solitary consumer.

Still, two other important passages in *The Use of the Means of Grace* are also right: "The Holy Communion is given to the baptized . . ." and "All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion . . ."¹³ The ordinary, classic and meaningful order of washing and festal meal is to be maintained and made clear as the norm for our practice. Ordinarily, we should welcome any seeker first to catechesis and baptism. Ordinarily, eucharistic hospitality is extended to all baptized Christians of whatever church — indeed, like James and John, of whatever conviction about the supper.

While these proposals together do not make up a consequent and logical legal decision, they can have the value of maintaining the pastoral paradox: "Holy things for holy people." And "only one is holy."

Some communities, however, may be called to a "critical exception"¹⁴ in their practice. Their open table and later baptismal process may stand as a challenge to us all to recover the deep anchor of the sacraments in the single sacrament of Jesus Christ. Examples of communities engaged in such a critical exception might include the Episcopal congregation of St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco and many Methodist congregations.¹⁵ Still, such communities have a weighty responsibility to understand their practice as an intentional exception and, thus, a responsibility to maintain a dialogue with the larger church, to establish a serious baptismal process, to make constant reference to the Trinitarian and Christological center of the sacraments, to undertake a profound engagement with the needs of the world, and to exercise a critique of their own practice.¹⁶ The decision to be such a community of exception ought not be taken lightly.

¹³ UMG 37 and 49.

¹⁴ For "critical exceptions," see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 244. For the same phenomenon, called "catholic exceptions," see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 157-8.

¹⁵ See Mark W. Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). It is important to note, however, that John Wesley's understanding of holy communion as a "converting ordinance" is to be understood within the context of 18th century revivalism: those to be "converted" were the already baptized but inactive or inattentive members of the church.

¹⁶ See Stamm, 19-40.

Every Lutheran congregation needs to make clear the grace and open mercy that is available for all people in baptism. More: They need to place a congregationally-based baptismal/catechumenal process at the very center of their life.¹⁷ This baptismal process should be seen as important, beautiful, existentially powerful, desirable, highly valued by the Christian community, challenging, life-changing and yet utterly open and free. We need to practice “the open yet serious font.” Baptism is always gospel, and that gospel needs to be seen and heard.¹⁸ A recovery of immersion pools, of a baptismally focused Lenten observance, and of the liturgy of the Three Days can assist in this seeing and hearing in our time.

On the other hand, it must be said that pastors deceive themselves if they think that baptism without catechesis and formation are easily perceived by people as “grace,” instead of as a thing those people think they “ought to have done” — perhaps even a thing required by God or necessary for “going to heaven” — for themselves or for their child. Pastors are also misled if they think that reception of the Holy Communion apart from the word of the cross and the mystery of the trinity, the words that fill a faithful baptismal process, is perceived as “grace.” Pastors may think — as they themselves have been catechized to believe — that they are forgiving sins by the free distribution of Holy Communion. Many communicants, however, may themselves see no particular need for the forgiveness of sins and may altogether miss the many other meanings of the supper. In our culture, God’s grace and these many meanings need to be taught. The danger also exists that while baptism without sponsors, catechists and catechesis, and eucharist without baptism may seem to congregations to be the most hospitable or “gracious” choices, these practices may have actually come into existence largely as the easiest and most culture-conforming way, requiring the least effort by the congregation or the pastor.

The communal meanings of baptism and the supper will be much clearer to us all with a renewed eucharistic practice as well as a renewed baptismal practice. The continued use of medieval hosts and of individual glasses in the distribution of communion tends to support the American individualist and consumerist approach to religious meaning. So does the “eastward” celebration of the thanksgiving, the absence of a full thanksgiving prayer, and the kneeling congregation. A shared loaf of bread and a shared cup of wine need to be widely recovered,¹⁹ and the latter needs to be clearly taught as the most communally hygienic mode available. The celebration of eucharistia should be at a table, with the presider facing a participating assembly that is standing together — as they have been raised up with Christ so to stand — around the holy gifts. For a visitor to see that assembly, that sign of the body of Christ

¹⁷ See UMG 18-20.

¹⁸ UMG 25-27.

¹⁹ UMG 44A.

enlivened by the Spirit and standing before God and the world, will also be for her or him to see the gospel, into which we all are being continually invited.

The consequences of receiving Holy Communion may be best taught in our day with the words of Martin Luther's 1519 "Sermon on The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ." This sermon makes clear to all of us how receiving communion is always a communal matter, gathering us together into God's going out in care for the life of the world, inserting each of us into a fellowship of beggars. Baptisma exists to gather us into this fellowship and form us in this mission:

When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship . . . Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given to you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and — if you cannot do more — have heartfelt sympathy . . . It is Christ's will, then, that we partake of it frequently, in order that we may remember him and exercise ourselves in this fellowship according to his example.²⁰

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²⁰ Luther's Works 35:54-56. See UMG 54.



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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

“Given for you all”: Eucharistic Hospitality

Moses Penumaka

One of the joyous moments in ministry of word and sacrament for me is to say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” One of the gracious moments for me is to invite by saying, “The things of God for ALL the people of God! Draw near and receive.” Baptism and eucharist are the visible signs of invisible grace of God. They are the means of grace through which God communes with us. There is a lot of preparation. There are many questions and a great deal of tradition to follow to use both of these sacraments in the life and witness of not only each of followers of the Christian faith but also of the community of faith - the church. In this essay I will describe briefly the theological meaning and significance of baptism and eucharist and the relationship between these two sacraments. I will also share a few of the true stories in ministry that may be used as case studies for discussion and clarity on the use of the means of grace.

Baptism

The Augsburg Confession of our faith states: “Concerning baptism it is taught that it is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him.”¹ In the *Book of Concord*, edited by Kolb and Wengert, one can find out the confessional articles and the explanation of the same over a period of time. In studying these sacraments it is helpful to understand the *nature* and *effect* of the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

What is the *nature* of baptism? It is a gift from God. God gives it to us. God baptizes us. According to Scripture it is part of the great commission and therefore can be

¹ Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, ed. *The Book of Concord*, Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2000. p. 42.

understood as God's ordinance. It is commanded by God according to the Scriptures. In baptism through the water and the word, our sins are washed, our human nature is endorsed, and our relationship with God as our creator and we, as children, is affirmed. The Holy Baptism involves first and foremost God, then an ordained minister of the church (when available) and also the community of faith. God baptizes us and we receive baptism by faith. Baptism is once for all. There is no need to be re-baptized. There are many false teachings about rebaptism or baptism by the Spirit by pastors who misinterpret and misuse baptism to claim new members and keep them in their fold.

What is the *effect* of baptism? Through baptism our sins are forgiven, our guilt of sinful nature (original sin) is removed and we enter a new life a new birth. One more important effect is that baptism justifies us saints in spite of our sinful nature because God through Christ has forgiven us. We die and rise like Christ, being justified as saints. For all these theological and confessional reasons, we believe that infant baptism is necessary, right and efficacious.

Both the nature and effect of baptism are to be explained and discussed in detailed during the preparatory classes with the parents, family, sponsors or Godparents and the community of faith as much as possible and necessary. I have baptized a number of children often by parents who were not married or who were divorced and are in a new relationship. It is very touching and powerful that many couples who are not able to afford a wedding or could not marry in the church, or are unchurched, look to the church as soon as they have a child. They seek baptism of their child not only for the child to be blessed in the church but also that their relationship as mother and father are to be recognized in the community of faith at the service. The preparatory classes are a great opportunity to explain the nature and effect of baptism as a means of grace.

The Lord's Supper

The Augsburg Confession states: Concerning the Lord's Supper, it is taught that the true body and blood of Christ are truly under the form of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper and are distributed and received there. Rejected therefore is also the contrary teaching."² How do we define the *nature* of eucharist? The Lord's Supper is based on the scripture; the witness of the gospel writers and Paul who narrate Christ's words and institution. It is the tradition of our church that the words of institution should be interpreted not as figurative but as they stand, in their proper, clear, literal sense. In this sacrament also it is God who invites us to the table, who offers us hospitality and who becomes not only the host but the feast itself.

² *Ibid*, p. 44.

How do we understand the *effect* of eucharist? At the Lord's Table we receive God's grace and forgiveness of sins. We commune- live in union- with God, Christ's true presence in the bread and wine as body and blood. The *effect* of the Lord's Supper is again the word the omnipotence of God in Christ. The Sacrament of the Altar does not rest on our belief or unbelief but on the word and ordinance of God. Who is worthy to receive is also not our piety, merit, holiness, or worthiness but it is purely as God's gracious gift for the forgiveness of sins and the sustaining of life in all its abundance. Luther says "In the same way I also say and confess that in the Sacrament of the Altar the true body and blood of Christ are orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even if the priests who distribute them or those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament. It does not rest on human belief or unbelief but on the Word and ordinance of God...." ³

Two practical issues arise on the nature and effect of eucharist in Indian faith communities, especially among the vegetarians. At special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, many Hindus worship in congregations are open to come to the table. If we apply the nature of eucharist as explained above in the strict literal sense, those who are pure vegetarians and do not eat meat cannot really understand the literal meaning and significance of the Sacrament of the Altar. However as Luther explains in the effect that even those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament, it will remain as real and true bodily presence of the crucified and risen Lord.

Open table at a Wedding at Queens, NY

In New York there was an inter-religious wedding. The bride is Christian and the bridegroom is from the Sikh faith tradition. The wedding took place both in the congregation and at the *Gurudhwara*, the worship place (dharbar - King's court) of their faith. The wedding had brought together a big crowd. The pastor was inspired by the crowd and the Holy Spirit and so after solemnizing the wedding, he spoke the words of institution and served communion to the newly-wedded couple and then gave the bread and cup to the bride and bridegroom to serve the communion to everyone attending the wedding. It was well received. Everyone was happy. Everyone was served the grace of God and the true presence of Christ by the newly-wedded couple. The crowd that was gathered were from many faith traditions and were not baptized. Some of them might have received it as simple bread and wine, some might have receive it as *prasad* (sacred food offered at the temples), and others might have wondered what is it all about. Now, do we rejoice that everyone received the body and blood of Christ, or do we question the pastor if what he did was appropriate or

³ *Ibid.*, p. 598.32.

not? Can this be a theologically sound example of open table? How do we respond to this event?

Ethnic cultures in tension at the Table— Oromoean Christians in Fremont, California

Ethiopian Lutherans, both Amharic and Oromean, are not only large in numbers but are fast in growing as a church. In the San Francisco Bay, there are many Oromeans. Before they acquired a property generously given by a Lutheran congregation, they worshiped at Good Shepherd South Asian Ministry, a multicultural congregation in Fremont, California. Sometimes we used to have combined worship with all caucasians, south Asians and Oromeans. It was a very powerful experience of Pentecost. During communion it was the tradition of the church that the ushers invite communicants pew by pew. Our guest Oromenas are used to going as a whole crowd. This cultural behavior was seen as objectionable to some long-time Lutherans who decided to quit the church and never worship again. Such responses reveal not only the cultural ignorance but also theological bankruptcy on the most important sacramental understandings.

Conclusion

Today the body of Christ and the communion of saints have grown beyond the four walls of the sanctuary and above the memorials of the church. Therefore, the apologetics of the confession of the church are to help us open our hearts and eyes and see what God is doing among us, how the crucified and risen Lord appears to the world in the most unexpected places and how all are welcome and how the sacred and true presence of God “given for you” is literally “given for you ALL.”

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion.

“Butter in the Sunshine”:

The Fragility of Faith and the Gift of Baptism

Melinda A. Quivik

This essay addresses the question: Is it important to be baptized before receiving Holy Communion? Those who challenge baptism as the sacrament that leads to reception of bread and wine give several reasons: 1) Turning someone away from the meal means the church is excluding someone from Christ Jesus' presence. 2) Because Jesus ate with sinners, the church should do so, as well. 3) The Holy Spirit blows where it will, and since we cannot know the heart of a person who desires to feast without first being baptized, the church must honor the experience of the unbaptized. Faith is the goal, they would say, and baptism is no more a source of faith than is Holy Communion. Both sacraments contribute to faith. 4) Welcoming the unbaptized to the table, it is said, does not deny the importance of baptism, because the pastor and congregation may, and probably will, still teach about baptism and encourage its acceptance.

These perspectives call into question major tenets of Lutheran teaching. From *The Use of the Means of Grace*, a document approved by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, we read: “Baptism Incorporates into the Church: In Baptism people become members not only of the church universal but of a particular congregation.”¹ Those who take this position voice concern over what seems to be a dismissal of the primary gifts received from God in baptism. For centuries, the church has considered baptism essential to faith because baptism — as both 1) washing with water and God's word, and 2) teaching — imparts faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, all Christians share a unity. The 1982 document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, upholds ecumenical agreement on baptism as sacramental incorporation.² This is not a small matter.

Martin Luther wrote that faith is a fragile thing, like “butter in the sunshine”³ which melts away quietly without appropriate care. Faith can dissolve and disappear, as well, because without God's help, human beings are not powerful enough to sustain faith.

This essay will hold that baptism incorporates a person into the body of Christ where, nourishment is found in word and meal for all of life.

Ways to Approach the Question

In order to explore eucharistic hospitality, we have to ask not only about the meaning of the sacraments but also about the meaning of faith, how we receive the Holy Spirit and baptism's role in the creation of the church. We can approach this question through several pathways. We can inquire of scripture: What do the scriptures invite us into? We can look historically: What did our ancestors do to bring new people into the body of Christ? We can examine the theology of the Reformation that insisted on justification by grace through faith as a counter to the prevailing practices that over-emphasized human accomplishment. And, finally, we can ask questions about the nature of the church: What creates and sustains the church? How did the early church understand the way a person was to become a member of the body of Christ? How do people today who want to eat the meal without being baptized understand what it takes to build up the body of Christ? The churches that welcome everyone to the table of our Lord today, without explicitly first inviting them to the waters of baptism, are responding to people who are not baptized but who want to join others at the altar table. Is that good for the individual and the body of Christ in the long run?

How does our treatment of the sacraments honor the intention of each of the sacraments and uphold our Lutheran understanding of God's gifts? In order to explore the question, it is necessary to look at the scriptural and liturgical origin of baptism, its purpose according to Martin Luther, its theology, and how a changed relationship between the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion alters Lutheran proclamation. Because this discussion is necessarily brief, please refer to the bibliography attached for further fruitful reading.

Origins

Looking at Scripture, we see that the church baptizes because Jesus was baptized,⁴ and at least in Matthew's Gospel (28:19-20), Jesus sent the disciples to make disciples, baptize and teach the commandments.⁵ As *The Use of the Means of Grace* asserts, "Baptism was given to the Church by Jesus Christ in the 'great commission,' but also in his own baptism by John and in the baptism of the cross."⁶ We might note that Jesus did not send the disciples out to make meals, telling the people that the bread and wine are his body and blood. Out of context, the meal does not readily make sense as a feast of forgiveness and new life. Mistaking what was meant by this meal, the early Christians were accused of being cannibals by those outside of the church who did not understand the meaning of this eating that took place when they gathered. People

need to be tenderly brought into the church to make clear the full import of the food as eucharist, as thanksgiving.

In the “great commission” we find a pattern to the invitation to become part of the body of Christ. The disciples were sent to meet strangers and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them in the fullness of Jesus’ way. This gift marks the ending of one way of life and the beginning of another: A life immersed in the reality of the triune God.

This is the logic of baptism. People are first given a new identity, and then are given food for the journey this new identity will bring upon them. The Christian life is, after all, a dangerous journey. Jesus learned who he was in his own baptism when the voice of God named him “my beloved Son.” Then his troubles began.⁷ Baptism ushers the baptized into a life of danger and challenge, requiring strength. Jesus’ own baptism, the cup he had to drink, is a model for our own baptism.

Scholars are not certain how Jewish ritual washing (a repeated cleansing) became the baptism of John (a one-time event), but what John initiated and Jesus embraced took hold. Through baptismal washing and teaching the essentials of the catechism (whether teaching or washing came first), the church grew. Baptism came to hold many images and meanings found in scripture, in writings of early theologians, and in Lutheran writings.

- Baptism is cleansing, washing with water and God’s word, removal of sin.⁸
- Baptism is God’s seal on the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism.⁹
- Baptism is incorporation into the Christian community. The one who is baptized belongs to a new household with a radically changed understanding of life, death and resurrection to eternal life.¹⁰
- Baptism is the great equalizer: all are called, all are equal in God’s eyes.¹¹
- Baptism makes new priests.¹²
- Baptism is rescue from death into the reign of Christ.¹³
- Baptism is being clothed in Christ, being brought *into* Christ.
- Baptism recapitulates God’s salvation of Noah’s family through the flood.¹⁴
- Baptism gives enlightenment.¹⁵
- Baptism is Jesus’ death.¹⁶
- Baptism is fire coming out of the water.¹⁷
- Baptism is grounding in the death and resurrection of Christ toward “newness of life.”¹⁸
- Baptism leads to the meal the baptized community shares in Jesus’ body and blood.¹⁹
- Baptism is “the making of Christians done in such a way that the act itself becomes a *life-long pattern of living*.”²⁰

- Baptism is likened to marriage in Paul's analogy linking baptism with love between spouses.²¹ Luther extends the metaphor: "The blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because in it God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort."²²

All of these understandings of baptism can be operative at the same time. None excludes the others.

As we grapple with eucharistic hospitality, we are faced with the statement in Luther's *Large Catechism* that Lutherans "do not intend to admit to the sacrament [of the Altar] and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come."²³ This was asserted, as well, in the *Didache* (ca. 50-150 CE)²⁴ and implied in *The First Apology* by Justin Martyr (ca. 150 CE)²⁵ and other early church orders. In Acts 2:41-42 the Pentecost event unfolds as a paradigm and order for future practice: "So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Early church writings — chief among them the book of Acts, the *Didache*, and the Apostolic Tradition (ca. 250-400 CE) — show an order to incorporation into the church. It is baptism first and then the meal.

We do not know whether churches actually did what is described in the church orders. Caring for the faith that has been handed down is not about adhering to old forms as if that alone had merit. The importance of past practices is more significant than just going through rote motions. Words purportedly from Gustav Mahler say it well: "Tradition is not the worship of ashes but the preservation of fire."²⁶ Even though we cannot know precisely what our ancestors did, we take what has come down to us from them as a guide to the deep meaning within what we are doing now.

Ask the Right Question to Know what Baptism Gives Us

In using the sacrament, the primary question is: What feeds faith according to God's Word? There are good reasons to alter practices in any age as evidenced by the many ways Christians live out faith today in different denominations. Let it be clearly said: There is not, historically, one right way to baptize, eat the meal or worship. Yet, theological change accompanies changes in sacramental practice. Those who believe that baptism is not needed for admission to the meal are asking: How can the church express God's welcome if the church insists that everyone be baptized before coming to the meal? Although this question sounds reasonable, it may be the wrong question.

- 1) When we challenge baptism as the sacrament that incorporates a person into the body of Christ, we may downplay God's role by over-emphasizing the churches' responsibility to welcome people to the body of Christ. Baptism is God's welcome to all people. The church's role is to invite people into God's welcome. "Baptism is a sign and testimony of God's grace, awakening and creating faith."²⁷ It is God's invitation into a mystery that, because of its rich and complex imagery and long heritage, also calls for continuous learning. "Baptism includes instruction and nurture in the faith for a life of discipleship."²⁸ As the church has practiced it for hundreds of years, people are baptized because the baptismal sacrament is the means by which, as *The Use of the Means of Grace* puts it, "God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church."²⁹ The church's role is to shepherd the newcomer by not misrepresenting the gospel as if it was law or by pretending that there is no call from God to be baptized. We demonstrate our welcome by making sure that everyone has the opportunity to encounter the outpouring of mercy that is baptism.
- 2) Focusing the question on how we (rather than God) welcome someone into Christian communion is acquiescence to cultural values because it places our intentions over those of God. The church should be proclaiming God's welcome: Here is new life for you. Free in the waters of baptism! Here is food for the journey. Free at the table of the risen One! Luther wrote: "Baptism signifies two things — death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification."³⁰ In short, baptism saves.

What, then, do we mean by salvation? Here is Luther: "To be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever."³¹ This is not somehow optional or unnecessary, let alone merely an obstacle erected to keep people from the thanksgiving feast. Baptism is our very life, the great gift offered to all who come seeking. All are welcome. For that reason, what Martin Luther and the Lutheran reformers, especially Melancthon, wrote about baptism must be part of our deliberations over its place in our congregations today. The Lutheran Confessions serve as our plumb line in determining how to flex our heritage and still abide within the convictions we have received from our ancestors and share with them today.

- 3) Asking how we are to welcome people to Christ's feast may put the church in a position that trivializes baptism. Our theological heritage tells us that baptism is dangerous and therefore of paramount importance. Why? The late Gerhard Forde wrote that baptism "is the primary attack on original sin." Baptism makes us new

because it intervenes “in the endless turning of the self in upon itself, thus breaking the self's incurable addiction to itself.”³²

Refusing baptism but requesting the meal may most graciously be viewed as a natural response to change. We hedge. We take baby steps. We want to test the waters. (What a fitting cliché for this issue.) We want to be the ones to decide. Aware of this very human bent, Gerhard Forde reminds us that “the very point of baptism is to save us from having to depend on our own decisions. . . . God refuses to pander to us. Grace is not cheap, or expensive; it's free. . . . The free gift alone destroys the self who wishes to stay in control.”³³ Being invited into baptism is terrifying indeed, because it is God's great tidal wave of grace bearing us into abundance of life. For the church to withhold this gift for fear of scaring people away is to abet a twisted notion of welcome and to deny the best of our own theology.

Luther's *Large Catechism* is clear that baptism's importance is based in the fact that it is “not something devised or invented by human beings...” and is “no human plaything but is instituted by God...” The Augsburg Confession insists that God's compassionate mercy is not “an indifferent matter, like putting on a new red coat.”³⁴ It is life itself.

Which is to come first?

Can the meal, as well as baptism, deliver us from sin, death and the devil, bring us into Christ's kingdom and give eternal life? Certainly, Luther's emphasis in both of the sacraments is on the power of God's Word to transform this world. And God's Word, alive and at work in the sacraments, forgives and renews. Baptism does this once; Christ's body and blood repeatedly strengthen.

The purpose of baptism is to immerse us in the triune God in order to join us physically and personally to the crucified and risen body of Christ. Baptism makes real for each Christian — in no uncertain terms — that each one *is* a person of faith, lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, and belongs in the same crucified and risen body of Christ received in the meal. All of these gifts are God's doing.

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¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Holy Baptism Principle #29, in *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 33 (hereafter *UMG*).

² *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

³ *UMG*, Holy Baptism Principle #1, pp. 19-34: "In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Holy Baptism is received by faith alone."

⁴ Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34.

⁵ Matthew 28:19.

⁶ *UMG*, Holy Baptism Principle #15, p. 21.

⁷ Glauca Vasconcelas-Wilkey alerted me to this observation from a sermon by Herbert Anderson.

⁸ Acts 2:38 and 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:9-11, 15:29.

⁹ 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Romans 4:11; Titus 3:5-7.

¹⁰ Acts 2:38-41; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Cor. 12:12-13.

¹¹ Galatians 3:26-29.

¹² 1 Peter 1:22—2:10.

¹³ Colossians 1:13-14.

¹⁴ 1 Peter 3:21.

¹⁵ Hebrews 6:2-4, 10:32; 1 Peter 2:9.

¹⁶ Mark 10:38-39.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Baptism of Christ: Sermon for the Day of Lights," at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2910.htm>, 2140, preaching on Elijah's defeat of the priests of Baal.

¹⁸ Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50; John 3:5; Titus 3:5-7; Romans 6:1-14; Colossians 2:12.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:2-3, 12:13; Acts 2:41-42; Revelation 22:14; Hebrews 6:4-5; 1 Peter 1:22—2:3.

²⁰ Gordon W. Lathrop, "Baptismal Ordo and Rites of Passage in the Church," in *Baptism, Rites of Passage, and Culture* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Department for Theology and Studies, 1998), 36.

²¹ Ephesians 5:26.

²² Martin Luther, "The Holy Sacrament of Baptism," *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 33.

²³ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., "Large Catechism, Fifth Part: The Sacrament of the Altar," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 467.2.

²⁴ Aaron Milavec, trans., *The Didache* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 9.5, p. 23: "(And) let no one eat or drink from your eucharist except those baptized in the name of [the] Lord, for the Lord has likewise said concerning this: 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs.'"— also at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/didache.html>.

²⁵ See Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>, XLI – XLVII.

²⁶ I have been unable to find the source for this widely-quoted statement.

²⁷ UMG, Holy Baptism Principle #16 and Background 16A, p. 22.

²⁸ UMG, Holy Baptism Principle #19, p. 25.

²⁹ UMG, Holy Baptism Principle #14, p. 20.

³⁰ Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 67.

³¹ Kolb and Wengert, "The Augsburg Confession—Article IX: Baptism," in *Book of Concord*, 459.25 (see n. 23).

³² Gerhard O. Forde, "Something to Believe," *Interpretation* 47, no. 3 (July 1993): 234.

³³ Forde, 234.

³⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 457.6.



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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Exploring the baptismal foundations of eucharistic hospitality

Thomas Schattauer

The value of the conversation in our church about eucharistic hospitality is the opportunity to explore and to celebrate the great gifts of our sacramental life in relation to the missional context of congregations today. The discussion about the relation of baptism to communion and the practice of an open table encourage us to explore the very foundations of Christian faith as we seek to communicate and practice that faith in the contemporary religious marketplace. "The Use of the Means of Grace" reminds us: "In the teaching and practice of congregations, the missional intention of the means of grace needs to be recalled. By God's gift, the Word and the sacraments are set in the midst of the world, for the life of the world" (principle 51).

Baptism has long been regarded as the sacrament of mission. Baptism is the promise and sign of God's unconditional generosity in Jesus Christ, the savior of the world, and the source of the church's mission empowered by the Spirit to make disciples of all nations. In the practice of the early church and among eastern Christian traditions to this day, baptism leads directly to participation in communion at the Lord's table. Such a practice makes clear that eucharistic communion is an integral part of baptism and the way that the baptismal life is regularly renewed and nourished. Martin Luther gave renewed attention to the significance of baptism for the whole course of the Christian life, and one of the gifts of contemporary liturgical renewal has been the recovery of baptism as central to the church's life and mission. What follows here explores the baptismal foundations of eucharistic hospitality with a view to current questions surrounding an open table and the invitation to communion.

The Lord's Supper is celebrated by an assembly of those who are baptized.

Christian worship is the worship of a Christian assembly. It is an act of those gathered in the name of Jesus by the Spirit of God to be a visible witness to God's purpose for the whole world. At the Lord's Supper, those gathered as the body of Christ in a local place receive the sacramental body of Christ. As Augustine taught, we receive what we are, and we become what we receive: the body of Christ.

Baptism visibly marks individuals as members of the body that celebrates the supper. At baptism the assembly proclaims to the newly baptized: "We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission that we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world." Those who are baptized into Christ's body participate in the supper of Christ's body as a sign of and witness to God's life-giving purpose for the whole world. The presence and participation of an assembly of the baptized is essential to the celebration of the Lord's Supper and a part of what it means.

Individuals will stand in a variety of relationships to that assembly of the baptized in their presence at worship. Many, normally most, will be among the baptized. Some — infants, children and adults — in one way or another will be actively preparing for baptism. Others — and we pray an increasing number — may be drawn to worship by the witness and fellowship of the congregation. They may in fact be "unbaptized," but their presence also carries a relation to baptism. They are present as the result of the congregation's own baptismal life and mission, which is nothing other than the activity of God's word, the same word that claims a person in baptism. The assembly that celebrates the supper is an assembly constituted by baptism and oriented by its baptismal mission to show forth God's life-giving purpose for each and every one.

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Baptism is part of the logic of participation in Holy communion: baptism implies communion -- communion implies baptism.

Baptism is part of the logic of Holy Communion and vice-versa. Baptism into Christ and his body, the church, implies the communion with Christ and his body that the Lord's Supper celebrates. So too, participation in the supper implies the communion with Christ and his body the church that baptism initiates.

There is a distinction, however, to be made between the communally shared logic of Christian faith and the individual experience of coming to faith. When applied to questions of pastoral-liturgical practice, such as eucharistic hospitality, this distinction suggests that we have a dual responsibility: the responsibility to steward the logic of the faith as well as the responsibility to welcome and honor the way that each person comes to faith.

There are those who come to the table before baptism and discover there God's mercy for them. That experience and local practices that provide for it, need not deny or threaten the relation of baptism and communion. Susan Briehl has taught that while most are washed to the table, some are fed to the font. That way of stating things holds together both the logic of the faith and the various ways people come to faith in a way that preserves the deep connection between baptism and communion. And more — people are washed to the table and fed to the font within a Christian assembly, an assembly of the baptized. The washing and feeding take place in a community that lives "in Christ" and is thus rooted in baptism. In the community of the church, where the crucified and risen Christ lives among his people, the Spirit of God "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies" (Luther, Small Catechism) individuals by bringing them into that same life and visible identity.

Baptism helps us to see that the gift of communion involves us in costly discipleship.

"For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (Thanksgiving at the Table I & VI; 1 Corinthians 11:26). The gift of life offered at the Lord's table comes to us through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Baptism into Christ unites us in Jesus' death in such a way that our old self, as the apostle Paul teaches, is crucified with Christ and a new self, freed from sin, rises to life. This dying and rising with Christ is the pattern of our lives initiated in baptism and received again and again in communion. We lose ourselves to gain a new life in Christ in a communion of love together with others and radically for others.

The welcome to Christ's table, the being together in the sharing of his body and blood, is a recurring invitation to the life that baptism commits us to. In baptism, we "renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of the world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw [us] from God" and receive the new life that comes from the triune God. This renunciation and turn to new life are the fruit of Jesus' death that we continually proclaim at the risen Lord's table.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us to distinguish the cheap grace of human imagining from the costly grace of the gospel. The cost of discipleship in the way of Jesus is one's very life. "When Christ calls a man [sic], he bids him [sic] come and die" ("The Cost of Discipleship"). Eucharistic hospitality welcomes a person to nothing less than the baptismal renunciation of life as we know it for the life that comes from God. Baptism and the Eucharist are deeply wedded.

What, then, shall we say about the invitation to communion?

Who is welcome to participate?

On the one hand, to say that only the baptized may receive communion can make baptism sound like a rule rather than God's generous invitation, a condition imposed by the church rather than the free movement of God's grace, a barrier and boundary rather than the way to life in Christ. On the other hand, to say that anyone can participate in communion without reference to baptism can make it seem that baptism does not matter anymore, that there is no relation between baptism into Christ and communion in Christ, that participation in the sacraments can be separated from participation in the body of Christ, the church.

The above reflections on the baptismal foundations of eucharistic hospitality suggest several things. When we put the primary focus on the assembly of the baptized in relation to the supper, the question shifts from the "qualification" of the individual to the baptismal character of the community that celebrates the supper and its baptismal mission. When we are committed to the baptismal logic of participation at Holy Communion, we are not committed to enforcing a rule about who is qualified to receive but to communicating persuasively the deep relation between welcome to the table and the welcome to baptism. When we understand that participation in the supper involves a person in a costly discipleship in the way of Jesus, we are committed to inviting people into the baptismal community that shares that life.

These reflections offer a perspective that could sponsor some freedom in congregational practice or even practices within a congregation, ranging from practices that make a strong witness to the logical priority of baptism before communion to a more "open" practice of welcome to the table that nevertheless regards the baptismal foundation of the assembly itself as essential and seeks to lead those who commune with us to baptism and the discipleship of the cross.

If we take seriously the baptismal foundations of eucharistic hospitality, we face two significant challenges:

How shall we practice baptism and carry out the baptismal life and mission of the church in such a way that baptism is no longer understood to be entrance into a restricted club of the saved but rather into the communion of those who live in Jesus Christ and his unrestricted mission for the communion of all people, indeed all things?

How shall we practice the communion at the Lord's Supper that all who participate there encounter Jesus Christ alive among his people and in such a

way that those who are baptized are renewed in their baptismal calling and anyone who is not baptized hears a generous and open welcome to baptism?

Our practice needs to uphold baptism as God's open welcome to life in Christ for all rather than to make it seem like a sign of exclusion. Our practice of communion needs to uphold the connection to a baptized assembly and to the baptismal implications for the individual, realized or not.

All of this makes it difficult to formulate clear verbal and written statements of invitation to communion. It is worth noting that our liturgy itself makes no such definitive statements, it simply invites and declares:

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

or

Come to the banquet, for all is now ready.

The body of Christ, given for you.

The blood of Christ, shed for you.

Although there is much in the liturgy that points to the baptismal character of the assembly that celebrates the Supper, there are no statements that give direction about who may participate in communion. Perhaps we should take our guidance from that and be more reticent about what we say and what we print about who is invited to the table. What we most need now is greater clarity about the meaning of our personal and corporate baptismal identity in today's missional context and with that more regular and robust statements of welcome to baptism.

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

All Are Welcome

Bradley Schmeling

Holy Communion saved my life. When I was growing up in the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, I was internalizing all kinds of messages about what a boy was supposed to be. I knew deep down that I would never meet all the expectations my church and culture had for me. I found it hard to love myself. However, every time I came to the table I heard the promise, “The body of Christ given for you.” Somehow a message of grace and love took root among all those other messages and grew to be a source of redemption, a counter-message to the world that draws boundaries and often decides who is worthy and who is not. I suspect I would have wandered away from the church had I not discovered Christ Lutheran Church in Athens, Ohio, where I attended college, a congregation of the Lutheran Church in America whose invitation to the table included the words, “all baptized Christians.”

In those days, including “all baptized Christians” was a powerful way of announcing that our church did not draw boundaries around Christ’s table as did other churches. The words were intended to be open and inclusive. We welcomed everyone from every expression of the church to gather together around the promise of the gospel, present for us in bread and wine; a beautiful sign of the unity that God intends for the whole church. The predecessor churches to the ELCA were laying down the tracks for an ecumenical spirit that would lead the ELCA from table fellowship to full communion in so many, beautiful directions. Eucharistic hospitality (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 49) quite literally led us more deeply into mission and discipleship, transformed by the grace of Christ, to be a more powerful witness to the gospel in the world.

Since my days in college, the world and the church have changed. As our church experiences declining membership, most of us are aware that the pipeline of Lutherans into our new member classes is shrinking dramatically. We find ourselves in relationship with people from many religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Our children are

going to school with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Young adults increasingly list their primary religious preference is “none.” Issues of hospitality and community play out across the front pages of our newspapers. People walk away from many religious traditions because they experience them to be judgmental, divisive and sectarian — behaviors that counter a message of unconditional love. The church finds itself in mission in a profoundly new and different context than when *The Use of the Means of Grace* was beautifully relevant. As we move into this new century, our eucharistic hospitality will need to take this new context into account. We will need to be (about) mission, invitation, and poetically descriptive.

Eucharistic hospitality as mission

Our language of “all baptized Christians” is no longer experienced by many with its intended welcome, but rather as a limit—God’s love reserved for those who are already “inside.” In many of our congregations, (Thanks be to God!) new people are coming forward, hands outstretched to receive a gift that is being offered at our tables. They are drawn to participate in our mission, having heard something about Christ’s love for them and for the world. Coming to the table is how all of us are drawn into that mission, members and visitors, even the baptized and the unbaptized. I suspect that in the early church, the meal was often the way that new Christians found their way to the font. A wide welcome at the table can, indeed, be a primary way that we take seriously our great commission to baptize and teach all that Christ commands. Table fellowship invites all of us more deeply into discipleship, some of us into baptism, some of us into affirmation of baptism. We must find language in our welcome that links eucharist and baptism, so that what we say draws us from table to font and back again. Either way, if our language leads people to think that the sacraments create categories of insiders and outsiders, we have likely made our sacramental life into works righteousness.

Eucharistic hospitality as invitation

It’s rather ironic that we find ourselves debating who should be called to our tables when, in truth, our congregations are not flooded with unbaptized people racing forward to receive the bread of life. Oh, that we really had that problem! Rather than decide who should or should not be receiving communion, we should probably put our energy into evangelism, announcing to our neighborhoods that God’s mercy is for all of us. In a congregation I served, we announced weekly in worship and publicly in the neighborhood, “In Christ’s love, there are no longer insiders and outsiders, but all are welcomed into God’s work of love and justice.” Many in our culture expect the church to be exclusive. The media reinforces this stereotype over and over again. Most of us have friends who have some kind of church horror story. To be about Christ’s mission in

this context, we have to be careful and clear to announce that everyone is welcome. Better to be extravagant than stingy in a starving and wounded world.

Eucharist hospitality is poetry

In order to be extravagant in our welcome, we need language that describes Christ's presence in bread and wine rather than defines who can receive it. We are stewards of a mystery, not gatekeepers at the altar rail. Our welcome calls for poetry. In the end, we cannot contain Christ's love. Grace is always larger than our words can communicate. It will be transformative in ways that we often cannot expect. The Holy Spirit will call, gather, and enlighten people that we never expected to show up at our door. (Read the book of Acts!) We cannot fully define how and to whom God will be truly present in bread and wine. We set bread and wine extravagantly on our tables, offering great thanksgiving for the ways that God can take us, as well as any gift of creation, and use it to bless and redeem the earth. We break the bread, Christ's body and our own, broken and healed. We cast our bread upon the waters, trusting that God will feed the hungry. We sow the seeds of the gospel, trusting that God will bring faith to bloom. Maybe all we need to say is "Come! Come, and receive the gifts of God, holy things for holy people." And in that moment, the whole creation is redeemed.

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Eucharistic Hospitality:

Unexpected Grace at the Lord's Table

Harvard Stephens

As I begin my brief reflection on eucharistic hospitality and some of the issues that pertain to communing people who may not have been baptized, I want to share a few words found in the wonderfully provocative book written by Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist – Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection*.

"This book is about people who pray stammering, but fiercely, for the end of tyranny; it is about people who from time to time face death's dark shadows, and by doing so are confronted with their own helplessness and despair. In the midst of this turmoil they await the coming of God. It is about people who share a meal together in which the Dayspring comes and cheers the spirits, disperses the gloomy clouds of night, and puts death's dark shadows to flight. It is about people who juxtapose in odd, sharp, and sometimes painful ways the texts of reality with the living traditions of the Christian faith that embody resurrection hope."

This statement suggests to me that our deliberations about eucharistic hospitality are always impacted by the ways we read scripture and by many *texts of reality* that confront us as we encounter the questions that grow out of the particular pastoral concerns that have pushed us to re-examine our traditional Lutheran sacramental doctrines. Ultimately, we must find both clarity and courage to reclaim our authority and voice as a church prepared to offer a distinctive understanding of *the living traditions of the Christian faith* that will guide and interpret our experiences of word and sacrament ministry in the world today.

Many ELCA congregations are already very comfortable with the notion of an *open table* that does not limit their eucharistic hospitality by excluding ecumenical visitors who may attend our public worship services and who desire to share in our Holy Communion. This practice rests on our rather fluid interpretation of what Christian baptism is, how its authority is derived, and the hope that mutual recognition of baptism offers for the realization of a more unified church – not just in an eschatological sense, but also in a practical and missional embrace of scripture's vision of one Lord, one faith and one baptism.

We seek to celebrate Baptism in such a way that the celebration is a true and complete sign of the things which Baptism signifies."

Principle 25, *The Use of the Means of Grace*

The anxiety and resistance we may experience as we consider policies that affirm the discretion of pastors and congregations to celebrate the eucharist with an *open table that includes people we know have not been baptized* is not surprising. Baptism in our tradition signifies a public witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ that is supported by catechesis and other forms of instruction, an affirmation of membership and participation in the life of a particular congregation, and our insistence that "all the baptized share responsibility for the proclamation of the Word and the formation of the Christian assembly." (Principle 8, *The Use of the Means of Grace*)

Can it be possible that someone who is not baptized can also share in our proclamation of the Word? Can someone who is not baptized be a fully valued and loved member of the Christian assembly, who is also called by God to accompany us and further equip us as we engage in our common public ministry? Should such a person have place at the Lord's Table and a share in the sacramental experience of Holy Communion? Here we encounter the healthy tension that is always present when we consider the great mystery of what our communion in Christ really is, what it encompasses, and how it always exceeds the limitations we may impose on such an extraordinary gift of grace, whether consciously and intentionally, or unconsciously and in unintended ways.

Dr. William Lazareth published *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982 on behalf of the World Council of Churches. Throughout my public ministry, I have been inspired every time I consider the implications of these words from that seminal document.

"The Eucharist is the great sacrifice of praise by which the Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation. For the world which God has reconciled is present at every Eucharist: in the bread and wine, in the persons of the faithful, and in the prayers they offer for themselves and for all people... The Eucharist signifies what the world is to become: an offering and hymn of

praise to the Creator, a universal communion in the body of Christ, a kingdom of justice, love and peace in the Holy Spirit."

Perhaps I am tempted to read too much into Dr. Lazareth's choice of words that speak of a *universal communion in, and not of, the body of Christ*. Surely we all recognize that Jesus has never stopped calling the strangers and the outcasts into his body. Surely a more fully open sharing of the gift of Holy Communion can embody this call, especially when the body of Christ has discerned that someone who is not baptized is responding to Christ's invitation. This, to me, is the crux of the matter. The discernment of the body, an expression commonly attributed to St. Paul, creates a space for unexpected grace to appear. Archbishop Oscar Romero once said: "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest."

I believe that our deliberations about eucharistic hospitality and the possibility of communing persons who are not baptized invite our whole church to rejoice in the gifts of unexpected grace. As Dr. Lazareth also wrote, "The minister of the Eucharist is the ambassador who represents the divine initiative and expresses the connection of the local community with other local communities in the universal Church." Clearly, our sacramental policies have always given us order and an institutional identity that is conformed to our desire to witness as evangelical Catholics who comprise a church that prays for the Holy Spirit to never cease to come among us and renew and reform and reshape us in the image of our Lord. Could it be that any eucharistic policy is inherently incomplete, and that it must always be refreshed by our Lord's grace-filled presence and desire and power to shape and empower the work we do as ambassadors who speak to the world in his name?

The 1984 Convention of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) adopted a response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Among other things, the LCA's statement pushed for a deeper reflection on the dynamics of sin and grace, the sinfulness of humankind, and *how this condition is related to the sacraments*. The document asks for a stronger articulation of what is constitutive for the sacraments, a more complete theology of ministry, and a more precise location of *the living voice (viva vox) of the Gospel*. I realize that this latter notion has become the theme of the ELCA's planned 2015 Worship Jubilee. Perhaps our deliberations concerning eucharistic hospitality will encourage how the living voice we embody articulates its evolving position on these issues, and at the same time affirm Dr. Lazareth's position that "a certain liturgical diversity compatible with our common Eucharistic faith is recognized as a healthy and enriching fact. The affirmation of a common Eucharistic faith does not imply uniformity in either liturgy or practice."

There is room at the Lord's Table – theologically and experientially – for all the people who hear the Saviour calling. Such a view does not destroy the witness of our teachings and traditions concerning the Catechumenate or even First Communion. It does not erode or degrade the identity of a church that honors the integrity of the sense of order and doctrinal authority conveyed by its Confessions. Rather, this view claims a somewhat radical and unexpected continuity with the fundamental teachings of our faith tradition. We are walking together faithfully in an effort to honor what the Augsburg Confession calls the Office of Ministry, imbued with a task unique in all the world: *to provide the gospel and the sacraments, so that through these, as through means, God gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where God pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.*

Malcolm Gladwell has written an immensely popular book: *David and Goliath – Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. The final chapter tells the compelling story of André Trocmé, a Huguenot pastor who served in the French town of Le Chambon during the Nazi invasion. The faithful people of this small community bravely offered sanctuary to Jews hunted by Nazi forces. Their refusal to comply with orders to turn over the refugees in their midst was for them a necessary expression of their faith in Jesus Christ. Gladwell's book shares this beautifully powerful letter to a Nazi officer that was read by the children of Le Chambon.

We have learned of the frightening scenes which took place three weeks ago in Paris, where the French police, on orders of the occupying power, arrested in their homes all the Jewish families in Paris to hold them in the Vél d'Hiv. The fathers were torn from their families and sent to Germany. The children torn from their mothers, who underwent the same fate as their husbands... We are afraid that the measures of deportation of the Jews will soon be applied in the southern zone. We feel obliged to tell you that there are among us a certain number of Jews. But we make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teaching. If our comrades, whose only fault is to be born in another religion, received the order to let themselves be deported, or even examined, they would disobey the order received, and we would try to hide them as best we could. We have Jews. You're not getting them.

There are occasions in our life together that call us to act with courage, despite the risks to our lives or our reputations. Supporting a more open Lord's Table does not nearly present the level of consequences that came with the decision to hide Jews in the mountains of France. But our response to people who desire to share in Holy Communion, under circumstances that preclude or precede their experience of Holy Baptism, may well express a kind of courage that is no less significant. The Gospel

teaching must prevail. If our congregations, called to bear witness to the gracious invitations of Jesus to *come and be fed*, are discerning God's voice, the *viva vox*, urging them and empowering them to share their Holy Communion with those not yet baptized, then they deserve the support of our church.

Gladwell's footnotes identify another book that tells the story of the French Huguenots who gave shelter to Jews during World War Two. It was written by a historian, Christine Van de Zanden, and the title, oddly enough, was *The Plateau of Hospitality*. Such plateaus of hospitality have been called into being in every chapter of human history, and certainly throughout the annals of Christian witness. Our eucharistic hospitality can indeed express our own calling to walk together on higher ground and shine a light from the plateaus of grace where Jesus has prepared a table with room for everyone. From this vantage point, we may glimpse new ways to live in the covenant of our Baptism and in communion with the Church. How amazing it is to consider anew that the journey of God's people responding to the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ may be confirmed and celebrated at either the font or the table.

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion.

Invitation and the Open Table

Benjamin M. Stewart

An Invitation Accepted

Why is the church now engaging the question of “open table”? Remarkably, one central reason is that an invitation spoken through the church is being accepted—perhaps to our surprise.

In many of our assemblies, a minister standing at the table speaks an invitation to the people. “Come to the banquet, for all is now ready.” Or “taste and see that the Lord is good.”¹ This invitation is strong: It draws on the scriptures, is extended across a table set with bread and wine and is offered to an assembly preparing to eat and drink.

Even the words “given for you,” repeated many times during the distribution of communion, are a sort of invitation. The “you” in the original Greek of the scriptural texts does not address a single individual already prepared to receive, but rather is plural and announces an invitation to a community of hearers.²

There are a number of ways to think about what has prompted the current conversation around open table. This is one way: The church is speaking an invitation to the table to which people are responding and, in newly significant numbers, some of those responding to this invitation are not yet baptized. This new situation calls for thoughtful exploration from multiple angles. The paragraphs below invite further reflection on the dynamics of the practice of invitation.

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides these two addresses as options for the presiding minister to speak to the assembly “in these or similar words.”

² See the second person plural formulation of Matthew 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.19-20; 1 Corinthians 11.24-26.

Invitation to baptism, too

Many congregations of the ELCA regularly offer an encouraging and gracious invitation to communion during Sunday worship. Such an invitation stands in continuity with the universal trajectory of the Gospel itself. This trajectory is set out in the opening paragraphs of *The Use of the Means of Grace*: "In Christ's flesh, in his death and resurrection, all people are invited to behold and to receive the fullness of God's grace and truth."³ It is to be celebrated that members of many ELCA congregations regularly experience such invitations in worship in relationship to Holy Communion.

We encounter a different situation if we ask how often participants in our assemblies are similarly invited to Holy Baptism. It may be good for congregations to compare how visitors to their assemblies are invited to baptism and to communion, respectively. Many congregations speak and/or print an invitation to communion every week in worship. Some of these same congregations rarely print and even less regularly speak a public invitation to baptism.⁴ The regular public invitation to communion stands in contrast to the hidden or unarticulated invitation to baptism.

Taking courage from the affirmative response of many to the invitation to communion, congregations of the ELCA may cultivate regular, public, encouraging and gracious invitations to baptism for all ages. Some congregations practicing various renewed forms of the catechumenate are indeed describing a reinvigorated connection between mission, sacramental life and discipleship especially in relation to those of new or renewed faith.⁵ It is good that these practices are being shared and becoming more widely known among congregations.

Avoiding opposition between baptism and communion

Our invitations into sacramental participation should not inadvertently oppose baptism and Holy Communion. However, some patterns of invitation seem to do just this. In some congregations, invitations to Holy Communion are phrased largely in terms of *hospitality* and *welcome*, while invitations to baptism are marked mostly by images of *commitment*. When the sacraments are framed in this way, it is only logical that communion becomes associated with entrance into the church, and baptism becomes associated with long-term church participation. Interestingly, this pattern more or less reverses an older, equally overdrawn opposition between baptism and communion.

³ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Background 1B.

⁴ Sometimes the explicit assumption in a baptismal invitation that actually is spoken or printed is that baptism is for infants, so that adults who are not baptized are implicitly left uninvited or shamed.

⁵ See, for example, Rick Rouse, ed. *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living: A Handbook to the Catechumenate*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012; and Paul E. Hoffman, *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond*. Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2012.

Some congregations, in a desire to speak as strong a welcome to the table as possible and inspired by the radical meal fellowship of Jesus recalled in scripture, extend an invitation that explicitly welcomes people to communion “whether or not you are baptized.” Quite apart from the interests of open table, this formulation seems unnecessarily dismissive of baptism – as if communion and baptism are easily separable things. (Imagine phrasing a standard invitation to baptism that welcomed candidates “whether or not you plan to commune.”) Instead, even in congregations that practice open table, our language of invitation to the meal can honor (with less binary, more modest speech) the sacramental unity of communion with Jesus Christ: The same communion effected by the Gospel preached and into which we are plunged in baptism.⁶

Conversely, congregations that keep the classic pattern of baptism leading to communion should not allow their invitations to communion to portray baptism only as a procedural qualification for communion. Any mention of baptism in an invitation to communion should speak to baptism's *theological* significance. Concerns for proper procedure and ritual order should not eclipse the more foundational theological invitation into the mystery of communion with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Much of the conversation concerning open table has framed the basic question as “should those who are not baptized be invited to communion?” This conversation invoking radical hospitality at Christ's table is taking place while some of the baptized—infants and young children—are themselves in many places not typically being invited to communion. Partly through some accidents of history that preceded the reformation, the original unity between baptism and first communion was largely lost in the west, so that first communion became an event separate from baptism. With a number of helpful considerations and a few caveats scattered throughout the document, *The Use of the Means of Grace* allows for the recovery of a welcome to communion for infants and young children at their baptism: “Infants and children may be communed for the first time during the service in which they are baptized.”⁷ Thus, while the practice of open table has sparked concerns about the separation of communion from baptism, the practice of splitting communion from the typical (infant) baptism in Lutheran churches has already in some senses normalized a separation that is not theologically well-informed. It seems that any discussion of open table (i.e. a discussion about the invitation to communion and its relationship to baptism) needs to consider again questions regarding the communion of all the baptized, including infants and young children.

⁶ This unity is set out in principle 1 of *The Use of the Means of Grace*.

⁷ The full text continues “... or they may be brought to the altar during communion to receive a blessing.” Application 37D.

Receiving (and becoming) Christ's body

A further opposition sometimes posited between communion and baptism portrays communion as being about *receiving* the body of Christ with baptism being about *becoming a member* of the body of Christ. This understanding corresponds to the overdrawn polarity (critiqued above) of being *welcomed to receive freely* at communion and being invited to *commit* at baptism. Invitations to baptism and communion that are locked into these polarities distort the significance of both practices. Instead, our congregations do well to invite people (including adults) to baptism in ways that speak clearly of the free gift of God's mercy—in addition to commitment to the life of discipleship. And this may be the more significant challenge: can our invitations to Holy Communion also make clear that we are not simply *receiving* Christ in the sacrament, but we are *becoming* Christ's living body. As St. Augustine put it in his own invitation to communion, when we come to the eucharist, what we see on the table and receive as food (the body of Christ) is also the very thing that we are becoming in the meal.⁸ This dimension of the invitation to communion—seemingly rarely referenced in contemporary invitations—speaks a word of profound welcome into Christ that at the same time includes a bracing warning: this meal is not one more spiritual good to sample. Rather, this food builds your own flesh and blood into the living body of Christ. You are becoming what you eat.⁹ In addition to the motif of a place at Christ's table, can our invitations to communion tell the discernment-inducing truth about becoming the body of Christ in this meal? Further, *becoming the body of Christ* refers not only to the identity of the individual recipient as body of Christ, but also refers to the community into which the recipient is being knit. Here, too, is a promise of communion and community that rightly deserves a word of honesty about obligation—particularly the obligation to serve the suffering body of Christ to which we are joined in the “least of these.”¹⁰

Invitation

The language of invitation—rather than compulsion or control—has long been valued by Lutherans.¹¹ The invitation to communion is being newly and sometimes surprisingly accepted. Congregations of the ELCA may be encouraged by this moment to offer more significant invitations to baptism, and to ensure that our invitations into sacramental life in Christ do not set up misleading oppositions between baptism and

⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 272*

⁹ On the pairing of welcome and warning in invitations to holy communion, see Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Matthew 25.31-45

¹¹ “Participation in the sacramental meal is by invitation, not demand. The members of this church are encouraged to make the sacrament a frequent rather than an occasional part of their lives.” *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Application 35C. See also Martin Luther's preface to The Small Catechism.

communion. Speaking the promise of *becoming* the body of Christ at communion offers newcomers to the faith an invitation to discernment about their own identity and their relationship to community. It may be helpful for congregations, as they extend invitations into sacramental life in Christ, to distinguish between, on the one hand, profoundly *supporting* people in their discernment regarding sacramental participation and, on the other hand, *controlling* access to the sacraments. I hope that this brief essay has shown that we have important work to do in the former category that is probably best prioritized over the attempts to accomplish the latter.

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