

Font to Table or Table to Font

by Bryon Hansen

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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 NAAC. 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 RCIA (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 ELCA (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, entitled *By Water and the Spirit*, we read: “Nonbaptized persons responding in faith ... welcome 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* (Liturgy Training Publications, no longer available), that amazing video presentation about the catechumenal process at a Roman Catholic parish in Pasadena, 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 video 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.” By “Open Communion” we are 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 therefore to be continued.

Open Communion announces God’s favor to all and 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, that 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 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 way 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 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 undergirded 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 catechumenal process?
- How might 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 to implement Eucharistic formation as a most vital component of catechumenal formation both before and after the Font.

Suggested Resources:

From the *Anglican Theological Review*:

- "Baptism, Eucharist and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of Open Communion" by James Farwell, volume 81, spring 2004.
- "In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell" by Kathryn Tanner, volume 86, summer 2006.
- A Brief Reflection of Kathryn tanner's Response by Farwell, volume 87.
- "Opening the Table: The body of Christ and God's Prodigal Grace" by Stephen Edmonson, volume 91, spring 2009.

"Open Communion as a United Methodist Exception" by Mark Stamm, *Quarterly Review*, Volume 22, fall 2003.

What Is Changing in Eucharistic Practice? Gordon Lathrop, series editor. "Who shall eat and drink at the Table?" by Sarah Henrich, volume 5. Augsburg-Fortress, 1995.

The Christian Sacraments of Initiation, by Kenan Osborne, Paulist Press.

Take This Bread by Sara Miles (Ballantine Books, 2008)

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