



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion.

Invitation and the Open Table

Benjamin M. Stewart

An Invitation Accepted

Why is the church now engaging the question of “open table”? Remarkably, one central reason is that an invitation spoken through the church is being accepted—perhaps to our surprise.

In many of our assemblies, a minister standing at the table speaks an invitation to the people. “Come to the banquet, for all is now ready.” Or “taste and see that the Lord is good.”¹ This invitation is strong: It draws on the scriptures, is extended across a table set with bread and wine and is offered to an assembly preparing to eat and drink.

Even the words “given for you,” repeated many times during the distribution of communion, are a sort of invitation. The “you” in the original Greek of the scriptural texts does not address a single individual already prepared to receive, but rather is plural and announces an invitation to a community of hearers.²

There are a number of ways to think about what has prompted the current conversation around open table. This is one way: The church is speaking an invitation to the table to which people are responding and, in newly significant numbers, some of those responding to this invitation are not yet baptized. This new situation calls for thoughtful exploration from multiple angles. The paragraphs below invite further reflection on the dynamics of the practice of invitation.

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides these two addresses as options for the presiding minister to speak to the assembly “in these or similar words.”

² See the second person plural formulation of Matthew 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.19-20; 1 Corinthians 11.24-26.

Invitation to baptism, too

Many congregations of the ELCA regularly offer an encouraging and gracious invitation to communion during Sunday worship. Such an invitation stands in continuity with the universal trajectory of the Gospel itself. This trajectory is set out in the opening paragraphs of *The Use of the Means of Grace*: “In Christ’s flesh, in his death and resurrection, all people are invited to behold and to receive the fullness of God’s grace and truth.”³ It is to be celebrated that members of many ELCA congregations regularly experience such invitations in worship in relationship to Holy Communion.

We encounter a different situation if we ask how often participants in our assemblies are similarly invited to Holy Baptism. It may be good for congregations to compare how visitors to their assemblies are invited to baptism and to communion, respectively. Many congregations speak and/or print an invitation to communion every week in worship. Some of these same congregations rarely print and even less regularly speak a public invitation to baptism.⁴ The regular public invitation to communion stands in contrast to the hidden or unarticulated invitation to baptism.

Taking courage from the affirmative response of many to the invitation to communion, congregations of the ELCA may cultivate regular, public, encouraging and gracious invitations to baptism for all ages. Some congregations practicing various renewed forms of the catechumenate are indeed describing a reinvigorated connection between mission, sacramental life and discipleship especially in relation to those of new or renewed faith.⁵ It is good that these practices are being shared and becoming more widely known among congregations.

Avoiding opposition between baptism and communion

Our invitations into sacramental participation should not inadvertently oppose baptism and Holy Communion. However, some patterns of invitation seem to do just this. In some congregations, invitations to Holy Communion are phrased largely in terms of *hospitality* and *welcome*, while invitations to baptism are marked mostly by images of *commitment*. When the sacraments are framed in this way, it is only logical that communion becomes associated with entrance into the church, and baptism becomes associated with long-term church participation. Interestingly, this pattern more or less reverses an older, equally overdrawn opposition between baptism and communion.

³ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Background 1B.

⁴ Sometimes the explicit assumption in a baptismal invitation that actually is spoken or printed is that baptism is for infants, so that adults who are not baptized are implicitly left uninvited or shamed.

⁵ See, for example, Rick Rouse, ed. *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living: A Handbook to the Catechumenate*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012; and Paul E. Hoffman, *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond*. Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2012.

Some congregations, in a desire to speak as strong a welcome to the table as possible and inspired by the radical meal fellowship of Jesus recalled in scripture, extend an invitation that explicitly welcomes people to communion “whether or not you are baptized.” Quite apart from the interests of open table, this formulation seems unnecessarily dismissive of baptism – as if communion and baptism are easily separable things. (Imagine phrasing a standard invitation to baptism that welcomed candidates “whether or not you plan to commune.”) Instead, even in congregations that practice open table, our language of invitation to the meal can honor (with less binary, more modest speech) the sacramental unity of communion with Jesus Christ: The same communion effected by the Gospel preached and into which we are plunged in baptism.⁶

Conversely, congregations that keep the classic pattern of baptism leading to communion should not allow their invitations to communion to portray baptism only as a procedural qualification for communion. Any mention of baptism in an invitation to communion should speak to baptism’s *theological* significance. Concerns for proper procedure and ritual order should not eclipse the more foundational theological invitation into the mystery of communion with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Much of the conversation concerning open table has framed the basic question as “should those who are not baptized be invited to communion?” This conversation invoking radical hospitality at Christ’s table is taking place while some of the baptized—infants and young children—are themselves in many places not typically being invited to communion. Partly through some accidents of history that preceded the reformation, the original unity between baptism and first communion was largely lost in the west, so that first communion became an event separate from baptism. With a number of helpful considerations and a few caveats scattered throughout the document, *The Use of the Means of Grace* allows for the recovery of a welcome to communion for infants and young children at their baptism: “Infants and children may be communed for the first time during the service in which they are baptized.”⁷ Thus, while the practice of open table has sparked concerns about the separation of communion from baptism, the practice of splitting communion from the typical (infant) baptism in Lutheran churches has already in some senses normalized a separation that is not theologically well-informed. It seems that any discussion of open table (i.e. a discussion about the invitation to communion and its relationship to baptism) needs to consider again questions regarding the communion of all the baptized, including infants and young children.

⁶ This unity is set out in principle 1 of *The Use of the Means of Grace*.

⁷ The full text continues “... or they may be brought to the altar during communion to receive a blessing.” Application 37D.

Receiving (and becoming) Christ's body

A further opposition sometimes posited between communion and baptism portrays communion as being about *receiving* the body of Christ with baptism being about *becoming a member* of the body of Christ. This understanding corresponds to the overdrawn polarity (critiqued above) of being *welcomed to receive freely* at communion and being invited to *commit* at baptism. Invitations to baptism and communion that are locked into these polarities distort the significance of both practices. Instead, our congregations do well to invite people (including adults) to baptism in ways that speak clearly of the free gift of God's mercy—in addition to commitment to the life of discipleship. And this may be the more significant challenge: can our invitations to Holy Communion also make clear that we are not simply *receiving* Christ in the sacrament, but we are *becoming* Christ's living body. As St. Augustine put it in his own invitation to communion, when we come to the eucharist, what we see on the table and receive as food (the body of Christ) is also the very thing that we are becoming in the meal.⁸ This dimension of the invitation to communion—seemingly rarely referenced in contemporary invitations—speaks a word of profound welcome into Christ that at the same time includes a bracing warning: this meal is not one more spiritual good to sample. Rather, this food builds your own flesh and blood into the living body of Christ. You are becoming what you eat.⁹ In addition to the motif of a place at Christ's table, can our invitations to communion tell the discernment-inducing truth about becoming the body of Christ in this meal? Further, *becoming the body of Christ* refers not only to the identity of the individual recipient as body of Christ, but also refers to the community into which the recipient is being knit. Here, too, is a promise of communion and community that rightly deserves a word of honesty about obligation—particularly the obligation to serve the suffering body of Christ to which we are joined in the “least of these.”¹⁰

Invitation

The language of invitation—rather than compulsion or control—has long been valued by Lutherans.¹¹ The invitation to communion is being newly and sometimes surprisingly accepted. Congregations of the ELCA may be encouraged by this moment to offer more significant invitations to baptism, and to ensure that our invitations into sacramental life in Christ do not set up misleading oppositions between baptism and

⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 272*

⁹ On the pairing of welcome and warning in invitations to holy communion, see Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Matthew 25.31-45

¹¹ “Participation in the sacramental meal is by invitation, not demand. The members of this church are encouraged to make the sacrament a frequent rather than an occasional part of their lives.” *The Use of the Means of Grace*, Application 35C. See also Martin Luther's preface to The Small Catechism.

communion. Speaking the promise of *becoming* the body of Christ at communion offers newcomers to the faith an invitation to discernment about their own identity and their relationship to community. It may be helpful for congregations, as they extend invitations into sacramental life in Christ, to distinguish between, on the one hand, profoundly *supporting* people in their discernment regarding sacramental participation and, on the other hand, *controlling* access to the sacraments. I hope that this brief essay has shown that we have important work to do in the former category that is probably best prioritized over the attempts to accomplish the latter.

Benjamin M. Stewart is the Gordon A. Braatz Associate Professor of Worship and Dean of Augustana Chapel at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.