

OPEN FORUM

The articles in the Nov./Dec. issue remind me there are as many viewpoints as viewers. Pondering them, three questions come to mind:

1) *On doctrine, creed and tradition.* Revelation of God and growth in human understanding didn't end with the last Hebrew Testament prophet. Did they end with the Christ event or establishment of canon and creed? Are we called to remain open to continuing revelation of God ever doing new things and expansion of our own conscious awareness? Or do we remain locked in doctrines, creeds and traditions of other times and places, not subject to reinterpretation, silencing the voices of people with new ideas?

2) *On conferencing.* Does parliamentary procedure continue to serve us well? It's a divisive method that forces people to take sides. Is it time for us to embrace a process of consensus building under the guidance of skilled leadership, even if it does take longer? Is this an answer for more than the issue named by Will Willimon?

3) *On apportionments.* Jesus spoke metaphorically of the power of leaven to transform the existing society. Wesley spoke of transforming the nation. In the face of ever-present need I don't hear either advocate establishment of a parallel system to civil society or that any Christian community, local or global, must "do it all." Yes, we can do some things together we can't do alone. Yes, a mentality of abundance is desirable. In the past I witnessed local congregations let their facilities deteriorate in order to pay apportionments. When is the best we can do good enough? From Genesis we are people who must make choices about the use of our abilities and resources.

As delegates prepare for and go to conference, [my advice is to] make no assumptions, seek clarity, speak your truth in love, listen to others in love, take nothing personally, bring the abstract to where people

live, and simply do your best. Where you are, God is—incarnate in each.

Nancy Richards

St. Louis, MO

Taylor W. Burton-Edwards (Nov./Dec.) states rightly, "No biblical texts speak of nonbaptized persons receiving Communion." He is right. But no biblical texts speak of baptism being a prerequisite for communion, either.

I was relieved to discover the statement, "Nonbaptized people who respond in faith to the invitation in our liturgy will be welcomed to the table" in *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*. I profoundly object to efforts to limit Communion to baptized people, but I am thankful for the controversy and the opportunity it brings to clarify my understanding and practice of Communion.

As a young person, open Communion was one of the reasons I chose to become a United Methodist. I experienced my call to ministry as "Pass it on!" during a service of Holy Communion. As an ordained Elder, I take Communion to nursing homes and treatment centers. I cannot check the baptismal status of individuals, but I know that the power of God's Spirit is powerfully at work in their responses. Tears roll down faces as they say, "It's been so long." As a grandmother whose grandchildren have not yet been baptized because their parents wanted them to be old enough to choose it for themselves, I cannot refuse the children the Lord's Supper any more than I could refuse them lunch.

As I reread the scriptural references to baptism and the last supper, I cannot find proof that all the disciples present at the last supper (and the first communion) were baptized. Yet Jesus extended this life-giving covenant to all of them, including the one he knew was even then betraying him and

the one he knew would deny him.

Please, let us never use the gift of Holy Baptism as a means test for receiving God's gift of Holy Communion.

Susan K. DeBree

Buffalo and Kaycee, WY

In reading the "Open Communion" articles by Jon McCoy and Taylor Burton-Edwards in the Nov./Dec. issue, I did not hear anything that has moved me away from a broad invitation for people to gather at the communion table. Neither of the writers reflected on the repeated cases of Jesus gathering and eating with the "tax collectors and sinners." Look at the scriptural pictures and parables of banqueting with those who were not otherwise invited and could not return the invitation. Table fellowship with Jesus did not seem to have any prerequisites. Many scholars would agree that there is also Eucharistic language suggested in the feeding of the multitudes in which Jesus takes bread, offers thanks, breaks it and then gives. Do we know who was in those crowds? Just hungry people! Elsewhere Jesus clearly disregarded the restraints of purity codes that would have separated him from people who fell below its standards. Let's not establish another purity code. Aren't we reflecting the gospel way of Christ by reaching out to people with inclusion, hospitality and fellowship even when they may not have gotten "cleaned up" for the table? Communion is a place to say that our "open door" actions of grace in the name of Christ are greater than any of our liturgical or other doctrinal preferences.

Rory Swenson

Brainerd, MN

Try to imagine my unbounded joy and surprise when I discovered the articles on Open Communion. I knew the answers to both questions the titles posed. Wow, that's pretty good for a simple country preacher from Maine!

I should have known that something was wrong, however, as soon as I saw the small print that covered the rest of the pages of the articles. My answers each had one word; *God* for the "who decides" question and *completely* for the "how open" question.

My unbounded joy turned to profound sadness at the suggestion that the church I have loved so long is becoming exclusive and judgmental as strategies for getting along better with our ecumenical cousins.

How could I have missed all the evidence? By the way, who besides Jesus at the Upper Room table had been baptized?

Perhaps I am not wrong after all. God can decide the qualifications of table guests and I'll just go on inviting everyone within earshot and serving all who come.

Tom Merrill

South Portland, ME

I read the offerings in the Nov./Dec. issue under the heading, "Christian Conversation," and one thing is abundantly clear. James Heidinger clearly believes that he, and he alone of all the contributors, is able to interpret for the rest of us, what is and is not Christian! Clearly more devoted to his version of Orthodoxy than to the person of Jesus Christ or to the entire community of believers who take His name (Christ's, not Heidinger's), Heidinger is obviously still enamored of the notion that he, and he alone, is the guardian of the "One True Church of My Version of Orthodoxy!" What arrogance! But then, we should not be surprised. Heidinger is at least predictable in his message: "I am right, and to hell with everyone who dares to disagree with me!"

While Bishop Hopkins reminds us "the Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time...", it is not so clear that The United Methodist Church can survive so long as so many continue to worship at the idol of the "Gospel According to James Heidinger." How ironic that he calls his movement Good News, when it's "my way or the highway" style of Orthodoxy is decidedly Bad News for the United Methodist Church, and by extension, for the Body of Christ.

Paul Wiberg

Sacramento, CA

CR (Nov./Dec.) on General Conference was the best yet. Thanks.

Two points: First, I was glad to see Bishop Coyner willing to lead our UMC with some proactive suggestions rather than just sitting back and enjoying his leisure. We need more of our seminary professors and bishops to speak out on the issues of the day. As to accepting gays on the one hand while denying them the right of ordination on the other, that seems like offering them half-citizenship. Why not let a person's appointability be the standard of ordination? Are there no gay churches in need of pastors?

Secondly, with James Heidinger I too think that doctrine is important. The problem is what he means when he refers to the doctrines of the early church. From correspondence with him, I believe he holds as doctrines of the early church the culturally adduced doctrines of the 19th century: Historical Garden of Eden, Virgin Birth, Resuscitated Body, Bodily Ascension, Second Coming as a future historical event. What this does is to promote something finite and culturally bound to the position of the infinite. And in the words of Paul Tillich, "This destroys the humble honesty of the search for truth, it splits the conscience of its thoughtful adherents, and it makes them fanatical because they are forced to suppress elements of truth of which they are dimly aware" (*Systematic Theology*, 1951, p. 1). I think everyone going to General Conference ought to be given a copy of the first paragraph of this great work.

Al Milligan

Odebolt, IA

I do not envy the responsibilities of the nearly one thousand delegates [to General Conference], and at the same time, I do envy them. They will be in the heat and heart of United Methodism becoming!

Two articles in the Nov./Dec. issue did disturb me: James V. Heidinger II's "Our Difficulty with Dialogue," and Maxie D. Dunnam's "Doctrine and Theology Matter."

Heidinger's article seems to be a complaint about the failure of dialog within the Church but fails to detail the issue(s) he has in mind. He denounces the use of the term "relativism" but never illustrates. Likewise he condemns "theological pluralism" without any examples of what upsets him. Heidinger praises "doctrine" in the abstract, yet fails to be specific as to which doctrine(s) he feels is/are being ignored. Overall, the article implies without any examples that United Methodism has abandoned the faith. The best I can say for "Our Difficulty with Dialogue" is that it is obtuse and deals in the obscure.

Dunnam's "Doctrine and Theology Matter," like Heidinger's article, praises "doctrine" and denounces "pluralism." He spells out in the second paragraph the center of our faith, but seems to imply that United Methodism has turned its back on this core of belief. Most disturbing, he appears to believe that recognizing the rich variety of Christian experiences and under-

standings of the faith across the world is in some way unfaithful. Dunnam voices the ancient fear that seminaries are misleading potential pastors and destroying their Christian faith.

As I read these two articles, I kept hearing echoes of the extremity that the Missouri Lutheran Church went through as it forced its pastors and educators into a straightjacket of conformity in belief. Dunnam especially seemed to miss the point of John Wesley's welcome of divergent opinion, as long as the core of the faith remained solid. Unanimity of belief has never been a hallmark of United Methodism.

Robert D. Simison

Newton, KS

The Nov./Dec. issue of *Circuit Rider* is an outstanding issue for United Methodist thinking in preparation for the 2004 General Conference, especially among the delegates who must constructively deal with the important issues affecting our great denomination.

The concern of this letter is the function of the local church in United Methodism everywhere. Although the local church is related to the connectional system of our denomination and followers of Christ worldwide, it is still a local community of Christians within a secular community. It is by nature responsible for the spiritual and moral well-being of its members and constituents. It is thus dependent upon its own call to Christian mission and ministry and dedicated ministerial leadership to adequately fulfill its mission and ministry. Each church needs ministerial leadership that is a true "shepherd of the sheep," the biblical, theological, ethical and denominational interpreter and true servant of the Lord.

The article by James Heidinger ("Our Difficulty with Dialogue") is outstanding in interpreting the evangelical approach to the Christian faith as related to The United Methodist Church. However, his concern over the weakness of any form of Christian pluralism deserves [response].

It is acceptable from the spiritual and human standpoint for The United Methodist Church to be theologically pluralistic, if it is biblically based and Christ-centered and if The United Methodist Church adheres to Wesleyan doctrine and social principles. The members and constituents of The United Methodist Church come from varying knowledge of and experience with Christian beliefs and

interpretation of those beliefs. Thus, it is the sacred role of the church to minister to all individuals who are considered “souls for whom Christ died.”

In the true spirit of Christ’s teaching, the Apostle Paul gave credibility to the pluralistic approach when he wrote, “I have become all things to all men that I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Paul’s assertion simply means that we can identify with all persons, no matter what their theological approach to the Christian gospel might be—all in the name and redeeming Spirit of Jesus Christ, Head of His Spiritual Body, His Holy Church.

To be a fully effective leader, the local pastor must be a faithful student and interpreter of the Bible as related to life situations; also a faithful pastor (the shepherd always in the sheep-fold) like Jesus knows his people and is known by them. With our pastors moving from place to place, [I offer this] formula for effective, ministerial function: The local church is—the Lord’s Church, the People’s Church, and finally the Pastor’s Church. (But only as the servant of the Lord and the people.)

A.J. Schrader
Richmond, VA

Responding to “who decides if Communion criteria are met?” I would answer Jon McCoy, the Lord Jesus Christ decides and this is more than enough! The ONE deciding loves us so much more than we can imagine. And to Taylor Burton-Edwards’ “how open the table?” I would answer, wide open—no strings attached! Can any of us ever conceive of Jesus’ refusing a person at His table? Would Jesus ever say to a person what was once said to me by a pastor, “Sorry, there’s no more bread.” Similarly, will we some day take a more kindly view of the Eastern Orthodox practice of extending this precious sacrament to newborn babies? Will the day come when no one will have to wait years to be baptized or to receive Communion? Christ Jesus knows our hearts. In spite of our shortcomings, he keeps calling us by name, keeps coming to us, looking forward to hear our “Thank you, Lord!” Jesus blesses us in the giving of himself to whoever comes to or is carried to His baptismal font and to His table. Can we ever thank God enough?

Myron Yonker, Jr.
Walhalla, SC

Mercy! Two articles on the meaning of open communion, and neither considered Wesley. “Open communion,” as it now is called, effectively began with Wesley and for an evangelical reason.

During 1739-1740 Wesley often worshipped at the Fetter’s Lane Society with many Moravians. Philip Henry Molther, an influential speaker, then recently from Germany, advocated barring persons whose faith was not deemed complete from speaking in their assemblies or from receiving the sacraments. He called it “stillness.” Like the established Churches and like Calvinist, nonestablished congregations, sacramental participation was limited to those deemed to be saved or elect, that is baptized. Sacramental occasions identified the visible saints. But Wesley had his doubts. Sacraments, in the Anglican tradition are means of grace, even “converting ordinances.” Wesley reported on a sermon he preached in Fetter’s Lane in which he dissented from Molther’s teaching on the issue of admittance to the Lord’s Supper:

[Friday, 27 June 1740] I preached on “Do this in remembrance of Me.” In latter times many have affirmed that the Lord’s Supper is not a converting, but a confirming ordinance.

And among us it has been diligently taught that none but those who are converted, who have received the Holy Ghost, who are believers in the full sense, ought to communicate.

But experience shows the gross falsehood of that assertion that the Lord’s Supper is not a converting ordinance. Ye are the Witnesses. For many now present know, the very beginning of your conversion to God (perhaps in some, the first deep conviction) was wrought at the Lord’s Supper. Now, one single instance of this kind, overthrows the whole assertion.

Our Lord commanded those very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who (in the full sense of the word) were not believers, to do this ‘in remembrance of’ Him. Here the precept is clear. And to these he delivered the elements with His own hands. Here is an example equally indisputable.

[Saturday 28 June 1740] I showed at large: (1) That the Lord’s Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace according to their several necessities... And (4) That no fitness is required at the time of communicating,

but a sense of our state, of our utter sinfulness and helplessness; everyone who knows he is fit for hell being just fit to come to Christ in this as well as all other ways of his appointment.

Please read Wesley’s sermon “On the means of grace,” and other Journal entries from this period. Also read early American Methodist Journals and reports, especially from the frontier camp meetings which began as sacramental events and which were revolutionized by those “durn” Methodists and their open tables. When we forget why in Wesleyan tradition the sacramental table is open to all we backslide into pre-Wesleyan practices and the hubris of assuming any human can identify the visible, the probably visible, or the potentially visible elect/saints. To have “closed communion” is to prevent sinners from access to grace. Who is more in need of God’s grace than anyone who is not yet a believer? Closed communion attempts to prevent the redeeming work of Christ!

Kermit Krueger
Peotone, IL

Ah, the slippery slope of being the gatekeepers of Gods grace! Both articles on open Communion (*Circuit Rider*; Nov./Dec., 2003), by Jon McCoy and Taylor Burton-Edwards, essentially want clergy to become our denomination’s “sacrament police.”

I find Mr. Burton-Edwards’ points particularly distasteful. When did our ecumenical dialogue become more like NAFTA-compliance negotiations? When did a lack of scriptural evidence (Communion being given to the nonbaptized) ever deter us from practicing infant baptism? And what will newcomers, seeking welcome and acceptance in our churches, think when we set up “first-class” (Communion) and “coach” (a blessing ONLY) sections during our Communion celebrations?

Hopefully, we United Methodists will stop taking ourselves so seriously, heed Jesus’ words (especially the ones beginning with, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees...”), and, at General Conference, soundly reject all attempts to arrogantly and artificially limit access to the limitless grace of God.

Douglas Lindsay
Eagle River, AK

I felt compelled to respond to Albert Schrader's letter in the Sept./Oct. issue, wherein he states that "there is a psychological and/or emotional reality" in pastors knowing what people give "that leads to...negative responses...." Schrader says that such knowledge puts the pastor at an emotional disadvantage in his or her daily relationships with persons who might feel coercion by the pastor. What happened to integrity in ministry? Why is knowledge of giving patterns any more an issue in this regard than knowledge of marital problems, substance abuse problems, or any other problems? Schrader further says that such knowledge puts the pastor in a position of "judge" about the amounts given. Well, I don't believe this would be the case, but if persons are giving with grace and generosity then what would there be to judge anyway? He states that knowledge of giving can lead to the temptation of the pastor to give preferential treatment to the highest givers. What I have witnessed is preferential treatment given by laypersons and occasionally pastors to those whom they THINK are the highest givers based on their lavish lifestyle. In reality, the highest givers, in proportion if not in actual dollars, are more often than not the quiet, unassuming, deeply committed believers. Schrader's comment about the perception of the pastor's "lack of faith in the Lord's providing for the needs of the church" brings to mind the old story of the pastor who said one Sunday, "The good news is that the Lord has already provided for the needs of our church for the next year. The bad news is that it's in your pockets!"

Finally, Schrader says that the wise pastor will advise people that their individual giving is between themselves and the Lord. Is there any other area of our discipleship where we would want the pastor to advise that? For example, would the wise pastor also say that one's individual devotional life, prayer, or outreach is between themselves and the Lord? Ultimately, of course, that's true in all of these areas. But if there is not going to be any exhortation to grow deeper in discipleship, then we might as well all stay home on Sunday and pat ourselves on the back.

Bradley Call

Newcomerstown, OH

I have received the *Circuit Rider* since its beginning and I want to congratulate you upon the 2003 November-December

issue. I thought it was one of the finest editions you have published. I especially liked the articles by Taylor W. Burton-Edwards on "How Open the Table?" and by John McCoy on "Who Decides If Communion Criteria Are Met?"

Homer B. Clements

Lincoln, NE

I read with great interest the article by Taylor W. Burton-Edwards around the "openness of the Communion Table." Ever since I returned to Seminary to work on a Master in Christian Education degree and took the class, Worship & Christian Education, I have been struggling with this as well. But I have come down to a different conclusion than that of Burton-Edwards.

Since it is our Wesleyan tradition to search Scripture first, let's begin there. While I agree with the writer that baptism is understood as an "initiation rite" into the church, I also believe that the other images—identification with the saving acts in Jesus Christ, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the washing of regeneration, and the new birth are just as valid. But which takes on more authority here? Mystery is significant to both of the sacramental acts. The biggest mystery for me is the grace bestowed on the participant—something we cannot always identify or quantify.

Where do we have documentation in Scripture that indicates Peter, James, John, and the other disciples were baptized when Jesus instituted the Eucharist in the upper room? The issue for me is not semantic, but hospitality. It is God's hospitality and the church's as well. Yes, both Baptism and Holy Communion are intricately tied together because they draw us into the Holy Mystery that is ours in Jesus Christ. At the same time I do not believe that either sacrament takes precedence over the other, but each helps to deepen the understandings of both.

Do we deny access to unbaptized children and adults at our tables? I certainly hope not. Do we deny them access to the bread and cup if they do show up? To me, that may be placing a stumbling block in the way a person is given access to the presence of Christ. When reading and meditating on Matthew 18, I shudder at Jesus' pointed condemnation that sets up criteria between them and us.

I don't believe that we United Methodist need to apologize for opening our opening Communion Tables up to sin-

ners. As long as we can articulate our beliefs so that it conforms to our doctrine and liturgy, then we are justified. Frankly, I am more concerned about the souls who remain in the pews, ignoring the invitation, or feeling they are not worthy to come to the table.

While I may not understand why I am barred from some Christian eucharistic tables, even though I am baptized, I respect their right to do so. Even though we may not conform to other Christian traditions, I hope that we can allow our celebrations of the Lord's Supper to be means of grace for the sin-sick soul, baptized or not!

Bruce Jeffries

Palmyra, MO

What a faith-filled approach to the church debate over homosexuality is offered by Bishop Coyner in the November-December *Circuit Rider*! Following the good example of Acts 15, let us listen prayerfully to one another. Perhaps God can show us new paths to walk. Let us commit ourselves to an extended time of Christian conferencing. Meanwhile, let us "hold all homosexual relationships to the same biblical standards of monogamy, love, and commitment to which we hold all heterosexual relationships." If the General conference can find the wisdom to follow that spirit-filled counsel, we may yet find a new way hewn out of the prayer, scripture and listening to one another.

Wesley Sheffield

Nokomis, FL

I found your November/December issue reassuring as to approaching confrontational Conferences (General and otherwise). Particularly of note was the recommendation of Bishop M.J. Coyner as to a rewrite of Paragraph 65G. Why not take lesson from Bobby Kennedy in advising the President, i.e., ignore the troublesomeness from Moscow in its second letter and respond simply, shortly to the positive element of Mr. Khrushchev's first letter. – Cut to the chase, as it were. To wit: "We hold all sexual relationships to a Biblical standard of Monogamy, love and commitment." –Period.

Arthur B. Shenefelt

Bristol, PA