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*THIS PAPER OFFERS PART TWO OF A THEOLOGICAL ESSAY FAVORING **OPEN COMMUNION BEFORE BAPTISM**, TREATING BOTH SACRAMENTS AS SCRIPTURAL SIGNS.*

***PART ONE ADDRESSES THE “OPEN TABLE,”** AND HAS BEEN PUBLISHED BY CANTERBURY PRESS. (AN **APPENDIX** BELOW ATTACHES IT IN FULL, FOR INDEFATIGABLE PCTS READERS!)*

***PART TWO ADDRESSES BAPTISM AFTERWARD,** AND IS HERE IN DRAUGHT BEFORE PUBLICATION. FOR PCTS READERS’ IMMEDIATE CONVENIENCE, TWO EXCERPTS FOLLOW FROM PART ONE, WHICH ARE REFERENCED IN PART TWO:*

[A] *PART ONE introduces Jesus’ Table Fellowship as follows:*

### **JESUS’ PROPHETIC SIGN: A STUMBLING BLOCK**

For his distinctive message that “Here comes God, ready or not!” Jesus chose a distinctive Sign. The Hebrew word for a Sign is *’ôth*; the Greek is *sêmeion*; but setting aside etymology and linguistic philosophy that fill many commentaries, we may observe how Hebrew prophets actually use Signs in scripture. They use Signs to show people what God is doing, because people are dangerously failing to see it. Jeremiah shatters a pot at the Jerusalem garbage dump, saying: this is what God will do with our nation unless our leaders change their plans.<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah’s Sign does not begin magically to break up the nation; rather it is his urgent gesture to win people’s attention, so they will see what God is up to before it is tragically too late.<sup>2</sup>

Making a prophetic Sign that God comes here now, ready or not, Jesus took up an image from the prophet Isaiah, who envisioned a banquet where God’s chosen Hebrew people and the unclean heathen would dine together.<sup>3</sup> Jesus began dining publicly with notoriously unqualified sinners, who were shunned by other religious reformers: a practice that above all led to his condemnation and death.

Paul calls Jesus’ life and death a scandal, a term that likewise wants defining from usage. The words Englished as “scandal” or “stumbling block”<sup>4</sup> denote a snare or trap. But one singular

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 19.

<sup>2</sup> Today’s best secular analogy is “*Titanic*” films. Except for a recent romantic hit, nearly all contain the same scene. On the ship’s bridge officers peer ahead into the fog, seeing nothing. The cameras pan down the side of the ship to the water. There little ice cubes float by—and the orchestra cello sound “hmmmm!” Those ice cubes are a Sign. Moviegoers know they show what is coming and is already here, while the fog-blinded crew disastrously cannot see it. (The fact that *Titanic* actually sank on a clear night is mere history.)

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 25:6ff.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrew *mikshol/makshelah* and Greek *skándalon* or *próskomma*—these words occur interchangeably.

Levitical instance became normative for the New Testament. This was part of the Holiness Code, a text that Judah Goldin says all synagogue schoolboys memorized: “You shall not curse the deaf, nor lay a stumbling block before the blind. I am YHWH.”<sup>5</sup> Nearly all references to a stumbling block in Hebrew and Greek scripture imply blindness. When Jeremiah says, “I will lay a stumbling block before this people,” he is taunting them: My people are *blind!*<sup>6</sup> New Testament writers use the verb “lay a stumbling block” thirty times, twice as often as the noun, echoing the Levitical meaning: those who take offense are tragically blind, and in danger.<sup>7</sup>

Terming Jesus’ ministry a scandal means people may fail to see what God is doing, despite Jesus’ Sign, and risk destruction, just as Jeremiah forewarned his nation they would be destroyed. Jeremiah was ignored, and his people perished. Gospel editors believed that had happened again to the first century Jewish nation who ignored Jesus’ Sign, when the Romans invaded and paved Jerusalem; and it will happen wherever people fail to see.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus chose a Sign to scandalize his nation. In his day kosher meals still lay in the future;<sup>8</sup> ritual purity applied then to the diners, not to the food. Palestine abounded in dining fellowships called *chaburoth*, each restricted by profession and by degrees of contamination through business contact with gentiles and non-observant Jews. So Jesus chose that scandalous Sign for getting people’s attention before it was too late. And that scandal continues wherever Jesus shows up today. As the Lutheran writer Gordon Lathrop puts it: “Draw a line that includes us and excludes many others, and Jesus Christ is always on the other side of the line. At least that is so if we are speaking of the biblical, historic Christ who eats with sinners and outsiders, who is made a curse and sin itself for us, who justifies the ungodly, and who is himself the hole in any system.”<sup>9</sup>

Some opponents of the Open Table deride its “mere acceptance” of unbaptized people. P. Turner sees “a theological chasm...between those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* and those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*.”<sup>10</sup> But if such a chasm opens in popular piety, the gospel Sign does not point to it. The presence of genuinely wrong and *unacceptable* people at the table was essential for Jesus’ Sign. It fit his teaching perfectly. The outstanding heroes of his authentic parables are criminals, corrupt officers, pre-moral children and pushy women. Jesus’ criminals are real criminals: not to be rehabilitated by our “understanding” how they grew up oppressed or in dysfunctional families; not to be welcomed into our company in hopes they will change their ways. In Jesus’ parables they never change their ways.....

**[B]** PART ONE CONCLUDES AS FOLLOWS:

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<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19:14. These chapters differ from those focusing on sacrifice and diet. Contemporary additions to other books are sometimes labeled “holiness code” as well.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 6:21.

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:23, 8:9. Romans 9:32f, 11:9. Revelation 2:14.

<sup>8</sup> Kosher kitchens evolved slowly after the Temple’s destruction, as Levitical rituals from the lost sanctuary were transferred to domestic cooking, for example allowing the Passover sacrifice to be slaughtered at home: a subject of rabbinical debate.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: a Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2003) pg. 64f. Cited also in Thomas O’Loughlin, “The Eucharist as ‘The Meal That Should Be’” *Worship*, Vol. 80 No. 1, January 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Turner, “An unworkable theology,” *First Things*, vol.154, June/July 2005.

Newcomers' surprised joy at being welcomed to Jesus' Table must quickly become visible joy in welcoming others, or Christian mission fails. Northern Hemisphere churches can no longer presume outsiders' esteem such as the Apologists once claimed. Our contemporaries dismiss our sincerity, our competence, our relevance to everyday life. Their visit to a Sunday or wedding or funeral liturgy is virtually the only time outsiders will see for themselves what the Church is up to, and what we believe God is up to. There above all we must uphold Jesus' Sign of God's free welcome to a lost world that God has already forgiven and reconciled. Friedrich Nietzsche, a Lutheran pastor's son, put bluntly today's evangelical charge for the faithful inside church and out:

“Christians should *look* more redeemed.”

## PART TWO: MAKING BAPTISM OUR SIGN

For that work we baptize, and must give an account why we do so. George McCauley SJ, observes that Christian sacramental talk has been skewed for centuries by focusing on what worshippers *receive*, rather than what the Church *does* in Jesus' Spirit and after his example.<sup>11</sup> Talk about Communion has slid into disputes over the diners' fitness to receive grace that God actually gives for free; talk about Baptism has slid into disputes over regenerating the life which God alone creates and owns. Such disputes direct attention away from the Church's evangelical task, which is to hold Jesus high in the whole world's view.

Unless we still hold with old-timey preachers that Baptismal floods chiefly extinguish hellfire, we must tell our world afresh what Christians are up to, and why they should want to join us. Robert Daly SJ, an authority on doctrines of Sacrifice, puts succinctly the purpose of our Christian enterprise: TO RECEIVE LOVE, AND HAND IT ALONG.<sup>12</sup> Daly sees one task overshadowing all current theology: “We must find some way to carry on the classic Christian conversation without the old exclusivism.”

Daly echoes the bible. The prophet Amos<sup>13</sup> reproves Israel for banking on God's favoritism. He declares that God has also “brought up” every neighbor nation, including Israel's classic Philistine enemies, and Amos warns of disaster awaiting any “chosen” people who fail to give justice to the needy—a disaster that had surely occurred by the time this late verse entered his text (otherwise the bible's earliest prophetic writing). To complement Jesus' Table Fellowship, we must uphold Baptism as a prophetic Sign of what Christians believe God is already doing everywhere in the world. Therefore Baptism cannot make Christians “different from other people,” as the Lucan Pharisee wrongly believed.<sup>14</sup> Essays in *Worship* may not always treat Christianity's place among world religions—but in urban centers with growing immigrant populations this is a lively

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<sup>11</sup> George McCauley SJ, *The God of the Group*, Argus, Niles IL, 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Daly's purpose declaration offers a universal appeal uniquely matching the famous Buddhist declaration: to save all sentient beings from suffering.

<sup>13</sup> Amos 9:7f.

<sup>14</sup> [Exegesis of Luke 18:10ff appears in PART ONE of this essay.]

pastoral issue, and even more important, a rising intellectual challenge for educated children of Christian heritage.

Because One God loves and draws all humanity, inspiring every virtue everywhere, dialog among faithful peoples is open-ended and will likely move onward so long as our race survives. Along with a bloody history of religious conflict, traditions also offer encouraging examples. The Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi (d. 1200) was a close contemporary of Thomas Aquinas: both applied foreign metaphysic (Aristotelian or Indian) to a more poetic scripture tradition (Hebrew or Chinese), and so set the course of orthodoxy (Roman Catholic or Confucian) for centuries afterward. Song Dynasty sages debated whether education trains us to perform our present duties aright, and so earn promotion to a nobler re-incarnation (a common Buddhist idea then as today)<sup>15</sup> or rather fosters progressive improvement in this lifetime, as Zhu Xi taught. Zhu Xi invited his chief opponent to lecture at his college—and then instead of rebutting the rival argument, Zhu had it cast in bronze and raised up in his courtyard for his own students to study. His very action embodied his teaching, as an immediate victory could never have done. Christian Baptism must show our teaching as clearly to our plural religious world.

In our Baptismal rituals, exclusion emerges early. Alone among today's public rites, formal dialogs with candidates for Baptism, Confirmation and Vow-Renewal preserve a folk dualism foreign to Hebrew scripture. Some modern rites do smooth out renunciations of “the Devil and all his works” into “forces that war against God.” And indeed during the past century great human tyrants have expressly warred against God. Yet such renunciations sustain a paranoid fantasy that humans can identify some “outside” evil agency to eradicate. Whatever appeal folk superstition may yet have in our era of Vampire films, most hearers know that attitude has led to inquisitions, witch-hunts and pogroms. By contrast, Hebrew scripture's editors embraced the prophets' doctrine that rival deities were empty illusions. The bible Jesus knew allowed God only one ally or enemy, namely ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, Athanasius credits the Roman Empire's conversion to the pagan deities' powerlessness to match the proven ethical effects of Christ's Spirit.<sup>17</sup> (By a like logic, African Christians today have begun to counter the ritual killing of sick infants in order to drive the devil out, by charging the same shamans to supervise those children's medications.) We baptize people into a lifetime of moral choices, and paranoia wrecks moral choice. Genesis 2 portrays humans seduced to grasping after a good they already have—being like God—so their temptation actually offers nothing. As Gregory of Nyssa put it: “Evil does not exist as an object to be chosen.”<sup>18</sup> In the same vein an American

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<sup>15</sup> The present Dalai Lama advises that Christians not convert to Buddhism; any born as Christians should become the best Christians they can, so in their next life they will be re-born as Buddhists. By contrast, Confucians do not teach re-incarnation.

<sup>16</sup> The Apocalypse paints a rival vision glorified by Milton, but that book stole slowly into the New Testament canon, and Eastern Christians still never read it in church.

<sup>17</sup> Athanasius, *Peri tês enanthropêseos tou Logou /On the Word becoming Human*.

<sup>18</sup> Likewise, “Everything that exists is created amid good.” *The Great Catechism*.

proverb “There’s no such thing as a Free Lunch!”, coined during economic Depression, endures in easier times because fools still choose the Free Lunch they know cannot exist.

Origen, long before Luther, set the principle that Christian theology *is* commentary upon scripture. Half a century back, mainline rites replaced institutional names for the Church with “the People of God,” an image both scriptural and humane. But today even fellow-Christians ask: are not Hindus, Jains and Sikhs also People of God? They have a noble theological and ascetical tradition—and their cuisine alone proves divine inspiration! Then what are we doing when we baptize them? We have long recognized Baptism by desire, with or without water and chrism—but why should good people of other faiths desire it? We no longer dare presume to set them apart from their cultures, nor to cut away the ethics and theology already revealed to them by the Only God There Is. Prayers for “Abrahamic Covenant” peoples, meant as an ecumenical opening toward Judaism and Islam, hardly suffice. Watching the murderous violence among Abraham’s heirs in the Middle East and elsewhere, the huge majority of the world’s faithful see no advantage in joining up.

A modern purpose declaration for Christian Baptism will forsake some comfortable language we can no longer rely upon, while we study better speech, preferably from scripture. By far the least useful language is “Christian Initiation,” though this title has become a modern *shibboleth* that perhaps only we Philistine unbelievers eschew. It is by no means ancient; Pierre-Marie Gy discovers it first in post-Tridentine ritual books, where it suited a garrison church besieged from the Orthodox and Muslim east and Protestant north: intellectually defensive and closed to gifts from kindred faiths.<sup>19</sup> Nor is “initiation” scriptural. The Hebrew bible recognizes no successful rites for that, as the unlucky Shechemites learned upon accepting circumcision.<sup>20</sup> Matthew ridicules Hellenistic Jewish conversion campaigns<sup>21</sup> and Paul noisily leaves pagan converts in the same gentile status as he found them, only baptized to live by Christ’s death.<sup>22</sup> Above all, an initiatory analogy squares poorly with Jesus’ teaching that God’s Reign comes now, ready or not, as well as with his Table Fellowship practice.<sup>23</sup>

It is high time we replaced that Tridentine model. Nineteenth century sociologists of religion fancied Christianity as one among many Hellenistic initiatory cults. But

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<sup>19</sup> Harald Buchinger cites Pierre-Marie Gy, “La notion chrétienne d’initiation,” *Le Maison Dieu* 132 (1977), pp 35-36, reprinted in *La Liturgie dans l’histoire*, Paris Cerf (1990), pp 17-39.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 34. “We have no evidence that any author or editor whose work the Hebrew Bible preserves perceived circumcision to be a rite of entrance into the Israelite nation, for there was no such rite.” Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*, Oxford 2011, p.63.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 23:15.

<sup>22</sup> Galatians, *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> [See excerpts from PART ONE of this essay, cited above.]

Hellenistic adepts progressed from cult to cult, as Christians dared not do.<sup>24</sup> Maxwell Johnson cites Mark Searle's observations that pagan initiators assumed their ritual candidates already enjoyed group membership, and that Christian Baptism differed by requiring a decisive conversion of life.<sup>25</sup> Fraternities ran a simultaneous 19<sup>th</sup> Century fad among western men, who did undertake successive initiations as Masons, Oddfellows, Elks, Shriners, and German dueling brothers. Yet within decades those fraternities fell from fashion, some vanishing when they delayed racial opening-up after the American Civil Rights Movement. That same delay crippled US Labor Unions, which today initiate fewer than 10% of workers. In secular ears now, "initiation" evokes exclusive club fees or college parties flowing with alcohol rather than sacred water or social reality. By contrast, Eucharistic participation by newcomers at church is growing wherever welcomed. Churches have good reason now to make the Eucharist our formal Christian incorporation rite, as Nathan Mitchell suggests.<sup>26</sup>

We do better to sound out biblical titles for Baptism. Among those the ancient title "Illumination" ("Enlightenment") has a fine apologetic ring. New Testament texts resound with it, for example where Jesus is portrayed healing the blind: a likely baptismal allegory.<sup>27</sup> And it chimes in with Buddhists, who may be our natural allies more than rivals in freeing this suffering world. Countless enlightened Christian women and men shine brightly under any lens, notably under today's focus upon human rights: Russian Maria Skobtsova, Swedish Raoul Wallenberg, Danish Dag Hammarskjold, American Martin Luther King, Brazilian Helder Câmara, British Cecily Saunders, Chinese K.H. Ting, Serbian Teresa of Calcutta, and South African Desmond Tutu for a few recent examples. Those heroes make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ<sup>28</sup> and draw human hearts everywhere—whether baptized or not—in Jesus' Spirit. Those honor Baptism, and the Church that baptized them. Moreover, the image "Illumination" has enjoyed dramatic ritual expression. St Ephrem's Baptismal title "Fire on the Water" evokes early Syrian processions to the river, and St Gregory's Church processions today to our rocky font, with the whole congregation carrying candles: a participatory action involving all in doing the baptizing. This congregational participation marks a shift in sacramental thinking such as McCauley would have welcomed.

Unhappily, however, the liturgical churches have squandered their birthright to that luminary title. Not one has shone like its individual heroes. Roman clerical pederasty and hierarchical cover-ups spread only the latest clouds darkening our identity before a world that sees no denominational bounds. Enlightened Anglican bishops welcomed Copernicus and the new rational sciences which Martin Luther and Roman inquisitors alike condemned—yet for 300 years they fed off the slave trade, while Africans tilling their estates in the Caribbean and the Confederacy were worked or

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<sup>24</sup> A.D. Knock, *Conversion*, Oxford, 1933.

<sup>25</sup> M.E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: their Evolution and Interpretation*, Liturgical Press, 1999, xvi-xvii.

<sup>26</sup> N.D. Mitchell, *Eucharist as a Sacrament of Initiation*, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> John 9.

<sup>28</sup> Col. 1:24.

whipped to death. Contemporary Eastern Orthodox hierarchs likewise collaborated in enslaving millions of farmers, as “serfdom” spread anew across Russia and Ukraine just when western states had junked it. After the American Civil War, Episcopalian bishops sacrificed their black membership (60% of freedmen in 1865, today 1% of their descendants) by banning all mention of negro slavery out of deference to one slain slave-owning bishop, a Confederate general.

More wars and upheavals converted Episcopalians into a progressive body, with Civil Rights martyrs, birth control encouraged, women and minorities ordained, same-sex unions blessed, and campaigns to save our Mother Earth. But for embarrassing centuries the high liturgical churches abandoned Abolition to ritually impoverished bodies: Quakers, Calvinist sectaries and atheist revolutionaries. Even today longstanding rites block one-half the human race from ordained authority. Crossing the religious marketplace, our procession candles reek of oppression that incense cannot cover. Were our grand liturgical bodies now to call Baptism a Sign of corporate “Illumination,” the unwashed world could retort on evidence that our sacrament had lost its effect.

Another noble traditional image fits us awkwardly for a different reason. Gregory of Nyssa’s Song of Songs commentary and Eastern homilies since the 6<sup>th</sup> century have likened Baptism to Marriage, with Christ as husband and new Christians as spouse. Such sermons once drew richly upon biblical imagery. But today’s profile of marriage makes that simile shaky, and divorce is hardly its chief destabilizer.<sup>29</sup> Changed marriage roles create stresses that earlier Christians did not expect, but our churchgoers know well. An oft-cited United Nations survey across societies agricultural or urban, conservative or liberal, literate or not, could find only one feature shared by lifelong successful marriages everywhere: the husband does what the wife tells him to do! The upside-down Christological implications of that reality should give Baptismal preachers pause before invoking it.

## BAPTISM AND TEACHING

Some opponents object: “Baptism is open to everyone, so why do they need to move directly to Eucharist?”<sup>30</sup> The Book of Acts indeed retails immediate Baptism when a candidate expresses desire. But current Catechumenate planners longing for more committed Christians block off the ready water font, erecting a new ladder of preparatory steps required for Communion. These revive disused customs found in ancient documents: particularly the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, which purports to show Rome before Constantine. But text critique re-dates much information there into the fourth century, when the historical Catechumenate bloomed briefly before infant Baptism

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<sup>29</sup> 80% of first marriages still last for life, a rate known in other times and places; only the serial-remarrying minority push percentages notoriously below 50%.

<sup>30</sup> M. Tuck, “Who is invited to the feast? A critique of the practice of communion without baptism,” *Worship*, 2012.

flooded it away. Even that document's several authors and their churches have become hard to identify.<sup>31</sup>

Hence planners mine Constantinian post-baptismal “mystagogy” for their pre-baptismal curriculum. They create here a fine educational opportunity. Yet despite a nod toward our early heritage, they substitute an academic program leading to a baptismal graduation, in place of ancient mystagogical instruction afterward. Mark Searle, a movement founder, observed that instead of becoming knowledgeable parishioners as planned, top catechumens hoped to train as catechists in turn: an outcome exactly like graduate education.<sup>32</sup> Instead, we may wonder why today's leaders do not adopt the early mystagogical plan directly.

Martin Luther's Shorter Catechism declares that the essential action in Baptism is not the water bath, but the lifelong growth in virtue that follows it. Luther is hardly alone. As images for Confirmation—the conscious baptismal experience for most Christians—poet George McCauley SJ<sup>33</sup> calls up vivid actions: “unwrapping a new card deck before an all-night poker game;” “sliding behind the wheel for a cross-country drive;” and (my own favorite!) “meeting the person who will give you the transplant.” None of these crucial actions defines what follows; on the contrary, what follows gives the initial event all its meaning. One could throw new cards away otherwise, or drive to a neighborhood grocery and return, or decide against surgery after all. An ancient Christian mystagogue or Confucian teacher might well have embraced these images. Indeed, most Christian congregants today were baptized as infants, learned doctrine afterward, and have no other experience to share with the newly baptized. Worse than wasting an educational opportunity, rites overruling the experience of current participants cast a shadow of fiction over all Christian teaching, as if it only fit some bygone era. (The New Zealand Anglican rite avoids this pitfall: see below.)

In fact, Luther writes in a long orthodox tradition, if sometimes marginalized on sacramental battlefields. Gregory of Nyssa, the leading theologian of his age, revered progress above all status. Because humans have limits (unlike God) we must move and grow forever: toward or away from eternal goodness; in this life and the next.<sup>34</sup> Human ethical stability requires constant moral progress upward; to pause for even one moment would be to fall away from God.<sup>35</sup> A century later Theodore of Mopsuestia, a favorite

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<sup>31</sup> P.F. Bradshaw, M.E. Johnson, L.E. Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, Augsburg Fortress, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> In conversation with the author. Searle's early death in 1992 robbed the Church of an astute planner. John Hill, a current leader, informs me that this pattern has subsided since.

<sup>33</sup> George McCauley SJ, *The God of the Group*, *op. cit.*, p.37.

<sup>34</sup> A. Malherbe calls this the central theme of Gregory's final work, *The Life of Moses*. (Paulist Press, 1974); see also Gregory's *Against Eunomius*.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory labels this pairing of stasis and motion paradoxical, as perhaps it was for Hellenistic philosophy. But modern high schoolers understand from Galilean relativity that stability happens among objects constantly moving, like solar systems.



resource for modern Catechists, grounded his writings upon a presumed Pauline sentence emphasizing lifelong progress and achievement: “The Son of God learned obedience through what he suffered, and when he had been perfected, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation.”<sup>36</sup> That text centered Theodore’s Christology and his mystagogy together, inspiring new Christians to grow as their Master did. Theodore’s sermons supply most of what we know about early Christian education, and he delivered them *after* the water bath, matching practice and doctrine in the very way Luther divined.

## LIFE AND DEATH IN SERVICE

As Origen and Luther would have it, scripture does outline a purpose in baptizing. Yet churches have always painted that outline in colors beyond scripture’s somber palette. Unlike the bible’s rainbow of meal vignettes, but like a monumental Chinese landscape in ink monochrome, the New Testament shades Baptism with Death, and beckons the viewer to enter and walk with Jesus there.

Paul writes of being baptized into Jesus’ death, and all four gospels have Jesus call his coming death his Baptism.<sup>37</sup> Jesus’ passion shades gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry generally, revealing the evangelists’ challenge of proclaiming a Messiah shamefully executed, and their churches’ own experience of persecution. Mark has Jesus ask whether disciples James and John are willing to share his Baptism, and when they agree, Jesus insists he can promise them no higher reward.<sup>38</sup> Critical examination has discovered further passion imagery in passages less obvious: for example, the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, explored by Raymond Brown.<sup>39</sup> And most dramatically, the Markan Transfiguration on the Mount,<sup>40</sup> once treated as a resurrection experience editorially misplaced, is now recognized as a meditation on Christ’s passion, wherein the mount stands symbolically for Golgotha. Hence this pericope now precedes the Lenten readings in all three annual lectionary cycles that western denominations share.

Because the Jordan Baptism story opens Mark’s gospel with a Trinitarian theophany, preachers have conventionally portrayed it as Jesus’ public career launch. A few interpreters have read there a moment of adoption, when the young Jesus first became God’s Son and took authority; others as Jesus’ spiritual calling, for his followers to replicate sacramentally; still others as an institutional unification legend for two later disciple groups. But the Jordan Baptism is not a historical event. John the Evangelist’s community has clearly not heard of it; the fourth gospel separates Jesus from water Baptism ritual, saying that Jesus did not baptize, only his disciples did.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Etienne

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<sup>36</sup> Hebrews 5:8. Rowan Williams, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> Romans 6:3; Mark 10:39//Matthew 20:23; Luke 12:50; John 17, 18:11

<sup>38</sup> Mark 10:35-45//Matthew 20:20-28.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: an Adult Christ at Christmas*, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Mark 9:2-8 and parallels.

<sup>41</sup> John 4:2. M. Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, infers from John 3:22-4:2 that Jesus himself did baptize (pp. 16-19). Johnson’s argument employs textual speculation by

Nodet & Justin Taylor conclude from close textual study that Jesus and John the Baptizer never actually met: instead, the narrative presents a theological reflection. These historians draw a picture of first-century Palestinian religion so complex that no disciple group can be simply identified.<sup>42</sup>

Instead, I propose we read the Jordan story as a passion meditation like the Transfiguration. In form the stories exactly match. Both are set in locales crucial for Israel's national vocational narrative (Mount Tabor; the Jordan River). Both have Jesus' bystanders express amazement with wrong-headed responses, (Peter, James and John; John the Baptizer) whereupon Jesus assures them that what will soon happen fits a tradition they only partly grasp. (Moses and Elijah symbolize scriptures presaging the Messiah's death; John Baptizer learns the Messiah's real rank as God's Servant.) God's voice closes both stories with the same punch line: This is my beloved Son (the Transfiguration text adds: Hear =obey him!) Moreover, Jesus' allies in both scenes are headed for deaths like his own: James and John will taste his fatal cup (see above), the manner of Peter's martyrdom is prophesied at John 21:19; and John Baptist will be arrested and executed in Mark's next chapter.

Though lacking a Jordan pericope, John has Jesus wash his disciples' feet at dinner while preaching about his coming crucifixion, and bid them serve each other likewise. Here is Baptism as all four canonical evangelists somberly paint it. Only one short passage adds a brighter tint: the so-called Great Commission that ends Matthew's text.<sup>43</sup> Critics hold that Jesus reformed beliefs and practices among his own people only. Later this paragraph was added, like the extra endings in Mark and John, to assert Christ would affirm Paul's gentile mission, albeit decades after Roman soldiers had executed both teachers, and leveled Jerusalem in the year 70. Otherwise, the link between Baptism and Death remained obvious to early Christians. They counted pagans who chose to die with them as among the baptized, whether those had voiced desire for any sacrament or none. And Paul Bradshaw has discovered the moving tale of a shipwrecked and dying Syrian mother who anointed her baby Baptismally in her own blood when no oils were available.

Nevertheless, unlike zealot recruiters in many ages, churches ruled out rushing to martyrdom. Even in our own era—numerically the greatest age of martyrs, especially deadly in some countries—Christians have drawn candidates with an appeal to lifelong Service instead. John's gospel understands Jesus' death as a costly action of Service: to his chosen mission, to his gathered friends, and hence to God. John's reading created a core Christian theological principle: God acts by pouring out God's self in Service. Here is the likely source for our common speech, which in many tongues equates "services"

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another writer too complex to sift here; instead let me follow Zhu Xi by encouraging my readers to study it for themselves.

<sup>42</sup> E. Nodet & J. Taylor, *The Origins of Christianity*, Liturgical Press, 1998, pp. 74-80.

These authors conclude, for example, that Rabbi Akiva, martyred hero of later Judaism, would on his own terms have been counted a Christian. (ch.5.) That was a murky era!

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

with “liturgies.” Early twentieth century renewal promoted congregational participation by exhorting that “liturgy” (*leitourgia*) meant the Work of the People, and not of their ordained clergy alone. But in Hellenistic Greek *leitourgia* named the Service of one donor for the common benefit. Hence the “Divine Liturgy” is Service we receive from each other, and so from God.<sup>44</sup>

Service likewise shaped the standard vision of Christian community. Basil of Caesarea launched cenobitic (“common life”) monasticism in the fourth century, reforming an earlier culture of desert solitaries. Basil protested: how can anchorites live by the gospel if they have no one nearby to whom they can show charity?<sup>45</sup> For centuries since, churches and religious communities (including contemplatives) have practiced “service outreach” as a mark of authenticity. Non-Christian eyes admire it too: Hindus rank Service highest among spiritual values. Military recruitment in many cultures has shifted toward heroic Service in place of self-immolation. Here then is the Church’s proper purpose in baptizing: not a decisive shift in relationship with humanity’s Creator, but a life of growing Service like Jesus’ own, through a future beyond the water bath (Luther’s focus) whereas martyrdom ends the future.

## OUR SIGN OF GOD’S BLESSING

Let me propose here a further appeal for Baptism, not classically assigned to that sacrament, yet well known and widely beloved. Matthew’s Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) offer us an evangelical Sign drawn from scripture, as Isaiah’s banquet and Jesus’ table were. They declare what Christians believe God is already doing everywhere, whether the world recognizes God at work or not. Jesus himself preached the four blessings we find in Luke’s text, declaring them in simple, universal terms. And Matthew, who expanded those to nine, did likewise. No wonder Eastern monks recited them before Communion; and Orthodox Slavs now open every Eucharist singing them;<sup>46</sup> and non-Christian faithful people worldwide hear them warmly. After all, Matthew’s healing stories expressly find salvific Faith in unconverted pagans. (See below.)

Matthew’s nine Beatitudes distinctively suit our purpose. Jesus’ original four were conundrums, like *Zen Koans*. For example, his “Blessed are the poor” shakes a popular Semitic belief that riches signify God’s favor. (That belief resonates in American civil religion.) On the contrary, Jesus implies that the poor cannot be misled by such an error, and so can swiftly welcome God’s Reign while the rich miss their chance. Luke

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<sup>44</sup> The Septuagint uses this word for priests serving the worshipping congregation. Cf Luke 1:23, Hebrews 8:6. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* traces the term in subsequent eastern and western church use.

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Kirk, *The Vision of God: the Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (London & New York 1931, Harper 1966) pp 264-266.

<sup>46</sup> This chant eventually replaced the first of three processional psalms in the Slavic Divine Liturgy. The Episcopal Church picked up the chant in its current Hymnal, if not in the Prayer Book Eucharist.

writes for a non-Semitic readership, and to clarify he sets a classic Greek rhetorical *peirazmos* with a woe opposite each blessing: the tables can turn and impoverish those who are rich now. But Matthew composes more blessings of his own. Since he augments the first to read “poor *in spirit*,” some comment that he spiritualizes the lot. But those miss Matthew’s real target, which is Christology: his full nine Beatitudes draw an ethical portrait of Jesus himself, for followers to imitate. Matthew’s gospel portrays Jesus repeatedly like Moses, whose ancient Law once taught everyone—not Jews alone—how to be human beings as God created us. And here the New Moses teaches everyone: you can be a Christlike human being, through whom God saves the world, if you follow Jesus’ example through life and death.

Of Matthew’s five new blessings, the first he added (the third in his full list) is chief, because this alone quotes scripture directly: Psalm 37:11 reads in Hebrew, “the patient poor shall possess the land.” Direct biblical quotation invites our borrowing to declare why we baptize the world. But to catch Matthew’s meaning, we must read that psalm verse in Greek as he knew it—not “blessed are the meek,” or “humble,” as the Hebrew original implies.<sup>47</sup> *Anaw* is one of the rare qualities Hebrew scripture praises in humankind yet never attributes to God, who is always in command, even if longsuffering and quick to forgive (Joel 2:13). Moreover, an embarrassing history of political repression by Christians has put passive humility in poor odor today.<sup>48</sup> The Church can no longer ask the downtrodden to embrace such an ideal. By strong contrast, Paul repeatedly advocates striving like a runner or boxer,<sup>49</sup> overcoming pain to follow Jesus’ heroic leadership through faith unto death and beyond.

Perhaps with an eye to higher theology, the Greek Septuagint renders Psalm 37:11 with *praüs/praeis*. That is no passive quality. Gregory of Nyssa’s third Beatitude sermon shows that Hellenistic Greek still wrote *praüs* in the classic sense: an ideal sage or ruler who calmly faces calumny or opposition, never distracted by temptation to wrath or indifference, and moves to put things right.<sup>50</sup> Joel’s prophecy at 2:13 could hardly want a better one-word summary of God’s behavior. This virtue appears likewise in many gospel stories about Jesus, and the passion stories in particular, where Jesus cuts a regal figure in shameful contrast to pliant Pilate. The few socially radical sayings likely come from Jesus himself exalt *praüs*: do not return evil for evil; turn the other cheek, etc.<sup>51</sup> Roman occupation may have set their historical context but not their meaning. No pitiful servility is here, but self-mastery serving one’s main purpose.

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<sup>47</sup> Pace H.B. Green’s exhaustive study *Matthew: Poet of the Beatitudes*, 2001, which pairs the first and third blessings, equating both *poor in spirit* and *meek* with the Hebrew *anaw*.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Weiss’ *Marat/Sade* drama derides Christian social teaching as: *Leidet! Leidet! Denn so will es Gott!* Eighteenth century piety unhappily undergirded that attitude; whereas today Christian social activists argue instead for forgiving our oppressors.

<sup>49</sup> Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 2:16.

<sup>50</sup> Hauck et al. in Kittel, *TWNT* vol. VI.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 5:38-42//Luke 6:29-30.

The later biblical writer Sirach extolled *praiūs* monarchs,<sup>52</sup> and in his sense Hebrew editors ultimately added *anaw* to the Pentateuch description of Moses.<sup>53</sup> Jesus is Matthew's new Moses: no wonder among gospel writers Matthew alone uses this word! He augments also Mark's tale of the entry into Jerusalem so that Jesus rides an ass like ancient Akkadian royalty, following Solomon's example and Micah's prophecy.<sup>54</sup> And Matthew's passion retells the last trials of a regal Peacemaker. Here is a resolute, right-dealing hero, Israel's hoped-for King, and all who follow his example will inherit the earth. Drawing upon the Greek bible his readers knew, Matthew's third Beatitude paints Messiahship in a dramatic royal color, a color all resembling this king wear. Without this virtue we could recruit no career military, police or firefighters; no epidemiologists; no ill-paid schoolteachers or geriatric nurses; no missionaries or undercover spies. All those accept the costs and will pay them without anger as their chosen purpose requires.

The principle of non-anger enjoys even broader reverence among other world religions: for example Buddhists, with whom Christians have a growing conversation. And Zhu Xi would have recognized here a Confucian ideal.<sup>55</sup> Non-Christians attending a baptism can pray readily with us that our candidates will grow in such a *praiūs* life. —Our challenge is how best to English the word! *Meek* will hardly do; *patient* and *slow to anger* are too narrow; *calmly purposeful* may serve best, as it evokes Gandhi, Tutu, Mandela, and a myriad martyrs like Maria Skobtsova, who all took Jesus for their hero. We need not separate peoples from their values and longings, when we baptize them into serving one another by this Beatitude; nor change their spiritual identity to earn them the bible's promise that they will inherit the earth.

Such spiritual power serves our whole suffering world. Far from making Christians different from others, Baptism into Jesus' *praiūs* Spirit washes away the Sin—the sexism, racism, ethnic prejudice, ageism for example—that enrages humans and distracts us from our true calling: to become one with each other and with all creation. Matthew's Beatitudes spell out how Buddhists, Daoists, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Condomblés, Shintoists, Hindus, Jains, Huicholes, Hopis and Christians can all live alike in God's eyes. And our heroes are alike too. Siddhârtha Gautama, who found enlightenment before Jesus or Paul and spent a longer career teaching humanity to transcend suffering: he was *praiūs* clear enough. The Buddha's virtues reflect the goodness of the One and Only God There Is; and they have spread blessing—in Hebrew, fruitfulness beyond mere reason—exactly as Matthew's gospel promises.<sup>56</sup> Centuries after that sage, Jesus fulfilled every Matthean Beatitude completely. And now as Luther

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<sup>52</sup> Ecclesiasticus 45:4.

<sup>53</sup> Numbers 12:3.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Kings 1:28-49.

<sup>55</sup> *Liángzhì* means acting on conviction that people's profound nature is good, as Mencius taught. P.J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, Atlanta 1990, ch. iv.

<sup>56</sup> With our habitual focus on Jesus' passion, Christians will want to read of the Buddha's death in the *Great Parinibbana Sutra*: a brief text that epitomizes his life.

teaches, the ascended Christ fills all things.<sup>57</sup> Therefore we baptize all who revere Jesus' name, praying his Spirit will lead them ever forward into a life more like his, whatever their culture and religious heritage, and so will bless still others. That is why we can call Christian Baptism a prophetic Sign of what God is doing throughout the whole world, inside churches and outside.

Of course Matthew's Beatitudes explicitly anticipate opposition and death, which must test any human pursuing unification with enemies. The baptized need not rush to martyrdom, but only face it as *prais* Jesus did. And once started on the Beatitudes' path, they will never stop progressing towards God's goodness, because they never stop having ethical steps to take. That progress beyond the ritual gives Baptism all proper meaning: it is Gregory Nyssen's moral vision; Theodore's teaching practice; McCauley's inspiration; Luther's dream.

Then in place of modern "initiation," or ancient Christian "illumination," let Baptism become our Christian Sign of Serving Humanity According to the Beatitudes, with Matthew's third Beatitude in chief. Paul says as many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ: just so we put on Jesus' purposeful *prais* clothing. Of course it is oversized at first, but as his Spirit works upon us we grow daily until we fit it well.<sup>58</sup> Matthew's nine Beatitudes have cut the full Christ-like tailor pattern for us: whether we suffer persecution or not; whether we mourn or rejoice at times; so long as our plans remain pure and our love steady; when we face indignity resolute for what is right; and finally when we make peace where justice can no longer be sorted out: thus day by day every imitator receives God's love and shares it with the world. Our Sign says that Jesus' devout Hindu admirer Mohandas Gandhi spread Christ's Blessing as surely as Gandhi's admirer Mother Teresa of Calcutta did.

## PEOPLES OF FAITH

This universalist line may unsettle some who believe the Church's Faith alone can define Christian Baptism. On the other hand, it addresses today's plural religious context, which many Christians know, and local mission must address. Some patristic and medieval writers took an exclusive view of Church and sacraments, without dialog or cooperation among religions sharing ethical values. But not all ancient authors did so. The New Testament leaves us no way to tell what Jesus himself thought of Faith. All surviving texts come from bible writers and editors: that is, from our fellow Christians expressing their faith. For Paul, our earliest author, Faith means trusting God to fulfill God's promises despite appearances, as Abraham and Jesus did. Paul lists no doctrines beyond God's plan proven in Christ's resurrection, not even the acceptance of Paul's own

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<sup>57</sup> This was Luther's rebuttal to Zwingli, for whom Christ's body had risen to heaven and could not be found on our altars.

<sup>58</sup> R.A. Norris drew out Paul's metaphor so, and Theodore and Luther would surely second him.

arguments. When raging against opposing' views, Paul never claims that his teaching is salvific, only that God's actions are.

Faith shows up next in gospel *midrash* stories, where aggressive people reach after the healing power they believe Jesus has, and unconverted pagans receive God's Blessing upon their Faith, excelling even observant Jews. The Samaritan Leper and the Syro-Phoenician Woman (a Philistine) are both traditional enemies of Jewish religion; the Roman Centurion is purposely distinguished from believing Jews.<sup>59</sup> Indeed Matthew's gospel has Jesus say that correct belief is wholly a gift from God, not anything humans can provide.<sup>60</sup> Here the synoptic editors continue Jesus' own contrarian habit, whose parable protagonists rupture his hearers' moral assumptions. Matthew reports bluntly a saying likely by Jesus, "from John the Baptizer until now...violent people have taken the kingdom by force."<sup>61</sup> Luke's Zacchaeus *midrash* represents that saying through a precisely constructed story.<sup>62</sup> The loathed tax collector Zacchaeus responds immediately to an arriving opportunity, much as the parables' heroes do; he acts aggressively, as the healing stories teach; Jesus invites Zacchaeus unconditionally, to the crowd's blind consternation; he responds as the prophet Joel would have him do—not with tears, but a change of life plans. Here is Luke's portrait of his own church, faithful at once to Jesus' teaching and to the core of Hebrew scripture.

Luke's portrait adds an ethical nuance further inferred from the prophet: Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' dinner invitation as the parables' heroes do not, by an absurdly generous plan that he cannot credibly fulfill. Yet Jesus thereupon declares his salvation, since human ethical success cannot measure out God's *chesed*. Luke's church expects a change of plans will result from Eucharistic fellowship, though never properly earn it. Likewise the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns against "cheap grace:" a fatal error that consists not in taking salvific gifts undeservedly (what Lutheran would object to that?) but failing to change one's life direction in faithful response to God's free gift.

New Testament writings do hint at early Faith formulae, but our earliest explicit lists come from mystagogical instruction centuries later. And whereas late patristic churches installed doctrinal "Symbols" (later called Creeds) as pre-conditions for Baptism and Communion, The New Zealand Book of Common Prayer follows earlier rites by reversing that order. There after the water bath, the newly baptized join the whole community professing Faith together, in a biblical summary that even some non-Christians might affirm.

That New Zealand liturgy affords moderns our closest likeness to New Testament Faith. God's Grace exceeds reason, and attends our life's actions without depending upon our beliefs. As James 2:19 warns, "The demons believe the same as you do, and

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<sup>59</sup> Luke 17:19, Matthew 15:28, Matthew 8:6 // Luke 5:10.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew 16:17

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 11:12.

<sup>62</sup> Luke 19:1ff.

they tremble with rage and fear!” Nor can our sacraments “channel” Grace to reward Christian prayers above non-Christians, as some propose without biblical support, since Grace (Hebrew *chanan*) by definition does not flow through channels. The more universal our understanding of Faith, the more scriptural and traditional we actually become, and the readier to promote Christian Baptism among the world’s folk. Judging their Faith is beyond our ken; like heroes in *midrash* healing stories they must come on their own terms, and tell us what they mean by coming. Paul presents Jesus as the New Adam who restores all humanity, not believers alone. And Gregory of Nyssa reasons that since Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, and sexually birthed all their human descendants, therefore God’s image can never be seen in Richard Fabian, or *Worship*’s readers, or any Christian church, but only in the human race as a whole.<sup>63</sup>

Eastern tradition long brought these insights forward, overriding lethal religious boundaries. After an Easter reading that now introduces every Vigil Baptism, the sixth century preacher and poet Romanos the Melodist sang at Holy Wisdom Cathedral, in the Roman Empire’s final capital:

Then the Red Sea did not save all,  
only the people whom the waters revealed.  
But now it is open for each person and all races.  
They are not turned back,  
nor separated from one another.  
You are not an Egyptian, are you?  
Whoever you are, come,  
for living water has shown  
your resurrection.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Gregory Nyssen, *That there are not Three Gods*: “To say that there are ‘many human beings’ is a common abuse of language. Granted there is a plurality of those who share in the same human nature...but in all of them, humanity is one.” *Tunc et Ipse Filius*: “Christ’s body, as it is often said, has been united to all human nature.”

<sup>64</sup> Walter Ray, *Tasting Heaven on Earth: Worship in Sixth-Century Constantinople*, Eerdmans, 2013.



## APPENDIX: PART ONE IN FULL

### THE SCANDALOUS TABLE

©By Richard Fabian

(from *The Art of Tentmaking*, Stephen Burns, editor  
2011 Canterbury Press)

Upon first entering St Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church in San Francisco, you will see a church distinctively arranged. Immediately before you stands an altar table in an open space; and rising beyond it in a bright courtyard, a rocky baptismal font. Nave seating for worshippers stretches off to the right.

St Gregory's altar table bears two inscriptions: one pedestal facing the entry doors reads in Greek from Luke's gospel,

“This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them.”<sup>65</sup>

Not former sinners, not repentant sinners; *sinners*. Despite some recent protests, gospel critics agree that such insults and scandalous charges, especially those embarrassing to the church, are our most reliable evidence about Jesus. Mainline Christian tradition has always upheld him on this point. The Christian Eucharist must be the world's only religious meal where all the diners are officially declared unworthy to eat, every time they eat. Nor does Eucharistic sharing set Christians apart as unlike others. The altar table pedestal facing our font quotes St Isaac of Nineveh:

“Did not the Lord share the table of tax collectors and harlots?

So then—do not distinguish between the worthy and unworthy. All must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve.”

On the other hand, our setting reverses the relation in many recent buildings that locate the font as an entry passage toward the Eucharistic banquet space. Our architectural plan expresses our sacramental custom, and both reverse widespread Christian order: we welcome all to communion at Jesus' table, and invite any unbaptized to baptism afterward. Today the “Open Table” or “Open Communion” spreads amid debate, as “conservatives” lament its break with two millennia of tradition, and “liberals” plead for welcome, acceptance, and openness more congenial with our age. But our rationale at St Gregory's differs from both parties, and rises instead from a revised reading of Jesus' teaching ministry and death, to which we intend the same faithfulness that ancient Christians always intended. We express that same faithfulness in a modern way, just as all churches without exception must do today.

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<sup>65</sup> Luke 15:2. The Greek *houtos*, lit, “this one”: in idiomatic usage the substantive alone is dismissive or pejorative.

## ***MODERN HISTORY AND JESUS***

The sociologist Peter Berger distinguished “modern” from traditional societies. In modern societies all is done by rational choice, not taken as given: therefore every choice demands explaining.<sup>66</sup> (Let me sidestep the term “post-modern,” which suggests faster intellectual change than human society can demonstrably achieve. The modern world began at the dawn of the Renaissance, and on Berger’s terms it is still going on.)

Moderns must criticize the past, not merely purge the past. Our western sixteenth century Reformers preached faithfully against superstition wherever they saw it; yet while attacking superstition they mistakenly destroyed much that was beautiful, truthful, and indeed primitively Christian. Today we must allow that Christians in every age have acted in faithfulness to Jesus’ teaching and example. The architects of our received sacramental policy built for no other purpose. Nevertheless, our knowledge of Jesus has shifted sharply today, and faithfulness to Jesus compels us to shift our practice too. Otherwise we launch something that would shock our forebears: an anti-Jesus counter-revolution.

Over a century ago scripture critics began distinguishing the “historical” Jesus from the “Christ of faith” our written gospels portray. At first their goal was “Positive History,” as the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) put it, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*: tell the past as it really was. This project produced a remote and puzzling Jesus, variously imaged from conflicting details. But ancient writers prove poor sources for Positive History, not only from limits to their own knowledge but also from their evangelical intention to tell what they believe matters. Then as now, each interpreter chooses preferred colors for a portrait. Every portrait, from the “scripturally conservative” to the most hypothetical, must be viewed and weighed for the modern sculpture it is.

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<sup>66</sup> Berger’s example: at *Ujamaa* villages the Tanzanian government has collected tribes too small to thrive alone, into cooperative villages. The village councils like to choose days when the various tribes dance their dances for each other, as a way of fostering mutual understanding among people who may not share the same language. Here Berger finds all the elements of modernness. Beforehand, people danced their dances because these inevitably had to be danced: when the moon rose; when the crops came in. But now they were danced at a time and for a *reason* chosen by the village council—who could conceivably choose *not* to dance at all. Beforehand, the whole people danced; there was no audience, except perhaps the gods. But now they danced for an audience of their fellow villagers to watch and learn. Berger concludes, “In sum, even if the motions of the dances remained unaltered in every detail, they would now no longer be the same dances; dancing then and dancing now are two drastically different activities.” [Berger, P., *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethic and Social Change*, Basic Books, New York, 1974, p.170.]

It seems each new publication about Jesus' time throws fresh darkness on the subject. Etienne Nodet & Justin Taylor's magisterial *The Origins of Christianity* (1998) recreates an anciently confused mixture. These authors conclude, for example, that Jesus and John Baptist never met; and Rabbi Akiva, martyred hero of later Judaism, would on his own terms have been counted a Christian. That was a murky era! As New Testament critic H. Benedict Green, CR, put it: the more we learn, the more we must admit Jesus is a man we know very little about.

Trained historians keep sight of how little we know. The Jesus Seminar in the USA has usefully publicized historical criticism of the gospels. Yet I recall a presentation where one member proclaimed, "I think I know who the historical Jesus was; I just don't like him very much." That critic was touted as a radical, but he was merely out of date. No trained modern historian would claim both to know and dislike Napoleon, let alone a figure 2000 years dead who left only second-hand evidence behind. Many thousands loved Napoleon, and many thousands hated him; but whether *you* and Napoleon would have liked each other is unavailable information, pure conjecture. The historical Jesus is no different.

Even more challenging, the past is a country none today can visit. Modern history-writing began when the Dutch art historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) studied the 15<sup>th</sup> century brothers Van Eyck, and the more he researched them, the farther away their world seemed, and stranger. Huizinga wrote: "We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed."<sup>67</sup> That means the end of Positive History. If even sensory experience cannot build us a bridge into past peoples' lives, a historian must rely solely on what they choose to tell us. And past peoples have no thought of talking with us—what can they know of the future? Instead, they talk of their connection with their

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<sup>67</sup> *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919). Huizinga's opening deserves quoting fully:

"To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. All experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life. Every event, every action, was still embodied in expressive and solemn forms, which raised them to the dignity of a ritual. For it was not merely the great facts of birth, marriage and death which, by the sacredness of the sacrament, were raised to the rank of mysteries; incidents of less importance, like a journey, a task, a visit, were equally attended by a thousand formalities: benedictions, ceremonies, formulae.

"Calamities and indigence were more afflicting than at present; it was more difficult to guard against them, and to find solace. Illness and health presented a more striking contrast; the cold and darkness of winter were more real evils. Honours and riches were relished with greater avidity and contrasted more vividly with surrounding misery. We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed."  
(F. Hopman translation, 1924, republished Dover, 1999.)

own past. Human thought and behavior change slower than journalists propose, and our continuities typically outweigh our revolutions. So first of all a modern historian searches for what ancient peoples say connects them with their own past.

Hence “conservatives” and reformers face the same challenge: the past is faraway from all, so all must give reasons for their choices. And “conservative” ripostes that sainted ancient writers did not countenance the Open Table are doubly illusory. (1) No proponent claims that Justin Martyr or his successors favored the Open Table. Evidence abounds that churches since the age of Apologists have required baptism before communion, at least normatively. Nevertheless (2) I claim a stronger continuity with the ancients: our common loyalty to Jesus as our age knows him, and to theology based on scripture study first of all. (It was Origen, long before Luther, who established that Christian theology *is* commentary upon scripture.)

And scripture looks ever backward. The gospel writers write much the way Chinese painters paint landscapes: with allusions to treasured past words and works, which they expect their public to recognize. Gospel writers present Jesus’ sayings and his whole career in the light of his crucifixion, which was an unknown future for him, but well past for their readers; and they use the yet more distant written past to tell readers what Jesus meant. We must look to Hebrew scripture first of all, in order to understand what the gospels say Jesus is saying.

Therefore Jesus’ own relation to scripture is crucial. Some critics argue that because his parables refer regularly to agrarian life, Jesus must have been a peasant, and so illiterate. Yet others point a few miles from Nazareth to the Galilean city of Sepphoris, a cosmopolitan center where a boy of peasant stock could readily have learned to read. Synagogues even in small towns like Nazareth and Capernaum were places for study, before they were places for worship. Jewish historians tell us scripture was their first textbook, and schoolboys memorized long passages much as boys do there in a muslim *medrassah* today. Yet more important, internal gospel evidence supports Jesus’ awareness of sacred text. And more than one parable turns on a question of literacy.

For example, the Cheating Bailiff<sup>68</sup> can read: he helps illiterate peasants to forge new low-rent leases, and so to defraud their landlord, his former employer. This parable, perhaps drawn from local events, was ethically disturbing enough to call for an editorial gloss at its end. But the original can hardly be a story told by an illiterate for illiterates to hear. Peasant folk tales exalt canny locals who outwit the educated by their native wiles; they do not hold up educated examples like the bailiff, whom illiterate peasants cannot imitate.

Because Jesus’ parables often draw on well-known events or bear multiple interpretations, his relation to scripture is one area where we may hope to catch his own beliefs. That enterprise is driven by more than scholarly curiosity. Jesus holds authority among Christians that no historical figure holds in other religions. Buddhists may

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<sup>68</sup> Luke 16:1ff.

recognize many teachers sharing equal standing. Prince Siddartha Gautama launched Buddhism with his revolutionary insights about transience, attachment, asceticism, and enlightenment. But there are many buddhas: you too can be one today. And later *jataka* legends abound, telling the prince's incarnations in far remoter antiquity, without compromising Buddhist teaching. By contrast, the New Testament assigns Jesus unique authority; and the fifth century Council of Chalcedon likewise ruled that Jesus was not inspired like biblical authors—he speaks with God's own voice. Thus in Paul's case we may modify or discard Paul's talk about slavery, about women in church, about other matters. But no Christian writer cavalierly corrects Jesus. And no disagreement with Jesus will hold up long among his followers. Correcting Jesus is out of the question for his Church.

Jesus' uniqueness has created problems for modern apologetic. Above all, God's Kingdom fills our scripture and our worship texts. The 20<sup>th</sup> century opened with agreement among biblical scholars and liturgy reformers, that Jesus preached God's future Kingdom would come soon, so his hearers must prepare to handle it. The New Testament uses the metaphor *parousia* in Greek, or *adventus* in Latin: this was a regular administrative event, when a provincial governor came auditing tax returns, rewarding loyal officers, punishing treason, hearing appeals, and firming up public order. Here was a ready image for the Hebrew *tsedaqah*, which throughout the bible means "God undoes our enemies and puts things right." First century Palestine abounded with groups preparing for God to come like a touring governor, finish off the wretched world order they knew, and put things right with the Jewish nation properly back on top. Our biblical book of Revelation typifies their literature, with a few Christianizing paragraphs stitched in. So 20<sup>th</sup> century liturgists reformed our worship to restore this re-discovered eschatological emphasis on the future, assuming they were matching Jesus' teaching.

But a dilemma arose once Schweitzer distinguished the Jesus of History from the Christ of Faith. By 1975, Hans Küng's *On Being a Christian* warned: modern Christians must come to terms with the fact that Jesus was wrong about the *parousia*. The world did not end as Jesus had prophesied. On the contrary, Roman imperial power thrived for fourteen centuries more, and embraced Jesus as its new official god. Here was the profoundest challenge scientific research has made to Christian orthodoxy, far more threatening than evolution! How could Christians hold faith in an incarnate Lord whose "messianic consciousness" was not only bizarre, but mistaken? What further authority could we give him, seeing his favorite obsession disproved? Assigning authority to an all-knowing Risen Christ of Faith (once the mistaken Jesus is gone) would contradict the gospels wholesale. They were written expressly to tell us Who It Is That Is Here Now: so abandoning the historical Jesus would mean abandoning scripture too.

A decade later and to many scholars' surprise, Schweitzer's and Küng's dilemma about correcting Jesus dissolved, and with it, a scholarly alliance on which liturgical renewal relied—though some old allies have not noticed. In the 1960's, British critics Norman Perrin and Reginald Fuller had overturned five decades of earlier argument by relegating all gospel futurism to Christian commentary (*midrash*). During the next decades their opinion attained critical consensus. Unlike both Jesus' contemporary

teachers and his well-meaning gospel editors, Jesus himself never talked about the future. Instead, Jesus preached the Kingdom come here and now, before we could possibly prepare or manage it. We must respond wisely, and just in time—otherwise fools will find it is already too late. Here comes God, ready or not!<sup>69</sup>

### ***JESUS' PROPHETIC SIGN: A STUMBLING BLOCK***

For his distinctive message, Jesus chose a Sign. The Hebrew word for a Sign is *'ôth*; the Greek is *sêmeion*; but setting aside etymology and linguistic philosophy that fill many commentaries, we may observe how Hebrew prophets actually use Signs in scripture. They use Signs to show people what God is doing, because people are dangerously failing to see it. Jeremiah shatters a pot at the Jerusalem garbage dump, saying: this is what God will do with our nation unless our leaders change their plans.<sup>70</sup> Jeremiah's Sign does not begin magically to break up the nation; rather it is his urgent gesture to win people's attention, so they will see what God is up to before it is tragically too late.<sup>71</sup>

For a prophetic Sign of his teaching that God comes here now, ready or not, Jesus took up an image from the prophet Isaiah, who envisioned a banquet where God's chosen Hebrew people and the unclean heathen would dine together.<sup>72</sup> Jesus began dining publicly with notoriously unqualified sinners, who were shunned by other religious reformers: a practice that above all led to his condemnation and death.

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<sup>69</sup> Frederick Borsch once lamented to me how swiftly the majority sided with Perrin & Fuller, rejecting Borsch's work along with others'. Yet writers in allied areas have missed or ignored this about-face. Twenty years on, Fuller lamented in turn that New Testament discourse had become schizophrenic, with Paulist critics still trumpeting futurism as the fundamental view Jesus and Paul shared, even while gospel critics methodically pared it away. And liturgists continue today writing futurist prayers and formulae like "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again"—apparently unaware that from today's New Testament critical majority viewpoint, focusing Christian aspirations on a future climax contradicts the distinctive teaching of Jesus himself.

<sup>70</sup> Jeremiah 19.

<sup>71</sup> Today's best secular analogy is "*Titanic*" films. Except for a recent romantic hit, nearly all contain the same scene. On the ship's bridge officers peer ahead into the fog, seeing nothing. The cameras pan down the side of the ship to the water. There little ice cubes float by—and the orchestra celli sound "hmmmm!" Those ice cubes are a Sign. Moviegoers know they show what is coming and is already here, while the fog-blinded crew disastrously cannot see it. (The fact that *Titanic* actually sank on a clear night is mere history!)

<sup>72</sup> Isaiah 25:6ff.

Paul calls Jesus' life and death a scandal, a term that likewise wants defining from usage. The words Englished as "scandal" or "stumbling block"<sup>73</sup> denote a snare or trap. But one singular Levitical instance became normative for the New Testament. This was part of the Holiness Code, a text that Judah Goldin says all synagogue schoolboys memorized: "You shall not curse the deaf, nor lay a stumbling block before the blind. I am YHWH."<sup>74</sup> Nearly all references to a stumbling block in Hebrew and Greek scripture imply blindness. When Jeremiah says, "I will lay a stumbling block before this people," he is taunting them: My people are *blind!*<sup>75</sup> New Testament writers use the verb "lay a stumbling block" thirty times, twice as often as the noun, echoing the Levitical meaning: those who take offense are tragically blind, and in danger.<sup>76</sup> Terming Jesus' ministry a scandal means people may fail to see what God is doing, despite Jesus' Sign, and risk destruction, just as Jeremiah forewarned his nation they would be destroyed. Jeremiah was ignored, and his people perished. Gospel editors believed that had happened again to the first century Jewish nation who ignored Jesus' Sign, when the Romans invaded and paved Jerusalem; and it will happen wherever people fail to see.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus chose a Sign to scandalize his nation. In his day kosher food still lay in the future; ritual purity applied then to the diners, not to the food. Palestine abounded in dining fellowships called *chaburoth*, each restricted by profession and by degrees of contamination through business contact with gentiles and non-observant Jews. So Jesus chose that scandalous Sign for getting people's attention before it was too late. And that scandal continues wherever Jesus shows up today. As the Lutheran writer Gordon Lathrop puts it: "Draw a line that includes us and excludes many others, and Jesus Christ is always on the other side of the line. At least that is so if we are speaking of the biblical, historic Christ who eats with sinners and outsiders, who is made a curse and sin itself for us, who justifies the ungodly, and who is himself the hole in any system."<sup>77</sup>

Some opponents of the Open Table deride its "mere acceptance" of unbaptized people. P. Turner sees "a theological chasm...between those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* and those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*."<sup>78</sup> But if such a chasm opens in popular piety, the gospel Sign does not point to it. The presence of genuinely wrong and *unacceptable* people at the table was essential for Jesus' Sign. It fit his teaching perfectly. The outstanding heroes of his authentic parables are criminals and pushy women. Jesus' criminals are real criminals: not to be rehabilitated by our "understanding" how they grew up oppressed or in dysfunctional families; not to be

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<sup>73</sup> Hebrew *mikshol/makshelah* and Greek *skándalon* or *próskomma*—these words occur interchangeably.

<sup>74</sup> Leviticus 19:14.

<sup>75</sup> Jeremiah 6:21.

<sup>76</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:23, 8:9. Romans 9:32f, 11:9. Revelation 2:14.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: a Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2003) pg. 64f. Cited also in Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Eucharist as 'The Meal That Should Be'" *Worship*, Vol. 80 No. 1, January 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Philip Turner, "An unworkable theology," *First Things*, vol.154, June/July 2005.

welcomed into our company in hopes they will change their ways. In Jesus' parables they never change their ways.

### ***JESUS' CLAIM TO ORTHODOXY***

That is not to say Jesus thought himself a revolutionary. One of his most famous parables shows quite the opposite: the Parable of the Pharisee & the Tax Collector,<sup>79</sup> which most “conservative” and “liberal” critics concur that Jesus authored.

Despite common misreading and many commentaries, this parable does not set a hypocritical Pharisee against a repentant Tax Collector, as opposing models for our ethical choice. Perhaps unique among the parables, this is a theological story-form comment (*halakah*) on Joel 2:13f, which lays out the Hebrew Scriptures' doctrine of God. When read on our Ash Wednesdays, that text is commonly mis-heard as an appeal to sorrow over our sins; but Joel means quite the opposite. The Hebrew imagery “Tear your hearts, not your clothes” means: “Quit mourning over your deeds and your predicament, and instead change your *plans*,<sup>80</sup> and return to YHWH. For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love (*chesed*), and relents from punishing.” The Hebrew editors carved a virtual woodblock from that text, and stamped it twelve times around their bible, sometimes bluntly overruling the earlier revanchist theology preserved alongside.<sup>81</sup> This is the Hebrew editors' theology: therefore this is the true Old Testament doctrine of God.

Jesus' parable is ingenious. It says God fixed things for the Tax Collector—just as the biblical *tsedaqah* means: God undoes our enemies and puts us back on top where we belong—whereas the Pharisee went home all unfixed, which is to say, doomed.

But not because of hypocrisy! Hypocrites pretend to virtues they lack; but the Pharisee reports truthfully that he fasts twice in the week, and gives tithes of all he has. Indeed, both his claims exceed the Torah's commands, which mention no weekly fasting, and require tithes of only certain agricultural produce: a requirement that may have cost farmers up to 12% of their income, but cost merchants and rabbis like him practically nothing. By contrast, the Tax Collector promises no change of life, no turning over a new leaf. For all we know, this Tax Collector may have to gouge people as before, if only to make his living. “Lord have mercy on me a sinner”—period.

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<sup>79</sup> Luke 18:10ff.

<sup>80</sup> In the Hebrew bible the heart (*lëv*) is not the seat of our emotions: those reside in the kidneys, nose and other body parts; *lëv* is where we make *plans*. Hence the Greek Septuagint regularly translates *lëv* as *nous*.

<sup>81</sup> See Exodus 34:6 and Numbers 14:18, where the older theology of God's implacable and endless vengeance follows directly: the editors preserved that text while stamping their revision literally on top.



Nevertheless in the light of Hebrew scripture's doctrine of God, the Tax Collector is orthodox, and the Pharisee is not. The Tax Collector tells the essential two truths that Joel and the bible's editors teach: he is a sinner; and God has *chesed*, the strong love that sticks with people no matter what. (As in "You'll always be my child, no matter what you do.") By contrast, the Pharisee tells two lies, which he wrongly if earnestly believes: (1) that his virtues make him "not like others" in God's eyes; and (2) that God achieved this difference, for which the Pharisee can give thanks. Whereas the true God observes no differences among human beings,<sup>82</sup> and God has *chesed* for all. The Tax Collector's truth-telling is all God requires, to put things right for him. But God will not work with lies, so the Pharisee dooms himself.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector represents the core of Old Testament Theology, as stamped twelve times around the Hebrew bible. So if Jesus is its author, he cannot be an illiterate peasant, as some critics theorize, because the author knows Hebrew scripture more intimately than scholars do who fail to recognize his crucial theological allusion. But the parable implies more: like the Tax Collector, its author is orthodox, and his opponents are not. He is loyal to biblical tradition, and they are not. He is the conservative, his opponents are the wrongheaded innovators. Some scholars wonder if Jesus may have been a Pharisee, though of a different stripe than later Judaism would recognize. In any case, if Jesus is the author of this parable—as historical critics and their "conservative" opponents concur—then Jesus' dining with impure and unqualified sinners lays his insistent claim to biblical orthodoxy. His Sign comes directly from Hebrew scripture itself, in the prophecy of Isaiah, unlike widespread *chaburah* practice. And it upholds the well-published Old Testament doctrine of God, in contrast with the puristic movements of Jesus' own time.

How remarkable, then, that later Jewish usage followed Jesus' example better than his Church did! Rabbis soon shifted their focus from the purity of the diners, to the purity of their dinner foods—and the kosher kitchen was born. Today all but ultra-orthodox Jews welcome non-Jews to their tables, while Christians cannot agree formally to eat with each other; instead, we mimic Jesus' opponents, with their various *chaburoth* for diners variously purified. Worse yet, if Jesus' claim to biblical orthodoxy has merit, Christians are defying the bible's theology wholesale. Then in what sense can we call our official closed-communion policy traditional? Recent essays deploring the Open Table appeal to ancient theologians who indeed required baptism before communion; and a few writers side with those for institutional reasons, against Jesus' radical Sign of biblical orthodoxy. But not one of those ancient Christian authorities would ever have done so. Their purpose was to follow Jesus fully; and their arguments appeal to scripture first, as every Christian theological argument must.

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<sup>82</sup> By contrast, popular religion believed riches and power were marks of God's favor: hence warnings at Colossians 3:25, Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, James 2:1, 1 Peter 1:17. See also Acts 10:34, where Peter congratulates a pagan centurion: *Ep' alêtheias katalambanomai oti ouk estin prosôpolêmptês o theos.*

Welcome, acceptance, and openness are all important to the gospel. But the current debate about such virtues' rightful place within Eucharistic discipline sidesteps the main point. It is as though after Jeremiah broke the pot at the garbage dump, the faithful had debated for 2500 years How God Wants Us To Recycle Trash. (Who should take the trash where? Who may receive it? Who should say what words?) Like the virtue of hospitality, recycling is important: it shows our respect for the environment and our responsibility toward Mother Earth, and may impact our chances for a human future on this planet. But recycling was hardly the point of Jeremiah's Sign. Likewise, welcoming strangers and telling them God loves them, and building community, and growing bigger and more effective ministries, are all fine things; moreover they yield moving stories about people introduced to communion for the first time. Sara Miles' book *Take This Bread: a Radical Conversion* (2008) recounts her change from atheism upon first communion at St Gregory's, and the feeding ministry she founded in response. But these were not the chief point of Jesus' Sign. His point was: God is reconciling people who scarcely imagine how they belong together, and making peace among them—God is doing this everywhere in the world, not just in churches—and if *we* do not join in with what God is doing, we are headed for disaster.

Talk of Jesus' own orthodoxy, and Christian and Jewish inheritance from it, raises the question of faith. Classical theory requires faith for effectually sharing Christian sacraments, and Open Table advocates properly address this requirement by examining faith in scripture. New Testament writers present faith more simply than later doctrinal formulae will do. Paul's faith might fairly be summed up as trusting God the way Abraham and Jesus did, while the gospels later nuance that concept to fit their community experience. Simple doctrinal declarations do appear in gospel *midrash*, yet declarers are never rewarded with promotion among the disciples. Indeed Matthew's gospel has Jesus say that correct belief is wholly a gift from God, not anything humans can provide.<sup>83</sup> Where faith does explicitly earn a reward, as in the healing stories, it bears no relation to doctrine. The Samaritan Leper and the Syro-Phoenician Woman (a Philistine) are both traditional enemies of Jewish religion; the Roman Centurion is purposely distinguished from believing Jews.<sup>84</sup>

In gospel *midrash* faith shows up instead as a conviction that Jesus has something people want, which they seize aggressively. Matthew reports a saying likely authentically by Jesus, "from John the Baptist until now... violent people have taken the kingdom by force."<sup>85</sup> Luke's Zacchaeus *midrash* expands that saying through a precisely constructed story.<sup>86</sup> The loathed tax collector Zacchaeus responds immediately to an arriving opportunity, much as the parables' heroes do; he acts aggressively, as the healing stories teach; Jesus invites Zacchaeus unconditionally, to the crowd's blind consternation; he responds as the prophet Joel would have him do—not with tears, but a change of life

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<sup>83</sup> Matthew 16:17

<sup>84</sup> Luke 17:19, Matthew 15:28, Matthew 8:6 // Luke 5:10.

<sup>85</sup> Matthew 11:12.

<sup>86</sup> Luke 19:1ff.

plans. Here is Luke's portrait of his own church, faithful at once to Jesus' teaching and the core of Hebrew scripture.

Luke's church portrait adds an ethical nuance further inferred from the prophet: Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' dinner invitation as the parables' heroes do not, by an absurdly generous plan that he cannot credibly fulfill. Yet Jesus thereupon declares his salvation, since human ethical success cannot measure out God's *chesed*. Luke's church expects a change of plans will result from Eucharistic fellowship, though never properly earn it, because without such a change of plans, successful or not, Joel's prophecy spells our doom. That is why the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns against "cheap grace:" a fatal error that consists not in taking salvific gifts undeservedly (what Lutheran would object to that?) but failing to change one's life direction in faithful response to God's free gift.

More cheerfully, Luther's Shorter Catechism holds that the essential action of baptism is not the water bath, but the progress in virtuous living that follows it. And even in baptism, where faith is a central issue, correct doctrine is not a primary condition for entrance. In many baptismal services composed since the New Zealand Prayer Book of 1989, following early Christian ritual texts, doctrinal faith profession *follows* the water bath and anointing, and is voiced by the whole community—not offered by candidates as a condition for acceptance. Might not the same be said of Eucharistic sharing? What more faith can be required of sharers than the aggressive desire which Zacchaeus exemplifies, and newcomers show as they communicate at St Gregory's Church for the first time in their lives?

### ***FORGIVE US AS WE HAVE FORGIVEN***

John Patton bases his revolutionary work, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible? A Pastoral Care Perspective*, (1985) on many years' experience guiding people through forgiveness processes. He argues the Church makes a mistake by urging people to forgive, and so adding a hard obligation to their sense of injury. Whereas in practice, he finds forgiveness involves discovering that you *have* forgiven people and given up your desire to be separate from them—

*"Understanding human forgiveness not as doing something but as discovering something—that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Although the experience of God's forgiveness may involve confession of and the sense of being forgiven for specific sins, at its heart it is the recognition of my reception into the community of sinners—those affirmed by God as his children."*<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> J. Patton, *op.cit.*, *ad finem*. Italics original.

From Patton's perspective we may remark the line in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our debts as we also *have forgiven* our debtors" (perfect tense in Matthew).<sup>88</sup>

Yet more radical than Rowan Williams' well-meant praise for "the meals that Jesus shared with outcasts and sinners to show that God was ready to welcome and forgive them,"<sup>89</sup> Jesus' scandalous meals were Signs that God *has forgiven* all humanity and holds no desire to be apart from us. Today when we watch people whom we think unworthy join our eucharistic gathering, instead of our telling ourselves we were mistaken about these folks, and should reconsider how they deserve inclusion—we had rather think: these are real, nasty, active sinners, and God sees no difference between them and me. I am just like them. So I hereby abandon my desire to be separate from them.

No chasm yawns here between acceptance and redemption. It is not sinners we accept, but the world which God has already forgiven and redeemed. We can rightly embrace Turner's preferred "theology of *redemption*," if we recall what that biblical metaphor means. Redemption means paying off other people's compounded debts without their help because they are fiscally or morally bankrupt and absolutely cannot quit them—not because they have reformed and become a better risk now, and should get a second chance. They are not reformed. Neither are you who read this. Let me list some of my own qualifications for this Eucharistic feast, which your lives surely mirror. You are a pack of lying, cheating, thieving, treacherous snobs; you are misogynist, misandric, homophobic, racist, ageist hypocrites: just like me. No changes. *Psychology Today* magazine says the average American tells over 900 lies a day. "Lovely to see you!" "I'm doing just great, thanks!" "I'll be there in a minute!" At Jesus' table we liars eat together, offering nothing. Not our repentance; not our frail New Years' Resolutions, which neither God nor Jesus has ever credited; not our little moral improvements; nothing. God does all that happens there.

### ***STILL THE RIGHT SCANDAL FOR OUR DAY***

Today as in Jesus' day, the Eucharistic Table is a Sign of what God is doing everywhere, that the world otherwise tragically fails to see. Yet the world offers no other answer, and God's answer is urgent. Consider the terrorist bombs that blew up the muslim golden-domed shrine in Iraq only a few years ago: that shrine was sacred to *both* Shi'a and Sunni; indeed the imam buried there had prayed his tomb would be a refuge of reconciliation to both. The terrorist bombs were unanswerable, un-repayable, un-solvable. No option remains but forgiveness. That is our world, the world God has already forgiven and completely reconciled to God's self.

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<sup>88</sup> Matthew 6:12.

<sup>89</sup> Ursula Hashem cites R. Williams, "Lecture delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Islamic University, Islamabad" *ACNS*: 4081. Lambeth, 23/11/05.

In our liturgy, Jesus' Open Table feeds all the genuinely wrong guests together. This banquet serves for more than making people feel accepted. It serves for more than building community. It serves for more than church growth. It serves for more than sharing gifts that baptized Christians can have, or faithful Trinitarians can have, or sanctified and morally improved converts can have. Jesus' Open Table remains today a scandal, a stumbling-block thrown down on our path, to teach a blind and reeling world what God is doing everywhere in this world, before it is too—damned—late.

If my argument offends in any way, please savor in your imagination the offense which Jesus' Sign caused then. He knew the self-dooming took offense: "blessed is anyone who does not stumble blindly over me."<sup>90</sup> Not that Jesus was an unfeeling man, or a social iconoclast. Rather, Jesus was *importunate*. Importunity means demanding attention boldly at the worst possible time, in order to gain what you cannot gain politely. For example, after you have ignored monthly bills and phone messages, a bold creditor might importune you in the public street to pay your bill, hoping that your embarrassment will force you to pay up, as your self-respect did not.

In Jesus' parables, importunity always works. A neighbor pounds on your door at night to borrow food, betting correctly you will jump out of bed before he wakes your household;<sup>91</sup> a poor widow screams at a corrupt judge in open court, until he grants her justice without his customary bribe;<sup>92</sup> a hungry child demands bread and gets it;<sup>93</sup> violent people storm into the kingdom.<sup>94</sup> In the gospel *midrash* a blind man shouts politically dangerous titles ever louder over the disciples' protests until Jesus heals him;<sup>95</sup> and a bleeding woman successfully grasps her healer's robe, when she knows she is ritually impure.<sup>96</sup> By contrast, in real life prophetic importunity is always risky: Jeremiah was shut up (in every sense) in a dry well. Likewise, Jesus could have welcomed sinners discretely, politely, stating his rationale in conventional form—but that would have undone his purpose, which was to seize his nation's attention and show them what God was up to while they remained tragically blind. So Jesus chose to make a scandal: importunate, deliberate, and fatal for himself.

The banquet we keep to remember him is almost a happy historical accident. What if the religious custom of Jesus' time had allowed everyone to dine together without distinction? Would Jesus have had to search the scriptures for some other scandalous Sign to win people's attention? Then what would we be doing today in his memory? If not eating and drinking together as Isaiah dreamt, then marrying prostitutes like Hosea? (Jesus' company included whores.) Or like Jeremiah, burying our dirty underwear and digging it up a week later as a Sign of the Resurrection for all to wear?

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<sup>90</sup> Matthew 11:6 // Luke 7:23 in Greek: *makarios estin hos ean mê skandalisthêi en emoi.*

<sup>91</sup> Luke 11:6ff.

<sup>92</sup> Luke 18:1ff.

<sup>93</sup> Matthew 7:9.

<sup>94</sup> Matthew 11:12.

<sup>95</sup> Mark 10:45ff, Luke 18:35ff.

<sup>96</sup> Mark 5:25ff.

Christians are lucky the aberrations of Jesus' time suggested such an agreeable Sign instead, for him to make a scandal of, and for us to carry onward!

Textual criticism undercuts an alternative interpretation favored by some opponents of the Open Table: that the Last Supper differed from Jesus' suppers with whores and greedy villains. At his Last Supper, so that argument runs, Jesus dined with his close disciples only, and the Eucharist is properly celebrated thus, with only the qualified present. (This argument is also raised against the liturgical presidency of women.)

Certainly there was a *last* Supper, but New Testament evidence does not tell us what happened there. John describes no eating or drinking ritual; synoptic accounts merely copy Paul's first Corinthian letter, written years earlier.<sup>97</sup> There Paul reports what Christians told him at Antioch when he visited, about what *they* were doing in Jesus' memory.<sup>98</sup> Based on Paul's report, scholars have debated Gregory Dix's question<sup>99</sup> whether the Last Supper and our Eucharist derived from the Passover Seder or the *chaburah* friendship meal—both of which we know today only from later sources. But recent Jewish scholarship has killed that debate. All four documented dinner ceremonies represent historical stages of one evolving ritual: the Hellenistic symposium banquet, which is not Jewish at all. With each successive stage, organized teaching about symbolic meanings moved earlier into the ritual: thus today's Passover Seder represents the final stage.

By Paul's report, Christians at Antioch were keeping that Hellenistic ritual at a stage halfway along the development line, with the bread explained symbolically at dinner's start, and the cup and remaining teaching still given afterward. Thus the Antiochenes imported their memorial of Jesus into a Hellenistic banquet order they already knew. We learn nothing about what ritual Jesus himself followed at any supper, including his last: that might have been Hellenistic, but we have no reason to presume so. Paul is not concerned with rite anyway. He adduces the Antiochenes' Last Supper story to bolster his message that Christians should share their food. You stupid Corinthians who will not share are failing to perceive Christ's body in this company present right here. You are *blind* to the Sign right before you, and blindness will mean your ruin. Paul's logic focuses on this company, this meal; not Jesus' last.

### ***THE OPEN TABLE AND BAPTISM***

Entering the doors at St Gregory Nyssen, San Francisco, every newcomer sees Jesus' table nearby awaiting all, and the baptismal font sunlit beyond it. During the liturgy most people accept our communion invitation, some for the first time ever; and

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<sup>97</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:20ff.

<sup>98</sup> My late friend Thomas Talley thus interpreted Acts 11:26. Nevertheless Talley opposed Open Communion today as a threat to ecumenical consensus.

<sup>99</sup> *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1945.

through thirty years and two successive rectorships, any unbaptized who return to communicate regularly have asked for baptism soon. (An exception is Jewish spouses in mixed marriages: some communicate, some never do; but we do not press Jews to be baptized.)<sup>100</sup>

While this pattern obviously reverses the traditional relation of baptism to eucharist, it also induces us to tell newcomers why we encourage their baptism. The same challenge faces every church in our modern world, where every choice requires a reason. The oft-heard title “Christian Initiation” is not ancient; it appeared first in Counter-Reformation ritual books,<sup>101</sup> marking a table fellowship bounded by dogmatic formulae—whereas today’s newcomers already participate there in growing pastoral practice. Moreover, secular initiatory outfits like Freemasons and Oddfellows, hugely popular during the nineteenth century, are declining today while eucharistic participation is on the rise. Even apart from historical research into Jesus’ ministry, churches have good reason now to make the eucharist our formal Christian incorporation rite, as Nathan Mitchell suggests.<sup>102</sup>

Fortunately, the rich history of Christian sacramental life offers more appealing symbols for summoning folks to baptism. “Illumination” appears widely in early documents, and light imagery has renewed modern churches’ baptismal rituals. St Ephrem’s title “Fire on the Water” evokes early Syrian processions to the river, and St Gregory’s Church processions to our rocky font, with the whole congregation carrying candles: a participatory action involving all in doing the baptizing. More than an appealing style choice, congregational participation points up an important shift in sacramental theory, and the right relation between baptism and eucharist, however we order them. George McCauley, SJ, observes that Christian sacramental talk has been skewed for centuries by focusing on what worshippers *receive*, rather than what the Church *does* in Jesus’ Spirit and after his example. Talk about communion has slid into disputes over the diners’ fitness to receive grace that God actually gives for free: these disputes direct attention away from the Church’s evangelical task, which is to hold Jesus high in the whole world’s view.

It is important that newcomers experience welcome at Jesus’ table—yet more important, even essential, for Christians to *do* the welcoming that Jesus himself did.

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<sup>100</sup> Jews’ participation at Jesus’ table today is always conscientious, and so is properly for them, not for Christians to regulate. When touring with museum groups in Asia I always announce at Saturday supper that I will celebrate the Divine Liturgy early next morning for all who wish to share. Many Jewish tour members come to pray and make their communion, while the baptized Christians mostly stay in bed.

<sup>101</sup> Harald Buchinger cites Pierre-Marie Gy, “La notion chrétienne d’initiation,” *Le Maison Dieu* 132 (1977), pp 35-36, reprinted in *La Liturgie dans l’histoire*, Paris Cerf (1990), pp 17-39.

<sup>102</sup> N.D. Mitchell, *Eucharist as a Sacrament of Initiation*, 2003.

Early Apologists emphasize our forebears' actions, quoting pagan observers: "See how these Christians love one another!" Jesus' Open Table was his way of showing the world what divine *chesed* means. So after welcoming newcomers to dine with us at St Gregory's, we invite them to re-create Jesus' welcome for friends and neighbors like themselves. Embracing baptism they go beyond being blessed recipients, and in Jesus' name they join our mission of welcoming the whole humanity God has redeemed, by holding up Jesus' Sign—and a hundred more ministries in his Spirit—for a blind world to see, and change its plans. The Open Table serves for their incorporation; baptism serves next—and urgently—for their enrollment.

Newcomers' surprised joy at being welcomed must quickly become visible joy in welcoming, or Christian mission fails. Northern Hemisphere churches can no longer presume outsiders' esteem such as the Apologists once claimed. Our contemporaries dismiss our sincerity, our competence, our relevance to everyday life. Their visit to a Sunday or wedding or funeral liturgy is virtually the only time outsiders will see for themselves what the Church is up to, and what we believe God is up to. There above all we must uphold Jesus' Sign of God's free welcome to a lost world that God has already forgiven and reconciled. Friedrich Nietzsche, a Lutheran pastor's son, put bluntly today's evangelical charge for the faithful inside church and out:

"Christians should *look* more redeemed."