
A Case for Closed Communion in Interfaith Contexts

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Two Eucharistic vignettes

Vignette 1: The Focolare, a Roman Catholic ecclesial movement, “is committed to promoting dialogue between religions, because the religious pluralism of the world should not be a cause of division and war, but contribute to the building of brotherhood and world peace.”¹ One of the Focolare’s most remarkable dialogues has been with followers of the late Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, who in the 1970s established a mainstream African American Muslim group out of the Nation of Islam founded by his father, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

At a five-day gathering of Focolare and Imam Mohammed’s followers called Mariapolis in Valparaiso, Indiana, a Catholic Mass was held each day before lunch. One Focolare woman remarked about the Eucharist, “It is suffering that the table still cannot be shared.”² This sensitive lay Catholic was involved in a laudable interfaith relationship, yet she grieved over a perceived missed opportunity for deeper fellowship between Catholics and Muslims.

Vignette 2: Some years ago, Lake Street Church in suburban Chicago transformed World Communion Sunday, an annual observation in many Protestant churches, into World Community Sunday, an occasion for interfaith worship. The pastor excludes no one from the Communion table at his church, explaining, “That is a direct contradiction of what we see in Jesus, who was present with everybody, regardless of their standing in society.”³ Sharing Communion together on World Community Sunday, claims the pastor, is a way to reenact Jesus’ radically inclusive dining fellowship. The pastor has even allowed Buddhist monks to bless the Communion elements.

When I use this case in workshops with Christian groups, it invariably generates strong reactions, both positive and negative. One sensitive United Methodist pastor was so deeply offended by such unrestricted access to the Communion table that she pronounced Lake Street Church no longer Christian. Other sensitive

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Christians have agreed with the pastor that access to Christ’s table must be open to all, arguing that such an invitation is crucial to strengthening interfaith relations.

This article makes a case for closed Communion in interfaith contexts. I will argue that the ritual today variously called Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass, or the Lord’s Supper is a Christian identity-marking rite and thus it is justifiably restricted to Christian participation. After a brief explanation of the function of identity-marking rites, I will first discuss selected trajectories of this particular identity-marking rite in the New Testament and early Church, and then discuss selected contemporary Communion policies and practices. I will conclude by challenging the notion that closed Communion hampers harmonious interfaith relations, encouraging Christians to dine with adherents of other faiths in a way that both accomplishes their interfaith goals and maintains the integrity of the central Christian rite of Communion.

The terms “closed” and “open” Communion have historically referred to which Christians may legitimately partake in the Eucharist. In this article, I address the question of whether the Eucharist should be open to adherents of other faiths. To be clear, I am not saying that a case *cannot* be made to open the Communion table in this way. Lake Street Church’s pastor makes that case, as do others. I disagree with this position because I distinguish the Eucharist from Jesus’ dining fellowship. Thoughtful and sincere Christians can disagree, and I respect the theological investment that goes into an opposing view on this important matter. I believe that Christian leaders should make some kind of argument—either

1. “Dialogues,” <http://www.focolare.org/usa/dialogues/>, accessed Oct. 9, 2016.

2. Paul D. Numrich, *The Faith Next Door: American Christians and Their New Religious Neighbors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 112. Chapter 8 features the Focolare Movement.

3. *Ibid.*, 82. Chapter 6 features Lake Street Church.

way—rather than rely on well-meaning but wrongheaded sentiments, whatever they may be.⁴

Identity-marking rites

My training in the academic study of religion impressed upon me the importance of rites or rituals as a core component of religions. James Livingston offers a typical definition of a religious ritual as “an agreed-on and formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions carried out in a sacred context.”⁵ Livingston elaborates that religious rituals are sacramental in nature in that they “make use of temporal things—words, gestures, and objects—for a spiritual purpose, to make manifest the sacred or the supernatural.” Quoting the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” The performative elements of a sacrament become “fixed and conventional,” departure from which can cause anxiety in the participants.⁶

As Harvey Whitehouse and Jonathan Lanman observe, “Social scientists have long appreciated that collective rituals serve to bind groups together.”⁷ Most pertinent to our understanding of the function of Communion for Christians is what Whitehouse and Lanman call the “group identification” type of social cohesion: “Group identification is the perception that one belongs and is committed to a social group.”⁸ Large religions routinize their rituals in order to solidify their social cohesion—repeated corporate acts build familiarity and trust and reinforce group identity markers.⁹ To anticipate the discussion below on an early Christian text, *our* religious community does things “in this way.”¹⁰

The evolution and varieties of Communion

Christian meals in the New Testament and early Church: Two important distinctions must be made in examining New Testament and early Church texts. First, I distinguish Jesus’ dining fellowship from the Communion rites that developed after Jesus’ Resurrection.¹¹ Jesus famously—or infamously, according to some

4. An homage to my graduate school advisor, Edmund F. Perry, an ordained United Methodist minister as well as a scholar of Buddhism.

5. James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 96.

6. *Ibid.*, 117, 118.

7. Harvey Whitehouse and Jonathan A. Lanman, “The Ties That Bind Us: Ritual, Fusion, and Identification,” *Current Anthropology* 55.6 (Dec. 2014):674.

8. *Ibid.*, 678. The other type of social cohesion is “identity fusion.”

9. *Ibid.*, 680–682.

10. Jonathan Schwiebert’s translation of the Greek word in the *Didache*; see *Knowledge and the Coming Kingdom: The Didache’s Meal Ritual and Its Place in Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 80 and *passim*.

11. See, for example, John W. Riggs, “The Sacred Food of *Didache* 9–10 and Second-Century Ecclesiology,” in *The Didache in Context: Essays on Its Text, History and Transmission*, ed. Clayton N. Jefford (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 257–258; cf. Dennis E. Smith, *From*

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at the time (for example, Luke 15:1–2)—dined with many kinds of people, both within and outside his circle of followers, but the rituals that delineated the boundaries of the emerging Church are a different matter. Second, post-Resurrection Communion rites evolved in diverse trajectories, which can be grouped under two large categories—the Lord’s Supper Tradition and the Eucharist.¹² These will occupy our attention in the following paragraphs.

I begin with the insights of my Trinity Lutheran Seminary faculty colleague, Walter F. Taylor Jr. In his essay, “The Lord’s Supper as a Meal of Siblings,” Taylor argues that 1 Cor 11:17–34 should be understood as Paul’s attempt to instruct a nascent community of Christ-believers in the true significance of their gatherings for a meal and worship. On these occasions, the Lord’s Supper served as a fictive family meal during which siblings in Christ should behave properly toward one another. Paul “wants believers to live in the way that sisters and brothers ideally should live,”¹³ strikingly addressing his readers with the Greek word for “from the same womb.”¹⁴ Paul is trying to create a new social group that cuts against the cultural grain of his time, “a kinship group in the Lord” that establishes its peculiar identity in the social contexts of the Roman Empire.¹⁵ Taylor writes, “As opposed to the charges in the second century from Celsus, that Christian belief sought to destroy the family, Paul worked to create a new family of brothers and sisters, a family evident at the family table.”¹⁶

Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 279.

12. I primarily follow Schwiebert’s analysis here; other scholars who recognize variant trajectories include Smith, discussed below, and Andrew McGowan, “First Regarding the Cup...’: Papias and the Diversity of Eucharistic Practices,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 46.2 (Oct. 1995):551–555.

13. Walter F. Taylor Jr., “The Lord’s Supper as a Meal of Siblings,” in *Raising up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson*, eds. K. L. Noll and Brooks Schramm (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 329. It should be noted that Taylor’s essay occupies the honored position as final chapter in this volume.

14. *Ibid.*, 328.

15. *Ibid.*, 338.

16. *Ibid.*, 339. Taylor discusses the notion of a fictive or surrogate family on 329–330. In *From Symposium to Eucharist*, Smith

Taylor identifies Dennis Smith's "important benchmark study," *From Symposium to Eucharist*, as the "primary dialogue partner" for his essay.¹⁷ Smith argues that the earliest communal Christian meals were adaptations of the banquet tradition common to the Greco-Roman world. These Christian meals took a variety of forms in particular locales. Paul's letters indicate that the churches on his circuit both ate and worshiped together, during which time the Lord's Supper functioned as the specific "community-creating ritual" by virtue of the one body of believers sharing the bread and cup.¹⁸ The separation of a regular meal from the Lord's Supper rite was likely accomplished by the early third century, when earlier meal traditions collapsed into an orthodox Eucharist rite.¹⁹

Jonathan Schwiebert traces the diverse trajectories of the Communion rites described in the New Testament and early church texts. According to Schwiebert, we see variants of the Lord's Supper Tradition in 1 Corinthians, Mark, Matthew, Luke, Ignatius of Antioch, John, Justin Martyr, and Hippolytus of Rome. Schwiebert's primary interest, however, is in the *Didache*, which he places within the trajectory of the Eucharistic tradition that eventually held sway in orthodox circles (though the *Didache's* rite never gained widespread usage).²⁰

Although no scholarly consensus has been reached on its exact date, the *Didache* may have been compiled as early as the late first century and may contain sections dating from the years 50–70 that would be contemporary with the earliest portions of the New Testament.²¹ The location and make-up of the *Didache's* community have also been thoroughly debated. No matter the answer to such questions, "the *Didache* sheds a very vivid light on the period immediately following the apostolic age. It makes a unique contribution to our knowledge of the early church and its initial legislation."²²

From his analysis of the ritual elements in chapters 7–10, Jonathan Draper contends that the *Didache* reflects a Jewish Christian community that integrated Gentiles into its membership. Drawing upon the insights of the anthropologist Victor Turner, Draper postulates an extended period of initiation into the community marked by several rites, including fasting, baptism, and a culmi-

(283) writes, "Indeed, it was in the context of the meal that the earliest Christians experienced the bonding event that made them into a fictive family, in which they could call one another brothers and sisters and think of themselves as part of the family of God."

17. Taylor, "Lord's Supper," 326.

18. Smith, 282–283. Paul frequently uses the metaphor of a single body for Christ-believers; see 1 Corinthians 10:16b–17 for a specific link between the one body of Christ and the single loaf of bread in the Lord's Supper. Paul goes on in verse 21 to distinguish "the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" and "the table of the Lord and the table of demons," a striking articulation of the identity-marking function of the ritual.

19. Smith summarizes his view on 4–5, 279–287.

20. Schwiebert, 250.

21. Here following Lucien Deiss, *Springtime of the Liturgy: Liturgical Texts of the First Four Centuries*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1979), 73. Schwiebert (110, 125) seems to agree on these dates.

22. Deiss, 73.

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nating Eucharist. The Gentile initiates thereby renounced their previous social identity and joined a new community, a new fictive family (recall Taylor's essay).²³ The *Didache* emphasizes communal separation, both from Gentiles and from Jews who do not follow Christ, which is epitomized by a sacred meal, the Eucharist. "A holy community is one which excludes outsiders at its meal and maintains a strict watch over what is eaten and by whom..." writes Draper. "This seems to be the understanding underlying the ritual process in the *Didache*."²⁴ The sacred meal creates and sustains a sacred community, in this case a minority religious community whose "primary intermediary" with God is Jesus, not another.²⁵ Our religious community communes "in this way" (Schwiebert's translation of an oft-repeated Greek word in the *Didache*).²⁶ As another scholar quips, "You are with whom you eat."²⁷

Didache 9 and 10 make this clear. John Riggs sees in these chapters the culmination of a process of fencing off the table for exclusively Christian participation in a sacred meal of divine food. Outsiders (that is, those not initiated into the group through baptism) were not invited to the table and insiders (the baptized) had to be "holy" to partake.²⁸ Johannes Betz translates *Didache* 9:5 as follows: "But none shall eat or drink from your eucharist except those who are baptized in the Name of the Lord. For the Lord has also spoken concerning this, 'You shall not give what is holy to the dogs!'"²⁹ This verse may reflect a pre-*Didache* rule

23. Jonathan A. Draper, "Ritual Process and Ritual Symbol in *Didache* 7–10," *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (2000):124–125, 150.

24. *Ibid.*, 135; also, see 133–134, 138, 143, 144, 151.

25. Schwiebert, 80; also, see 120, 168, 178–179.

26. See note 10 above.

27. Peter Garnsey, cited in Schwiebert, 95.

28. John W. Riggs, "From Gracious Table to Sacramental Elements: The Tradition-History of *Didache* 9 and 10," *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.2 (Summer 1984):83–101; see also his "Sacred Food."

29. Johannes Betz, "The Eucharist in the *Didache*," in *The Didache in Modern Research*, ed. Jonathan A. Draper (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 246. The saying about not giving what is holy to dogs parallels Matthew 7:6. Huub van de Sandt argues that the *Didache* and Matthew drew the saying from a common source rather than the *Didache* borrowing from Matthew; see "'Do Not Give What Is Holy to the Dogs' (Did 9:5D and Matt 7:6a): The Eucharistic Food of the *Didache* in Its Jewish Purity Setting," *Vigiliae Christianae* 56.3 (2002):223–246.

precluding the unbaptized from participating in the meal, which Betz sees as consistent with the apparent exclusionary references in 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Revelation 22:15.³⁰ According to Betz, *Didache* 10:6, which bids only those who are “holy” to come forward and those who are not to “do penance,” provides further indication that only the baptized were to partake in the meal, specifically only the ethically worthy baptized.³¹ As Lucien Deiss comments, the Eucharistic meal was one of the means by which “[t]he Church of the *Didache*...intensifies its unity.”³² The eschatological significance of this unity is proclaimed in the prayer of 9:4: “As this bread was scattered over the mountains and gathered together became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power for ever!”³³

Two later Church texts reflect the further evolution of the Eucharist’s identity-marking function. The *Apostolic Tradition* by Hippolytus of Rome (compiled 315) “is by far the richest source we now have for understanding the constitution of the Roman Church and its liturgy at the beginning of the third century.”³⁴ In it we find this colorful instruction: “Let everyone take care that an unbeliever does not taste of the Eucharist, nor a mouse or any other animal, nor that any of it falls and is lost. For the body of Christ is to be eaten by believers and not to be despised.”³⁵ Deiss points out that the practice of celebrating the Eucharist in homes explains the animal references,³⁶ but it is clear that the ritual is meant only for believers. The concern to maintain “ritual purity” is expressed in *Apostolic Tradition* 26–27 where unbaptized catechumens are restricted to eating “exorcised bread” rather than partaking in the Eucharist.³⁷

The *Apostolic Tradition* (21) presumes that a believer’s first Communion would be taken immediately after being baptized. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, written later in the same century (ca. 380), is “the most extensive liturgical and canonical compilation of antiquity.”³⁸ In the liturgy of the so-called Clementine Mass found in this work, we see further ritual purification. Whereas in the *Apostolic Tradition* unbaptized catechumens were present during the Eucharist (though they could not partake of it), here they are dismissed immediately prior to the Eucharist.³⁹

What we see in these New Testament and early Church tra-

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jectories is illuminated by the insights of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. As Riggs summarizes Douglas, “the functional role of food [is] a way to provide a social identity for a group of people, thus to differentiate a particular people from their neighbors while also to provide for internal social guidelines.”⁴⁰

Contemporary Communion policies and practices: Closed Communion has characterized most of church history.⁴¹ Nonetheless, as we might expect, policies and practices differ across denominations today. In this section I survey selected denominations to give a sense of the variety, though I will focus mainly on the arguments for closed Communion.

Orthodox Christianity comprises a complex configuration of self-governing churches across the globe. Those churches that are in communion with each other (the phrasing is important) welcome baptized Orthodox to participate in the Eucharist. A bulletin insert provided by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and titled “Why Non-Orthodox Are Excluded from the Sacrament of Holy Communion,” begins, “In the light of Church history, the question might better be asked, ‘Why does anyone allow for ‘open communion.’” It goes on to state:

The Orthodox Church does not consider it sufficient to express belief in Jesus in order to be admitted to the sacrament. Many heretics believe in Jesus. Arius, the fourth century heretic, believed in Jesus. Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons believe in Jesus. Hindus believe in Jesus. But none of these individuals or groups believes in the One Lord Jesus Christ known and proclaimed by the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.⁴²

In “What to Expect When Visiting an Orthodox Christian Church,” we read, “When you visit, please keep in mind that the Orthodox Church practices closed communion. This is not for triumphalistic reasons, but for very important theological

30. Betz, 252.

31. *Ibid.*, 268–269.

32. Deiss, 77.

33. Betz, 246.

34. Deiss, 126.

35. *Apostolic Tradition* 37, trans. Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 182.

36. Deiss, 150, n. 60. According to Riggs, “Sacred Food,” 271, 281–282, this section of the *Apostolic Tradition* indicates that the Eucharistic elements had taken on magical properties.

37. Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, 142. The phrase “ritual purity” comes from the authors; “exorcised bread” is their translation of the Latin in the *Apostolic Tradition*.

38. Deiss, 215.

39. See *ibid.*, 224.

40. Riggs, “Sacred Food,” 264; cf. Taylor, “Lord’s Supper,” 326.

41. See A. James Bernstein, *Communion: A Family Affair: Why the Orthodox Church Practices Closed Communion* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Conciliar Press, 1999).

42. “Why Non-Orthodox Are Excluded from the Sacrament of Holy Communion,” available at <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/outreach/resources/bulletininserts/communion>, accessed Feb. 15, 2017.

reasons.” This is followed by an invitation: “All are welcome to come forward at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy to share in the antidoron—the blessed bread—which is offered to all.”⁴³

Canon 842 of the *Code of Canon Law* of the Roman Catholic Church states that “A person who has not received baptism cannot be admitted validly to the other sacraments.” Canon 844 states further that “Catholic ministers administer the sacraments licitly to Catholic members of the Christian faithful alone.” Rare exceptions are allowed for Christians who are not in “full communion with the Catholic Church” (again, note the phrasing), but conditionally: Such cases must involve Christians “who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who seek such on their own accord, provided that they manifest Catholic faith in respect to these sacraments and are properly disposed.”

The instruction issued by the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments titled *Redemptionis Sacramentum* is subtitled “On certain matters to be observed or to be avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist.” It instructs pastors on how to handle large public celebrations of the Mass when “out of ignorance non-Catholics or even non-Christians [may] come forward for Holy Communion”: “It is the duty of Pastors at an opportune moment to inform those present of the authenticity and the discipline that are strictly to be observed” (84). The instruction then cites the restrictions of Canon 844 above.⁴⁴

Contemporary Protestants vary widely on Communion policies and practices. The opening vignette about Lake Street Church, which is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches denomination, is a case in point. Although most Baptist denominations and congregations adhere to the practice of communing only baptized Christians, debates have centered around what constitutes proper baptism, and thus to which Christians the table is “open.” It is safe to say that Lake Street Church’s openness to adherents of other faiths is an outlier in the Baptist world.⁴⁵

The policies and practices of the two major Lutheran denominations in the United States will likely interest readers of this article.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), which typically uses the term “close Communion,” is largely concerned with

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determining which Christians worthily commune together. Since the Eucharist is a sacrament of Christian unity, “Differing church confessions render common eucharistic fellowship impossible.”⁴⁶ For this reason, the LCMS “asks that fellow-Christians who are confessors of a different doctrine not participate in the Lord’s Supper at our altars,” though there may be exceptions for such individuals in “situations of crisis or personal spiritual need.”⁴⁷

The notion that non-Christians could worthily participate in the Lord’s Supper is not entertained by the LCMS since such individuals would not hold the requisite “genuine faith.”⁴⁸ A document titled *Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper, Part I* addresses non-Christians in four places. First, they are implied by the phrase “general population,” to whom Communion is denied. Second, the document speculates on how non-Christians will perceive the practice of open Communion by diverse Christians. Third, celebrating Communion at weddings is discouraged because of the likely presence of non-Christians. Finally, “the distinctive theological meaning of the Lord’s Supper” should be emphasized when a Jewish Seder meal is included in a Communion service.⁴⁹ This document makes an interesting statement that could be applied to those Christians who justify opening Communion to non-Christians for reasons of hospitality: “Also rejected by the Scriptures and the [Lutheran] Confessions is that observance of the sacrament which would use it merely as a tool toward closer human fellowship rather than as a thankful celebration of that Christian fellowship which God has given.”⁵⁰

There is some discrepancy of practice across the LCMS de-

43. “What to Expect When Visiting an Orthodox Christian Church,” available at <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/visiting-orthodox-church>, dated Apr. 21, 2016, accessed Feb. 15, 2017.

44. The *Code of Canon Law* is available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html, both accessed Feb. 15, 2017.

45. For an overview of Baptist practices, see Nathan Finn, *Baptism as a Prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper* (Fort Worth: Center for Theological Research, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006). Finn (2) writes, “The proper subject of baptism is someone who has repented of his sins and exercised faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This means non-Christians and infants in Christian families are not proper baptismal candidates; the former rejects faith in Christ and the latter is still unable to make a voluntary faith decision.”

46. *Admission to the Lord’s Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching* (Commission on Theology and Church Relations, Nov. 1999), 43.

47. *Ibid.*, 53. Roman Catholic and Reformed Christians are the primary concerns in this document; non-Christians are implied in only one place (54).

48. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

49. *Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper, Part I* (Commission on Theology and Church Relations, May 1983), 20, 21, 27, 34.

50. *Ibid.*, 19.

nomination, though a completely unrestricted Communion is rare. In a survey of 3,000 LCMS pastors, less than ten percent reported serving “Anyone sincerely desiring to commune,” which presumably includes adherents of other faiths. The other survey options covered Christians of various types.⁵¹

According to the document titled *The Use of the Means of Grace*, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), “Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.”⁵² When an unbaptized person is communed “inadvertently,” the document counsels that no one should feel “ashamed,” but instead give praise for Christ’s gift. Nevertheless, the unbaptized “person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.”⁵³ In other words, there should be no deliberate or ongoing communing of the unbaptized. The document does not mention adherents of other faiths, but whether or not such individuals were in the minds of the authors, they would certainly be counted among the unbaptized.⁵⁴ The concern for ritual integrity is voiced in another ELCA document, here regarding weddings: “Wherever the marriage rite is held, syncretism needs to be avoided. This could result in a rite that is neither Christian nor that of the other religious tradition.”⁵⁵

My Trinity Lutheran Seminary faculty colleague, Cheryl Peterson, has written a perceptive theological analysis of the trend within the ELCA (and other mainline Protestant denominations) of departing from tradition and inviting all, including the unbaptized, to the Communion table “in an attempt to be radically hospitable to the ‘outsider.’”⁵⁶ Peterson argues that the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist are soteriologically and ecclesially connected, and that one precedes the other as identity-marking rites of the church: “Baptism is the sacrament that joins us to Christ in the first place. Eucharist is the meal we share that both signifies and realizes anew our unity with Christ and with one another.”⁵⁷ To see the Eucharist as merely a means of grace for individuals—one of the justifications for admitting unbaptized individuals to the table—misunderstands the corporate nature of

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the ritual, which, after all, speaks of the one body of Christ. To anticipate my argument below about whether closed Communion somehow undermines interfaith relations, Peterson contends that limiting participation to members of Christ’s body “is not to say that the community that celebrates the eucharist is an ‘insider’ or ‘closed’ community. It is open to all people—but the way to enter it is through baptism.”⁵⁸ Taking a pastoral approach, Peterson explains that she will commune anyone who comes forward, quipping, “I don’t ‘card’ at the table.” However, “When I find out someone who has not been baptized has communed, I will invite them into a conversation about being baptized.” She reports that in every such case, the person has chosen to be baptized before communing again.⁵⁹

Does closed Communion hamper harmonious interfaith relations?

Some Christians today—how many cannot be quantified—worry that closed Communion hampers harmonious interfaith relations, and perhaps even causes offense to non-Christians. “It is suffering that the table still cannot be shared,” opined the Focolare attendee at the Mariapolis gathering. I would direct this person and others to the Catholic position, which I think gets it right. And I would contend that no one can honestly categorize Vatican II-inspired Catholic interfaith engagement as unharmonious.

The co-directors of the local Focolare group explained the arrangements for their gatherings:

At the Mariapolis a special room is prepared for the Muslims so that they can perform their daily prayer in an environment suited to the requirements of their religion. Some Focolare members join them, but in ac-

51. Klemet Preus, “Do We Really Practice Closed [sic] Communion in the LCMS,” <http://steadfastlutherans.org/2008/09/do-we-really-practice-closed-communion-in-the-lcms-by-pr-klemet-preus/>, accessed Feb. 12, 2017. Some of my ELCA seminarians dismiss the perspectives of the LCMS out of hand. The better course would be to seek to understand those perspectives. If my seminarians still reject them, there is at least a chance that it will be for good reasons.

52. *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (adopted by the Fifth Biennial Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, Aug. 19, 1997), Principle 37 (41); also, Principle 49 and Applications 49A and 49B (52). The ELCA is the parent denomination of Trinity Lutheran Seminary.

53. *Ibid.*, Application 37G (42).

54. Application 49A (52) comes closest in offering advice about guests.

55. *How Do We Worship and Pray with Other Christians and Non-Christians?* (ELCA, Jan. 2013).

56. Cheryl Peterson, “Font to Table or Table to Font?” *Lutheran Forum* (Summer 2008):46.

57. *Ibid.*, 48.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Peterson per email, Mar. 1, 2017. She also shared this with me: “I think I have heard every argument possible in favor of changing the [ELCA] teaching, but I am still on the side of ‘communion is for the baptized’” (per email, Oct. 9, 2016).

cordance with the directives from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, they stand respectfully in the back of the room as the Muslims recite their prayer. In the same way the daily Catholic Eucharist is open to everyone, although Communion is offered only to those who are in union with the Catholic Church. This distinction between the various religious traditions is greatly appreciated by all those who participate, since it allows each believer to worship according to their own belief, and gives witness to the unity in diversity among us.⁶⁰

In its *Guidelines for the Reception of Communion*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops states, “We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.”⁶¹

The implicit distinction here between the fictive Christian family and the larger human family to which Christians belong offers guidance for enhancing interfaith harmony while maintaining Christian integrity. We might put it this way: Keep your meals straight. Jesus’ radically inclusive dining fellowship is a wonderful model for sharing meals with adherents of other faiths. Such opportunities are ubiquitous in interfaith circles today, including Ramadan Iftar dinners offered by Muslims to interface with their neighbors. But these interfaith meals differ categorically from the central Christian rite of Communion. Jesus recognized no social boundaries when he dined, and Christians should follow his example when they dine with others. But the church that coalesced out of the Jesus movement justifiably established boundaries for celebrating Christ in the Eucharist.⁶²

Some may counter that the situation today differs from the New Testament and early Church periods. Those Christians needed to demarcate themselves in order to survive as a fledgling, sometimes persecuted, minority religious movement, whereas Christianity today is well-established and the majority religion in the United States. Perhaps this attention to identity boundaries makes sense in those areas of the world where Christians are persecuted or minorities today, but not in the U.S., the argument might go.

But this misses the point of identity-marking rites. It is not a matter of numbers or persecution, but rather social cohesion. Religious plurality characterizes both the first and the twenty-first centuries,⁶³ and thus it is just as important for Christians to maintain their group identity now as it was then. Perhaps the

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only difference is the noble intention of many Christians today to break down any and all barriers between religious groups. But that becomes wrongheaded when legitimate boundaries are ignored or dismissed. When baptism is substituted for the Eucharist, the absurdity becomes obvious. I cannot imagine any Christian congregation, including Lake Street Church, inviting visitors of another faith forward to be baptized merely as a gesture of hospitality during a worship service. To be baptized is to become part of a Christian community that reaffirms and celebrates its corporate identity in the Eucharist.

Another objection to my argument may run like this: What about those religions that seem to welcome others into their rites? Why are they not concerned about maintaining identity boundaries? Hindus and Buddhists tend to be offered in evidence for this argument.

It is true that I have often been invited to participate in *pujas* (worship) at Hindu and Buddhist temples in America. I do not have enough evidence to know whether this is common in Hindu and Buddhist countries, but that is beside the point. As we have seen, Christians also differ on the question of inviting others to partake in their central rite.

My response to this objection is twofold. First, it has always been clear in my experience that such participation is that of a guest or visitor rather than an adherent. It is certainly the prerogative of the host to invite guests and visitors to participate in aspects of a ritual event. Second, it is also true that even in Hindu and Buddhist temples there are things I cannot do (such as participate in a *patimokkha* ritual which is restricted to Buddhist monastics) and places I cannot enter (such as the *garbhagriha* or inner sanctum of a Hindu temple).

I am not offended by this. Nor am I offended that as a non-Muslim I cannot participate in the Hajj, or even travel to Mecca. Likewise, I am not offended that as a non-Jew I cannot recite the traditional mourning prayer, the Kaddish, at a Jewish funeral. With Rabbi David Wolpe, “I am mystified why a member of one community is upset at being excluded from the rites of another community.” He continues:

Guests to my home may eat at my table, but they do not sleep in my bed. They may watch my television, but

60. Numrich, 113.

61. *Guidelines for the Reception of Communion* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996).

62. See Riggs, “Sacred Food,” 259; Smith, 285.

63. Consider this quote from Reuven Firestone, *Who Are the Real Chosen People? The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008), 30: “The Roman system did not satisfy the religious and spiritual needs of many in the empire. As a result, new religious movements began to emerge.”

they may not make entries in my checkbook. We all reserve the right to control access to parts of our lives, our homes, and our communities. Religious traditions are sacred to those who practice them. They are the proper arbiters of what may be done and what may not be done. To take offense is to selfishly elevate one's own sentiments above the collective beliefs and holy traditions of generations.⁶⁴

My faculty colleague at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Ryan Schellenberg, suggests that the expectation of open access “plays into a more general trivialization of religious rituals, which are envisioned in individualistic and elective ways—as a sort of smorgasbord of options from which one might select what looks tasty.” This is “actually a mark of profound disrespect,” he continues, “insofar as it devalues religious commitment generally, as something not really to be taken seriously.” Like Rabbi Wolpe, Schellenberg uses an analogy that distinguishes house guests from family members: “Whatever a nonmember might experience when he or she participates in the religious rituals of other people, it is simply not at all the same thing that a member experiences, just as you might stop by my family gathering and hear us telling stories about each other, and find them mildly entertaining, but not really experience the most important thing happening in the room—the flourishing of relationships with deep histories.”⁶⁵

My answer to the question posed above is this: Closed Communion need not hamper harmonious interfaith relations, as long as both Christians and their interfaith partners understand the function of Communion and mutually cultivate a harmonious relationship in other ways. Sometimes I hear the claim that we must worship together, to which I reply: Why? Why is that required in an interfaith relationship? We can come together, we can even attend each other's worship services, but that does not necessitate joint worship. Frankly, too many Christians (and others) plan or participate in a joint worship service without thinking through the theological or doctrinal justifications, only to discover how fraught with tension and ambiguity these occasions can be.

There is a telling scene in *The Imam and the Pastor*, a video documentary of the inspiring reconciliation work of two clerics in Nigeria. Imam Ashafa explains that before beginning their workshops, Christian members of their interfaith teams will wait outside a mosque while Muslims finish their prayers, while Muslims will do the same outside a church. By this, he says, “You can see mutual respect for one another, absolute trust, absolute unselfishness in action.”⁶⁶ No artificially crafted joint worship service would enhance these Christian-Muslim interactions. In fact, it might undermine them.

64. “Interfaith Funerals,” <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2000/07/Interfaith-Funerals.aspx?p=1>, accessed Apr. 30, 2015. Wolpe is a Conservative rabbi. His name no longer appears as the author of this essay.

65. Schellenberg per email, Mar. 1, 2017.

66. *The Imam and the Pastor*, Executive Producer David Channer (FLT Films, 2006).

When Christians attend the ritual activities of another faith, it is best to adopt the posture of “respectful presence.” When adherents of other faiths attend a Christian worship service, for instance as relatives, visitors, or invited guests for special events, they should be welcomed warmly.

Interfaith gatherings can serve noble purposes, such as addressing traumatic events or commemorating important civic occasions. I think of the New York City Prayer Service at Yankee Stadium in the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001⁶⁷ and the many local interfaith prayer services conducted around the country today. Here I follow the practice of those who distinguish praying *in the presence* of others and praying *with* others.⁶⁸ Each representative brings something from his or her own religious tradition but does not impose it on others, thus honoring the integrity of all the gathered traditions. It would be very appropriate to share a prayer that is meaningful for Christians, though it would not be appropriate to pray it on behalf of everyone present as if they were all Christians. Likewise, it would not be appropriate to offer Communion on such occasions, not only for the theological reasons discussed above, but also for the practical reason that this would undercut the unifying purpose of the gathering.

When Christians attend the ritual activities of another faith, it is best to adopt the posture of “respectful presence.”⁶⁹ When adherents of other faiths attend a Christian worship service, for instance as relatives, visitors, or invited guests for special events, they should be welcomed warmly. I encourage Protestants to develop practices of spiritual hallowing in conjunction with the Eucharist, like the Orthodox antidoron (blessed bread) or the custom that has arisen in some Catholic circles of bestowing a blessing on those

67. Video coverage is available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?166250-1/new-york-city-prayer-service>, accessed Feb. 27, 2017.

68. See, for example, Todd Hertz, “Praying in Their Midst: Under What Circumstances Is It Appropriate for Christians to Worship or Pray with Non-Christians?,” *Christianity Today* (Internet issue, Dec. 2001); *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger: Fostering Respect and Mutual Understanding between the Religions* (London: Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2010), 58–59.

69. See, for example, *Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective* (PCUSA, 1997); *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, 61. For an example of this posture, see the report of Pope Francis's visit to a Buddhist temple: “Pope Makes Unscheduled Stop at Buddhist Temple in Sri Lanka,” *Catholic Herald*, Jan. 15, 2015 <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/01/15/pope-makes-unscheduled-stop-at-buddhist-shrine-in-sri-lanka/>, accessed Feb. 4, 2016.

who request one in the Communion line. “The legal situation of the usage is still murky,” writes Fr. Edward McNamara of the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum, “with bishops making statements falling on both sides of the argument.” McNamara admits that “the tendency appears to move away from imparting blessings, but, wherever a certain custom already exists, it can be interpreted as a kind of spiritual communion accompanied by a prayer that Christ enter into the person’s heart.”⁷⁰

Wally Taylor and I have not discussed interfaith topics very often, so I do not know what he will make of this article. But I think he would agree with me that communities of Christ-believers today should treat other faith communities in ways pleasing to the Apostle Paul, whose goal was to create a new social group that would cut “against a cultural grain that is built around social inequality and discrimination.”⁷¹

“Do not be conformed to this world,” Paul implores the Christians in Rome, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Christians thus transformed will treat each other and those outside the faith in love and with honor. “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,” writes Paul, “live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18).⁷² In a similar vein, the Pauline author of Colossians advises Christians to “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Colo 4:5-6).⁷³

I began this section with the claim that no one can honestly categorize Vatican II-inspired Catholic interfaith engagement as unharmonious. I will conclude with two excerpts from *Nostra Aetate*, a groundbreaking declaration from that assembly that again gets interfaith relations right.

The first quote urges Catholics—and all Christians by extension—to uphold the good that can be found among the adherents of the world’s religions: “The Church therefore exhorts her sons and daughters to recognize, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions” (sec. 2). The second quote makes another strong exhortation: “[T]his Sacred Synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to ‘maintain good conduct among the peoples’ (1 Pt 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in

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peace with all, so that they may truly be sons and daughters of the Father who is in heaven” (sec. 5).⁷⁴

If Christians uphold the good found among the adherents of other faiths and engage them with good conduct, then reserving Communion as a Christian rite will not hamper their interfaith relationships.⁷⁵

70. Edward McNamara, “Blessings in Lieu of Communion: Tendency Is to Avoid Them,” *Zenit*, Dec. 20, 2016, <https://zenit.org/articles/blessings-in-lieu-of-communion/>, accessed Feb. 28, 2017.

71. Taylor, “Lord’s Supper,” 338.

72. See the discussion of Rom 12:1–15:13 by Walter F. Taylor Jr., *Paul, Apostle to the Nations: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 246–248.

73. Taylor discusses the scholarly debate over the authorship of Colossians (and other books) in chapter 2 of *Paul, Apostle to the Nations*. I follow Taylor’s lead in doubting that Paul authored 2 Cor 6:14–7:1, which includes abrasive elements that do not “tie in well with the language of reconciliation found in the rest of this larger section of 2 Corinthians” (*Paul, Apostle to the Nations*, 192), particularly 6:14–15 regarding our argument.

74. Thomas F. Stransky, “Translation of *Nostra Aetate*,” in *Nostra Aetate: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Catholic Church’s Dialogue with Jews and Muslims*, eds. Pim Valkenberg and Anthony Cirelli (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), xix–xxii. The English title of *Nostra Aetate* is *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.

75. The author expresses profound appreciation for the expertise and insights of faculty colleagues Cheryl M. Peterson and Joy A. Schroeder of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Ryan S. Schellenberg of Methodist Theological School in Ohio, and W. Becket Soule and Peter G. Veracka of Pontifical College Josephinum, and for the valuable research assistance of Audrey Mihalacki of Trinity Lutheran Seminary. They are all blameless for any deficiencies in this essay.