Signs of Life

WORSHIP FOR A JUST AND LOVING PEOPLE

A TREATISE IN ELEVEN PARTS

RICK FABIAN

CHURCH PUBLISHING INCORPORATED

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Jesus's Sign: The Welcoming Table

> The Lord's supper takes place on the basis of an invitation which is as open as the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross. Because he died for the reconciliation of "the world," the world is invited to reconciliation in the supper. It is not the openness of this invitation, it is the restrictive measures of the church which have to be justified before the face of the crucified Jesus. But which of us can justify them in his sight? The openness of the crucified Lord's invitation to his supper and his fellowship reaches beyond the frontiers of the different denominations. It even reaches beyond the frontiers of Christianity; for it is addressed to "all nations" and to "tax-collectors and sinners" first of all. Consequently we understand Christ's invitation as being open, not merely to the churches but to the whole world.[1]
>
> —Jürgen Moltmann

The practice of Open Communion or "Open Table" spreads among churches today amid debate. Opponents criticize its defection from millennia of tradition, or object that instead of theological reasoning, proponents appeal to modern social fashion. Here we will seek to ground an Open Table theology upon modern critical study of Jesus's teaching in the New Testament gospels, and its deeper Hebrew Old Testament foundation. In crucial ways, Jesus's own voice was conservative, against ascendant sectarian fashion. By practicing an Open Welcoming Table like his, we moderns actually imitate classic Christian writers, who sought above all to follow Jesus faithfully. Happily for us, Jesus's Open Table meets the evangelical challenges of our own day, as my own urban parish has found.

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 1975), 246.

David Sanger

St. Gregory of Nyssa Church Altar & Font

Upon first entering St. Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church in San Francisco, you will see a sanctuary 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 before you bears two inscriptions. One pedestal facing the entry doors reads in Greek from Luke's gospel, "This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them."[2]

Not former sinners, not repentant sinners; *sinners*. 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 Jesus on this point. The Christian Eucharist may 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 opposite altar table pedestal facing our font quotes 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.

2. See Luke 15:2. "*Houtos hamartolous prosdekhetai kai synsethêei autois.*" *Houtos* (this one) used alone is dismissive.

Our architectural plan expresses our sacramental custom, and both reverse widespread Christian order: we welcome all to Communion at Jesus's table, and invite any unbaptized to Baptism afterward. Our rationale at St. Gregory's rises from a revised reading of Jesus's 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.

Modern History and Jesus

The religious 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. (Let me sidestep the term "post-modern," which suggests faster intellectual change than human society can demonstrably achieve. On Berger's terms the modern world began at the European Renaissance, and is still going on.)[3]

Moderns must criticize the past, not merely purge the past. Our Western sixteenth-century Reformers preached faithfully against superstition; yet they mistakenly destroyed much that was beautiful, truthful, and indeed primitively Christian. We must allow that in every age Christians have intended faithfulness to Jesus's teaching and example. The architects of conventional 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 truly shock our forebears: an anti-Jesus counterrevolution.

Over a century ago, scripture critics began distinguishing the "historical Jesus" from the "Christ of faith" our written gospels portray. At first, the critics' goal was "positive history." As the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) labeled it, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist:* telling the past as it really was. That project produced a remote and puzzling Jesus, however, variously imaged from conflicting details. In fact, ancient writers prove poor sources for positive history, not only from limits to their own knowledge, but also from their evangelical intention to tell their contemporaries what they believe matters most. Then as now, each interpreter chooses colors for a portrait, and every portrait—from painters calling themselves "scripturally

3. *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethic and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 170.

conservative" to the most hypothetical—must be viewed and appraised for the modern artifact it is.

It seems each new publication about Jesus's time throws fresh darkness on the subject. Said gospel critic H. Benedict Green, CR: the more we learn, the more we must admit Jesus is a man we know very little about.[4]

Trained historians keep clear sight of how little we know. The Jesus Seminar in the United States 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 radical, but he was merely out of date. No trained modern historian would claim both to know and dislike Napoleon, let alone a figure two thousand 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. True modern history-writing began when the Dutch art historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) studied the fifteenth-century brothers Van Eyck, and the more he researched them, the farther away their world seemed, and stranger. Huizinga's revolutionary 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

4. H. Benedict Green, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, New Clarendon Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

> 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.[5]

That kills "positive history." If even sensory experience cannot build us a bridge into past peoples' lives, a historian must work with 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 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.

The past is far away from all writers, so all must give reasons for their choices. No proponent claims that the second-century Apologist 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 we 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.

Jesus's Bible

Scripture looks ever backward. The gospel writers write much the way Chinese painters paint landscapes and Western composers write chorales: with allusions to treasured past words and works, which they mean their public to recognize. Gospel writers present Jesus's sayings and his 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.

Today 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 the Bible. Synagogues even in small towns like Nazareth and Capernaum were places for study

5. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, F. Hopman trans. 1919 (New York: Doubleday, 1954, 2013), 1.

before they became 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. We will see how internal gospel evidence supports Jesus's awareness of sacred text. And more than one parable turns on a question of literacy.

For example, the cheating bailiff[6] can read: he helps illiterate peasants to forge new low-rent leases, and so to defraud their landlord, his former employer:

> A rich man heard that his majordomo was spending beyond his salary, and told him: "Turn in your accounts, you're fired." The majordomo thought: "How will I live without a job? I'm too weak to be a farmer, and begging is shameful. But I do know how to make people welcome me into their homes." He returned all the sharecroppers' lease documents, allowing each peasant to sign a new substitute promising only half the rent. [The Master praised the unscrupulous man's astuteness because his kind dealt more sharply with their own low type than the "enlightened" do.]

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 folktales exalt canny locals who outwit the educated by their native wiles; they do not hold up educated models like the bailiff, whom illiterate peasants cannot imitate.

Jesus's parables often draw on well-known events or bear multiple interpretations; nevertheless his relation to scripture is one area where we may hope to catch his own beliefs. That enterprise answers more than historical curiosity. 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 spoke with God's own voice. Thus in Paul's case we may modify or discard talk about slavery, about women in church, about other matters, but overwriting Jesus is out of the question for his church.

The twentieth century opened with agreement among Bible scholars and liturgy reformers, that Jesus preached God's future reign 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,

6. Luke 16:1–7.

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 corrupt world order they knew, and put things right with the Jewish nation properly back on top. So twentieth-century liturgists reformed our worship to restore this rediscovered eschatological emphasis on the future, assuming they were matching Jesus's teaching.

By 1975, however, 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 ever 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 (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, Küng's dilemma dissolved, and with it, a scholarly alliance on which liturgical renewal had relied—though some old allies have not yet noticed. In the 1960s, British critics Norman Perrin and Reginald Fuller overturned five decades of earlier argument by relegating all gospel futurism to editors' and later preachers' commentary, which Jewish tradition calls *midrash*. During the next decades Perrin and Fuller's opinion attained critical consensus. Unlike both Jesus's contemporary teachers and his well-meaning gospel editors, Jesus himself preached God's reign already 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 now, ready or not!

Jesus's 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 some commentaries, we may observe how Hebrew prophets

actually 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, declaring: this is what God will do with our nation unless our leaders change their plans.[7] Jeremiah's sign does not pretend 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.

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 feast together.[8] Jesus began dining publicly with notoriously unqualified sinners, those shunned by other religious reformers: a practice that many modern critics think chiefly led to his condemnation and death.

Paul calls Jesus's life and death a scandal, a term that likewise wants defining from usage. The Hebrew words translated as "scandal" or "stumbling block"[9] 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."[10] Nearly all references to a stumbling block in Hebrew and Greek scripture imply blindness. When Jeremiah warns, "I will lay a stumbling block before this people," [11] he is taunting them: My people are *blind!*[12] Terming Jesus's ministry a scandal means that people who fail to see what God is doing, despite Jesus's sign, risk downfall and 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's sign, when the Romans invaded and paved Jerusalem, and it will happen wherever people fail to see.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus consciously chose a sign to scandalize his nation. In his day kosher food still lay in the future; ritual purity applied then only to the

---

7. Jeremiah 19.

8. Isaiah 25:6–8.

9. Hebrew *mikshol/makshelah* and Greek *skándalon* or *próskomma*—these occur interchangeably.

10. Leviticus 19:14.

11. Jeremiah 6:21.

12. See 1 Corinthians 1:23, 8:9. Romans 9:32–33, 11:9. Revelation 2:14. New Testament writers use the verb "lay a stumbling block" thirty times, twice as often as the noun, echoing the Levitical commandment and so declaring: those who take offense are tragically blind, and in danger.

diners, not to the food. Palestine abounded in dining fellowships called *chaburoth*, each restricted by profession and by degrees of contaminating business contacts with impure Gentiles and non-observant Jews. So Jesus chose that scandalous sign of common dining to seize people's attention before it was too late. Today that scandal continues wherever Jesus shows up. 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."[13]

Some opponents of the Open Table deride its "mere acceptance" of unbaptized people. Philip Turner sees "a theological chasm . . . between those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* and those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*."[14] But the presence of genuinely wrong and *unacceptable* people at the table was essential for Jesus's sign. It fit his teaching perfectly. The heroes of his authentic parables include criminals, pre-moral children, and pushy women. Jesus's 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's parables they never change their ways.

Jesus's Claim to Orthodoxy

That is not to say Jesus thought himself a revolutionary. One of his most famous parables argues otherwise: the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which most "conservative" and "liberal" critics concur that Jesus authored.

> A Pharisee and a tax collector both went to pray in the Temple. The Pharisee stood erect praying: "Thank you, God, that I am not like other folks: grasping, cheating, fashionably adulterous, or anything like that tax collector. I fast twice weekly; I donate ten percent of all I get." The tax collector stood far off with his eyes lowered and struck himself, praying: "God have mercy on me a

13. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 64f. Cited also in Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Eucharist as 'The Meal That Should Be,'" *Worship* 80, (no. 1, January 2006).

14. Philip Turner, "An Unworkable Theology," *First Things* 154 (June/July 2005).

sinner." But I tell you this second man went home with his life all fixed; the first man did not."[15]

This parable does not oppose a hypocritical Pharisee against a repentant tax collector as models for our ethical choice. Perhaps unique among the parables, this is a theological story-form comment (*halakah*) on Joel 2:13–14, which lays out the Hebrew Scripture's doctrine of God:

Tear your hearts and not your clothing,
Return to YHWH your God,
For he is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,
And relents from punishing.

Joel's text is commonly misheard as an instruction to sorrow over our sins; but Joel means quite the opposite. In Hebrew imagery the heart (*lëv*) is not the seat of our emotions. *Lëv* is where we make *plans*. Hence the Septuagint and Greek liturgical texts regularly translate *lëv* as *nous*, or "mind." "Tear your hearts, not your clothes" means: "Quit mourning over your misdeeds and your predicament, and instead change your *plans*, and return to YHWH." Editors carved a virtual woodblock from the next verse, "YHWH is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love (*chesed*), and relents from punishing," and stamped it eleven more times around their Bible, sometimes bluntly overruling the earlier revanchist theology preserved alongside.[16] This is the Hebrew editors' theology, which formed the Bible we receive; therefore this is the true Old Testament doctrine of God.

Jesus's 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. By contrast, the tax collector guarantees no change of life as a claim on God's love. However

15. Luke 18:10–14. *Dedikaiôménos*, "fixed," from the Hebrew *tsedaqah*, putting things right, as next paragraph explains; see also chapter 5, below.

16. 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 earlier material while stamping their revision literally on top.

he might wish, this tax collector may yet have to add his share to taxes as before, if only to make his living. "Lord have mercy on me a sinner"—period.

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,[17] and God has *chesed* for all. The tax collector's truth-telling is all God requires, to put things right for him. 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 quoted twelve times around the Hebrew Bible. So the author knows Hebrew scripture more closely than those scholars who fail to recognize his theological allusion. 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 today's critics and their opponents styled "conservative" concur—then his dining with impure and unqualified sinners laid his strong claim to biblical orthodoxy. His sign came directly from Hebrew scripture itself, in the prophecy of Isaiah, unlike widespread *chaburah* practice. And it upheld the well-published Old Testament doctrine of God, in contrast with the puristic new movements of Jesus's own time.

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 Jews welcome non-Jews to their tables, while Christians cannot agree formally to eat with each other. Instead, we mimic Jesus's opponents, with their various *chaburoth* for diners variously purified. 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

17. At Acts 10:34, Peter congratulates a pagan centurion: *Ep' alêtheias katalambanomai hoti ouk estin prosôpolêmptês o theos.* Popular cult believed riches and power were marks of a god's favor: see similar reproofs at Colossians 3:25, Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, James 2:1, 1 Peter 1:17.

side with those for institutional reasons, against Jesus's radical sign of biblical orthodoxy. Yet 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.

"Fashionable liberal" values do but support our practice. Welcome, acceptance, and openness are indeed 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 twenty-five hundred 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, 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's book *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*[18] recounts her change from atheism upon first Communion at St. Gregory's, and how she founded a famous feeding ministry in response. Yet these noble results were not the chief point of Jesus's sign. His chief 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 recognize what God is doing, we are headed for disaster.

Talk of Jesus's own orthodoxy, and Christian and Jewish inheritance from it, raises the question of faith. Classical theory requires faith for sharing Christian rituals effectually, and both Eucharist and Baptism rites expressly evoke faith. Today's public exhibit religious diversity such as our forebears barely imagined: not only ethnic immigrants, but many Christian youth pursue other world faiths and spiritualities, and criticize church standards. Indeed, Luther's Small Catechism holds that the essential action of Baptism is not the water bath, but the progress in virtuous living that follows it, where faith grows. Might we not say the same of eucharistic sharing? What truer faith can we require than the aggressive desire that Zacchaeus[19] exemplifies and newcomers show as they communicate at St. Gregory's Church for the first time in their lives?

18. Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).

19. Luke 19:1–10. See full exegesis in chapter 3 on Baptism.

Forgive Us as We Have Forgiven

John Patton bases his provocative work *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* on many years' experience guiding people through forgiveness processes. In practice, he finds forgiveness involves discovering that you *have* forgiven people and given up your desire to be separate from them. 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).[20] More radical than Rowan Williams's well-meant praise for "the meals that Jesus shared with outcasts and sinners to show that God was ready to welcome and forgive them,"[21] Jesus's 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 quit my desire to separate from them.

It is not sinners we accept, but the world that God has already forgiven and redeemed. We can embrace Turner's preferred "theology of *redemption*" if we recall that biblical redemption means paying off our relatives' or fellow tribesmen'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. We are a pack of lying, cheating, thieving, treacherous snobs; we are misogynist, misandric, homophobic, racist, ageist hypocrites. You just like me; no changes. *Psychology Today* magazine says the average North American tells hundreds of lies a day. "Lovely to see you!" "I'm doing just great, thanks!" "I'll be there in a minute!" At Jesus's table we liars eat together, offering nothing. Not our repentance; not our frail New Years' resolutions, which neither God nor Jesus could credit; not our little moral improvements; nothing. God does all that happens there.

---

20. Matthew 6:12, *kai afes . . . hôs kai hêmeis afêkamen tois ofeilétais hêmôn*.

21. Ursula Hashem cites R. Williams, "Lecture delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Islamic University, Islamabad" *ACNS* 4081 (Lambeth 2005).

Still the Right Scandal for Our Day

Today, as in Jesus's day, the eucharistic table is a sign of what God is doing everywhere, which the world otherwise tragically fails to see. Yet the world offers no other answer, and God's answer is urgent. No option remains but forgiveness. That is our world, the world God has already forgiven and completely reconciled to God's self, through Jesus's sacrificial life and death.

In our liturgy, Jesus's Open Table feeds all the genuinely wrong guests together. This banquet serves for more than making people feel accepted, or building community, or growing churches. It serves for more than sharing gifts that baptized Christians, or faithful Trinitarians, or sanctified and morally improved converts can have. Jesus's 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*.

Jesus knew the self-doomed took offense: "blessed is anyone who does not stumble blindly over me."[22] Not that he 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.

In Jesus's 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;[23] a poor widow screams at a corrupt judge in open court, until he grants her justice without his customary bribe;[24] a hungry child demands bread and gets it;[25] violent people storm into the kingdom.[26] In the gospel *midrash* stories added by Christian preachers, a blind man shouts politically dangerous titles ever louder over the disciples' protests until Jesus heals him;[27] and a bleeding woman successfully grasps her healer's robe, when she knows she is ritually impure.[28] By contrast, in real life prophetic importunity is always risky: Jeremiah was shut up (in every sense) in a dry well.[29] Likewise, Jesus could have expounded his policy

22. Matthew 11:6 // (and parallel at) Luke 7:23 in Greek: *makarios estin hos ean mê* skandalisthêi *en emoi.* The mathematical symbol // normally links parallel text citations like these.

23. Luke 11:5–8.

24. Luke 18:1–5.

25. Matthew 7:9.

26. Matthew 11:12.

27. Mark 10:46–52, Luke 18:35–43.

28. Mark 5:25–35.

29. Jeremiah 38:6.

politely—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.

Textual criticism undercuts an alternative interpretation favored by some opponents of the Open Table: that the Last Supper differed from Jesus's suppers with whores and greedy villains. At his Last Supper, 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 gospel accounts merely copy Paul's first Corinthian letter, written years prior to the writing of the gospels. There Paul reports what Christians told him at Antioch when he visited, about what *they* were doing in Jesus's memory.[30]

> You are not eating the Lord's Supper when you meet, because each eats his own meal, and one hungers while another gets drunk. Can't you do that at home, instead of shaming those who have nothing, and the whole church besides? The Lord himself handed on to me what I taught you: on the night before his betrayal, the Lord Jesus took some bread, gave thanks, broke it to share and said, "This is my body, which is for all of you, do this to remember me." And in the same way he shared the cup after supper, saying, "This is the new covenant sealed in my blood, remember me whenever you do this." So eating and drinking shows forth the Lord's death until he comes . . . And any who eat and drink without recognizing the body manifest here eat and drink judgment on themselves.[31]

Scholars have debated Gregory Dix's question[32] whether the Last Supper and our Eucharist derived from the Passover Seder or the *chaburah* friendship meal—both of which we now know only from later sources. Recent Jewish scholarship has stilled that debate. All four documented dinner ceremonies represent stages of one evolving ritual: the Hellenistic symposium banquet, which

30. My late friend Thomas Talley thus interpreted Acts 11:26. Nevertheless Talley opposed Open Communion today as endangering ecumenical consensus.

31. 1 Corinthians 11:20–29, NJB translation.

32. Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London and Glasgow: Dacre, 1945).

is not Jewish at all.[33] With each successive stage, organized teaching moved earlier into the ritual. Thus today's Passover Seder represents the final stage, with all symbols explained before anything is eaten or drunk.

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 ethical 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 ritual anyway. He adduces the Antiochenes' Last Supper story to bolster his demand 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 today; not Jesus's last.

Open Table and Baptismal Font

Entering the doors at St. Gregory Nyssen, San Francisco, every newcomer sees Jesus's 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 through thirty years and two successive rectorships, all the unbaptized who return regularly to Communion have asked for Baptism soon.

It is important that newcomers should experience welcome at Jesus's table—yet more important, indeed essential, for Christians to *do* the welcoming that Jesus himself did. Early Apologists emphasize our forebears' actions, quoting pagan observers: "See how these Christians love one another!" Jesus's 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 recreate Jesus's welcome for friends and neighbors like themselves. Upon embracing Baptism, they advance beyond being blessed recipients, and in Jesus's name they join our mission of welcoming the whole humanity God has redeemed, by holding up Jesus's sign—and a hundred more ministries in his Spirit—for a blind world to see, and change its plans. The Open Table serves

33. Paul Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (London: SPCK, 2004), 43–44. Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) finds forms too diverse to specify a single Eucharist source.

first for their incorporation; Baptism serves next—and urgently—to enroll them in joyfully welcoming more.

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 Baptism or wedding or funeral liturgy is virtually the only time most 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's 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."