

# Reflections on Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist: A Response to Resolution D084 of the 75th General Convention

THEOLOGY COMMITTEE OF THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS  
OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH\*

In the light of Resolution D084 from the General Convention in 2006, “Upholding Communion of the Baptized,”<sup>1</sup> the House of Bishops Theology Committee has discussed matters related to the relationships between baptism and eucharistic practice. We have particularly focused our conversations on issues related to offering communion to the unbaptized, a practice often referred to as “open communion.” There are numerous different issues at stake here and the Committee is not of one mind about them all. In addition, we hope to be in contact with the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music concerning the theological, liturgical, and pastoral issues surrounding this practice.

The sense of the Committee is that our work is not yet complete and that we have not had sufficient time to discuss all of these matters as fully as we would like. Instead, we offer this document to the House of Bishops as a promissory note. It represents the current state of our deliberations, but we do not assume this is our last word on these matters. In this document we try to reflect on some of the issues around

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\* This report was prepared in May 2009 by members of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops: The Rt. Rev. David Alvarez, The Rt. Rev. John Bauerschmidt, The Rt. Rev. Joe G. Burnett, Dr. Ellen Charry, The Rev. Dr. Sathianathan Clarke, Dr. Stephen Fowl, The Rev. Dr. A. Katherine Grieb, The Rt. Rev. Robert W. Ihloff, Dr. Charles T. Mathewes, Dr. Joy Ann McDougall, The Rt. Rev. Stephen A. Miller, The Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley Jr. (chair), and Dr. Kathryn Tanner.

<sup>1</sup> Resolution D084 states: Resolved, That the 75th General Convention recognize the position of the Constitution and Canons (1.17.7), that only those who have been baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion; and be it further Resolved, That the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, in deliberate consultation with the Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music, and others they may deem appropriate, provide to the 76th General Convention a pastoral and theological understanding of the relationship between Holy Baptism and eucharistic practice.

which our discussions have coalesced, though often without resolution. We also raise several issues and questions regarding the practice of open communion. These are issues that have either come up in our face-to-face discussions or our examination of essays written on this topic, or from conversations at various levels in our own dioceses. We hope that with further time and effort, we can produce a more substantial document over the course of our next meetings.

### *Preliminaries*

On the one hand, no one, as far as we can tell, advocates that churches establish checkpoints on the way to the altar. Nobody wants to be the baptism police and nobody denies that clergy should be free to exercise their prudential judgment in specific cases and in specific times and places. On the other hand, the canon with regard to baptism and communion is quite clear: “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion.”

Moreover, clergy enter into a type of covenantal relationship with their bishop regarding the “doctrine, discipline and worship of Christ as this Church has received them.” They also promise obedience to their bishop. It would also appear that both bishops and priests enter into a similar covenantal relationship with the people in their care. In that light, one might well question any deviation from the canons with regard to baptism and eucharist. It is equally important, however, that any change in practice occurs in the light of these covenantal relationships and therefore should be clearly thought out, openly discussed, and prayerfully discerned. Regardless of one’s views about whether this canon should be followed, we all agree that it should not be willfully violated in arbitrary, secretive, or idiosyncratic ways, where clergy and parish becomes a law unto themselves. This is not so much for the sake of the canon as for the sake of the covenantal relationships between bishops, priests, and people.

At the same time, we recognize that the impulse toward open communion arises out of serious pastoral issues faced by clergy in the diverse contexts in which they seek to minister faithfully. Sometimes these pastoral issues are connected to the particular contexts of their ministries. Sometimes they arise in the course of particular liturgical occasions such as weddings or funerals.

Further, there would be serious implications for ecumenical relations as well as relations within the wider Anglican Communion

should the Episcopal Church alter their canons. These would need to be explicated and explored further.

With this in view, our discussions thus far have coalesced around three interrelated issues: (1) the doctrinal and liturgical connection between baptism and eucharist; (2) Jesus' practice and hopes for his followers; (3) mission and eucharistic participation.

### *The Doctrinal and Liturgical Connection between Baptism and Eucharist*

Both those in favor of keeping the canon and those who advocate changing the canon on baptism and eucharist recognize that there is an intrinsic connection between baptism and eucharist and a theological sense to the church's traditional practice. The relationship between baptism and eucharist can be understood in a variety of ways. We display some of these below. This list is not comprehensive, but exemplary:

- Baptism unites one to Christ. One receives thereby Christ's own Spirit as the power to lead a reformed, Christ-like life. In the eucharist one actually draws upon that life-giving Spirit, which comes to us through the gift of Christ's own humanity to us in the elements, to grow into and sustain under trial a Christ-like transformation of life.
- Baptism inaugurates a particular relationship into which one then lives empowered and renewed through the eucharist. In baptism one is graciously adopted into God's household and then nourished by God. Believers receive the Spirit in baptism leading to sanctification by the Spirit's work in the eucharist.
- Our baptism is a baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. We recognize with Paul that our eucharistic practice proclaims the Lord's death until he comes.
- In baptism one is made a member of Christ. In the eucharist we both remember and are re-membered as the body of Christ.
- In baptism we are cleansed from sin and raised to newness of life. In the eucharist we partake of the blood of Christ which was shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

All of these ways presume that baptism leads to eucharist and not the other way around. Moreover, one can see this integral connection confirmed by comparing the language in the baptismal service with language in the eucharistic liturgy. In particular Eucharistic Prayer C explicitly ties baptism to eucharist (BCP 371). It is those redeemed and made a new people by water and the Spirit who offer the gifts that become Christ's body and blood.

Both theologically and liturgically there is a rich tradition of reflection that develops and explains the connections between and the movement from baptism to eucharist. This raises a set of questions for those who wish to open communion to the unbaptized: Is it also possible to provide a doctrinal account of this close connection between baptism and eucharist in a way that might show how eucharistic reception might lead to baptism? Would such an account require a significant reconception of baptism or eucharist? That is, can we retain the intelligibility of baptism if we presume the eucharist precedes baptism? Clearly, there are accounts of people who have been moved to seek baptism through regular eucharistic reception. Are there any theological accounts of the relationship between these two sacraments that would enable one to think of this as a normal way of proceeding?

### *Jesus' Practice and Hopes for his Followers*

Many accounts of open communion seek to base their arguments on Jesus' normal eating practices, especially his well noted habit of eating with "tax collectors and sinners." In some cases it appears that people want to distinguish between Jesus' final meal with his followers, which was an exclusive affair, and Jesus' normal eating practices, which are taken to be radically inclusive. Depending on whether one takes his final meal or normal eating practices to be the church's precedent for the eucharistic celebration, different conclusions follow for the practice of open communion.

It might be worthwhile looking at what we do know about Jesus' everyday practice and its relevance to this issue. Jesus is notorious for eating with "tax collectors and sinners." This scandalizes many of his Jewish contemporaries. Nevertheless, we should recall that "tax collectors and sinners" were Jews and that Jesus confines his ministry and his eating companions to Jews (with the possible exception of the

feeding of the multitudes in the gospels). Moreover, this is a portion of the population already in a covenant relationship with God, even if that relationship was in need of repair and reconciliation.

More importantly, Jesus' mendicant pattern of life meant that he was almost never the host of a meal. He responds to and even provokes invitations from a wide variety of Jews, but does not really offer invitations. Outside of the last supper and the accounts of the feeding of the multitudes and the post-resurrection meal in John 21, we never learn of him hosting a meal. Even on the road to Emmaus Jesus is invited by the disciples to eat with them.

Further, if Jesus' practice were really as open as is sometimes assumed, it is difficult to account for the early church's struggles over getting Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus to sit down at the same table. Indeed, it would seem that it is baptism and not communion that enables the diverse yet unified body imagined in Galatians 3:27–29. Whatever one wants to say about open communion, it cannot easily or directly be based on Jesus' day-to-day eating practices as best we can reconstruct them. Moreover, Jesus' focus on the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" should remind us that his engagements with tax collectors and sinners were directed at restoring and repairing their covenantal relationship with God.

Although baptism (at least Christian baptism) was not required of those at the last supper, the gospel accounts make it fairly clear that Jesus ate this Passover meal with his closest followers. On its own, though, this account does not straightforwardly argue for baptism prior to communion. Alternatively, Paul's account of eucharistic practice in Corinth presumes that Jesus' last meal is paradigmatic for Christian practice. Moreover, it appears that Paul assumes that the Corinthians are baptized even if that fact caused divisions among them (compare 1 Cor. 1:10–16), but there is no explicit connection between baptism and eucharist. Nonetheless, for Paul, participating in this meal implies sharing a set of convictions about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and a set of practices that stem from those convictions. Further, misunderstanding or failing to embody those convictions can lead either to "unworthy" participation in the Lord's supper or can render the meal as something other than the Lord's supper (compare 1 Cor. 11:17–34). By the time of *Didache* (circa 95–110 C.E.), baptism is expressly required to participate in the eucharist. Following Paul and the Christian tradition, our liturgy also treats the last supper as the

paradigm for Christian eucharistic practice. This recognition does not decide the issue of open communion.

### *Mission and Eucharistic Participation*

Many see open communion as part of an overall focus on mission. Without question, mission must be a pressing concern for Episcopalians and all other Christians. At its best, the desire for open communion arises out of an impulse to reach out as far as possible into the “highways and byways” where those who might be prone to follow Jesus reside. In the course of such outreach one also faces the question of whether those who respond to a well-formed open invitation to communion might be catechized and baptized.<sup>2</sup>

This approach raises at least three important issues for our consideration. The first concerns the nature of the invitation. It would appear that there is a great deal of diversity in the ways in which people are invited to open communion. Some invitations simply note that whoever desires to come may come. Others invite those who seek God or who are being drawn to Christ. Other forms of invitation may be yet more specific. In each case, however, we are concerned that people understand the nature of the meal to which they are invited.

Regardless of one’s views about open communion, Christians agree that eucharistic participation is part of our transformation into ever more faithful followers of Christ. Eucharistic participation is one of the central ways in which our friendship with God and each other is deepened and, in the course of that deepening, our habits, desires, and manner of life are radically transformed through the workings of the Spirit. Eucharistic participation is part of our sanctification. As John Koenig notes, “What believers do by celebrating eucharistic meals is to join Christ’s ministry for the life of the world (1 Cor. 15:24–28)—not apart from the church but through the agency of the church as Christ’s body.”<sup>3</sup> This is precisely what we ask God to do in the prayer that sends us out from the table into the world.

In this light, we should be careful about how people are invited to this meal. We do not want to practice an ecclesial form of the old bait-

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<sup>2</sup> It would be particularly useful for this discussion if there were some empirical research on these matters. For example, can one decisively show that the practice of open communion generates more baptisms?

<sup>3</sup> John Koenig, *The Feast of the World’s Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 219.

and-switch by which people are invited to the eucharist indiscriminately, only to learn that there are rather significant implications for those who partake. Of course, the infants we baptize cannot understand those implications either, but those who present them in baptism can. This, of course, might be an argument for more thorough catechesis of parents and godparents as well as the congregations who make rather extravagant promises to those who are baptized. The form of the invitation, then, will need to be a matter of prayerful discussion. Moreover, even prior to that discussion one would have to determine if people could honestly be invited to this meal unless they are already some sort of nascent believers.

A second issue concerns the practice of hospitality. In some cases, a missionary impulse to open communion is driven by a concern to extend hospitality to the stranger. Hospitality to the stranger is a practice deeply embedded in Scripture. The unified table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles in Christ was seen to be a foretaste of God's eschatological banquet for all the nations. Jesus himself urges his followers to find that in welcoming and feeding the last and the least, they are feeding him. All of this would seem to fit well with the idea that a well-framed open invitation to communion could be a missional reflection of God's own hospitality.

This emphasis on hospitality is salutary for the church at large. Nevertheless, there are several points that require further reflection. None of these points rule out the connection of open communion to hospitality, but they would require the practice of open communion to be tied to a number of other practices in order for its connection to hospitality to be evident. For example, in most Episcopal churches eucharistic practice is not regularly tied to a conventional meal. There may be some instances in which this is the case, but they appear to be rare. We thank God for feeding us with "spiritual food" every Sunday, but for us and for most Christians, this spiritual food is no longer tied to participation in a more substantial meal. Thus, making open communion the occasion for our demonstration of hospitality can undermine the really radical hospitality of opening our homes and families and tables. One can open one's house without advocating open communion, but it is not clear how one can advocate open communion without a concomitant obligation to open one's home or church to open hospitality around real shared meals.

Third and finally, if we are to retain the very clear historical, doctrinal, and liturgical connections between baptism and eucharist, the

practice of open communion will need to be tied to catechesis that is directed toward baptism. The practice of eucharistic participation leading to baptism as a missionary strategy need not become the norm, but it might become a norm. If that is to happen, it must take place in the light of patterns of catechesis and formation that would need to be both developed and embodied.

### *Conclusion*

Whatever our views on open communion, it appears that there is a great deal of catechetical work to be done in parishes. It is essential to understand the doctrinal and liturgical connections between baptism and eucharist, especially in a church that has been rediscovering the centrality of baptism.

We invite the church into this work. For in the absence of a revived catechesis and a commitment to lifelong learning and formation among the faithful, it is likely that our views on open communion will be formed by an under-thought repetition of tradition on the one hand, or strongly formed habits of individualism and freedom of choice on the other hand, rather than by careful habits of theological reflection.