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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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