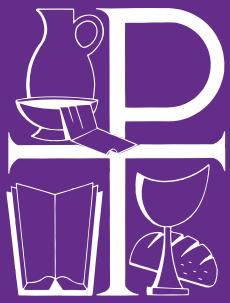

The Open Table

What Gospel Do We Practice?

by David L. Stubbs

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The Open Table

What Gospel Do We Practice?

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Preface

For more than a decade, Presbyterians have been wrestling with the question of whether persons who are not baptized are to be invited to participate in the Lord's Supper. This is a question that has surfaced (and continues to surface) at every level of the church's life—from overtures to the General Assembly to sacramental practice in the local congregation. Some understand "open table" practice to be a mandate of Christian hospitality or an evangelical imperative; others are concerned that it disrupts the meaning of the Sacraments and the integrity of covenant community.

Responding to this persistent question, in 2006 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Sacraments Study Group published *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table: A Guide to Sacramental Practices*. *Invitation to Christ* called the church to a period of intentional liturgical practice and theological reflection around five simple sacramental practices. (Learn more at gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/sacraments/.) This study contributed to a remarkable season of sacramental renewal in the denomination, one that continues to bear much good fruit.

Nevertheless, the question remains: Will we invite those who are not baptized to share the Lord's Supper? In *The Open Table: What Gospel Do We Practice?* David Stubbs examines the deep theological and ecclesiological issues behind the persistent debate, asking, What are the tellings of the gospel and understandings of the church that inform each position? Having explored these questions, Stubbs offers some helpful conclusions and proposals. Stubbs is a professor of ethics and theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He was a member of the study group

that produced *Invitation to Christ;* that experience makes him particularly well suited to address this important issue in the life of the church.

As the church continues to wrestle with questions of sacramental theology and practice, the Office of Theology and Worship is grateful for this significant contribution from Prof. Stubbs. We pray that it may help to inform and guide the church in the ongoing reformation and renewal of our common life and liturgy.

Grace and peace,
David Gambrell, associate for worship and editor, *Call to Worship*
Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Open Table

What Gospel Do We Practice?

Introduction

In many Protestant churches today, the practice of regularly communing individuals who are not baptized is widespread. Regularizing this "open table" practice was proposed in overtures to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1998 and 2004. Those overtures and the issues they represent remain unresolved in the PC(USA) and other Reformed denominations.

The debate around this practice is often quite polarized. Some consider open table practice a "gospel imperative," which should be embraced, while others see it as one more example of "cheap grace," which should be resisted. Given the centrality of the Lord's Supper to the Church's life and understanding of the gospel, this is an issue of great importance.

To get better traction on this treacherous ground, I offer this: an analysis and a set of distinctions. On the basis of these, I suggest a direction for thinking through this issue that maintains as normative the traditional eucharistic practice of Baptism before Communion, but that also has room for the understanding that it would be acceptable and even wise for the church and its leaders in certain instances to accept open table practice. My hope is that such a way of thinking might help the church, on the one hand, to protect the integrity of and to avoid reducing the full meaning of our Sacraments, while on the other hand, to be open to the work of God in situations that do not fit neatly within our typical sacramental patterns.

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Part I: The Gospel and the Visible Church

Proponents for and against open table practice rightly turn to the Bible. They present and analyze biblical passages that inform our understanding of the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, identify certain meanings associated with them, and then argue whether open table practice better manifests these meanings or obscures them.

The problem is in deciding which meaning or meanings should be emphasized and which are more central. For example, some authors emphasize that the Eucharist is about God's forgiveness and wide hospitality, while others emphasize that the Eucharist is a rite of rededication to the new covenant. These different meanings tend to point one toward different responses to the question about open table practice.

One can make progress by recognizing that the meanings of Baptism and Communion and their relative emphasis are quite dependent on the larger story they reference and are part of. One cannot decide on the relative emphasis one should place on different meanings, nor even on the fuller sense of those meanings, apart from wrestling with the differences in how people understand this larger story or narrative.

Alasdair MacIntyre makes a similar point in his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* For MacIntyre, the frequent arguments in our culture about which policies or actions best exhibit "justice" are interminable because people understand justice differently. People's conceptions of justice stem from different traditions of ethical reasoning. Furthermore, these traditions have largely been forgotten or are not taken seriously.[1] In similar fashion, arguments about whether Baptism is required before Eucharist depend on one's understanding of the larger story these Sacraments reference and from which they gain their meaning. Without some agreement here, we will simply talk past one another.

The larger story in this case is the gospel. While people do not need to agree on every detail of the gospel in order for there to be agreement about the essentials of Eucharist and Baptism, arguments people make in this discussion suggest there is enough disagreement about what the gospel is to matter. There are different "rules of faith" or "tellings of the gospel" floating about the church.[2] Without some agreement on this story, this issue can be resolved only through the imposition of power.

So how do people tell the gospel differently? One crucial matter of divergence is the role the church plays in this larger story. Because of the great renewal of thinking about the identity and purposes of the church in the late twentieth century in many theological circles, there are substantial numbers of theologians and academically trained pastors who take the biblical ideal of the church much more seriously than our forbears did fifty years ago. This renewed understanding has strong links to patristic theology and the early church, and it has substantially changed our understanding of the Sacraments and worship. Almost all the scholars and pastors who have written in opposition to open table practice speak in the language of this ecclesiological renaissance. For shorthand, let me call this a "church as visible public" ecclesiology.[3] Their—and my—telling of the gospel goes something like this:

The plan of God to defeat evil, sin, and all that holds us captive as fallen people involves an unlikely means. God has planned to bring reconciliation to the world by healing it from the inside out, by revealing Godself to a particular people, calling them to a particular role and working with them. In and through this people all the families of the earth will be blessed. Thus God's plan concerns the call of Abraham and the creation of the people of Israel, and the gift of the Law and Temple. The good news or gospel of the coming of the God-man Jesus Christ includes both that God has not abandoned his people because of their sin but forgives them, and that God will fulfill God's purposes for his chosen people revealed in Torah and Temple in *him*. The fruits of God's action in Christ are then spread through the calling of a renewed people of God, the Church, and the participation of

this people through the Holy Spirit in Jesus, in his cruciform and resurrected life and ongoing mission.

This telling of the good news certainly involves the *forgiveness* of sins, but the mystery of God's plan is more fully the *defeat* of sin and evil and the *healing of humanity* through the incorporation of all into this new community, this new household of God, this Kingdom of Christ. It also involves a strong role for Israel and the Church in God's economy of redemption. Christ in calling the Twelve was creating a renewed Israel. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the proper creaturely response of those called, a city on a hill, a missional church, an *ecclesia* was being created. While certainly not fully embodying the coming Kingdom shadowed forth in Torah and Temple, for it is at this point only fully embodied in the person of Christ, the Church through its words and deeds witnesses to it and partially embodies it. Just as Israel's life as a people was centered on the worship at the temple—the place of God's presence—so too the life of the renewed Israel, the Church, centers around its celebration of God's presence among us in Word and Table.

Telling the gospel this way greatly influences one's understanding of both Baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism is seen not only as a Sacrament that welcomes an individual into a renewed relationship to God, but it is also one's entrance into and commitment to this called people of God. Similarly, the purpose of the Eucharist is not exhausted in its aspect as a remembrance of God's work in Christ, nor even as a place of reconciling encounter with God. This encounter also involves a call and a covenant renewal—God's empowerment of the Church and the Church's recommitment to *be* the public body of Christ in and to the world.

Given this, it makes perfect sense that Baptism before the Lord's Supper would be the normative practice. Making an open table the normative practice would tend to undercut this logic of the Sacraments and would tend to mute the eucharistic call to the church to be a "visible public" of committed discipleship.

One can hear this underlying telling of the gospel and related sacramental logic in the words of those who argue against the regular practice of an open table. For example, Jim Farwell speaks

of the table as a meal in which people "commit themselves to anticipatory practice of the kingdom."[4] Farwell also argues that the open table position so emphasizes the divine gift that creaturely action gets lost: "It is a gift that the sacraments celebrate, but the gift of God is not an abstraction: *it is the shape of a life* which we receive by living it (and, of course, by seeking forgiveness and renewal as we stumble repeatedly in its appropriation)."[5]

Likewise, Michael Cartwright and Gary Shiplett say: "Thus, it is right that the church should be careful to invite *only* those persons who seek to live out the life of discipleship, precisely because the church is called to live out the *new reality* proclaimed in the Resurrection. . . ."[6] Similar statements are heard in the responses of Dipko, Boersma, Radner, and Turner.[7]

On the other side, many—but not all—of those who argue for a regular open table practice tell a gospel story where the church as a visible public of discipleship is not mentioned. In my estimation, these are extensions of typical ways the gospel was told in both liberal and conservative theological settings before the recent renaissance of ecclesiological thinking. These tellings of the gospel emphasize that in Jesus Christ, the sins of all are freely forgiven and walls are broken down between God and humanity. As this new life of Christ-shaped forgiveness and hospitality breaks into our lives, it calls us and empowers us to also break down walls between human beings, especially those walls among human beings that marginalize some because of race, gender, or class. It creates a way of life of hospitality and openness to all. All this is certainly good news.

Much of this telling of the gospel, and its connected understandings of Baptism and Eucharist, resonates well with the central Reformation concern with justification by grace through faith. The centrality of radical acceptance by God as the center of the gospel also draws upon analyses of the Gospels by scholars such as Norman Perrin. Perrin understood Jesus' "inclusive meal practice" of eating with tax collectors and sinners to be the symbolic center of Jesus' ministry. He argues that the central meaning of our gospel meal, the Eucharist, should also reflect this concern to break down the walls of class and exclusive purity

requirements that separated people from freely experiencing God and enjoying fellowship and justice with one another.[8]

Richard Fabian, a strong advocate of an open table, emphasizes this meaning of the Sacrament. He argues that in his prophetic practice, Jesus replaces "ritual purity" with table fellowship with "unprepared, unreformed, unwashed" sinners as the central sign of the Kingdom.[9] Sara Miles, in her beautiful, moving, and gritty memoir, *Take This Bread*, understands the central meanings of the Eucharist similarly.[10] As a writer of one of the open table overtures to the PC(USA) General Assembly put it, "[the Eucharist is] about telling people they are loved by God! Everybody is loved by God!"[11]

The obvious practical implication of this would be to celebrate the Lord's Supper in such a way that these meanings would come to the fore; an open table would seem to be required in order to be true to the intentions of Jesus.

While there is much to respond to here, two things are quite striking about the gospel as implied by these arguments. First, there is something so correct, so right about this—the compassion and surprising love of God which shines forth in the life and teaching of Jesus also shines forth here. But second, themes such as the church as a visible public of Christ-shaped discipleship and God's call to conversion and sanctification are largely absent.[12]

The critiques of open table practice by Hans Boersma and more recently by Ephraim Radner and Philip Turner particularly address this ecclesial absence and theological reduction. Radner and Turner lament in particular what they call the "theological poverty" of the "working theology" of the Episcopal Church in the USA they see underlying open table practice.[13]

While the gospel in these proponents of an open table can seem tied to the politics of the left, it is important to note its similarities to the gospel that informs the evangelical advocates of an open table. Listen to the wording of the 2004 overture to the PC(USA) General Assembly. It suggests that the PC(USA) substitute the sentence "all who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are to be welcomed to the table" for the sentence "all the baptized are to be welcomed to the table." In an interview

with the writer of that overture, he explains that "Communion is for those who put their trust in Jesus Christ. There is an invisible church—Baptism is only an outward sign of what's already happening on the inside."[14] Somewhat differently, Tony Maan, a pastor of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Alberta, argues we should allow Communion for "seekers" because it best represents the spirit of "inclusive invitation" evidenced in Jesus' "meals for misfits." For him, a "seeker" is someone who is new to the faith, but has not yet made "an official public profession."[15] While making an argument that is slightly different from the overture, what is similar is the sense that what prepares one for Eucharist is personal faith. Baptism seems beside the point, a needless ecclesiastical hurdle, or worse an example of "works righteousness" that gets in the way of the true substance of Christianity. Or perhaps it is simply a public display of an inner reality that can be delayed without loss.

The desire for an open table here seems to be intertwined with a fairly common underlying theology that sees little need for the church as a "public," but understands salvation in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship characterized above all by love and acceptance based on Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. This telling of the gospel certainly influences one's understanding of what the Eucharist communicates. The Eucharist is primarily about an encounter with God in which we approach God in faith, and in which we remember and trust that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is what it took to pay for our sin.[16]

Certainly there are differences between the working theology of Richard Fabian and the working theology of many evangelicals. But one common factor is that for both, the gospel is understood primarily and almost exclusively as the good news about God's acceptance of sinners. It is a gospel of grace on the one hand and a gospel of grace through penal substitution on the other. The meanings of the Eucharist are similarly reduced, and the church is largely invisible rather than a "public" foretaste of and witness to the coming Kingdom of God.[17]

If this is all the open table offers, I too must decline. I judge the gospel of those I have mentioned so far, while certainly containing part of the truth, to be a reduction of a fuller gospel. I refuse to settle for a gospel that is individualized, lacking

in ecclesial depth, and lacking in richness of description of the new life we are called to. This gospel reduction results in understandings of Baptism and Eucharist that are thin. Such understandings simply do not stand up to the best understandings of the biblical witness as evidenced both in contemporary theology and in the directions and understandings of the writers of the ancient ecumenical councils and creeds. I draw the following conclusion: Baptism before the Lord's Supper should continue to be the normative practice of the church.

However, I also see the beauty in many of the stories I have heard about actual open table practices and in the testimonies of many Christian sisters and brothers about how the openness of those open table practices has allowed them to experience and know the love and acceptance of God in new and life-changing ways. Because of these experiences and the truths they point to and participate in, any official decisions to completely close down open table practices will probably seem little more than crusty traditionalism and the imposition of power to many. These testimonies and experiences also have caused me to ponder more deeply what these practices look like in the eyes of God.

Part II: The Content of the Gospel of the Visible Church

As I have tried to integrate my best theology with the reality of those experiences, I have found a set of distinctions to be helpful. To arrive at these distinctions, one should note that not all who argue for certain open table practices tell the gospel in the ways mentioned above, however. There are theologians, such as Kathryn Tanner, possibly Rowan Williams, possibly Jürgen Moltmann, and definitely Mark Stamm in his recent book, who have highly developed ecclesiologies, and yet who support or at least seem open to certain open table practices.

How can they have a high view of the role of the church and its Sacraments and also be open to an open table?

To answer this, one must first address the nature of the church. What *kind* of a "visible public" is the church? It is a public constituted not according to clear boundaries of place and citizenship delimited by law, but it is a public constituted through the Spirit of God, and one that is on a journey yet to be completed. As Reinhard Hütter writes in *Suffering Divine Things:*

> The highly unique character of this public . . . prevents the church from being described according to the purely spatial logic of modern political thought, logic focused entirely on "boundaries" . . . . *As the public of the Holy Spirit, the church is constituted not through "boundaries" but through a "center" that in the core practices creates "space" and "time" and is expressed authoritatively in* doctrina. *This center is of an utterly christological nature* . . .[18]

This means we cannot be fully aware of the exact *boundaries* of God's activity in constituting the church, nor can we fully specify

the exact spiritual result of a church practice. While God is faithfully present to us in our performance of the Sacraments, he is not controlled by them. As Solomon exclaims at the dedication of the temple, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). While we are able to specify the *central* marks of the church and the *central* meanings and spiritual realities of its core practices normatively conceived, we should, for good theological reasons, maintain a proper humility about the boundaries of the church and the activity of God in its central practices. The church is a visible public—yet its ultimate nature depends on something unseen.

Furthermore, we should also be aware of the difference between church practices normatively conceived, and the actual meanings of church practices as they are actually performed. Local sacramental practices, due to both their exterior performance and their internal reception by those involved, have a range of meaning that wanders close to and far from the norm. The church is the body of Christ—yet we are not Christ.

These realities create the need for distinctions between normative human handling of means of grace, the actual handling of these means of grace, and the work of God. To account for these cracks and seams which are due to a variety of causes, I prefer not to rely on the distinction between visible and invisible church, nor to try to pinpoint the joint between the work of God and human activity in the Sacraments. Instead, I think it is more fitting and useful to create distinctions between normative, anomalous, and deviant practices.

David Matzko McCarthy, in an article about another contested church practice, develops the category of an anomaly. An anomalous practice is something in between normative practice and deviant practice. He writes, "Anomaly is a useful concept because an anomaly does not conform to normative categories, but neither does it conform to customary conceptions of deviance."[19] Going on, he says, "The anomalous appearance requires a decision about which categories will be used to arrive at the best evaluation of its characteristics." Anomalous practices which are acceptable are those which uphold the purposes and key characteristics of

the practice and thus can contribute to the life of the community. Deviant practices, on the other hand, do not look like normative practices, nor do they uphold their purposes.

Jesus' occasional breaking of sabbath restrictions on work is arguably a good example of an acceptable anomaly. Jesus customarily kept the sabbath. Luke writes that "[Jesus] went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom" (4:16). But occasionally, he healed the sick on the sabbath, an action regarded as work. When questioned about this, once Jesus answered, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The sabbath is a means of grace, created in part for our well-being. By healing, by doing work, Jesus upheld and even highlighted the ends of the sabbath, but did so in an anomalous way, in a way that seemed to go against sabbath work prohibitions.

Conversely, this example also shows there are ways of "celebrating" the sabbath that fall within the typical boundaries of acceptable practice, but that obscure what the sabbath was intended for.

Relating this to open table practices, could there be instances when upholding the typical baptismal requirement obscures and reduces the full range of meanings of the Eucharist? Could there be local instances when open table practice is the best option for upholding the full range of meanings of the Eucharist?

As detailed above, the argument often used *against* open table practice is that it obscures and reduces some central meanings of the Sacrament. A central meaning of the Eucharist is our union with Christ in which we are constituted as the visible body of Christ and recommit ourselves to that covenantal relationship; we receive grace and offer ourselves so that we might be that body. Experiencing and celebrating our forgiveness of sins and divine acceptance is a crucial aspect, among others, of that union with Christ, but it should not be unlinked from or obscure those meanings of union and recommitment.[20] The lack of baptismal requirement seems to do precisely this.

But problems of obscuring and reducing meaning might also be reversed. Taking seriously the insights of the proponents of the open table concerning how forgiveness of sins and unconditional

acceptance form important parts of the meaning of Jesus' last supper, we should be careful that these meanings are also reflected in our eucharistic practice and not lost. Rowan Williams and Kathryn Tanner stress these meanings of the supper. Rowan Williams writes that the Lord's Supper "is at least the climax of Jesus' extending of and accepting of hospitality in relation to the marginal or disreputable in the course of his ministry."[21] Besides understanding this meal in light of the "meals," they also emphasize the fact that Jesus hosted his last supper in the face of "the most decisive human rejection," the anticipated rejections of the disciples, Peter, and Judas. Accordingly, anything that makes the Eucharist a celebration dependent on achieved local human fellowship is to be rejected.[22] They argue the inclusivity and "unconditional fellowship" offered by God through Christ must mark the meal and the new community.[23]

Might requiring Baptism obscure this crucial meaning of the Sacrament, that God accepts us even in spite of our sin? Ideally and normatively, it should not. But, and this is crucial, there are ways that the church might actually celebrate both Baptism and Eucharist in which it might. For example, Michael Welker points out how the Eucharist has wrongly been celebrated in the past in ways that make people think that they must demonstrate a certain level of achieved holiness before coming to the meal. Similarly, Baptism-as-practiced might be understood as, first of all, some kind of external "work" that must be accomplished before one is worthy to come to the table. This tends to be the critique of a baptismal requirement from the evangelical side. One might quickly respond, "But that is not what Baptism means," and I would agree that normatively, Baptism is not a kind of work done to make ourselves acceptable to God. But there may be segments of the church where Baptism-as-practiced does mean precisely that. One need go no further than the worries of some about the eternal destiny of unbaptized children to begin to see this kind of lived baptismal theology at work.

Or, on the other hand, Baptism-as-practiced might in some quarters seem to be a kind of religious badge worn by the "Christian elite" that seems to exclude the marginalized, the poor, or those coming from situations other than WASP-like

backgrounds, especially given a cultural situation in which infant Baptism has become a standard cultural phenomenon that for many is simply the "proper" thing to do. This is precisely how Sara Miles, for example, seems to have experienced the church as a whole: "At a moment when right-wing American Christianity is ascendant, when religion worldwide is rife with fundamentalism and exclusionary ideological crusades, I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centered on Sacraments and action." For her, a baptismal requirement seemed "coded" with exclusion, and with a "proper" form of religion without the substance.

Given such poor situations of Baptism-as-practiced, in which the proper sacramental meanings of "covenant community" and "commitment to discipleship" have emerged in their shadow-sides as "exclusionary club," "works righteousness" or "achieved holiness," I can imagine that in the eyes of God, people, even leaders of churches, who practice an open table might in fact be intending something and doing something that is pleasing to God. While my own preferred long-term solution is to fix the poor baptismal practice and theology that the open table action is implicitly protesting against, in the short term, such anomalous actions may be the most fitting thing to do for an individual (who comes to the table) or a leader who presides over a church's practice. And even if a person is wrong in their opinion about the poor state of baptismal practice, perhaps it is only their perceptions of Baptism that need correcting—perhaps God sees their heart and true intentions and meets them and blesses them in that sacramental encounter.

That being said, the acceptance of certain of these anomalous practices need not make them normative. Working with Tanner and Williams' analogies to the last supper, while I agree with the lessons Tanner and Williams draw from it, I find the phrase "unconditional fellowship" somewhat imprecise. Yes, we come to Jesus without condition, but the fellowship we find with him is a demanding one. Jesus invites all, but does so with the end goal of the creation of a new community and the sanctification of the individual. Furthermore, thinking specifically of the last supper, one must distinguish between what Jesus is doing as host and what, say, Judas is doing as guest. Jesus' action as host is marked by

patience and suffering love in the face of Judas' apparently deviant, not anomalous, practice. Yes, Jesus' extension of fellowship is in one sense unconditional, but it is at the same time an unrelenting call to Judas to enter into costly discipleship and in no way makes Judas' behavior normative.

So, we could not use this example to *recommend* that people come to the table unbaptized. We might welcome the unbaptized, but not their unbaptism *per se*. This is a crucial distinction. In *welcoming* the unbaptized, the church imitates Jesus. We could do this faithfully while at the same time opposing recommendations that Eucharist without Baptism be considered normal or even normative.

I think Mark Stamm is making similar arguments in his book *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest*. Stamm gives historical examples in his book in which opening the table to the unbaptized seems to uphold the meanings of the Eucharist better than a closed table practice.[24] In the circumstances surrounding these examples one often finds the actual Church is not acting like the normative Church. But while giving a very sympathetic reading of the commitment of some Methodists to an open table, Stamm is careful to emphasize that the Eucharist is also a call to "participation in the paschal mystery of Christ," a call to costly discipleship. He emphasizes that the open table practices of the United Methodist Church must be complemented by a "culture of serious formation."[25] He encourages teaching about the connections between Baptism, Eucharist, and discipleship and working on a more prominent and inviting practice of Baptism.[26]

Does all this make sense? I believe it does given the framework of normative and anomalous practices. Stamm can be understood as arguing for the liturgical norm of Baptism before Eucharist, while also being open to certain instances of anomalous practices that still uphold the central meanings of Baptism and Eucharist.[27]

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would make three recommendations to Reformed churches struggling to respond to questions about open table practice.

First, based on my understandings of the gospel, Baptism, and Eucharist discussed in Part I, and for several other reason,[28] I would strongly recommend upholding the normativity of Baptism before Eucharist.

Second, normativity should be distinguished from strict requirement. As Christians who live in a church where normative is not necessarily normal, and where the christological and Holy Spirit center is much clearer than the boundaries of acceptable practice, we can expect and even welcome certain anomalous sacramental practices that uphold the central purposes of the Sacraments, but do not fit the normative paradigm. For this reason, I greatly respect the phrasing of the PC(USA) Directory for Worship: "All the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table" (W-2.4006). It upholds a strong center of both Baptism and faithfulness, while leaving room at the edges. I much prefer it over the EC(USA)'s constitution, which states, "no unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church."[29] Welcome the unbaptized in certain anomalous circumstances, but not the unbaptism *per se*. In a hospitable way, encourage the person to move toward normative practice or change the church structures that create the felt need for this anomalous practice.

Third, I think those who uphold the normative practice must directly wrestle with the fact that as a Reformed communion, there are different tellings of the gospel prevalent in our church that greatly affect our understandings of Baptism and Eucharist and the logic that holds between them. As one strategy for moving the church toward the mind of Christ on these matters, I recommend precisely what the PC(USA) Sacraments Study Group

set forth in our publication,[30] and what Mark Stamm proposes in his book: strengthening and deepening our sacramental practices, encouraging more frequent celebrations of the Eucharist, strengthening the prominence of Baptism and baptismal imagery in our worship, and strengthening the culture of discipleship that surrounds our worship. God is present in the celebration of these Sacraments in ways that often go beyond what we might appreciate. Especially if they are performed in such a way that they are transparent to the larger patterns of the Kingdom, patterns seen both in their celebration as well as in the larger life of the Church, they will lead people forward not only in their understanding of, but also embodiment of the gospel.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 1–6. Cf. After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6–23.
2. Paul Blowers argues the early church's *regula fidei* or "rule of faith" has a narrative character in "The *regula fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (Spr 1997): 199–228.
3. I develop this phrase specifically from the work of Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things:Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), esp. 160–164. I am intending this description to be broad enough to encompass the diverse theological terrain marked by writings on ecclesiology by Bonhoeffer, de Lubac, Zizioulas, Yoder, Hauerwas, Moltmann, Tanner, Newbigin, Hunsberger, Wright, Lohfink, Jenson, and Yeago, to name a few.
4. James Farwell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of 'Open Communion,'" *Anglican Theological Review* 86.2 (Spring 2004): 224. Also, "we approach the table with the commitment to be so transformed by the meal" (225).
5. Farwell, 227. As Farwell responds to arguments about the larger meal practice of Jesus, those other meals are understood as part of the mission of Christ and the Eucharist "provides the foundation for those wider meals"(221). Those who are committed to and understand the missional vision of Christ are the ones who should be partaking of the central meal, and the sign of this commitment is Baptism (222). Here the logic is quite clear, one enters into this story of Jesus through Baptism and is fed for the journey through Eucharist—it is a meal for the committed.
6. Michael Cartwright and Gary Shiplett, "Closing Ranks on Open Communion: Two Views," *Quarterly Review* (Spring 1988): 67. They continue: ". . . a reality that is uniquely depicted for Christian disciples in the eucharistic *anamnesis* (the remembrance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus)."
7. Thomas Dipko writes: "It is the centuries-tried wisdom of the church that a faithful response to this message first involves a

willingness to enter the covenant community, the body of Christ, through Baptism/confirmation, and then to gather at the table for the sacramental meal that nourishes and sustains that body across all time." The theme of entering a covenant community characterized by a Christ-shaped life of discipleship is dominant. Thomas Dipko, "Reflections on Admission to Holy Communion," unpublished manuscript, 3. For Boersma, Radner, and Turner, see below.

8. Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967). In Perrin's understanding, Jesus throughout his ministry set up a counter-community formed around an "inclusive meal." In his conscious breaking of purity rules and inclusion of those normally excluded, Jesus both proclaimed a key aspect of the Kingdom and came up against the authorities of his day. The breaking of boundaries set up by the religious authorities is also understood by Perrin to be a key precipitating factor in his eventual crucifixion. In the early church, there was change for the worse as they began both to ritualize this largely free-form meal and to create exclusive boundaries for participation in it. The last supper as recorded in the Gospels, on his reading, is also quite dubious historically; the writers of the Synoptics read back their current practice into the life of Christ. For a brief reconstruction of Perrin's argument and a fuller bibliography of those New Testament scholars who argue for this (Bultmann, Marxsen, Mack, and Crossan), as well as those who oppose this understanding (Sanders, Meier, Theissen, Merz, Ehrman), see Andrew McGowan, "The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church: Eucharistic Origins and Admission to Communion," *Studia Liturgica Diversa,* ed. Maxwell Johnson and L. Phillips (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2004), 104n11.
9. Richard Fabian, "First the Table, Then the Font," *The Clergy Journal* (Oct. 2002): 4. Cf. Fabian, "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ," *Open* 40.3 (Fall 1994). Richard Deibert takes a similar stance, but the "meal" that is most emphasized is the great banquet to come. However, the inclusive characteristics of this great banquet are biblically supported by "Jesus' frequent meals with tax collectors and sinners." Deibert, "Jürgen Moltmann and the Lord's Open Supper," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 34.4: 10.
10. Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (Ballantine Books, 2008). She writes in the prologue: "At a moment when right-wing American Christianity is ascendant, when religion worldwide

is rife with fundamentalism and exclusionary ideological crusades, I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centered on sacraments and action. . . . I was, as the prophet said, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the poor, the despised and the outcasts are honored" (xii–xiii).

11. 2004 interview with Rev. Steve VanKuiken by Heidi Worthen Gamble for the PC(USA) Sacramental Study Group.
12. More charitably, one sees an implicit emphasis that the life of discipleship precisely is radical inclusion of the outcast and service to the poor, and that these acts of service then become the key markers of the community and holiness. But this emphasis is most often left implicit.
13. For example, Hans Boersma writes, "The Eucharist is the celebration of reconciliation and of new life, but to extend the Eucharist to those who are not baptized . . . is to endanger the very character of the Church as the eschatological community of the resurrection. . . . The Church can only function as a witness to God's eschatological hospitality if, in fact, the believers commit themselves to practices of conversion and penance." Hans Boersma, "Liturgical Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Sharing in Grace," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 8 (2003): 76. Similarly, Ephraim Radner and Philip Turner argue the EC(USA)'s "working theology" is not about "divine redemption," but rather about "divine acceptance" and "radical inclusion." They cite as one piece of evidence the "increasingly common practice of inviting non-baptized persons to share in the Holy Eucharist." Ephraim Radner and Philip Turner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Eerdmans, 2006), 246. See also Philip Turner, "An Unworkable Theology," *First Things* 154 (Je-Jl 2005): 10–12. They mourn what they call the "theological poverty" at play as the significance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection are reduced to the point that God loves us, and the gospel of the kingdom of God and the mission of the church are reduced as well to a politics of radical inclusion. Radner, 247, 245.
14. Interview with Rev. Al Sandalow, writer of Overture 04-50 from Central Washington Presbytery by Heidi Worthen Gamble for the PC(USA) Sacraments Study Group. In that interview he refers to

himself as "a middle-of-the-road evangelical." He recommended the book *Inside the Mind of the Unchurched* (Zondervan, 1993) by Lee Strobel, a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church; I take the theology and practice of Lee Strobel as representative of what he means by that phrase.

15. Tony Maan, "Should Seekers Be Invited to the Table," *Reformed Worship* 48 (1988): 22–25. To be fair to Maan, perhaps Maan is best placed alongside someone like Kathryn Tanner below; I made assumptions about his underlying theology based on common phrases he used in his short article that signal a theology rather than fully explaining it.
16. I vividly remember worshiping at a church in north Idaho one Sunday. I visited it because it was known as an emerging church that celebrated the Eucharist every week. When the time came for the elements to be passed to us, the meaning of the Lord's Supper was flashed on the screen: "In the Lord's Supper we remember Christ's sacrifice on the cross. He paid the penalty for our sin and we put our faith in him." While I applaud their commitment to frequent celebration, I also mourn the reduction of the Eucharist to one particular meaning. With the substitution of only a word or two, the same PowerPoint slide might have been used during a service of Baptism. This interchangeability is precisely the point: given this particular telling of the gospel, the meanings of the Sacraments are fairly interchangeable in that they both point to the same thing, an inward faith in Christ, meaning primarily trust in Christ's vicarious death on the cross, by which we are assured of God's love for us and acceptance of us and assured of our eternal home. Given this interchangeability, the same kind of trust in Christ's salvific work becomes the *precondition* for the Sacraments, and this trust and God's acceptance of us becomes the *real substance* of both Sacraments. Phrases such as "being joined to the body of Christ" or "partaking of Christ" are then understood in light of this working theology. This being the case, there is little reason not to have an open table, at least in the sense that Baptism is not the proper requirement for Eucharist. Given this telling of the gospel, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is the proper requirement for Eucharist, and also the proper requirement for Baptism.
17. To put this vision of the Church's "public" calling in familiar Reformed terms, the gospel includes the church's call to not only accept but also participate in aspects of Christ's threefold office. See

Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

18. Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Eerdmans, 2000), 165. Italics original.
19. David Matzko McCarthy, "Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage," *Modern Theology* 13 (July 1997): 372. Matzko McCarthy is a Roman Catholic theologian and ethicist.
20. As Barth and Calvin would agree. Barth writes about Calvin approvingly and for support: "Calvin . . . asserted the Christ-created participation of the saints in the sanctity of Jesus Christ, and therefore their membership in Him as their Lord, as the basis of all soteriology." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2 (T&T Clark, 1958), 522.
21. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 217.
22. Williams, 217. This is a major point of Kathryn Tanner in her article "In Praise of Open Communion." In that article she travels down an Anglican *via media* between advocates for open Communion that draw upon Perrin's work based on the meal practices of Jesus throughout his ministry and Jim Farwell's rejection of an open table. As she treats the arguments about Jesus' meal practice throughout his ministry, she claims advocates of open Communion need not follow Perrin and company whole hog, but only need claim, "the New Testament account of the Lord's Supper . . . should be understood *in light of* Jesus' practices of eating with sinners and filling the bellies of all comers." Kathryn Tanner, "In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell," *Anglican Theological Review* 86.3 (2004): 476 (Italics mine).
23. Tanner, 476. Michael Welker draws from the inclusive meals of Jesus throughout his ministry in his work on the Lord's Supper in a similar way. While he does not argue for an open table, he emphasizes the fact that Jesus' last supper, which is connected to the Jewish Passover celebration, makes it clear that "Jesus' community is jeopardized not only 'from outside,' " as the Passover celebration emphasizes, "but also 'from inside'—even by his disciples." Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2000). The impact of this recognition is twofold for Welker. First, the meal as a whole must be connected to the "liberation from the power of sin," and second, and more to the point of this discussion, the Supper must be prevented from "being

misused for the purposes of moralism and church law" (53). The fear of eating "unworthily" and bringing "judgement" upon oneself, stemming from Paul's critique of the Corinthian church, has often been used as a means of excluding others on moral bases and keeping those deemed "unworthy" from full participation. Welker opposes such an abuse of the Supper. He works from the abuses within the Corinthian church, and concludes that the celebration of the Lord's Supper that Paul deems unworthy involves the rich of the Corinthian church taking out their own food and eating it in front of the poor and not sharing. The Eucharist in this way ironically becomes a meal in which the divisions within the society are being mirrored rather than broken down. As a result, he points out that once one works "against the background of the 'night of self-giving and betrayal,' it becomes impossible to cast doubt upon the fundamental acceptance of sinners in the Supper" (73). Welker has in mind both the wrongful exclusion of baptized Christians from the Supper as well as issues of intercommunion (the original "open table" discussion) between baptized believers from different denominations and traditions. He argues the Reformation emphasis on the forgiveness of sins must not be lost—and, he points specifically to the ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* as one place where these themes are underemphasized (156). Given Welker's emphasis, one could wonder whether this "logic" of forgiveness of sins should also be extended to the unbaptized; but Welker is quite clear that those who come should be baptized (146, 148).

24. In one historic example mentioned, certain Christians extended Eucharistic fellowship to Quakers, who conscientiously omitted Baptism. Mark Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 92. Most historic examples in his book, however, are of extending Eucharistic fellowship to those who are baptized, yet "unconverted," or examples in which a group (typically Baptists) extend table fellowship to those they consider unbaptized.
25. He lists three "cultures" that need to be developed. The other two are a "culture of mission rooted in the spirituality of the Eucharist," and a "culture of discerning the body of Christ." Stamm, 157–159.
26. Stamm, 178–181.

27. I think this way of speaking about certain acceptable open table practices is clearer than the language Stamm typically uses: "exceptions" that are "prophetic in nature." Stamm, 19.
28. A very important reason is that accepting anything other than a baptismal norm would be an incredible setback in the difficult journey toward ecumenical unity.
29. *Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*, Title 1, Canon 17, Section 7.
30. The Sacraments Study Group of the PC(USA), *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table: A Guide to Sacramental Practices* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2006).

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