

# Baptizing those already welcomed to Jesus' Table

*With no in-group, what is our theology of baptism?*

By Donald Schell

Breaking barriers frees the transforming power of our sacraments. I discovered this to my shame one Saturday in 1981. Our diocesan jail chaplain and I were offering weekly Eucharist in the County Jail to the "trusties," prisoners with jail jobs locked up separately from other prisoners and entrusted to do laundry and cook meals for their fellow prisoners.

One Saturday they proudly told us they had permission to serve us lunch after Eucharist the next week. I felt sick. Despite our weekly Eucharist, I was afraid to eat with them. I told myself I was afraid of getting hepatitis, but knew this made no sense; I eat in restaurants anywhere without that fear. The vestigial quality of our sacred meal stared me in the face. I valued the barrier that divided me from the prisoners. Eating with them would take the barrier down. I had a long hard week. I couldn't talk myself out of the fear, but the next Saturday after Eucharist did eat lunch with them, and saw gratefully how the meals they cooked us deepened to our Eucharist through the year.

Paul touches this identity-shaking sacramental ground when he claims in 2 Corinthians,

For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God.  
2 Corinthians 5:21

He says God uses Jesus to break the boundary between God's goodness and us sinners and to establish one goodness of God. The 1979 Prayer Book collect for the Last Sunday after Pentecost approaches this understanding,

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule. . .

Paul goes further than this divine will. He sees God actually ending human division and slavery by restoring universal freedom in Christ, not just God's will, but also God's accomplished action. Before he says God made the sinless one into sin for our sake, Paul says,

"God reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that *they are reconciled* . . . 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Will Campbell calls Paul's claim that we can only carry the news and live into the accomplished fact of God's reconciliation, 'the most radical passage in the Bible.' As a Baptist preacher, storyteller, and advocate for civil rights, Will Campbell worked for reconciliation among black and white poor in the rural South. His reading of Paul left him no room to treat Ku Klux Klansmen as *the enemy*.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was preaching the same Gospel of reconciliation when he was shot at mass in San Salvador. Archbishop Romero's work and martyrdom remind us that dangerous, frightened people still resist and reject God's completed victory; they battle on like un-reconciled partisans even though God's peace has already ended the war.

Fear of those who have not (or cannot) hear the news can't teach us how to enact our sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism. For that we must "Pattern the sacraments after Christ," to paraphrase the title my colleague Rick Fabian used for his article in OPEN (Fall 1994). We shape our practice of both Eucharist and Baptism from Jesus' example and from Paul's teaching of God's accomplished reconciliation.

Patterning the sacraments after Christ begins with Jesus' meal practice of which Maxwell Johnson wrote in *The Rites of Christian Initiation*,

Entrance to the meal of God's reign, anticipated and incarnated in the very life, ministry, and meals of Jesus of Nazareth, was granted by Jesus himself and granted especially to those were not prepared and not (yet) converted, to the godless and undeserving, to the impure, and the unworthy. Conversion itself, it seems was a consequence of, not a pre-condition for, such meal sharing.

~ Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation, Their Evolution and Interpretation*, p. 5

Two recent articles in OPEN, Andrew Waldo's "Baptism and Eucharist: Challenges," OPEN, Summer 2000, and Stephen Reynolds' "Baptism and Communion," OPEN, Winter-Spring 2001 concluded that an Open Table invitation to Eucharist, like Jesus' meals with sinners, is hospitable at the expense of full sacramental intent. Waldo frames the distinction between the "hospitality" of Jesus' meals with sinners and a sacramentally richer "community memory and identification with Jesus" that Jesus gives separately to the church in the Last Supper.

Following Maxwell (and ultimately Norman Perrin in *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*) practitioners of an Open Table find hospitality, identification, and formative memory imitating Jesus' risky prophetic hospitality which included and converted those who ate with him, and so also defined his followers' "identification with" him and the "community memory." Jesus in his teaching and practice overturned an old "set apart" holiness, and any fully renewed understanding of Christian baptism (whether our congregations administer baptism before or after communion) must find its way back to this universalizing context of Jesus' hospitality. I claim this context of Jesus' divine welcome is clearer in both Eucharist and Baptism where receiving Eucharist precedes Baptism.

When Paul speaks of the different, new holiness Jesus instituted, he calls it God's "new creation:"

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. - 2 Corinthians 5:17-18a

Exercising Jesus' hospitality in this new creation, a Christian Eucharist must find some way to enact what Jesus enacted in his rabbinic teaching meal with unprepared, unclean sinners and outcasts. Because in all his meals Jesus claimed to enact God's hospitality, any Eucharist will risk being -

- a deliberate prophetic welcome to alienated, outcast sinners,
- a dangerous confrontation with the religious, political and social establishment, and
- a sacramental enactment of the Kingdom of God.

Our experience (and courage) may fall short of such divine hospitality. Nonetheless, discovering that the sacraments actually do accomplish what they promise (rather than imaging or reminding us of something we pray God will accomplish later), each Eucharist manifests the God-created unity of humanity and all creation in feasting with Christ. The Byzantine liturgy says it wonderfully, "Thine own of Thine own we offer Thee, On behalf of all and for all." We count on the power of Christ's body and blood offered on behalf of all and for all to transform ordinary daily living into what God has already made our Life, Life in God that breaks boundaries and unites what is divided.

With all that we pray that our Eucharist will accomplish, open communion appears to me simply faithful. Open communion is plain sacramental realism, letting God use our sacraments to reveal locally the God's already accomplished peace. It is as counter-cultural and uncomfortable as eating with prisoners in the County Jail.

This logic echoes through the Passion material in the Gospels fusing Eucharist and Baptism in surprising ways in Jesus' death on the cross. Following Jesus in his baptism, we will suffer a painful washing away of all that separates us from even the worst condemned criminal or most despairing misjudged victim. To speak fully of Baptism we must pay careful attention (as the Gospels do and Paul usually does) to Jesus' companions in suffering and death and to where he dies.

Norman Perrin, like other Gospel scholars since, argued that Jesus suffers crucifixion, because he wouldn't stop welcoming all to feast with him. Jesus in the Gospels does speak of John baptizing at the Jordan, but when he speaks of his own baptism, he always refers to his coming death. Paul and Pauline material once attributed to him see communion with estranged sinners in this same death. The strands are inseparable. Jesus' Last Supper, his shameful dying with criminals, and his (and our baptism) all signify and all accomplish universal reconciliation,

breaking down what divides us. The Bible and our Tradition say Jesus went freely to this baptism/death to unite himself to sinners like those with whom he feasted.

Anyone entering St. Gregory's church will see these words carved into the base of the Holy Table, "This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them." It is the ancient (very probably original) accusation Jesus' disciples heard. On the other side of the Table, the congregation re-entering the church from a baptism meets this startling text from Isaac of Nineveh (Sixth Century):

Do not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy;  
All must be equal in your eyes to love and serve.  
Did not the Lord share the table of publicans and harlots,  
Without putting the unworthy away from him?

[Ascetic Treatises, 23, condensed from Olivier Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism* p. 285-6]

Knowing *ourselves* welcomed unconditionally at Jesus' Table and glimpsing how we are like the outcasts and condemned criminals Jesus dies with outside the walls, a longing stirs to be like Jesus, to live and die like Jesus. Our Lord Jesus who died outside the walls continues to draw us out to new, riskier, more loving discipleship. As we practice open communion, people do ask to be baptized like Jesus, imitating his committed practice of not holding himself apart from anyone. To be baptized like Jesus we join a fellowship with all the un-welcomed others, every imaginable, dreaded "them."

Jesus' death does not make his teaching meals mean less, but unlocks the meaning of his whole work within them. At the Last Supper Jesus made his impending death a sign of his self-offering and the forgiveness it was brought, that is, everything he did as a teacher. In the institution narratives Jesus interprets what he had been doing through his ministry by pointing toward his baptism of suffering and death. In the words of administration to the Last Cup, he says, "for you and for all ('many' reflects the Aramaic idiom for 'all') for the forgiveness of sins," that is for release and freedom from all that divides us.

The Last Supper was emphatically not a gathering of the faithful for a closed meal. The Last Supper, just like all the other meals of his ministry, is an unmerited, reconciling act of divine hospitality. Facing death, Jesus offers his Kingdom feast to his betrayer and a few frightened disciples prepared only to prove their faithlessness and abandon him. In the institution narratives when Jesus says, "do this in remembrance of me," we can only wonder that he is commanding them (!) and us (!) to carry on those meals.

Whenever we feast with sinners and outcasts and declare this feasting in Jesus name, we enter God's accomplished peace of universal, unconditional forgiveness. Though the church through history has multiplied conditions and requirements on those who receive, Christians have never denied this core – we and all who communicate at Jesus' Table are wholly unworthy. Jesus' Eucharist makes reconciliation and universal forgiveness present.

Those who practice an open table also believe and sometimes see that Jesus' prophetic sign destroys the root divisions in human history and culture. Both Eucharist and Baptism take us beyond simple initiation 'into' a closed group to lead us into the new creation, an undivided humanity. Sinners rejoice in a welcome that can include even US. At Jesus' feast we meet Jesus as our Risen Lord to be healed and reconciled to all. Continuing the meal disciples must enact God's humble, loving service to *all* humankind.

At least one of the possible Biblical understandings of atonement taken together with Jesus' meal practice offers solid theological grounding for open communion leading to baptism. As I set out and comment on that line of Biblical thinking, I ask that readers consider the argument texts make together before mustering counter-arguments. Both argument and counter-argument are in the Bible, so Bible and Tradition do not stand above this controversy. This contradiction and strain have been in our tradition from the first apostolic preaching.

We can begin with Jesus response to the sons of Zebedee's request to sit at his right hand and left hand in his glory,

"Do you know what you ask? Can you drink the cup that I must drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?" They replied, "We can." Jesus said to them, "The cup that I must drink you shall

drink, and with the baptism with which I must be baptized you shall be baptized, but as for the seats at my right hand or my left, these are not mine to grant.” Mark 10:38

Skeptical Gospel scholars will hear in these words the apostolic community’s retrospective knowledge of Jesus’ passion. For our purposes this only makes the text more interesting. We hear in it sacramental theology from a very early community; the community’s concerns for sacraments in community life, and the community’s experience facing persecution shape the saying.

Note the recurrent and seemingly non-traditional order in these Gospel sayings, first cup then baptism. Notice Jesus in the Gospels speaks of his baptism to refer to the death he anticipates, that is, Jesus’ words about drinking his cup or receiving his baptism point to the cross. Notice also Jesus here portrays himself neither as priest nor minister of sacrament, nor as sacrificial victim, but as the communicant and as the one baptized. His crucifixion will be his own communion and his baptism.

The synoptics offer cup imagery again in Jesus’ anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “. . . he fell on his face and prayed. “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it.” Matthew 26:39-40 (and see also Luke 12:50 and Matt 20:23).

The Gospel of John gives Jesus identical language of ‘drinking the cup’ when he reproves Peter for attacking the high priest’s servant with his sword: “Put your sword back in its scabbard; am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” John 18:10-11. Asking, “Shall I not drink?” Jesus claims his freedom in the choices he will embrace until he cries, “It is finished.”

John completes this fused sacramental interpretation of Jesus’ death, saying that when Jesus hung dead on the cross, “. . .one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water” John 19:33-34. As sacramental theologians, the four Gospel writers consistently identify cup and baptism with Jesus’ dying on the cross.

In the letters of Paul and Pauline epistles, Jesus’ cross is also his “shame.” Gathering texts around this theme, we will see a crucial way the discursive, explicitly theological writers of the epistles see the sacraments. Jesus’ *shame* is not one piece of suffering among others, but a central theological theme, what he chooses exercising his freedom as means by which God accomplishes the reconciliation of all.

In Jesus’ shameful death outside the city gates and with the worst sinners he freely chooses communion with them. Hippolytus’ eucharistic prayer is on solid New Testament grounds here imaging Jesus’ outstretched arms on the cross as a willing embrace:

To fulfill your purpose when he came to suffer, and to gain a holy people for you, he stretched out his hands to free those who believed in you from suffering. When he was handed over to suffering and death, a death he freely accepted that he might bring to naught death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread hell underfoot, and give light to the righteous, and set up a covenant and manifest his resurrection, he took bread. . .

~ Cf. A. Hamman, *Early Christian Prayers*, p. 95.

Jesus’ chosen shame takes him deep into the desolate territory of exile and curse. His freedom in suffering undoes the helplessness we impute to a victim. Dying willingly with those who have no freedom, Jesus’ death completes his chosen, unconditional fellowship with sinners. We might imagine Jesus’ (or anyone’s) human terror in the face of such suffering, but like Hippolytus, still proclaim his freedom to the very end. It is an article of faith and flows from his courageous choices throughout his ministry.

Jesus accepts being condemned and accursed and cast out of his community in order to die in communion with thieves and murderers. All pass him on the execution hill outside the city gates can gawk and mock. The place he dies is ritually out of bounds. He dies ‘forsaken’ by God, dreadfully beyond reach of any piously conceived grace or righteousness. And when he has drunk his last communion cup to its dregs, the cup of reconciliation with sinners, in John’s Gospel he says, “It is finished.” Jesus’ solidarity in suffering in that place of exclusion IS the final redemption of and inclusion of all.

His words at the supper as he offered the final cup had already defined this moment, so his suffering and death are the final cup at the feast with its prayer for ultimate reconciliation. The cup literally does end the feasting ritual as we hear in I Corinthians 11:25 (“after supper he took the cup”). The Didache gives a blessing prayer for the final cup that recalls the Jewish models. The last cup ends the meal in prayers for reconciliation and union,

As grain once scattered on the hillsides  
was in this broken bread made one,  
so from all lands thy church be gathered  
into thy Kingdom by thy Son.

Or as Jesus says it in John, “When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself.”

The cross shows Open Table and Baptism to be one sign. This death is also his “baptism,” because again he submits to be joined indiscriminately to ordinary people (making one sign of his baptism by John, his feasting with harlots and tax collectors, and his dying with condemned murderers and terrorists). As the Gospels tell it supper (rhetorically this concluding cup) leads to baptism.

The epistles untiringly return to this theme of shame, curse, and degradation, often combining it in startling ways with joy and freedom, Jesus’ or our own. I first heard this clearly in Hebrews thanks to James Alison, in *Raising Abel*,

“Let us not lose sight of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who, *for the sake of the joy which was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding the shameful of it*, and from now on has taken his place at the right of God’s throne.

- Hebrews 12:1-2

Matching shame and freedom continues in Hebrews. After likening Jesus’ death outside the camp to the burning of temple refuse (the discarded, unclean portion of the temple sacrifice) the writer says,

“...so Jesus too suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood. Let us go to him, then outside the camp, and share his degradation.” -Hebrews 13:11-14

The cross gives us and all humanity freedom exactly *because* it is “shame,” “degradation,” and “curse.” “For the sake of the joy which was set before him,” Jesus willingly goes where good people and pure community cannot go. He seeks the same communion with those who die there as he had established with those who lived beyond any welcome to Temple or Synagogue. We become his community as we learn to go to him, outside the camp and share his degradation.

Paul is just as stark in his explanation of what this means and what it accomplishes for us. Jesus, he tells us, IS cursed, IS sin (2 Corinthians 5:21 quoted above). We cannot legitimately draw back from such designations or confidently claim that God only imputes sin, curse, or degradation to Jesus; Jesus’ absolute and complete identification with curse and sin gives us our freedom and the promised Spirit of God:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by being cursed for our sake, since scripture says: cursed be everyone who is hanged on a tree. This was done so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might include the pagans, and so that through faith we might receive the promised Spirit.” - Galatians 3:13-14.

In other words, Jesus identifies with and is cursed with outcasts, and his identification with them is so complete there is no ‘as if’ left to it. For this we thank God. It is our Life.

Jesus goes to the place of our shame to make it the place of God’s feast, the place of baptismal cleansing and newness. Cursed Jesus hanging on the tree brings us blessing because in communing wholly with the suffering and death of the worst of us, Jesus’ baptism on the cross completes what he began feasting with sinners. He has taken on our secret, stripped it bare, and said, ‘me too.’ We find Jesus (and our communion and baptism) wherever anyone abandons privilege, holiness or insider status to reconcile human divisions. Our baptism is not an initiation into set-

apart status, but our free fall into God's community without boundaries. Jesus' embrace of outcasts in his baptism on the cross enables Paul to say,

“ . . . you are all of you, sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are on in Christ Jesus.  
- Galatians 3:26-29.

The Byzantine hymn we sing at St. Gregory's after every baptism translates it this way, “As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia.”

Is that Alleluia realistic NOW in the life we live? Consider how unerringly these passages from writers in Paul's tradition speak of God's completed peace and the ending of division and hostility in the past tense:

“God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross.” Colossians 1:19-20

Jesus makes peace by dying horribly and absorbing in himself all the violent rejection those he died with him and as he did. We aren't even talking about resurrection yet. To reconcile all things, he must go to the place of no reconciliation and there be baptized into suffering. Just what Paul calls 'being made into sin' the writer of Ephesians calls 'all perfection,'

“Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. – Ephesians 2:13-16

So Paul and the writers of Ephesians, Colossians and Hebrews repeatedly assert that Jesus' death completed God's work of reconciling all humanity. When Jesus suffers the worst that divides us, our brokenness is then and forever broken open and made whole. Here we taste and feel the power to live the truth of God's own torn brokenness in Christ's dying. Here in this place of freedom, we can make new choices.

As we have tasted God's welcome at Jesus' Table, we will follow Jesus into baptism, stepping outside our religion as we know it and into the single renewed humanity that church walls cannot contain and prison walls cannot keep out. This was the baptism Jesus promised his death would be. Can we be baptized with his baptism?

FINAL NOTE: James Alison and I have discussed open table and though he sees the theological rationale in our reading of the Gospels, as a faithful Roman Catholic he respectfully questions any congregation's ability to re-make sacraments as we have received them. Gil Bailie, Rene Girard, James Alison, Rowan Williams and others, do see in Jesus' enactment of the divine hospitality whether at his table or on the cross, the destruction of in-group and end of its rationale for scapegoating violence. I do not claim that they or Maxwell Johnson are advocating an Open Table, though I will be interested to see where this conversation over the coming years takes any of them and all of us. Theologians and Bible and liturgical scholars whose understanding of atonement rides on the issue of scapegoating and the outsider do point where the Gospel scholarship takes us in understanding Jesus' Table Fellowship.