



How Open the Table? Cues from Ecumenism and United Methodist Heritage

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Since publication of *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) and *Book of Worship* (1992), Evangelical Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, members of the Reformed Church in America, even Roman Catholics, may join us on a Communion Sunday and feel they are on familiar ground through the Great Thanksgiving. That is, until the pastor says, “In the United Methodist Church, we practice open communion. You do not have to be a member of this congregation, or any congregation, to receive from this table.”

Our guests would consider odd the way the United Methodist pastor defines “open communion.” Since *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982), most Protestant denominations worldwide have embraced “open communion.” By that term they mean that “all baptized Christians” may receive the bread and cup. They do not mean that anyone may receive regardless of baptismal status. The Canons of the Episcopal Church put it most plainly. “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.”

Since our response to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* in 1986, the United Methodist Church has been revisiting our teaching and practice of Baptism and Eucharist. *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* (1996) placed the United Methodist Church in line with its Anglican heritage and the ecumenical Church in baptismal theology. But neither *By Water and the Spirit*, nor “This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion,” has done so for the relationship between baptism and communion. While the latter affirms that “Holy

Baptism normally precedes partaking of Holy Communion,” it also states, “Non-baptized persons who respond in faith to the invitation in our liturgy will be welcomed to the table.” For such non-baptized receivers, the next step is that “[t]hey should receive teaching about Holy Baptism as the sacrament of entrance into the community of faith. . .and Holy Communion as the sacrament of sustenance for the journey of faith and growth

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in holiness.”

There are two problems with this proposed remedial practice. First, it hasn’t worked. British Methodists introduced a similar provision in 1987; their 2003 follow-up study has shown almost no compliance during these 16 years. The second is about what feels more welcoming to a newcomer—to be told all are welcome to the table, but then to receive a call from the pastor indicating that the newcomer really ought to be baptized; or to be told that all are invited to the table, the baptized to receive the bread and cup, and the non-baptized to receive a blessing. The latter is widely practiced among our ecumenical partners today. It is a good cue for our practice.

But United Methodists need look no further for good cues for practice than our traditional sources of authority—scripture, tradition, reason and experience. These give solid warrant to restore the practice of baptism preceding communion. No biblical texts speak of non-baptized persons receiving communion. Instead, the New Testament constantly teaches that baptism

is the means of entering the church, including its worship. In Christian tradition, as “This Holy Mystery” also cites all early Christian liturgical texts testify to this ordering, and we know Wesley offered communion only to persons he knew were baptized. Applying reason to the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith shows they assume that those receiving communion have been baptized. Ultimately, then, the only remaining source for establishing a practice of offering the bread and cup to the non-baptized is the experience of some Methodists beginning in the 20th century. That is when our now widespread practice of “communion for all” really began. Yet our *Discipline* reminds us that experience alone is insufficient to make a stand.

So let us listen to our ecumenical sisters and brothers, and to our own history and heritage. Let us warmly extend to all Christ’s invitation to “Come to the waters.” And let us continue to extend his invitation to all to “Come to the table”—the non-baptized for a blessing, and the baptized to share in his body and blood. □

Note: “This Holy Mystery” is the report of the Holy Communion Study Committee that will be submitted to General Conference 2004. See www.gbod.org/worship



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