

FIRST THE TABLE, THEN THE FONT

by Richard Fabian, for the Association of Anglican Musicians, ©2002

“Open Communion” has become a hot topic as the third Christian millennium begins—a topic perplexing some who have campaigned boldly for other inclusive reforms, such as communion of all the baptized, or opening all ministries to Christians of every ethnic or sexual identity. Should churches today call the world to baptism first, and only afterward to share the eucharist—a policy predominant since at least the second century? Or should churches today welcome newcomers at once to Christ’s eucharistic table, and lead them to commitment in baptism afterward? Both sides recognize that an informal practice of open communion has a long history within denominations formally closed to it. But formally inviting everyone to the table diverges from ancient models that reformers have used to support other liturgical changes. Some ecumenists fear that Anglicans abandoning on their own the rules which many sister churches keep will hinder Christian re-union. And some critics of contemporary culture object that blurring this boundary will compromise our authentic Christian identity, merely to serve the modern secular fashion for friendliness.

Nevertheless, today’s movement for open communion builds on more than fashion’s shifting sands. Critical New Testament research has uncovered a biblical foundation for church reform which our forebears could not see as we see today. Like us, they framed structures to secure the church’s faithfulness to Jesus throughout Christian common life. Such a faithful intention doubtless still motivates many opponents to open communion. But where Jesus’ ministry looks different now, faithfulness to his example looks different too. Admittedly, given the sparseness and complexity of our historical evidence, modern knowledge of Jesus can never be certain; and where we err, future ages may correct us. But history shows that rules contradicting Jesus as he is known in any age will not work in his church, and must inevitably fall.

Recent New Testament scholarship and Jewish scholarship together prove Jesus was a distinctive and innovative teacher. His religious contemporaries craned their necks in futuristic expectation. Many gathered in cultic dinner fellowships (*chaburoth*) where members faithful to the Mosaic law talked scripture and prayed for a messiah to come. Others, like John Baptist or the Essenes, called their errant countrymen to wash themselves ritually and prepare for God’s coming reign with a strict rule of life. Most such groups enforced their membership’s purity far beyond orthodox Jewish custom today, hoping to hasten God’s saving intervention for their nation. For example, merchants who kept the law, yet had business contact with those less pure, dined in quarantined fellowships of their own. But Jesus’ parables taught instead: God is already here working with all of you; you have no time to prepare for, learn about, win, or manage God’s coming; now you must respond; and your response today makes all the difference.

This teaching he symbolized in a gesture that shocked many. If Jesus had ever been John's disciple—a relation contradicted within the gospel texts, and increasingly doubted—he abandoned baptizing (John 4:2) and instead sought out, welcomed, and dined with unprepared, unreformed, unwashed sinners. His action was a prophetic sign suiting his own more radical message: here comes God now, ready or not! And seen against Jesus' contemporary religious background, the presence of obviously unqualified diners was essential to his sign. Perhaps Isaiah's vision of a banquet for all nations inspired his choice: there the prophet says, the pure and impure will share one feast. Nevertheless such dinner company was politically scandalous for a teacher, and many scholars today, following Norman Perrin, judge that above all Jesus' actions it led to his death. He may have expected it would. His message unsettled his contemporaries as much as his chosen meal-sign did, and indeed has stirred up his church at major turning points ever since. We may reckon that he died for both scandals at once.

So it can hardly surprise us that most New Testament resurrection stories are mealtime scenes. When Jesus' disciples met again to eat together after his crucifixion, their experience convinced them that he was not dead—that instead God had poured out his life like gasoline, setting the world ablaze. Paul wrote that God brought the whole world salvation by Jesus' death to reward his faith (Galatians 3:13, Romans 3:25) and virtually all churches made Jesus' table fellowship, the prophetic sign of his faith, the center of their common life too. Their gospel midrash stories echo Jesus' teaching, and consistently portray his relation with sinners the same way. For example, the despised tax collector Zacchaeus finds himself summoned to dine with Jesus, and responds then—not beforehand—by a dramatic change of life (Luke 19). Today New Testament research confirms the early church's understanding, and obliges us to look at its implications afresh. Church growth studies also confirm that human nature has changed little, and still responds best when welcomed unconditionally first of all, and then challenged to take up Christian living and church membership.

Early Christians understood ritual washing as a sign of deliberate religious commitment, and undertook it for their own commitment to Christ: they were baptized just as Jesus was baptized. The gospels they wrote made this point diversely. Mark's gospel describes Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, while heaven thundered approval. Matthew and Luke expand on Mark as usual, and four centuries of Christian baptismal sermons used this imagery exclusively for the baptism of Christians. On the other hand, John's gospel tells no such story—the Johannine community may not have heard it—but portrays Jesus' death itself as his committed baptism. Paul apparently shared their ignorance of the Jordan story, arguing only that we are baptized into Christ's death (Romans 6:3). For decades, Acts 19 suggests that Christian groups linked baptismal washing with Jesus' table just as diversely. Some baptized new converts after welcoming them to dine, and developing their allegiance to Jesus at ritual meals; while others baptized them straight off and fed them regularly afterward.

Remarkably, even when the latter order became the widespread standard, Christian theology preserved the original sense of Jesus' table sign as his banquet with the unqualified. Unlike Essenes or other messianic sects then or since, Jesus' disciples share a meal which all the diners are officially declared unworthy to eat, every time they eat it. This sense has endured through ageless conflicts over other baptismal and eucharistic matters, upheld by nearly all sides in debate. Whatever regulations councils argued or adopted, no document implies that they considered revising Jesus' meaning. On the contrary, all clearly meant their rules to secure ongoing faithfulness to Jesus' word and example.

Baptism beforehand—and eventually ritual confession and absolution beforehand—still gave Christians no better entitlement to eat than the rest, as prayers and sermons show. Many readers will recall the Prayer of Humble Access, repeated for centuries by Anglicans baptized, shriven and approaching communion: "We are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under thy table." At St Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church in San Francisco, where I serve, our altar table bears two gilt inscriptions. On one pedestal, Greek words from Luke 15:2 greet everyone entering our doors. This was an insult directed at Jesus, and so our surest historical evidence about him:

"THIS GUY WELCOMES SINNERS AND DINES WITH THEM!"

And in English on the table's other pedestal, a charge by the seventh century mystic Isaac of Nineveh (St Petersburg's chief cathedral is named for him) faces the baptismal company returning from the font:

"DID NOT THE LORD SHARE THE TABLE
OF TAX COLLECTORS AND HARLOTS? SO THEN—
DO NOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE WORTHY AND THE UNWORTHY.
ALL MUST BE EQUAL IN YOUR EYES TO LOVE AND TO SERVE."

It is just this faithful tradition which now presses churches to re-open Jesus' table to all, as he did. Opponents to open communion may warn of its organizational and educational risks, not to mention the strain of overturning many centuries' hallowed practice. But our common life dare not hide Jesus' chosen sign, whatever the risk, or we will forfeit our apologetic for Christian faith in a world where spiritual hunger and spiritual alternatives abound. How can we tell people today what we believe about Christ, and yet keep his table fellowship in the way he distinctly refused to keep it? The likelihood that Jesus' dining with the unready preeminently doomed him makes it all the more urgent that we show this sign plainly. Christ's table has always defined his disciples' authentic identity. Let the world see it, and experience it, and join us in showing it to others.

Open communion cannot diminish baptism. The modern catechumenal movement has enriched church life by exalting baptismal practice based on historical research. Yet research continues to re-evaluate evidence for early baptismal procedure, sometimes drastically, and any modern baptismal program must stand on its own rationale. Welcoming all newcomers to Jesus' table, and

baptizing them afterward when they are ready for commitment, reflects modern organizational learning and exalts baptism equally well. Church growth scholar George Barna sees such a pattern already at work in non-sacramental church services. There newcomers enjoy being welcomed and fully included at worship; but newcomers themselves must make the first move toward affiliating with the church's mission, before church members can effectively share their vision with them.

As they move from table to font, newcomers who have known Christ's banquet welcome and his presence before they could prepare or manage it, now undertake to share his work with us, carrying the good news wherever they go, and serving the world as Jesus and his followers have done. Unqualified sinners summoned to Jesus' eucharistic table can respond like Zacchaeus by a change of life through baptism, as the godlike human nature they have from their creation sheds the deadly shackles of sin, and is reborn and empowered with Christ's Spirit. Having seen and shared Christ's banquet sign, in baptism they can put on his new humanity. (Richard Norris wonderfully likens this transformation to high school students of *Hamlet* mounting their first production. The costumes may be too big, and the lines haltingly spoken; nonetheless the students are really doing *Hamlet*, and they will do it better as they grow.)

This program is more logical than some experiments with grafting fourth century baptismal procedure onto modern public worship, where parishes weekly march catechumens out of the liturgy for instruction instead—while casual visitors stay for the eucharist, and may volunteer to eat and drink whether baptized or not. Such artifice makes baptism look like a certifying formality for scrupulous churchfolk, more than an opening for all into Christlike responsibility and leadership. In our pastoral experience at St Gregory's, unbaptized people who come regularly to Jesus' table proceed to baptism almost without exception, and speedily enough. (Those already baptized in other denominations may move toward Episcopal reception more slowly.)

By contrast, making baptism—or sacramental absolution after baptism—a gateway to the eucharist has repeatedly diminished communion everywhere. Whereas sinners once flocked to Jesus' table, fifth century Christians lingered in the catechumenate for a lifetime, dreading to be baptized and approach the sacred meal before they were utterly ready—that is, so near death that they stood little danger of transgressing afterward. Augustine, a longtime catechumen baptized at last only in order to be ordained, typifies the ascendancy of gateway-baptism over Jesus' inclusive prophetic sign. After infant baptism drowned the catechumenate (with Augustine's paradoxical help!) medieval and baroque Catholic layfolk communicated rarely. Eastern church adults still do.

And despite the Reformers' preaching and example, their successful revival of baptism and communion discipline began three centuries' decline in Protestant eucharistic worship. John Calvin himself shared the eucharist daily, for example. But in the American southeast today, sacramental prison chaplains run interference by wardens and guards recruited from the local Calvinist majority, who believe condemned murderers do not deserve communion before

they have paid for their crimes with their lives. Across North America attendance figures tell us that far from reconciling the sinful or estranged masses with God, Jesus' table now draws few of the obviously unqualified guests he sought out. In famously growing evangelical churches, many baptized members skip eucharistic worship altogether. Persecutions alone have reinstated Jesus' chosen sign at the center of Reformed laypeople's life: said one Chinese pastor during the Cultural Revolution, "The eucharist is all we do. It is the only thing people still want to come for."

On an ecumenical front, restoring Jesus' open table sign will strengthen church re-union, not undermine it, since ecumenism can only build on evident faithfulness to Jesus. Surely that is what already motivates ecumenists to work so hard and long as they must do, overcoming centuries of prejudice and chauvinism! Without that faithfulness, the most elaborately balanced ecumenical document is doomed to the dustbin, because rules that Christians believe contradict Jesus, Christians will not keep. Moreover, our ecumenical opportunity surpasses now the rationalization of church structures that fills many such documents. Our opportunity surpasses the church itself.

This article began by recalling the exclusion of impure diners from messianic sects' meals, and Jesus' defiance of that trend. Christians have carried Jesus' alternative table fellowship onward through two millennia, always affirming that sinners may share it. Meanwhile, Judaism also rejected the rules banishing impure diners from faithful tables—more completely indeed than Christianity did. Because Christians abandoned circumcision under Paul's influence, and so were expelled from synagogues that insisted on Judaizing gentile converts, we have largely overlooked the later rabbinical shift toward the kosher kitchen. That shift wholly replaced earlier demands for the ritual purity of dinner guests with care for the purity of foods prepared and eaten. Today Jewish homes may vary in keeping kosher kitchen rules; yet all but the most "ultra-orthodox" will share their feasts with guests of other faiths.

Many musicians reading this article play or sing in synagogues on Saturdays, and churches on Sundays. They will have felt the deep spirituality of their Jewish congregations, typically humane, sometimes heroic, often closely akin to Christian congregations at their best. These readers will recognize that by such an open table policy—quite literally the crucial policy for Jesus—modern Jews have upheld Jesus' example better than Christian churches have. And Jews are not alone.

Since the Day of Resurrection, the New Testament teaches that Jesus' fiery Spirit has blown throughout the world, always ripening more grain than any church of any era can hope to harvest. In our own tragic time of religious bloodshed, deeds of hospitality like Jesus' hospitality have delivered devout Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Shinto, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Bahai and Animist hosts to perfect their own faith through martyrdom, as Christian martyrs have always done. How ironic that among the world's great religions, only Christians keep the table company taboo which Jesus broke to symbolize his teaching, and persistently defied at the cost of his life!

This sharp irony guts otherwise reasonable arguments for banishing the unready, unworthy, untaught, unproven, and unwashed from Jesus' table any longer. Excluding them now despite what we have learned about Jesus—and what religious seekers throughout the world have learned *from* Jesus—would be worse than foolish. The world cannot credit what we teach about Christ while the church seems every Sunday to betray him. Here is the real missionary cause for changing our practice today: not to serve some market fashion, but to serve our market Jesus himself, and to draw our market into his work—in baptism when they are ready for it, and a life of priestly ministry beyond. The New Testament assigns his church no other goal, no other work, no other rules to keep.

Some protest that hasty changes are often repented of, and can disturb church unity, so that we dare not open eucharistic sharing before all agree on legislation, or at least official authorities promote fresh policies. But in our time the Anglican Communion has followed a more primitive and natural reform process, of testing changes in local use before promoting them widely and legally. Our newer alternative rites largely result from that testing. Today in many Anglican congregations, open communion is already an informal pastoral pattern. The next step needful is to say openly what Anglicans are doing there. We are following Jesus' example as we understand it. Frankness on this point enables us to communicate closely with our own church authorities and other fellow Christians; and communication is the best way to advance the unity we treasure.

Frankness requires that we tell our market, too, what we are doing. At St Gregory's we say: "We are all guests at Jesus' table, so we welcome all without exception to share the bread and wine that are Christ's Body and Blood." These are not some vaguely holy symbols which they might find elsewhere, or which mean whatever seekers might think comfortable. When Christ's Spirit blows newcomers in our church doors to share his table with us, we know these gifts will transform their lives mysteriously. (Indeed, our wisest theologians understand the workings no better than our infant communicants do!) Ruth Meyers remarks that the communion invitation is our best opportunity to tell people what we believe they receive, and we should tell them plainly. Otherwise our communion ministers can startle embarrassed strangers when they hand them the gifts saying "the Body (or the Blood) of Christ." And we belittle everyone's acceptance, when they take up his Spirit's invitation to dine. This banquet sign cost Jesus dearly, and it will cost all who share it, as well as bless them. Our fellow guests must hear the words naming that cost, or they need not eat and drink.

We do not know where Jesus' example will take us in this way. We do not know who will follow him, or what church they will join, or even if they will join a church. Should they follow Jesus in another faithful company, perhaps that is God's mysterious will. Like the earliest Christians, we are spreading the good news about Jesus in a Spirit we cannot control. During our time, like their time, Christ has many things to teach which his church cannot bear, yet his Spirit will

lead us into all truth. And in every reforming age, Anglicans have cherished telling the truth above all.

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BIOGRAPHY:

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Fr Fabian dedicates this article to Bishop William Swing of California and his United Religions Initiative.