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## Table and font: Who is welcome?

*An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion*

### **Eucharistic Hospitality: Unexpected Grace at the Lord's Table**

Harvard Stephens

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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