Recently I received an email from a student who is on internship. He wrote:

I have been reading through the *Use of the Means of Grace*. Principle 37 says that only the baptized are to receive the Lord’s Supper. I don’t understand the reasoning behind this. Baptism is no guarantee of faith. None of us approach the table as “worthy” to receive anything. The testimony of Scripture seems clear to me: every time someone tries to put a boundary around God’s grace, that boundary is torn down. Why set baptism as the requirement? Doesn’t it make more sense to make this means of grace available to all?1

What was once viewed as a radical departure from the tradition is being practiced by more and more mainline Protestant congregations in an attempt to be radically hospitable to the “outsider.”2 Inviting *all who are present to come to the Lord’s Supper* (as a matter of principle, as opposed to accidentally communing on occasion someone who is not baptized) is becoming a normative practice in some ELCA congregations.3

Two of the ELCA’s full-communion partners have recently addressed this issue head-on.4 In 2003, the issue was brought up at the General Convention of The Episcopal Church and was referred to a standing committee. It was raised again in 2006 and the convention delegates voted to uphold the canon that requires baptism before communion.5 In between these two conventions, a spirited debate was held between Episcopal theologians James Farwell and Kathryn Tanner in the pages of *Anglican Theological Review*.6 The Episcopal Diocese of Northern California issued a study of the matter in November 2003 which included collecting data as to how widespread the practice had become in TEC. Of the 51 bishops (out of 100) who responded to a survey, nearly half reported that communion of the unbaptized is practiced in their dioceses. The task force did not propose any resolutions (nor were they charged to) but offered their report in 2005 both to the diocese and the larger church to consider as this issue continues to be discussed and debated.7

In 1998, the Presbyterian Church (USA) began significant theological conversation on this issue in response to an overture (what in the ELCA is called a memorial) of the presbytery of the Twin Cities to change “baptized” to “persons of faith” as the requirement for receiving the eucharist. The issue was referred first to the issue to the Office of Theology and Worship in order to clarify the relationship between baptism and communion. It was then recommended that the 214th assembly (in 2002) authorize a full study on the sacraments. This study was to include both Reformed and ecumenical perspectives.8

The study resulted in a document, *Invitation to Christ—Font and Table: A Guide to Sacramental Practices*, which was received by the 217th General Assembly in 2006.9 The Assembly concurred with the recommendation of the Sacraments Study Group to invite the whole church into a two-year discipline of expanded sacramental practice as “a way of inviting the church to listen together to what the Spirit of God is saying to us about our identity and mission.” *Invitation to Christ*, which includes descriptions of and theological reflections related to the practices and questions for discussion, was commended to Presbyterian congregations.10 On the issue of communion without baptism, the guide states:

In conclusion, in our review of the literature, the biblical-theological rationales used by those in favor of and opposed to open table practice seem to suggest that the fullest range of meanings of baptism and the Lord’s Supper—both God’s expansive love and forgiveness and the call to be a community of disciples, the body of Christ in the world—is preserved and embodied through the normative practice of baptism before eucharist. However, there is a strong biblical crosscurrent, notably in Jesus’ inclusive meal practice and his breaking of certain purity laws, that would seem to allow or even call for the disruption of those regular practices if and when those sacramental practices wrongly serve exclusionary purposes.11

During this time of reflection and discernment, the Reformed Theology group of the American Academy of Religion devoted an entire session to this topic: “Open
And yet the questions hard to find. Lutheran theologians are fleeting and individual treatments of the issue by churchwide assemblies of the ELCA. Individual treatments of the issue by Lutheran theologians are asking the same kinds of questions about the long-standing tradition of the church of offering the Lord’s Supper only to the baptized. My purpose in writing this article is not to respond to all of the issues involved in this debate, but to address a couple of the operating assumptions that seem to accompany Lutheran proposals for changing the church’s practice.

Though some traditions frame this as an issue of “hospitality to the outsider,” I am convinced that many Lutherans are more particularly concerned with “access to grace.” If the grace of God in Jesus Christ is for all people—which we can affirm is true biblically—then why bar some people (i.e., those who are not yet baptized but who desire to receive this grace) from the table? Why must they be baptized first? Why, as my student asked, is there a “boundary” to the benefits of the sacrament of the altar?

The first major premise underlying this argument is that because baptism and eucharist each are a “means of grace,” they are therefore interchangeable; you can receive grace from one or the other, or both. Why not change the order from font-to-table to table-to-font, if these are interchangeable means of grace? Is it nothing more than “tradition” that keeps us from doing so? The second major premise is that one’s desire to receive grace—an incipient form of faith, if you will—is all that is required to receive the Lord’s Supper.

This line of thinking raises other questions that are important to consider: What does baptism do that eucharist does or can not? What is the purpose of receiving the eucharist (if it is not the same as for baptism)? Are these two sacraments really “interchangeable” with regard to the grace each offers? A cursory reading of Luther’s Small Catechism would seem to suggest so. Luther states the benefits received from each sacrament using the exact same words: “life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins.” Further, what about Luther’s words that the one who receives “worthily” is the one who “believes in the words ‘given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins’”? What if someone hears those words and believes them even though he has not been baptized? Isn’t faith all that is required for someone to come to the table? Why shouldn’t such a person receive the forgiveness that seems to be promised to all in the institution narrative?

The basis for the promise of forgiveness is baptism, as the Nicene Creed says: “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” The Lutheran Confessions teach that baptism is necessary for salvation because it is through baptism that the promise of salvation is given. (Whether Lutherans still believe and confess this is another issue!) The same claim is not made for the eucharist, but the grace offered through the eucharist presupposes the grace already received in baptism.

Baptism was instituted, Luther wrote in the Large Catechism (quoting Mark 16:16), because “baptism saves” and “to be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ’s kingdom, and to live with him forever.” Baptism promises and brings victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In the Small Catechism Articles, Luther writes that God has placed a spiritual power in the baptismal water which washes away sin whereby the old creature becomes a new creature, though not completely because the power of baptism must be applied to restrain and suppress the old person. And again in the Large Catechism, “as we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, as long as we carry the old creature around our necks.” Over and over, Luther describes baptism as a treasure and a medicine that swallows up death and brings regeneration and new birth.

Luther also describes the Lord’s Supper as a great treasure in which we receive forgiveness of sins, and as a wholesome, soothing medicine. He presumes that the one who receives the eucharist had already been made new in baptism—i.e., that there is a new creature to nourish. “It is appropriately called food for the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood, as I have said, have not lost their old skin.” The meal is for the one who has already died and been made new in the waters of baptism. It is food for the new life, food to strengthen one in the new relationship that God made with us in baptism and the daily struggle to live as those who are “simultaneously sinful and justified.”

Finally, in the Large Catechism, Luther speaks of baptism not only as entrance into the kingdom but also as “the sacrament through which we are initially received into the Christian community.” The communal aspect of the sacraments is not emphasized by Luther in his catechisms as in some of his earlier writings on the sacraments. Thus, there is there is both a soteriological and ecclesial connection between the two sacraments. Baptism
offers, while the eucharist renews, the gift of forgiveness. Baptism is the sacrament that joins us to Christ in the first place. Eucharist is the meal we share that both signifies and realizes anew our unity with Christ and with one another. In baptism we are joined to Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3) and incorporated into his body (1 Corinthians 12:13). In the eucharist, as members of his body, we come together to share his body and blood given under, in, and with bread and wine and thereby are strengthened in our unity.

Lutherans have long emphasized the connection between the Lord's Supper and the forgiveness of sins “for me,” which is an important contribution to eucharistic theology. However, if we focus too exclusively on our personal communion with Jesus, we may neglect the communal aspect of the sacrament which unites us together as the one body of Christ, as St. Paul affirms. That is to say, the Lord’s Supper is also a sacrament of unity. This is why the celebration of the eucharist is seen as the pinnacle, the goal of the ecumenical movement, that all Christians may share together at one table the unity that we are given in our baptism. So it is possible that inviting people to commune before they are baptized may lead some to forego baptism entirely, preventing people from baptismal incorporation into the body of Christ.

If we think of the sacraments only as individual instances or experiences of grace, it makes sense to question why one would “deny” this experience of grace to a well-meaning seeker by not extending the invitation to partake in the eucharist to all who wish to participate. The language of “the means of grace” was meant to emphasize God’s action in them (over and against a memorialist understanding), but it is important to remember the ecclesial context in which these means of grace are celebrated, for they do not offer only an individual encounter with grace, but join participants to the paschal mystery, to Christ’s death and resurrection, and incorporate them into the church, Christ’s body on earth.

This is perhaps the most clearly stated in St. Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:13. The Lord’s Supper is an ecclesial event which calls for participants to discern the body. If you are not prepared to be a part of the body of Christ (that is, if you are greedy and selfishly thinking only of yourself, or unrepentant in some other way, separating yourself from your brothers and sisters), then to receive the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine may be for you not an encounter with grace but a judgment.

Susan Wood wonders if our faith traditions (Catholic as well as Protestant!) have lost the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist that is rooted in the Pauline theology of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17. She writes, “Within our faith traditions we are very clear that we receive the body of Christ when we receive the eucharist, but how conscious are we that we also sacramentalize our communion with one another within the church which is the mystical body of Christ?” She adds, “The eucharist is the visible, sacramental sign of all the baptized in communion in the body of Christ within a concrete community that experiences its identity as the body of Christ. The Christian’s relationship to Christ is inseparable from that person’s relationship to the corporate body, the church. We are baptized into both Christ and the church. What happens in baptism is not the bestowal of reified grace, but the insertion of a person into a network of relationships which in theological terms we describe as ‘communion.’”

A generation ago, the theologians of the Lutheran church were debating whether infants and children should receive the sacrament. A major argument in favor was the inseparability of the two sacraments; if you are baptized, God has already made a claim on your life and is working to bring you to faith. The eucharist was thus called the “birthright of the baptized.” On this basis, they argued, it is wrong to deny this meal to anyone who has already been united to the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism. The only requirement for admission to the Lord’s Supper is that you belong to the body of Christ.

To affirm this is not to say that the community that celebrates the eucharist is an “insider” or “closed” community. It is open to all people—but the way to enter it is through baptism, by dying and rising with Christ in the waters of baptism by which the “old sinner” is put to death and new life is promised. No one is “worthy” to become part of this community; it is only in being reborn in the waters of baptism that one enters into God’s kingdom and becomes a member of Christ’s church.

It is true, as my student said, that cultural, racial, gender, and economic boundaries are crossed as the gospel is proclaimed (as is seen in Acts). But in every case in the early church, what brings someone into the new community (“where there is neither male nor female,” etc.) is the sacrament of baptism (“we were all baptized into one body”). Grace is available to all, but the foundational sacrament of grace is baptism. We receive grace in the eucharist because of the grace received in baptism. In baptism, we are united to the death and resurrection of Christ, made members of the body of Christ, receive forgiveness and a new birth, and are adopted as children in God’s family. In the eucharist, we are assured of and receive anew that forgiveness promised to us in baptism; we celebrate the unity we have with Christ and each other in the one body and are strengthened for our work as Christ’s body.

I do not want to deny that God can work “outside the box.” The real question being raised is, “Why make baptism and not faith the ‘requirement’ for coming to the Lord’s table? Why can’t your personal faith make you a member (and thus be your ‘ticket’ to the table)?” As Susan Wood states, “In baptism we do not claim Christ as much as Christ claims us, and he
does so irrevocably.”

Further, faith and the Spirit unite you to Christ, but not to the body of Christ, the church. It is in the eucharist that you are not only communing with Christ but with his whole body. To go back to Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 11, the eucharist is not only about your personal desire to know Christ more deeply, but about what it means to be a member of the crucified and risen body of Christ—and members one of another in that body.

The two sacraments work together to fully incorporate persons into a salvific relationship with God in Christ as well as into a relationship with the members of the body of Christ. The church’s practice of baptism before eucharist is predicated on an understanding that baptism is the sacrament that initiates us into this relationship (in fact, baptism is what “saves,” as Luther states) and into the ecclesial body of Christ, the church. To change the order would suggest changing our theology of baptism. It is my hope that Lutherans will more rigorously engage the theological issues raised by the all-too-often uncritical adoption of this practice in ELCA congregations.

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Notes

1. The student gave me permission to share this correspondence, which was sent to me on March 25, 2008.


3. In the Greater Milwaukee Synod, where I served a parish from 2000 to 2005 with my husband, we were the “odd pastors out” in the coalition of urban churches because we did not practice this kind of “open table” but followed the tradition of inviting only the baptized to the Lord’s Supper.

4. The United Methodist Church, with which the ELCA currently is in “interim eucharistic sharing,” adopted This Holy Mystery at their General Convention in 2004 as an “official interpretive statement of theology and practice in the United Methodist Church.” It says: “All who respond in faith to the invitation are to be welcomed. Holy Baptism normally precedes partaking of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a meal of the community who are in covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people, baptism is the sign of the new covenant (Genesis 17:9–14; Exodus 24:1–12; Jeremiah 31:31; Romans 6:1–11; Hebrews 9:15).” The background to the principle refers to John Wesley’s notion of the eucharist as a “converting ordinance” (Wesley’s journal from November 1, 1739, to September 3, 1741; Friday, June 27, 1740). The invitation to participate in the Lord’s Supper offers “an evangelical opportunity to bring people into a fuller living relationship with the body of Christ… Nonbaptized persons who respond in faith to the invitation are welcome to take communion. The issue is whether or not faith is present, not whether one has been baptized.” However, the statement concludes by stating that “nonbaptized persons should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism as soon as possible.” The statement is available at www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery/default.html, accessed April 25, 2008. See also Mark W. Stamm, Let Every Soul be Jesus’ Guest: A Theology of the Open Table (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

5. The Canons of The Episcopal Church (Title 1.17.7) state: “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.” The 74th General Convention (2003) referred to a Standing Commission a resolution to establish a task force to study the practice of open communion (Acts of the Convention 8089). The 75th General Convention (2006) voted to affirm that only those who have been baptized shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion (Acts of the Convention b004). The convention documents can be found at www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_search.pl, accessed April 25, 2008.


8. One of the participants was Dr. Craig Satterlee (ELCA) of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

9. In the meantime, another overture was made to the 2004 General Assembly by the presbytery of central Washington to change the language to: “All who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are to be welcomed to the table.”


12. The session met at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego. Papers such as “Biblical Arguments for and against Allowing Communion before Baptism,” by David Stubbs of Western Theological Seminary, were presented and discussed.


14. Many of the arguments made against the change in practice (e.g., James Farwell) do so by insisting that inviting someone to the eucharist before baptism is really not that hospitable in that you are inviting someone to something for which she is not ready. This seems to be easily countered by Sara Miles’s story in Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion (New York: Ballantine, 2007). It seems that her reception of the eucharist brought her into a profound and life-changing relationship with Christ and his church.

15. Hospitality to the outsider and especially the marginalized is a vital part of the church’s outreach and ministry, especially those practices which draw people into the baptized