

Who is communion for? The debate over the open table

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"This is the Lord's Table. It is not Grace Church's table. All are welcome to receive communion."

It is not unusual to hear or read these or similar words—with the local parish or its denomination named—at a service of worship in which the Eucharist will be celebrated. Such an announcement reflects the practice commonly called "open communion." To say that a church has an open communion policy has generally meant that persons who are not formally members of that church are nevertheless allowed or encouraged to share in the eucharistic meal.

Open communion in that sense is not universal, of course, and never has been. Some denominations as a matter of principle allow only their own members to commune and in practice take pains to ensure that the restriction is observed. But among churches of the Reformation, open communion has long been a custom widely accepted and fairly uncontroversial. Hence the invitation.

Lately, however, what is or might be meant by open communion has shifted. The received understanding has always included a proviso, sometimes explicitly stated but often simply assumed: “All are welcome to receive” has been taken to mean “all Christians,” which in turn has been understood as including all (and only) those who have been baptized with water in the name of the Trinity. In other words, an open eucharistic service has been open irrespective of denominational status but not of baptismal status. That proviso is now under discussion in many quarters, to the point that to ask whether such-and-such a church practices open communion is apt to be ambiguous. The disputed question at present is how open the practice is or ought to be.

The logic of what has been the accepted interpretation, which does in a sense limit the openness of open communion, is not hard to see. It stands to reason that if taking part in the Eucharist is a specifically Christian privilege, and if Christians are defined, minimally if not exhaustively, by their baptism, then those who would avail themselves of the privilege can be expected at least to have met this one objective criterion. Is this expectation indeed valid? That is the question at issue in the current discussion.

Confusingly, the result has been that even when the language of open communion continues to be used, what is often being discussed is somewhat different: the propriety of a practice which those who favor it sometimes prefer to call communion without baptism—CWOB for short, or less blatantly, “open table.” The distinction could be put this way: an *open communion* policy might, in very rare cases, apply to the unbaptized, though probably it would not, whereas an *open table* policy most definitely would.

But there is more. Some open table advocates would insist on going further by reversing completely the order that open communion (in the older sense) has taken for granted. There are congregations in which baptism is no longer held to be even the normal, much less the necessary, condition of receiving communion. Things are done the other way around. Communion without baptism is not an exception but a rule, which instead of requiring communicants to be baptized requires candidates for baptism to be communicants.

In short, to use the popular phrase, “it’s complicated.”

So too are the arguments for and against the various positions that can be taken. That is to be expected, since what is at stake is not a theoretical doctrine but a concrete practice that affects particular persons and communities. The greater the concreteness, the greater the complexity.

Here no attempt will be made either to build a decisive case, pro or con or, on the other hand, to hide the judgment that one line of argument for some form of open-table communion seems more compelling than any other. What follows is food for thought, not ammunition for controversy.

In the interest of clarity, let “open table” be defined as a more or less explicit policy of being willing to suspend, occasionally or indefinitely, the traditional rule of “no communion without baptism.” So defined, an open table position is one that stops short of establishing an entirely new rule, “no baptism without communion.” In other words, advocating an open table is here understood to be compatible with maintaining that to extend communion deliberately to the unbaptized is always exceptional, always a departure from the norm. The norm stands; baptism at some point is indispensable, even if it is postponed, so to say, as a matter of pastoral need, in extraordinary circumstances.

No doubt there are many pastors who have implicitly adopted some such view upon occasion by knowingly if quietly stretching the received rule. The disputed question is whether exceptions, which nearly everyone admits are possible, at least to some extent, had better be officially embraced and publicly acknowledged—not only for honesty’s sake but also because extraordinary circumstances are becoming less and less extraordinary. “New occasions teach new duties.”

What exactly is new? For one thing, there is the so-called post-Constantinian or post-Christendom environment in which every church finds itself. Not all that long ago, it could safely be taken for granted that strangers who showed up at a service of Christian worship would at some time, in some church somewhere, have been baptized. At least they could be given the benefit of the doubt. Today, churches have to reckon with the rising percentage of the general populace that is completely unchurched. Then too, whether visitors had been baptized was neither here nor there, as long as the service they were visiting was a preaching service, without communion, which it was quite likely to be. Now that the liturgical movement has become ecumenical, even “nonliturgical” denominations have been putting more and more emphasis on frequent reception of communion and providing more and

more opportunities for receiving it. In this they have been following the Reformers, while at the same time making it necessary to ask again what—and whom—the Eucharist is for.

That is the central question, theologically speaking, in the open table debate. The need to ascertain eligibility has never arisen with respect to the synaxis or “liturgy of the word.” Lessons, sermons and prayers have been as open to seekers, guests and drop-ins as they have been to baptized members. Only the individual act of receiving bread and wine—communion in the focal sense from which the whole rite takes one of its names—has been restricted to initiates.

The restriction is ancient. That needs to be said. It goes back as far as the Apostolic Fathers. “You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who are baptized in the Lord’s name.” So says the *Didachē*, the oldest catechism there is. Nobody, says Justin Martyr, is allowed to partake of “the food we call Eucharist” except one who “believes that the things we teach are true, and has been washed with the washing that is for the forgiveness of sins and rebirth, and is living as Christ enjoined” (*First Apology* 66).

Later there would be wide variations in the practice of baptism itself—at what age it was administered, when and by whom, after how much preparation. Yet even when Christians baptized in infancy were expected to complete their initiation with a further rite, confirmation or its equivalent, there was never any question that baptism came first and Eucharist afterward. If this means the communion table is closed, it has been closed for nearly the whole of Christian history.

The fact that few traditions if any are as solid and consistent as the font-before-table sequence is a strong reason, perhaps the strongest, for preserving it. The burden of proof falls on those who would modify it. While the open table position can be seen as a development rather than a revolution, it does introduce a significant change. Is it a defensible change? Granted, occasions do arise that may call for ad hoc deviation from the usual sequence, and such occasions do appear to be more numerous and frequent than formerly. But occasions are not reasons. What good would it do to make the Lord’s Supper more openly open, or more explicitly open in principle, than it already is in practice?

Three slogans are often used to sum up the value of a candid open table policy: *full inclusion*, *radical hospitality* and *unconditional welcome*. They are dangerous, as

slogans often are. Insofar as the emphasis falls on the qualifiers, they imply and foster an either-or, all-or-nothing frame of mind. Anything less than full, radical unconditional acceptance of the other can only be legalistic exclusion, a sub-Christian tithing of mint and dill and cumin. And like many another absolute position, this one easily topples over into its opposite, the hypocrisy of claiming to be holier-than-thou because more-hospitable-than-thou.

Whether the rhetoric of inclusion and welcome can be substantiated with theological reasoning is a different question, though not a question that everyone would agree is worth asking. There are those who hold that why and wherefore are irrelevant, that welcome occurs between persons, that interpersonal relations are motivated not by thought but by feeling, and that Pascal's reasons of the heart provide sufficient reason for opening the communion table to all. On this view, a policy that speaks to religious sentiment, as do radical hospitality and the like, is by that very fact a godly policy. Conversely, anyone who *feels* excluded *is* excluded, in which case the church has failed in its mission of hospitality to all.

Whether the reign of God can be equated with the hospitality of the church is a question that will return later. In any case, it would be a mistake to dismiss personal, affective considerations as though they carried no weight. The heart does have its reasons, and theologians do well to remember it. Still, there are perhaps not many earnest Christians for whom these ought to be the decisive reasons, or who would rest their case for open table communion entirely on an emotionally apprehended dichotomy of exclusion or embrace. The apprehension may be valid, as far as it goes; but if so, it should be capable of enlisting the support of intelligible argument. Presumably, too, it can withstand critique from the side of those who would maintain the traditional practice. A reasonable case still needs to be made for (more thoroughly) open eucharistic worship, intuitively attractive though it may be.

Probably the most obvious argument—certainly the most common, and perhaps the one most likely to be homiletically effective—is a variation on asking “What would Jesus do?” Nobody doubts that the Gospels associate appearances of the risen Jesus with meals of various kinds. Nobody doubts, either, that they portray Jesus at table with disreputable people. His “open commensality,” as Dominic Crossan is pleased to call this scandalous table fellowship, is widely accepted as a central component of Jesus' praxis.

Accordingly, one might argue that in the same way that Jesus welcomed outsiders to eat with him as a sign of the dawning reign of God, so the church's extension of his ministry should set no conditions on participation in the communion banquet, which likewise anticipates the eschatological Supper of the Lamb. The invitation should be simply universal, and whether to accept it should be left entirely to the individual discernment of those who are invited. "All are welcome" should mean just that—"all," not "all who happen to have been baptized," as it has commonly been assumed to mean. Jesus imposed no such restriction, or for that matter any other restriction. Neither should his followers.

This is a plausible argument, at least at first glance. It is not as sturdy as it seems, however. For one thing, it turns on a single image or idea: sharing food. Jesus ate and drank with sinners—true. Christians gather to eat and drink in their communion liturgy—true again. Therefore—what? In which respects, if any, should the liturgical meal conform to (some of) the meals at which Jesus was present? Without further premises and further argument, no answer presents itself. After all, the Eucharist is a meal only in a very stylized sense, and though it may still be a meal it is not a meal only. As the World Council of Churches' paper on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" observes, the Eucharist involves not only ritual feasting, communion in the narrow sense, but also invocation of the Spirit, thanksgiving to the Father and remembrance of the Son.

Moreover, the notion that Jesus invited the outcast and the marginalized to eat at his table is not entirely sound. On a plain reading of the Gospels, he did not invite anybody: he was himself invited, as much by the outsiders he ate with as by the disciples who met him on the Emmaus road. As for the Last Supper, that was scarcely an open, public occasion. As for the episode of the feeding of the four or five thousand, the one that most closely resembles open table, there for once Jesus does take the role of host, in a sense; but he issues no invitation, and his hospitality seems a little reluctant: "*You* give them something to eat" (Mark 6:37).

Still, it does not follow that Jesus' practice is irrelevant. Even if particular bits of narrative cannot be relied on directly to authorize a general policy, one might argue that they do exemplify a pattern which can. On this more theological argument, the way in which Jesus shared meals was—and the way Christians conduct their communion rites should be—an effective expression of divine grace. "Open commensality" in the first century and "open table" today are similar, in the relevant sense, just insofar as they both do what God does in the way that God does it. God

gives. In no way does divine giving depend on the recipient, and what is given is neither achievement nor prize. It is precisely gracious, gratuitous gift and only gift.

So too, it can be argued, the church's gift of inclusion within its own life and labor ought to be offered lavishly and gratuitously. Of that broad imperative the Eucharist is not the only enactment, but it is the one that in some sense defines the church, and as such it should not contradict itself by imposing conditions on who may or may not help to enact it.

This line of reasoning shifts from replicating the historical details of Jesus' practice—always a dubious move—to drawing implications from the doctrine of God's prevenience to which that practice, like everything else about Jesus, bears witness. Divine grace is always operating prior to human response. So then, if the Lord's Supper may be regarded as a "means of grace," it too should be an incarnate expression, a sacramental sign, of God's initiative.

The biblical warrant, if one is wanted, will not be the feeding of the multitude or meeting Zacchaeus in his sycamore tree so much as the parable of the prodigal son whose father went out to meet him. It is commonly held that worthy reception of communion is a matter of inward disposition, repentance above all. But while the foolish prodigal did confess his folly before the fattened calf was eaten, his father got there first, "preventing" him in the original sense of the word. So too, arguably, the church as publicist of God's antecedent willingness to embrace and forgive might at times "prevent" even that decisive act of repentance which is baptism by offering communion to persons who have yet to be baptized.

Those who adopt this train of thought may not use John Wesley's language, but they mean pretty much what he meant by declaring that communion is a "converting ordinance." Conversion happens in and as response to being "drawn" by the Father, without which no one comes to the Lord Jesus (John 6:44, 6:65). The drawing may go unregarded, but on the other hand a readiness to receive and follow it may also be nurtured by deliberate practices, among which is participation in the Lord's own supper.

Accordingly, on the sort of reasoning Wesley followed, the one indispensable prerequisite for receiving communion is a desire to accept whatever blessing God is pleased to give through it. Such a desire may be only the first faint beginning of conversion. Nevertheless, the church has no business withholding an appointed

means of forming and focusing it. On the contrary, the communion table ought to be open to all who find themselves drawn to it, including those who may never have been baptized as well as those who, by no decision of their own, were baptized as infants. They may not yet be able to make a profession of faith, and they may have only the vaguest conception of what they yearn for. The point is that they yearn for it.

If framing an argument in terms of converting ordinances seems too old-fashioned, the same point can be made in another way. The Eucharist, it might be said, is food for a journey, nourishment for growing into mature adulthood in Christ. The journey may begin at the baptismal font. It may begin afterward. It may instead lead *toward* baptism. But except on an extrinsic, magical view of what baptism does, there is no ground for believing that without it human beings are inherently quite incapable of benefiting from the Lord's Supper, whatever the benefits may be.

To include the unbaptized in the invitation to communion therefore need not be to say there is no journey—which would be offering cheap grace, or to say everyone is really an anonymous Christian already—which would be condescending and amount to the same thing. Rather, an open table invitation could constitute an acknowledgment that those who accept the invitation may well be cooperating with the prevenient operation of grace, in response to a “drawing” on which the church may not presume to set boundaries.

This theological rationale has much to commend it. There are still objections, however, that it would have to address. An invitation to communion is an invitation not simply to eat with friends but to encounter the risen Christ, which is to say, Christ crucified. “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). The meaning of the Eucharist, in other words, is not just the love of God but the love of God manifested in the “paschal mystery” of death accepted and transformed into new life. If that mystery is what unchurched seekers are being welcomed into, hospitality seems too bland a word. It would be only fair to inform them—warn them, rather—that the way of life which the church proclaims in its Eucharist comes with demands and costs and responsibilities. Otherwise, extending an unconditional welcome would amount to a kind of bait-and-switch.

For much the same reasons, it would be reckless simply to decide that as of such-and-such a Sunday, the communion table at such-and-such church will be open to



all, irrespective of baptism. Communion never is irrespective of baptism, although possibly it may in certain circumstances precede it. That is the truth of which the extreme “no baptism without communion” view can be seen as an exaggeration. As Mark Stamm argues persuasively in *Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest* (Abingdon, 2006), the idea of communion as a converting ordinance and a means of cooperating with divine grace implies no denigration of baptism; quite the opposite. What it does imply, practically and liturgically, is the integration of communion into an intentional program of formation that involves the whole local community and has in view the duties as well as the blessings that Christian initiation brings. A fully developed catechumenate; renewal of baptismal vows in the setting of eucharistic worship at regular times in the liturgical year; a font brought into architectural prominence; communicating the newly baptized at once, children and adults alike—such are Stamm’s recommendations for (re)establishing the link between the two great paschal celebrations.

The recommendations do not in themselves resolve the question of whether an open table policy is theologically justifiable in general or pastorally appropriate in any particular instance. They are not meant to. They do, or would, give concrete expression to a conviction that if the Eucharist is to be regarded as a means of Christian formation—and that is arguably the surest ground on which to build a case for open table communion—then eucharistic worship needs to belong to a larger pattern and process. A visitor who experiences a communion service as a discrete, one-off event, like a tour of the Grand Canyon, has missed the point, or else the point has not been made clearly enough.

That point, the embeddedness of this liturgical action within an all-inclusive, corporate turning to God, is one which has been made, negatively and somewhat mechanically, by insisting on “no communion without baptism.” There seem to be serious reasons for thinking it would perhaps be better made by saying, in many and various ways, “We are glad to have you join us in our pilgrimage. Please know that you are very welcome. Please know too that to join, you have to be prepared to join, to take the plunge, literally.” In that context, the question is not whether a ritual requirement for receiving communion may at times be waived for individuals who are indeed so prepared. The question is whether opening the communion table to them now is the most appropriate way to prepare them further.