

Opening the Table: The Body of Christ and God's Prodigal Grace

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This article, a theologically thick description of opening the eucharistic table to all, is rooted in Aidan Kavanaugh's conviction that liturgical theology is primarily that "knowledge" of God generated by the encounter of Christian congregations with God in the liturgy. Thus, this work began with a working group of four Open Table Episcopal parishes reflecting together on what they have found of God, Christ, church, and grace within their practice. The vision that emerged from this reflection was centered in a complex theology of grace and response inherent in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son. This central commitment was, moreover, structured around intuitions concerning the universal status of all persons as God's children, the relational character of grace, the communal character of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, a Christocentric ecclesiology defining the church by the commitments at its center, and a missional understanding of baptism.

As the practice of inviting all present to receive the bread and the wine of the Eucharist grows among Protestant, and especially Episcopal, parishes, some are concerned that this well-intentioned gesture is theologically confused, if not vacuous, and that its continuation is liturgically, pastorally, and canonically problematic. Those who have questioned the practice—most notably, James Farwell in the *Anglican Theological Review*—have pushed proponents of the Open Table to reflect upon and articulate a coherent theology that would make faithful sense out of this innovation in the church's ecclesial life; indeed, this was a central purpose of his article, for which I

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am tremendously grateful.¹ These questions have also been raised in more neutral forums. The most recent General Convention of the Episcopal Church shelved the discussion of opening the table until precisely this kind of further reflection could be undertaken.

This reflection has, of course, already commenced—especially in Kathryn Tanner’s initial response to Farwell’s query.² My intention is to extend Tanner’s argument through attention to one notable aspect of this practice: its reality as a liturgical theology that arose not through academic reflection on the nature of the Eucharist, but in the life of individual Christian communities as that life was shaped by their practice of the sacraments.³ The practice has emerged in the Episcopal Church, for example, not through the work of the Standing Liturgical Commission or the General Convention, but parish by parish, as local communities have discerned in it a faithful response to the gospel. It comes to us, then, as a first-order theology—a performance by a growing segment of the people of God of an understanding of God, Christ, grace, church, sacrament, and world through their practice of God, Christ, grace, church, sacrament, and world in their communal life. Indeed, as Aidan Kavanaugh argues, the presence of such first-order theology is evident in the life of a community in the liturgical shifts that occur out of the (almost chaotic) encounter of that community with God in the liturgy. The Open Table, its proponents will argue, is such a liturgical shift.⁴

This article is grounded in the conviction that we need to begin any theological exploration of the Open Table by teasing out at a

¹ James Farwell, “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion,’” *Anglican Theological Review* 86:2 (Spring 2004): 215–238.

² Kathryn Tanner, “In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell,” *Anglican Theological Review* 86:3 (Summer 2004): 473–484. These reflections multiply weekly. See also Gary Nicolosi, “The Open Church” (a speech given at the 2003 Forum on Ecumenical Relations of the Pennsylvania Conference on Interchurch Cooperation at the Cardinal Keeler Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, October 27, 2003); Richard Fabian, “First the Table, then the Font” (paper delivered to the Association of Anglican Musicians, 2002); Donald Schell, “The Font Outside the Walls” and Richard Bliese, “Addressing the Captives in Babylon” in *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*, ed. Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 32–50; Mark Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest: A Theology of Open Table* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2006).

³ See Aidan Kavanaugh’s definition of proper liturgical theology in *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1984), ix–x.

⁴ Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73–79.

secondary level the theologies implicit in the practice of these communities. The reflections in this text are rooted in the work of a theological reflection group consisting of members (several lay people and one ordained person) of four parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, funded by the Valparaiso Project.⁵ Our group provided a space and a structure for members of these four parishes to become more proficient at articulating explicitly the theological values and understandings inherent in their practice of the Open Table, especially in its relation to their communal life. The hope was to draw from these Christian practitioners a thick description of the theological vision embedded in opening the table, in order to inform more fully both their practice and the broader church's understanding of their practice.⁶

The thickness of the vision discerned from this project is critical for any understanding and evaluation of opening the table. It is all too easy to limit this practice to a simple statement about hospitality: As Christ's kingdom ministry is marked by the breaking down of the barriers that divide us through his practice of table-fellowship with sinners, so are we to embody this same ministry by inviting all present to dine with us at Christ's meal. Farwell begins with this as the understanding of the practice, and it also informed many of the comments from members in our project group. But such a theological definition of the practice, if we stop there, is reductionist, not only falling short of a full articulation of the vision of grace's prevenience inherent in

⁵ The Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith is committed to funding work focused on the cultivation of religious practices in the context of Christian community. See: www.practicingourfaith.org.

⁶ The relationship between secondary and primary theology is, according to Kavanaugh, mutually informative: hence, the tag *lex orandi, lex credendi*. George Lindbeck develops this insight through the notion of "thick description," drawn from Clifford Geertz and, ultimately, from Gilbert Ryle. (See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* [Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1984], 115.) Thick description is the process of exploring and describing with the practitioners of a faith the details of their practice, so that its complex meaning might be grasped in its fullness. The task of the theologian in this context is to explicate "the multiplicity of conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit." (The quotation is drawn from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 26.) In my experience with my study group, their conceptual structures were never strange, and seldom irregular or inexplicit. But they were knotted, and benefited greatly from further articulation through this process of description.

this definition, but also missing the broader array of theological claims embedded in this practice that inform its Augustinian emphasis on God's radical hospitality.

This article intends to remedy such a reductionist approach by drawing from the rich conversation among our project group a more complete understanding of their practice. This article is, as such, both constructive and descriptive. It is rooted in the thick description our four parishes provided for their practice of the Christian life in relation to their opening of their eucharistic tables. This description was generated through small group discussions of very general questions: What does it mean to be a member of your church? How does one become a member? What does your church have to offer visitors? What are visitors seeking? These small groups consisted of members of each parish. The fruits of these small group discussions were carried back to a plenary session, where we could identify confluences in our observations. The results of these discussions were recorded for further reflection. Although we must imagine that the thoughts of the parishioners were shaped in some way by the theology that was brought to the practice of opening the table in their parishes, their discourse, nonetheless, was a plainspoken, pragmatic reflection of their experiences and their observations of their communities. Their responses had the character, in other words, of a fairly straightforward reflection on their practice.

These groups, then, provided most of the content of this article. Though I have provided the formal categories through which it was framed, I do not believe that I have warped or read into their thinking a theology that was alien to them. I am comfortable with this for two reasons. First, a majority of the organizing ideas reflected in this article were new to me. I had not thought of this practice in these terms until they were suggested to me by the work of our groups. Second, I have run a draft of this article by the members of the groups, and they agreed that it was coherent with their conversations.

Given this approach, we will find in these congregations' practice of the Open Table an embodiment of the complex theology of grace and response inherent in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son, especially as that parable is read Christologically. Moreover, when we attend to the broader theology implicit in this practice, we will discern commitments to the universal status of all persons as God's children, the relational character of grace, the communal character of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, a Christocentric ecclesiology that defines

the church by the commitments at its center and not by its boundaries, and a missional understanding of our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. All of this will open out finally into the challenge for mission that the practice of the Open Table presents to parishes committed to it—a challenge that clarifies as the theology implicit in the practice is articulated more fully.

Radical Grace

Discussions of the Open Table, focused as they are on the issue of radical hospitality, typically revolve around contested understandings of Christ's meal fellowship with sinners—that he dined with tax collectors, prostitutes, and Pharisees, all without condition. Farwell's article serves as an example of this approach, taking the issue of meal fellowship as the theological heart of the case for the Open Table—that in this fellowship Christ instantiated a vision of a kingdom without boundaries between sinner and saint, so that all are welcome within it—and questioning the historical and theological presuppositions behind this understanding.⁷ He is concerned that we recognize the integrity of Christ's meal fellowship with his disciples at the Last Supper as a practice distinct from his more general habit of dining with sinners. The Last Supper, for Farwell, points to Christ's intent to nourish those who have committed themselves to his mission for the kingdom, and so it must be understood as a separate practice that more properly models contemporary Christian practice of the Eucharist.

Farwell begins here in response to arguments for opening the table (drawn from the work of the Jesus Seminar) that focus on Christ's meal fellowship while dismissing the historicity of the Last Supper.⁸ Farwell is correct that this is a dubious way of understanding this practice, but none of the parishes in our group defended their practice of the Open Table by dismissing the Last Supper. Rather, as Tanner points out, we best understand the relationship between Christ's fellowship with sinners and his celebration of a final meal with his disciples not by rejecting the latter, but by holding the two together.⁹ In both cases, Tanner rightly observes, we find Christ dining

⁷ Farwell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus," 218–224.

⁸ See John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper, 1994), 130.

⁹ Tanner, "In Praise of Open Communion," 475–477.

with sinners who have little or no understanding of the kingdom that he offers. Indeed, the similarity of the Last Supper to Christ's broader meal ministry is an aspect of its poignancy; even after all that time, they still don't get it.

In Tanner's analysis of the relationship between Christ's presence at the Last Supper and his meal ministry, she points us to the primary theological principle underlying his action: the unconditionality or prevenience of his love for his companions.¹⁰ In Christ's meal fellowship, Christ does not offer his presence as a blessing on the response of those with whom he dines, but rather as a catalyst for this response. Christ's meal with Zacchaeus stands as an archetype of this dynamic within Christ's meal ministry (Luke 19:1–10), but certainly Christ's last meal with his disciples, who would proceed to betray, deny, and abandon him before they took up their cross to follow him, is patterned in a similar way. This dynamic of God's prevenient outreach eliciting human response has been recognized by theologians from Augustine to Aquinas to Calvin and Luther, and it was continually referred to in our working group as the theological model that governed their practice. The Open Table, as one member put it, is a means of embodying justification by faith. The claim is not that all are invited because all are justified, but that the invitation is God's unconditional gift of grace, though the gift will only come to full fruition when it is received in faith. The meal, therefore, is offered not as a prize for faith, but as a gift that might produce faith.¹¹

This recognition of the centrality of prevenience in Christ's meal ministry highlights the central theological dynamic of the gospel account of Christ's ministry. However significant we might deem the breaking down of barriers that accompanied Christ's work, this is a sociological reality that does not stand at its heart. Rather, the breakdown of barriers is a product of a more fundamental dynamic of Christ's work, beginning with the very fact of Incarnation: Christ offers himself to initiate a relationship that is built on that offer, apart from and often in spite of our initial response. Indeed, we understand Christ's mission and message only when we understand that the principal barrier that Christ theoretically abolishes—that between

¹⁰ Tanner, "In Praise of Open Communion," 476.

¹¹ See Paul Althaus's discussion of Luther's understanding of the sacraments in *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1966), 351–352.

the sinful and the righteous—is a false demarcation of which we must rid ourselves so that we can recognize that for any of us, Christ’s invitation to the table is based solely on his prevenient love, and not our response. What the meal ministry encapsulates in relation to this broader theme of prevenience is the embodied and relational nature of this grace: Christ’s offer is the offer of himself, manifest in his presence at table for fellowship and the breaking of bread.

This understanding of Christ’s ministry and its relation to our practice of that ministry in the life of the church was reflected throughout the study group’s discussions of the theological foundation of opening the table. The claim is that our relationship with God, embodied at the table, rests on God’s graceful initiative, not our response. This is true of all the baptized who come forward for the Eucharist; we come not because of our baptism but because of God’s offer in and through Christ. It is also true of our extension of this same offer to all whose journey brings them to us. We invite all to the table, discerning in them not their baptismal status or lack thereof, but their status as the beloved of God to whom God has extended Godself in Christ, inviting them to come and eat. To withhold this invitation would be to call into question the welcome at the table of us all, since our worthiness to come to the table is grounded solely in the “manifold and great mercy” of God.

This intuition of the radicality of God’s grace—and by radical we mean both that which breaks our comfortable boundaries and that which lies at the root of everything—did not displace the importance of our response to grace in the conversation among our group. The significance of baptism, adult Christian commitment, and membership in an ecclesial community was roundly upheld in our discussion, but it was upheld only as it stood in a particular relationship to God’s grace. Baptism and ecclesial membership were seen by members of the group as an embrace of grace, so that those baptized could live more fully into the presence offered by Christ. In this sense, baptism is seen not as a requirement for access to the grace of fellowship, but as a movement toward the blossoming of this grace in the lives of those who have experienced it. Moreover, baptism and membership in an ecclesial community were seen in relation to grace’s fruition by making one not only a recipient of grace—one who is invited to the table—but, through that reception, also a servant of grace—one who waits at the table in Christ’s name. In both of these ways, our response was seen as the development of grace in our lives, so that it stands in

organic relationship to the grace of the original invitation and presence of Christ.

This dynamic is best captured in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which clarifies this logic of prevenience and response (Luke 15: 11–32). We see the prevenience of grace, which constitutes its gratuity, in the activity of the father in the parable: his anticipatory watch for the return of the younger son who has rejected him; his unconditional embrace of the younger son, dismissing his confession of unworthiness so that it simply does not factor into the father's invitation; the setting out of the feast for this one who had betrayed the father, lived with pigs, and was as yet unwashed in preparation for the meal.¹² In offering the invitation to the eucharistic feast to all who enter our churches—and by all we mean baptized or not, members or not, ordained or not—we recognize our equal status as those whom the Father longs for and embraces, apart from and as the basis of any confession or commitment that we might make.

Thus far what I have said is unremarkable, given the general understanding that most have of the practice of the Open Table. But the parable of the Prodigal Son is illuminating for the question of invitation to the Eucharist and the status of baptism within the church when we read the parable Christologically. In this context, the parable sheds light on the mission and ministry of Christ when we read him not as the father, who initiates the action in the parable, but as the true Elder Son—the Elder Son, that is, who understands and enacts the love of the Father. This unity in love allows him to share everything equally with the Father, which means principally in this context the desire of the Father for the prodigal. Thus, he is not only willing to empty himself of everything that he shares with the Father in his pursuit and embrace of the younger son—taking up the Father's mission—but he even ventures out into the far country (to borrow a phrase from Karl Barth), not waiting for the return of the younger son, but seeking him out in order to slay the fatted calf and invite him to the feast.

When the parable is read in this way, then it is evident that baptism confers on one not the right to be invited to the feast: this is the status of the younger son that is proper to all of God's children.

¹² Although often read as a parable of repentance, the context (the parables of the lost sheep and coin) and content (the son's economically motivated confession and the father's disinterest in it) guide us to an interpretation focused primarily on the father's grace.

Baptism, instead, joins one to the mission of the true Elder Son, as we are remade in his image. This means that we stand not only as guests at the feast, but also as those who share all with the Father. This begins to develop the notion of the fruition of grace through baptism and ecclesial membership mentioned above. More particularly, this means that we share with the Father his concern that we seek out and welcome the multitude of our siblings who might return. We are called to set out the feast, prepare their way to it, run out to greet them, issue the invitation, and help them to feel at home, so that they may learn to make this community their home. Then they too can come to share all with the Father and with those who have embraced the role of the true Elder Son.

The theological conviction concerning grace and response that emerged from the conversation among practitioners of the Open Table was remarkable for its coherence with the broad stream of the Christian tradition, especially as it has come down to us in the West. Calvin, Luther, Aquinas, and Augustine would all recognize this emphasis on the humble sovereignty of grace in the unconditionality of its invitation, and the spiritual flourishing of grace as the substance of our response. What is theologically distinctive in the practice of the Open Table, from our discussions, are five theological intuitions that give this practice its particular shape. These intuitions are also wholly congruent with strands of the Christian theological tradition, but they are aligned through this practice to form a unique constellation that opens our vision of the gospel in a striking way. Some of these intuitions are inherent in the theological conviction that I have just examined, while others emerge from the particularity of the practice. All of them are vital to the lives of the parishes that formed our group, though the members of the group articulated some of these intuitions more fully than others. What follows is my attempt to pull together and make explicit the theologies that emerged from our discussion.

God's Children

At the heart of the practice of the Christian life in the parishes of our group was the conviction that all are God's children whom God longs for and seeks—hence the applicability of the parable of the Prodigal Son to all who enter our doors. This conviction is the obverse side of our recognition of human solidarity in the light of God's grace, developed above. Just as we make a false distinction between the sinful and the righteous, given our need of grace, so we make false

distinctions when we exclude any from the family of God, given God's claim on all persons as their Creator, Father, and Mother. For Calvin, this was a central consequence of the Fall, that we are alienated from God and no longer recognize God's loving concern for each of us as God's children.¹³ The practice of the Open Table is founded on the redemptive recovery of the understanding that we all are the objects of God's concern.

For the participants in our group, the emergence of this recognition was essential to the growth of an individual and a community into the maturity of the life of faith. If the first step of this growth is the recognition of God's love for you—the position of the lost son—a next step is the recognition of God's love for all people, even those outside the circle of the faithful. This is the growth of the elder son into the image of the true Elder Son, as we learn fully to share all with the Father. As one member of our group put it, we need to recognize that some cannot be “more children of God” than others.

Indeed, the challenge of the practice of the Open Table is to live fully into this recognition, so that we are not simply willing, but desirous to seek out not only those who are “like” us, but also those whose status as God's children we have denied on the basis of race, sexual orientation, or social status. One member of the group argued that our table is truly open when we not only invite those present at our gatherings, but also attend to who is present and who is not—seeking out those excluded not merely from our table, but from our building by our past practices. Proclamation of the practice of the Open Table as solidarity with Christ's fellowship with the outcast rings false when we are inviting to our meals only those who are, by most accounts, from the mainstream of society. For one parish, then, the practice of the Open Table was bound closely to their outreach to the homeless in downtown Washington. Their 8 a.m. service combines a breakfast for those who otherwise might go without material sustenance with a Eucharist to provide all—the cooks and the diners—their needed spiritual sustenance. Inviting folks in this context to one table, while excluding them from the other, makes little sense in light of the gathered congregation.

This conviction about our universal status as God's children, whom God seeks and invites to the feast before and apart from a

¹³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.vi.1, 341 (OS 3:320).

confession or a bath, does not mean that parishes who open the table reject the equally biblical distinction between the ways of God and the ways of the world. Rather, it is to define “world,” when used in this negative sense, not as the unbaptized, but as the spiritual and material forces that oppress us and separate us from the love of God. By this definition, these parishes are more concerned about not perpetuating alienation from God as a loving, inviting parent than including the unwashed at their feast. They see the church as those of God’s children who, in rejection of the world, have embraced the Father’s mission of love and reached out to their siblings; they are the true elder brother. This will be fleshed out more fully below, when we talk about the church as the body of Christ, the true Elder Son.

The Relationality of Grace

The parable of the Prodigal Son, then, points us to God’s longing for all of God’s children, and it also makes evident a second, related theological intuition articulated by the group: the relational character of grace. In the context of the Open Table, grace is understood less as an infused quality of the soul and more as a renewal of relationship. It is grace as embrace, even as the father rushes from the doorway of the house to embrace the fallen son. More specifically, grace will be experienced as the embrace of the community as the body of Christ, and through that embrace, the embrace of God in and through Christ.

This relational understanding of grace was most evident from the descriptions of the eucharistic liturgy offered by several parishes in our study group. They placed great emphasis on the practice of circling the altar for the reception of the elements and remaining there until the entire group had received. This practice enhances the symbolic nature of the gathering at the table for Christ’s meal, but it also makes a statement about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist—that Christ is experienced richly and deeply in the community gathered around the meal as an integral part of the partaking of the meal. For parishes in which the Eucharist is received in this manner, the invitation to communion becomes not simply an invitation to receive the bread and the wine, and Christ with and in them, but to come stand in the circle of the community to receive Christ with and in them. When asked what it would mean for someone with no understanding of the Eucharist to respond to the invitation for communion, our group answered that one would perceive that one was coming forward for

blessing and the transaction of the sacred. It was clear from the broader responses of the group that welcome and inclusion into Christian community was at the heart of this blessing and sacred transaction. In the Eucharist, we invite all into the community of Christ's body, even as Christ has invited us into the community of the Trinity.

This relational understanding of grace was not, however, a simplistic reduction of grace to feeling welcome. Rather, our group saw the grace of communion as a more complex reality. First, they experienced it as the grace of reconciliation. The inclusion in the circle of grace of those who experience themselves as outsiders breaks down the barriers of rejection, fear, failure, and unworthiness that we bear from our sojourn in the far country. The invitation to the Eucharist instigates reconciliation between persons and God, while it also can reconcile persons to the Christian community. Often, those who are most profoundly affected by the invitation are not the unbaptized, but those who have been alienated from the church as a destructively exclusionary and judgmental place. When they hear that all are welcome at the table, they recognize and rejoice at this invitation to receive God's embrace in the context of Christian community.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, our group experienced the grace of communion as the grace of sanctification. The fundamentally relational quality of human personhood is a theological, and not just a psychological or sociological, reality. As John Zizioulas has argued, true personhood depends on the complex interweaving of freedom and relationship that receives its truest expression in the life of the Trinity.¹⁴ Modern individualism, which sacrifices the relationality of communion at the altar of unencumbered freedom, has deformed persons even as it has mistaken true freedom. Invitation to the Eucharist and inclusion in communion, then, offers the opportunity for the remaking of the individual into the "ecclesial person" that lies at the truth of our being. This truth is not fully transacted until one is willing to take the steps—baptism and membership in a Christian community—through which this fundamental relationality is integrated more fully into one's being. Opening the table, nonetheless, allows participants a glimmer of what this transformation may look and feel like.

¹⁴ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

Moreover, the community into which one is invited is not just any community; the invitation to the Eucharist is different from the invitation to proceed to the buffet at the Rotary Club, however gracious that latter invitation might be. The communion to which one is invited in the Eucharist is a communion shaped by the paschal, self-giving love of Christ, as Farwell rightly notes.¹⁵ Thus, the community by which one is touched in the Eucharist is such a self-giving community, a reality marked within the liturgy by the specification that we gather at the table in order to empower our ministry in the world. Our group noted that those who come to our churches are not looking simply for community, but community where they have opportunities to extend themselves in love and service—where they can participate in Christ's paschal mystery, though they may not articulate it in this way. This is the need that is spoken to, the reality that is met, when the community offers itself to the stranger in the invitation to come forward and join the faithful around the table where they gather in fellowship with Christ.

There was, of course, no illusion among those present that a simple invitation would give someone the full experience of inclusion into Christian community, but the conviction emerged that one found at the table a glimpse and a foretaste of that experience that could come to fruition when nurtured by the work of the Spirit and the broader reach of the church's life. Another challenge of inviting all to the table is how to realize and manifest the relational realities that are practiced in the Eucharist in the life of the community as a whole, so that all might be truly transformed. In other words, how do we give ourselves to the stranger and invite him or her to experience with us the relational character of our lives not just for ten minutes at the altar, but in the whole of our community's activity and existence?

This relational understanding of grace also speaks to a particular psychology of desire—a topic that Farwell touches on in his article.¹⁶ Farwell is concerned, quite rightly, with a culture that seeks to nurture desire through its immediate gratification in order to fuel an ever-growing consumerist expansion of the economy. He fears that opening the table only plays into this dynamic by promising a pseudo-satisfaction of the desire for God, rather than nurturing this desire

¹⁵ Farwell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus," 228–229.

¹⁶ Farwell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus," 233–235.

through the catechumenal process, leading to baptism and then to Eucharist. His base intuition—that “longing and fulfillment are mysteriously woven together in the Christian faith”—is on target, but within the theological orientation of our group the next step in his argument—that “the object of our desire is one that transcends our grasp yet gives itself to us, even as our longing deepens”—is a misstep, mistaking the relational character of grace.¹⁷

The human longing to which the practice of opening the table is directed is not to possess God as an object, nor to possess a quality in the soul. It is not a longing for the possession of an object at all, but is a longing for a subject. It is the desire to enter into a rich web of relationship, with God and one another, through which we are established in our true personhood. It is the longing to step out of the disintegrating ways of the world and to begin to reintegrate ourselves in line with the truth at the heart of us.¹⁸ If this analysis of desire is correct, then it is pastorally insensitive to withhold the integrating power of the grace of the Eucharist from those who are being continually unmade by the forces of the world. We must recognize that this longing is not quenched by the embrace of God through the Christian community, but is nurtured and sustained so that it might burn brighter and lead one deeper into relationship with the community. To return to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father, on seeing the return of the son, was not a coy lover, teasing out desire through a series of hurdles to be cleared before the son was admitted to the table. Rather, the father resurrected a desire that had died within the son to return to the truth of himself through the embrace of the family within which his truth lay.

This understanding of grace, finally, coheres with the sense of the Fall as our alienation from God—our assumption that we are now outside the realm of God’s mercy and care. This sense of the Fall as alienation does not supplant more complex understandings of sin; there is a full recognition of the sundry ways that we betray the image of God within us as we betray God, self, and others through our intentions and actions. It will claim, however, that we can begin to be converted

¹⁷ Farwell, “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus,” 235.

¹⁸ Athanasius, in his *On the Incarnation of the Word*, offers a compelling analysis of the power of the Logos, incarnate in Christ, to work such an integration. For our group, we encounter this integrating power of the Logos through our inclusion in his body, if only for a moment, through our inclusion at the eucharistic table.

from this sin only as our relationship with the love of God is restored. Thus, in the theological universe of the Open Table the order of conversion, which typically begins with revulsion at our sin and culminates with a turn to God, is reversed. We can truly recognize and repent of our false ways only when we have been embraced by God and have begun to allow ourselves to be transformed by this embrace.

The Body of Christ

The third intuition that structures the practice of the Open Table in the parishes of our study (an intuition that remained more implicit in our discussion) is a corollary to the second when looked at from an ecclesiological and sacramental perspective: in a relational model of grace, we focus on Christ's presence in and through the Christian community as the body of Christ, constituted in the Eucharist. This focus accords with an Orthodox critique of much Western eucharistic debate from earlier generations, that we focus too much on the elements and miss the transformation of the community enacted through the liturgy as a whole.¹⁹ This approach will differ from an Orthodox approach, however, insofar as it will emphasize the church as the body of Christ that was blessed, broken, and shared in his ministry, much as the elements are blessed, broken, and shared, rather than the church's ascension to Christ in the heavenly realm. The argument is not to denude the Eucharist of its heavenly aspect, but to argue that we taste heaven most truly and fully when we join Christ in his offering of himself at table with the broken and outcast.²⁰

This issue of the church's constitution as Christ's body in the Eucharist is telling for both sides in the debate over the Open Table, for

¹⁹ So Alexander Schmemmann argues in *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973). This may be an outdated critique of liturgical theology in the West, insofar as the liturgical renewal of the last century drew a primary inspiration from the Orthodox. Indeed, Schmemmann also argues that Western liturgical thinking now serves as a source of liturgical critique for the East, given its fulsome sources. See Schmemmann, *On Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966), 15–16.

²⁰ Compare Schmemmann's understanding of the Eucharist as the church's entrance into heaven (*The Eucharist* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987], 27–48) with Gregory Dix's discussion of the church's realization of Christ's eschatological kingdom in its midst by joining itself to Christ's paschal action in the world (*The Shape of the Liturgy* [New York: The Seabury Press, 1983], 47–50, 247–255, 263–266).

each embraces the idea. But each also draws different implications from this affirmation. Farwell, for example, would agree with proponents of the Open Table that Jesus embodied in his ministry the unconditional welcome of God's kingdom. He then argues, however, that the logic of participation in the Eucharist, whereby we are nourished as members of Christ's unconditionally welcoming body, demands that only those who have embraced this reality, committing themselves to this welcoming, should participate in it. For those who have not committed themselves to Christ's kingdom vision to participate in the Eucharist belies the integrity of the mission.²¹

Farwell's point carries some persuasive weight, but an ironic implication of his argument is that it leaves the church, in its central and constitutive meal, betraying the kingdom's mission of unconditional welcome as a way precisely to highlight and uphold the mission. For proponents of opening the table, we are most faithful to Christ's kingdom not by keeping the company of its adherents pure, but by embodying in this constitutive act the unconditional welcome through which it is, in part, defined. Indeed, the practice of opening the table was essential to the identity of these parishes, apart from the welcome that they offered to strangers, insofar as through this practice they constituted themselves as a hospitable and gracious communal body.²² Kavanaugh argues that in the liturgy, the church is "caught in the act of being most overtly itself."²³ Given the vision of the gracious and welcoming kingdom to which the church is responsible, the church can be itself only as it embodies in its liturgy precisely this welcome.

We should not neglect Farwell's point that this meal is meant to nourish those who have committed themselves to Christ's mission, and at times, when a church retreats to an isolated and deserted place, the Eucharist can nurture its struggle to live as a close-knit community. But on Sunday mornings, when we find that a crowd, or just one sheep, has been drawn to our retreat, then with Jesus we must invite them to seat themselves on the grass, and feed them with whatever loaves and fishes we have to offer (see Mark 6:30–44).

²¹ Farwell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus," 223–224.

²² Farwell critiques the individualistic bent of opening the table ("Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus," 235–236), but the discussion of our working group revealed a practice that is oriented profoundly around communal understandings of the liturgy and human personhood. Opening the table is essential, from their perspective, to the embrace of God's vision for the world and is an act that seeks to gather the stranger into this vision through Christ's welcoming, communal embrace.

²³ Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75.

We must recognize that to be Christ's body in the world is to be Christ's broken body, whose boundaries stand open to the outsider. We must be wary of the attempt to define our communion through the clarity of our boundaries, for these inevitably tend to exclude and become, themselves, oppressive. We must remind ourselves that the world against which the church defines itself is not those persons, beloved of God, who stand without us; they are, along with us, members of God's family. Rather, the world against which the church defines itself is those forces that serve to oppress and destroy God's beloved. The church as Christ's body is responsible for service to these, our alienated siblings.

Centered Communities

But does this leave the church without any sense of clear boundary and definition? How can a church that will allow all to enter and participate provide itself the necessary sense of integrity that would allow communal life to thrive? Here our working group provided one of their most interesting insights, and our fourth intuition: the community of Christ's body has integrity in the midst of these open boundaries because it is defined and held together by its bonds, not its boundaries. It is the commitment and connection of the members of the church to the heart of the church—Christ's embracing love—and to each other that holds the church together.

Members of our group were quite clear about the identities of the communities to which they belonged, and they had no concern about the disintegration of those communities through their practices of inclusion. These identities were bound in every case to the love of God that they felt was active and manifest in sundry ways in their communities; indeed, it was this love that brought them to these communities in the first place. The dynamism of this active love, moving from the center of the church—Christ's presence in the Eucharist—and enveloping all of the church's members, holds these Christian communities together. From this perspective, the inclusionary embrace of the Open Table in no way threatens the church's identity; it affirms and supports it as yet another practice of Christ's embracing love.²⁴

²⁴ Gordon Lathrop speaks consistently of a Christian community as a place with strong symbols at the center and open doors. See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1998), 132–133; *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999), 93–94.

Boundaries, in this context, are important not to hold us together, but to protect us from the forces that oppress us; they create a safe space. We require safety not from the unbaptized, but from the destructive forces in the world that would invade our hearts. This is a theme to which our discussion returned again and again in our meetings. The “other” from which the church must distinguish itself in our world is the force of oppression, exclusion, and degradation that threatens to unmake us. Those who are not baptized need the church’s protection, seeking safe haven among us. The practice of the Open Table is one bulwark through which the church provides them passage into port.

Baptized to Mission

The final theological intuition, about which our group was quite explicit, dealt with their understanding of baptism and membership in the church. This issue is a complex one, given the complexity of the practice and theology of baptism in the Episcopal Church. The predominant practice of baptism in the Episcopal Church is infant baptism, and this practice accords fully with the theology that we have explored in this article—that God’s love comes to us through the embrace of the community, before and apart from any response that we can make, and that it gathers us into a community so that we might learn God’s ways through the ways of the community. Eventually, through the work of grace in the community, those baptized as infants can come to a place where they may, in turn, fully commit themselves to this mission of extending God’s embrace.

So, likewise, with those invited to the table as adults, regardless of their baptismal status. The practice of opening the table catechizes those entering our communities from the edge in the principal tenet of our faith—its foundation in God’s gift of Jesus—much as the practice of baptizing infants. Opening the table also depends on the faith of the broader community as the context for the full power and effect of this sacramental act. More significantly, opening the table testifies to the power of the Eucharist, in and of itself, to make Christians. As Tanner argues, the “rich, powerful, and evocative” nature of the Eucharist allows it the capacity “to inform and shape the character of Christian life through participation in it.”²⁵ Catechesis is not solely an

²⁵ Tanner, “In Praise of Open Communion,” 478.

intellectual enterprise for either children or adults who are new to the faith. Participation in this central symbol of the faith has the greatest power to draw from those who encounter Christ in it the response of an adult commitment, expressed in whatever manner is sacramentally appropriate.

But this does not account for the issue of how to understand the baptism of adults and the importance of commitment to the faith through which one has been included in the ecclesial body as a token of love. The members of our group would agree with Farwell that the commitment of adults through baptism marks our commitment to Christ's mission. As we stated earlier, with baptism, membership in the church, and an adult commitment of faith, we are on the move from the position of the younger son to that of the elder son who shares everything with the father—or perhaps it is better to say that, while remaining in the position of the younger son, whose place at the table remains always and securely a gift of the father's love, we also begin to grow into the reality of the elder son who shares in the life of the father. Chief among the goods belonging to this life is the call to mission.

There are two aspects that we must grasp in this understanding of baptism and membership in the body of Christ. The first is the recognition that the fullness of baptism is defined by its service as a response to God's grace, not by its privilege taken from that grace. We recognize the baptized not through their admission to the table of Christ, but by their service at the table, as they join with Christ in sharing the love they have found with him. Proponents of the Open Table would argue that this is what it means to participate in the paschal ministry through which Christ has redeemed us. This understanding of baptism's intimate relation to ministry gets lost when we close the table, making baptism the gateway to it. We do not want folks to be baptized on the basis of what they might get, but on the basis of what they might give.

This first point is properly understood, however, only when we couple it with the second recognition, that this opportunity for service in and with Christ is in many ways the greatest grace, the fullest gift that God has offered us. To take up Christ's service through baptism is not to take on a burden, but to be opened to a richness of life that exceeds our imagination. Our group was clear that people are drawn to our churches not simply out of curiosity, but out of desire for a community through which they can find this richness of love and life. The

task of the Christian community, then, is to model this love in its full, paschal glory, so that those who taste it through their participation in our Eucharist might choose to embrace it by the commitment of baptism to die and live with Christ.

This vision of baptism de-emphasizes remission of the sin of the individual as the focal point of the rite. Remission of sin is not, however, occluded from the whole of this theological vision. The practice of opening the table is grounded in God's radical, forgiving love. It mediates this forgiveness as a way not only to heal alienation from God but to sanctify those who come into its embrace. It defines sin, in many ways, not only as our alienation from God, but also as our self-centered propensity to focus more on what we can get than on what we can give. But it does not wish to define the church on the basis of this remission. On the one hand, we all, within and outside the church, are sinners, and on the other, we all are recipients of God's forgiving love. Baptism, within the context of the practice of the Open Table, defines the church, and it defines it as the company of those who have made themselves servants of this forgiving, embracing love.

The Mission

This leads to the missional imperative that the practice of the Open Table highlights. Our group was clear that in their practice, their communities needed continuously to grow into the grace promised through their embrace of an open table. This growth is tied to the theological conviction concerning the work of grace in their communities with which we began this article and the understanding of baptism in its relationship to this grace. The need for growth is made manifest in the practice of the Open Table, but the growth is required not only for the effectiveness of this practice of hospitality, but also for the fullness of the Christian life expressed through their Christian community overall.

A very real danger of opening the table is that the gesture of love expressed there stands in no real relation to the life of the community overall—that the promise of hospitality extended through the invitation to receive the Eucharist is not matched by a more complete effort to integrate the strangers who journey to our churches into the body of Christ. True hospitality must be a programmatic effort in Christian communities, embraced by a majority of the members of that community. Only in this way does welcome extend from the pew into the parish hall.

The goal of this hospitality, of course, is not simply to make someone feel like a welcome guest, but to provide a means by which they might become a member of the family—hence the importance of integration. In the conversation among our study group, this integration is accomplished through welcome, orientation, and education. Orientation is that process whereby we help strangers learn to negotiate the intricate pathways through which our church life is structured. Welcome is what brings strangers from the doors that they access by those pathways into the room of service and fellowship to which these doors lead. Education is the means through which they learn the gospel context of that fellowship and service so that they might live more fully into it. One concern with the Open Table is that it neglects catechesis, but this is to ignore the integral role that catechesis plays in the fullness of hospitality to which opening the table invites us. We have not been truly hospitable to our guests unless we tell them the stories and share with them the deep learnings of our lives so that they may join us in the journey of the Christian family.

At the heart of this catechesis is the gospel story of Jesus. We tell this story insofar as we find the grace of God most fully expressed and experienced in God's gift of Godself in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. We also tell this story, however, for its power to illuminate and conform us to the true structure of love in our lives. It reveals love's paschal mystery—that we find life's fullness only by the gift of ourselves to the other, even as God gave Godself in Jesus. The gospel lies at the heart of our catechesis, then, not simply so that we might teach outsiders our ways, but so that we might ever learn more deeply God's ways in Christ. Only through the continual baptismal immersion of the Christian community in Christ's story can it be transformed into a paschal community that reflects the true image of Christ's love.

One implication of opening the table, then, is the demand that it places on the preaching of the Word alongside the celebration of the meal in our Eucharists. Indeed, the task of the preacher is complex in this context. Several of the parishes within our study allowed their commitment to hospitality to shape their proclamation of the Word, so that their sermons were open and addressed to "skeptics and believers, alike." They have asked themselves, in other words, how they can preach the gospel to those for whom its language and categories may be foreign. At the same time, this practice demands preaching that will, through its catechesis, lead the members of the parish more deeply into the paschal mystery by which they have been embraced. This requires some depth of vision. The question of how

one addresses both of these needs consistently and coherently in preaching is beyond the scope of this article, but it bears noting for further reflection.

Finally, we practice the Open Table in its depth only if we practice it with a sense of expectation. Thomas Merton, in his story of his conversion, tells of his first trip to a monastery for retreat. When Merton entered the monastery, the gatekeeper asked him if he had come there to stay. Merton was startled, and frightened a bit; yet this expectation worked in his heart. On his next trip to Gethsemane, when the gatekeeper asked if this time he would stay, he could respond, “Yes, Brother, if you’ll pray for me.”²⁶

This sense of expectation can be expressed in numerous ways. One priest, in his invitation to the table, reminds all those present that when they come forward they will partake of both gifts and a responsibility—they are invited, in other words, always to the fullness of grace. Another priest, in her invitation, proclaims, “Wherever you are in your journey—whoever wants to meet Jesus, come to the table.” We practice this expectant hospitality most fully, however, when it is found not just in the invitation offered by the priest, but in the welcome extended by the community as a whole. When we greet those who have joined us at the table with the question, “Have you come here to stay?” or when we orient them to our community with the expectation that they will want to stay, then we have recognized that the fullness of what we have to offer lies not in the simple reception of the Eucharist, but in the embrace of the Christian community and the gospel way of life to which it is called. Only with this recognition have we truly opened our tables, our lives, and God’s world to those who come into our midst.

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1998), 408.