

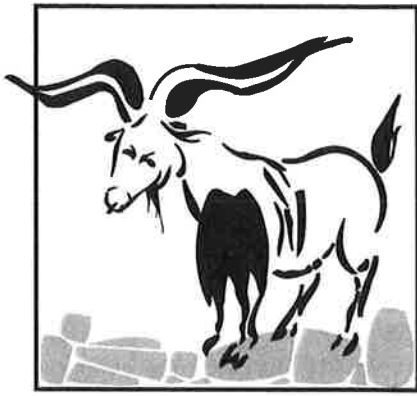
# Speaking the Truth about “Radical Hospitality”

To the Conference of Bishops of the ELCA: We bring before you our concerns regarding “radical hospitality,” which we understand to propose the invitation of the unbaptized to the Lord’s Supper as a matter of principle. We are informed that such “radical hospitality” is already practiced in some ELCA congregations and is being advocated in others by certain leaders and teachers.

1. “Radical hospitality” disregards in principle the stringent warning against unworthy reception in the Scripture, as in I Corinthians 11:27–28.
2. It further disregards in principle the repeated emphasis of the Lutheran Confessions that the sacrament of the altar is for those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and public profession—a faith and confession whose first act is holy Baptism into the Lord’s death and resurrection. See especially The Large Catechism on “The Sacrament of the Altar” and The Formula of Concord 7, “Concerning the Holy Supper.”
3. It discards the age-old rule of faith by which the church has always understood Baptism as the entry into the cross-carrying Christian life, for which holy Communion is the nourishment.
4. As such, it also discards the ELCA’s own teaching in “The Use of the Means of Grace” (1997) as expressed in Principle 37 and Applications 37E and 37G.
5. The proposal of “radical hospitality” misleads by falsely suggesting that identifying the addressee of the promise of holy Communion as the baptized is an act of anti-gospel exclusion.
6. “Radical hospitality” fails to recognize Baptism itself as the truly radical act of inclusion. All people in every nation are called by the gospel to join themselves to Christ, who “has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14), by baptism into a community in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female” (Galatians 3:28).
7. Under the cover of inclusivity, “radical hospitality” in fact deceives the unbaptized, encouraging them to participate in the sacrament without recognizing the entailed commitment to the cross of Jesus Christ and without discerning His body, both in the blessed bread and wine and in the holy community of those who take and eat it.
8. Baptism, repentance, and faith are not legalistic preconditions for grace, but the form grace takes as the Holy Spirit draws persons into a lifegiving new relationship with God.
9. As we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, we call upon the ELCA to remember in principle and in power the opening words of the Ninety-Five Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he meant for the entire life of the Christian to be one of repentance.”
10. We exhort pastors and laity of the ELCA to self-examination, whether our own lives reflect the way of the cross, the life of repentance, and the joy of faith, which are our proper witnesses to the unbaptized and in themselves an invitation to Baptism.
11. And we ask the Conference of Bishops to reiterate clearly the teaching of the whole church, the Lutheran Confessions, and the ELCA: holy communion is intended for the baptized, just as baptism is intended for the world.

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THE GOAT AZAZEL  
THE TRUTH ABOUT  
“RADICAL HOSPITALITY”

*Paul R. Hinlicky*

“**R**adical hospitality” is the catchphrase given to movements among mainline American Protestants to invite, as a matter of principle, unbaptized persons to the holy Supper. It is already practiced in some ELCA congregations and is reported to be a topic of conversation among the ELCA Conference of Bishops this fall.

What is the theological justification for such a move? Something that can fairly be characterized as “radical hospitality” is a special emphasis of the Gospel of Luke. Disciples are to “go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (14:23). “When you give a dinner or a banquet,” Jesus admonishes, “do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (14:12–14). The latter reference to the resurrection in Jesus’ statement is the key to the interpretation of radical hospitality as a strictly *theological* possibility—that is, a reality created by God’s promise, not by human efforts. This new way in generosity for disciples who follow their Lord is grounded in the gift of God: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

As Luke also makes clear, this gift of God brings with it a corresponding repentance: a transformation of human subjectivity and a reorientation of human activity. John the Baptist declares, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance!” (3:8). Receiving the radical hospitality of the heavenly Father by the calling of His Son entails transformation by the Spirit: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). As in a climax, it is to the *penitent* thief, who has iden-

tified with the dying Jesus, that He promises in turn, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). *That* is radical hospitality, according to the Gospel of Luke.

Radical hospitality is forgiveness for the sinner—*only* the sinner. It is food for the hungry—*only* the hungry. It is life for the dead—*only* the dead. It is only our doing insofar as it is first of all and primarily our being transformed as recipients of the Lord’s radical grace: radical (from Latin *radix*, “root”) like the axe cutting to the root in Luke 3:9.

It would be a very selective and highly distorted reading of Luke to turn penetrating, life-transforming, change-in-direction, divine hospitality into the characteristic cheap grace and sanctified permis-

siveness of North American liberal Protestantism. But, sadly, that is what is now being proposed under the name of Luke’s radical hospitality, which proposes to revoke the rule of faith from the earliest days of the church: namely, that the Lord’s Supper is for the baptized. In other words, the Lord’s Supper is for those who in principle and often in power know that they are the sinner, the hungry, the dead and the dying, because they have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection.

This kind of thing has been tried before. I recall a story that Richard John Neuhaus once told me of the heady days of the late 1960s when “radical” Lutheran pastors went in their vestments onto the New York City subways, offering the body and blood to total strangers. He didn’t quite make it clear whether he was one of them. It is not utterly wrong, to be sure, that idealistic young pastors experiment by pushing the envelope in the direction of outreaching grace. But there is a lot wrong with failing to take note of failed experiments, and with failing to push toward a deeper diagnosis of the presenting problem in the church’s

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administration of the means of grace.

Repentance in the sense of dying to sin with Christ in order to rise with Christ is not a *precondition* of grace. It is rather the *form* grace takes in repossessing a person who has belonged, mind and body, to the sinful world of violence and injustice. Accordingly, our teacher in the faith, Martin Luther, composed the programmatic declaration of the Ninety-Five Theses (the five hundredth anniversary of which we will celebrate in a few short years): “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he meant for the entire life of the Christian to be one of repentance.”

As generations have since learned from Luther’s Small Catechism, this lifelong gift and practice of repentance by faith in Jesus Christ consists in dying daily to sin in order that “I

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may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.” The gift of a new life is grounded in our

baptism into Christ and is nurtured along the way by the communion of the baptized in the holy Supper of the Lord.

Proposals in the air to alter the ELCA’s understanding of the radical hospitality of God would suspend baptism as the necessary preparation for reception of the Lord’s Supper, in contradiction to the document, “The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament,” adopted by the fifth biennial assembly of the ELCA in 1997. These proposals reflect a genuinely felt pastoral need to welcome and include visitors at the eucharistic worship of the baptized, and this need is not to be dismissed lightly. However, there are better—indeed, far more “radical”—ways to clarify and address the need.

As it stands, this proposal to remedy a supposed feeling of exclusion tells us more about its proponents than about any imagined visitors. As such, it reflects a legalistic misunderstanding of the alleged “requirement” of baptism. It is as if going through the hoops of baptismal preparation and ceremony were a meritorious precondition, rather than the Spirit’s own gracious preparation by the gospel and through the pastoral ministry of visitation, evangelization, and catechesis.

The elephant in the room, if this diagnosis is right, is the utter lack of such ministry between Sundays and its invisibility in the practice of the Supper among those who *are* baptized. Under these conditions, *of course* the invitation to the Lord’s Table still “limited” to all the baptized cannot but feel exclusionary.

Yet this feeling is projected upon the visitor. Would I as a Christian feel “excluded” when visiting a synagogue service or a Muslim call to prayer or for that matter a Masonic Lodge or the Kiwanis, if I possessed the minimal self-awareness that I came as a visitor to see, not a believing member to participate? I think not. The feeling of exclusion wells up in those contemporary Christians whose gospel

has become pure, abstract inclusivism. It is they who feel awkward and uncomfortable with the non-negotiable presupposition that the gospel’s gift consists in our personal transformation, signed and sealed by holy baptism.

If anything, this so-called radical hospitality at the communion table indicates how empty the theology and practice of *baptism* have become. Baptism itself is the true radical hospitality: as the Book of Acts illustrates and the Pauline Epistles declare, the washing in the triune name is a relinquishment of every “dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14) that exists between human communities, whether they are Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free (Galatians 3:28). Indeed, our actual congregations may not reflect this baptismal theology very well at all. But the solution is hardly to be found in shelving the intent of the Supper, too.

The logical alternative is not, as some would suppose or accuse, to police the communion table. It has been a step in the *right* understanding of holy communion to invite all who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to participate in the Supper, rather than to restrict participation to those in our denominational corner. Rather, a two-part response is called for: a truly evangelistic invitation to the unbaptized to the radical hospitality of the gospel that is the repentant life of baptism itself, and a truly catechetical ministry among the baptized to live out their vocations as the radically hospitable and reconciling presence of Christ in the world.

By contrast, the proposal to invite the unbaptized to the table reflects and perpetuates the legalistic misunderstanding of the rule of faith. According to the true rule of faith, holy communion is for those baptized into Christ’s death, gospel forgiveness is for sinners, gospel food is for the hungry, and gospel life is for the dying. We who are in the tradition of Luther’s *pro me* should know how grace

transforms our self-understanding: I am the sinner for whom Christ lived, I am the dying one for whom He died and rose, I am the hungry one whom He feeds.

How else could the reception of this Lord's body and blood have any

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meaning whatsoever? Paul emphasizes that this Supper is not any old supper; it is to be eaten with the whole community that shares in the same repentance and faith of receiving the Lord Himself; it is not to be consumed in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11). How unworthy and deceitful it is on the part of Christians to invite the

unbaptized to partake of this meal, without first teaching them to which Lord they are thereby binding themselves, whose holy cross they therewith take upon themselves!

The proposal to suspend the rule of faith in the name of radical hospitality wishes, even if unintentionally, to bypass the arduous way of personal transformation by conformation to Jesus Christ in His cross and resurrection. Indeed, it functionally replaces engagement with the person of Jesus Christ and His calling daily to take up the cross with the abstract idea of "radical hospitality" or "unconditional grace," which then takes on a life of its own. It proposes to market the eucharist as a no-fuss, no-bother, no-cost way of belonging without believing.

Ironically, this is but a new legalism and the sanctimoniousness of the "more-inclusive-than-thou" crowd. After the destructive tumult of the past five years, such proposals are particularly perilous to the fragile unity, not to mention ecumenical responsibilities, of the ELCA.

What is needed to address the pastoral and missiological needs of today

is a serious commitment to and training in evangelism, apologetics, and catechesis. It is an abuse of the Supper—not to mention an abuse of the unbaptized—to make the sacrament into a tool of proselytism, taking advantage of visitors with no understanding of these holy things, least of all that their reception entails taking up the cross. It undermines the foundational unity of the church in one baptism. It confuses the radical hospitality of God in the gospel with religiously sanctioned permissiveness in a decaying culture. The proposal to suspend the rule of faith in this case would take the ELCA another huge and fatal step in the wrong direction.

You are invited to share your concerns with the ELCA Conference of Bishops by signing the petition printed on the front inside cover of this issue. Visit [www.ipetitions.com/petition/speaking-the-truth-about-radical-hospitality](http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/speaking-the-truth-about-radical-hospitality).

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