

Come to the Table

A reflection on the practice of open communion
at saint benedict's table

Jamie Howison

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a worshipping community, rooted in an ancient future

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The first draft of this paper was written during a two-week study leave at The General Theological Seminary, New York, in January 2007. It is quite fitting then, that two of my key sources/dialogue partners are on the faculty at General. In particular, I enjoyed a long and searching conversation with Dr John Koenig, whose book, *The Feast of the World's Redemption* played a key role in my wrestling with the New Testament sources. While I suspect Dr Koenig will not agree with all of my conclusions, I trust that he will find my engagement with his work to be both respectful and honest.

Due to our conflicting schedules, I was not able to share such a conversation with James Farwell. I suspect that if I had, I might have ended up working even harder to address his objections to the practice of open table. As it was, his very fine paper “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion’” challenged me greatly, and I found again and again that I was in a position of needing to respond to his deep and legitimate concerns. While I am quite sure that Dr Farwell will have strong disagreement with my conclusions, I do hope that he finds that I have not been dismissive of his views.

I also found my conversation with my primary host, Dr Titus Presler, to be of great value in helping me to clarify and articulate my core concerns. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the support and patience of the staff of St. Mark's Library.

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Finally, I must acknowledge the community of saint benedict's table, both for its support of me in taking my study leave and for the thoughtful, creative and critically engaged spirit that characterizes our common life. Many people from the community offered their personal reflections on our practice of open communion, and these became quite crucial in the formulation of this book.

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Foreword

I grew up in a faith tradition where the “celebration of the Lord’s supper” was strictly a memorial event – and a rather dull one at that. Though our gatherings were generally lively and engaged, once a month I’d enter the sanctuary and see that dreaded table in front of the pulpit, set and draped with a white cloth, and my heart would sink. “Today’s service will be twenty minutes longer,” I’d think. Twenty minutes of rote communal recollection during which I would earnestly attempt, usually unsuccessfully, to conjure appropriate sorrow for my sins and corresponding gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice. I needed no convincing of either, but somehow this particular ritual always seemed unnecessarily laborious.

Years later, at a conference, I heard the liturgical theologian Robert Webber exclaim, “Are you faithful? Flee to the Eucharist! Are you a sinner? Flee to the Eucharist! Are you sick? Lonely? Hopeless? Flee to the Eucharist!” He went on to recall the time a homeless alcoholic walked in off the street and made his way straight to the communion rail. Robert did not hesitate to serve him. His response to the criticism that followed was, “Where better might a homeless sinner be than at the communion rail?” I’ve been fleeing to it since.

These days, the Lord’s Supper is not an intrusion on my spiritual life but rather its very centre. I gather around the communion table with others as conflicted and disintegrated as I, simply receiving what Christ wants to give – feeding on him so that we might live. It is at the Eucharist that I realize I so desperately want us to live, and I am convinced my longing doesn’t originate with

me but rather in the One who is life itself.

Jamie Howison's dialogical wisdom, something quite rare in my experience, is gathered equally from his honest participation in the common journey as one of the folks, as well as his diligent academic work and reflection. Thus a faith both well-reasoned and passionately lived is expressed comfortably in his gifted calling as a patient pastor, fierce priest and artful liturgist.

Under Jamie's leadership, the practice of welcoming everyone at saint benedict's table is neither born of sentimentality nor of mere innovation. Rather, it emerges from a rooted calm and engaged trust in the ongoing story of the Lover and the Beloved, both of which lend this book the quality of a gift offered freely and respectfully, even shyly, to the Church.

Steve Bell
singer/songwriter

Author

Jamie Howison is a priest of the Anglican Church and the founding pastor of saint benedict's table, a missional congregation of the Diocese of Rupert's Land in Winnipeg. A graduate of the University of Winnipeg and of Trinity College, Toronto, he serves as a member of the Primate's Theological Commission of the Anglican Church of Canada. Throughout his twenty years of ordained ministry, he has understood writing to be an important part of his priestly vocation, and has contributed to a variety of publications including *Sojourners*, *The Anglican Journal*, *Esprit* and *Canada Lutheran*, as well as to the collection *Get Up Off Your Knees: preaching the U2 catalogue* published by Cowley Publications.



Background

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES it has become increasingly common in Anglican parishes to see printed in the Sunday leaflet some sentence such as “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive communion.” While some parishes have quietly dropped the word “baptized,” or even the phrase “baptized *Christians*,” from the leaflet’s invitational sentence, in most instances there has been a lack of deeper theological reflection on the meaning of this shifting practice.

As James Farwell observes in his essay “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus,” “A handful of high-profile parishes, in conscientious defiance of the canons of the Episcopal Church that restrict communion to the baptized, have undertaken the practice and inspired a number of parishes to do the same.”¹ While one can make a coherent case that organizational change and development are often sparked through local practice and innovation, this only makes sense - and only has integrity - if that innovation is shared and reflected upon openly and widely.

This book represents an invitation to reflect on the experience of one worshipping community which, from its beginnings, has practiced open table. Along with the conventional theological and biblical sources, I will draw on the experiences of our

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

community members, reflected both in written responses to a simple question - "How would you describe your experience of the practice of 'open table' at saint benedict's table?" - and in the lyric context of music written for use in worship. In this study, the writers of lyrics are credited by name, while responses to the question are followed by the initials of the respondent.

By way of background, saint benedict's table is designated as a mission of the Diocese of Rupert's Land in the Anglican Church of Canada. While we have had this official canonical status since October 2004, the community began to be birthed in the spring of 2003, when a small group of a dozen or so people began to meet bi-weekly for Sunday evening worship.

In part inspired by the so-called "emergent church" movement,² this group was gathered around a desire to explore the possibility of forming a worshipping community both rooted in the liturgical and theological resources of Anglicanism and open to new expressions which flow from that tradition. Borrowing a phrase from Robert Webber, we began to describe ourselves as being "rooted in an ancient-future."³

It is notable that right from the start our worship, which uses a simple liturgy adapted from the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*, was centred around the table. So much so that when, in August 2003 we made the decision to move to weekly gatherings on an ongoing basis, the choice of the word "table"

² The term "emergent church" has become somewhat problematic for us, as we have watched a whole industry crop up to market all things required to help reinvent local churches as "emergent." Add to that the relative thinness of much of the theology of its leading proponents, and we have found it best to avoid the term in our self-description.

³ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1999).

in our name was both spontaneous and unanimous. Further, that St Benedict was chosen as the patron was due in part to the Benedictine emphasis on hospitality; on welcoming each guest as Christ.

It is also notable that the seeds for our current practice of an open table were effectively sown at those first few informal gatherings. Of our original circle of a dozen people, only five were Anglican, with all of the others coming from various Anabaptist and/or evangelical church backgrounds. Even as our numbers increased – there were 25 in attendance at our fifth gathering, and an average of 45 after less than a year of weekly liturgies – we drew predominantly from traditions which do not practice infant baptism.

The first question we faced had to do with whether or not we would admit to communion those few children who had been baptized as infants, yet deny those who had not. This was quickly followed by a second question, brought on by the fact that many evangelical and/or Anabaptist Christians have not in fact been baptized. In part, this is because baptism is often tied to the joining of a particular congregation, and it is not uncommon for people to spend years as an “adherent” before deciding to join as a full member.⁴

Further, in many instances, there is in that tradition a strong sense that adult baptism marks an end point – almost a settling down – in one’s spiritual pilgrimage, and many younger evangelicals simply are not prepared to take that step. Included in this latter group are people active in their church, and in

⁴ In one instance of which we became aware, full membership requires a commitment to participation in a weekly home group and a monthly open meeting. Some choose to remain adherents because such a time commitment is simply not feasible. I have also recently been made aware of a particular branch in the Mennonite tradition that withholds baptism until after marriage.

some cases theologically educated at a Bible college or even a seminary.

In raising the question of open table for this paper, one respondent observed that, “from my evangelical days, baptism is not viewed as inherently necessary for regeneration,” and this would seem to represent the normative view within that tradition’s mainstream.

Combining the numbers of these two groups - the unbaptized children and the adults and adolescents who have not yet requested baptism – roughly 20% of the people involved in our opening year explorations would not have been invited to receive communion had we not practiced open table.

For a community that has formed so much of its identity around the table, this would have been a deep irony. Further, rather than being able to build and grow as an expression within the tradition, strict adherence to the Anglican tradition’s position on baptism and communion could have halted us in our tracks. Witness the following:

Being raised in an atheist household, I have somewhat recently become a Christian and have not been formally baptized. If I were not welcome to participate in a rite as central to the Christian faith as communion, I would feel disconnected from the community and all that it offers. (K.B.)

This respondent goes on to suggest that his substantial involvement in our Christian education programming has been largely an extension of his ability to fully participate in the worship life of the community. He even cites Stanley Hauerwas in his reflection on how he understands the church! In short, what this respondent begins to open up is the fact that this is not narrowly a pastoral issue, nor is it one of being merely friendly and nice, but has deep missiological and ecclesial textures as well. We will return to these ideas later in this book.

In these earlier stages, rather than putting forth a thoroughgoing position on open table, as is offered in the parish of St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco, we opted for a less dramatic route. St Gregory's is clearly one of the "handful of high profile parishes" Farwell refers to as acting in "conscientious defiance of the canons of the Episcopal Church."⁵ The rationale for their practice of open communion is articulated in a paper by Richard Fabian, which is easily available on their website.⁶ Significantly, the altar at St Gregory's bears twin inscriptions, which proclaim the centrality of their table practice. From Luke 15:2 there is "This guy welcomes sinners and dines with them," while from Isaac of Ninevah comes the quote, "Did not the Lord share the table of tax collectors and harlots? Do not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy. All must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve."

In the formative days of our community's life, a simple invitation was made in words to the effect that "This communion is not the property of the Anglican Church, but is for all of God's people; regardless of your denominational background you are welcome, though no one should feel obligated." This approach became even more appropriate when, around the time of our receiving official status as a mission, we moved to All Saints' Church in downtown Winnipeg, and students from the nearby Salvation Army college began to visit. The practice of open table enabled these Salvationist worshippers, who come from a tradition that does not practice baptism, to participate as their own conscience might allow.

⁵ Farwell, p. 215.

⁶ Richard Fabian, "First the Table, Then the Font," for the Association of Anglican Musicians, ©2002. www.saintgregorys.org/Resources_pdfs/FirsttheTable.pdf

On a slight tangent, one respondent who, with her family, has been part of our community for the past year, and who, prior to that had attended a Salvation Army corps, offered her reflection on the experience of visiting an Anglican parish in which baptism was *emphasized* as being the prerequisite for communion:

When the service of communion occurred, there we sat as a family in the second pew – active in our spiritual journey, committed to Christ, and beside my mother-in-law (in her Salvation Army uniform), who has spent over 40 years of her life in ministry – watching others break bread and drink wine together.

(S.J.-R.)