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Liturgical Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Sharing in Grace¹

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Evangelical Hospitality

The Church's practice of hospitality is, in the words of Reinhard Hütter, "both a reflection and an extension of God's own hospitality—God's sharing of the love of the triune life with those who are dust."² The Church as a divine institution both receives and mediates God's reconciling initiative by the preaching of the gospel and by means of the sacraments. In her liturgy, the Church extends God's hospitality in Christ precisely because the Church is, in a real sense, the continuation of Jesus' presence through the participation in his anointing with the Spirit.³ The notions of recapitulation (Irenaeus) and of reconstitution (N. T. Wright) indicate an identity between Christ and the Church. The recapitulation or reconstitution of Israel in Christ implies that Jesus stands at the end of the Old Testament people of God, and that he forms the nucleus of the New Testament people of God. The Pauline notions of the believers being "in Christ" and so along with him being the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16, 29) are ways of saying that the life of the Church is more than people looking up to a Saviour in order to imitate him. Union with Christ means that, in a real sense, the Church has been raised up with Christ and has received a place in heaven at the right hand of God (Eph 2:6; Col 2:12; 3:1–4). In this paper I will address some of

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to the Christian Theological Research Foundation for providing a venue for discussion of this paper at the AAR/SBL Annual Convention in Atlanta, Ga., November 22, 2003, as well as for their invitation to submit it for publication. An expanded version will be published in my forthcoming book, *Hospitality, Violence, and the Cross: Contemporary Explorations in Atonement Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

² Reinhard Hütter, "Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 219. Christine D. Pohl likewise comments that our hospitality is a "reflection and reenactment" of God's hospitality" in her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 29. Hospitality "reflects God's greater hospitality that welcomes the undeserving, provides the lonely with a home, and sets a banquet table for the hungry" (ibid., 16). Cf. also Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 11–12, 57–61; Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000).

³ Cf. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 73–74, who refers to the work of Catholic theologian, H. Mühlen.

the implications of Christ's presence in and through the liturgical hospitality of the Church. I will argue that liturgical hospitality—mindful of the Church's boundaries—forms the primary shape of God's gracious hospitality in our world.

First a comment on being mindful of the Church's boundaries: liturgical hospitality is the practice of an identifiable, particular community. This particularity implies that hospitality has its boundaries. As Thomas Oden puts it: "A center without a circumference is just a dot, nothing more. It is the circumference that marks the boundary of the circle. To eliminate the boundary is to eliminate the circle itself. The circle of faith cannot identify its center without recognizing its perimeter."⁴ The need for boundaries implies that the hospitality of divine forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be absolute or unconditional. The divine means of embodying hospitality in the world—primarily the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments—cannot escape the tension between hospitality and its boundaries, that exists in all of human life. Boundaries are a *sine qua non* of ecclesial hospitality.

The concepts of hospitality and grace have unfortunately been co-opted to a large extent by a self-absorbed culture that tends to be more concerned about experiencing the feeling of being forgiven than about extending divine grace and forgiveness to others. Underlying our internalization and privatization of forgiveness, says Gregory Jones, lies a "preoccupation with individual feelings and thoughts at the expense of analyses of culpability, responsibility and repentance."⁵ Jones asks us to move away from a focus on the therapeutic and emotional effects that forgiveness may have on ourselves when we forgive others.

Patrick Keifert describes this danger of a betrayal of authentic hospitality in his book, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*. Keifert laments two ideologies. First, he mentions the "ideology of intimacy" that has taken hold of the North-American Church, and which posits "closeness and warmth" as "the most—or even the only—valuable experience that life affords."⁶ This "ideology of intimacy" in Christian worship fails to recognize the need to retain permeable boundaries that enable others to join the community in worship. Second, Keifert decries the "ideology of individualism." If the significance and impact of forgiveness is measured by the impact it has on the emotional stability of the individuals in the relationship (or perhaps mainly on the emotional well-being of the person offering the forgiveness), this means that the preaching of the gospel loses its public character. Since the public sphere has lost much of its meaning, the liturgy is construed as an extended family gathering: "The extended family

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 131. Caroline Westerhoff also emphasizes the need for boundaries to counter possible abuse of hospitality in *Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1999). Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 63–64.

⁵ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 50.

⁶ Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 24.

can become a small clique that establishes the norms for worship; its needs and interests become the focus of worship. For the inner circle, worship therefore seems very warm, open, and intimate. To other members, it appears exclusive.”⁷

Providing individual church members with feelings of well being is not the first concern of genuine hospitality. True hospitality reaches out to the other and can never be satisfied with erecting impermeable boundaries. The gospel (*euangelion*) is the true antidote to the self-enclosed economy of exchange that characterizes a therapeutic view of forgiveness. The good news of the gospel, in its very nature, expands boundaries as it reaches out to those beyond the Church. The gospel is the Word of God that invites everyone to repent and to accept the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Sunday morning preaching of the gospel has an open or public aspect. Every Church is at heart a “seeker Church,” seeking out and extending hospitality to those beyond her boundaries. The North-American Church needs to recover the notion that inasmuch as hospitality has a place in the liturgy, it is the hospitality of the *gospel*. It is, literally, an *evangelical* hospitality, in which God offers everyone his hospitality of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Of course, even evangelical hospitality has its boundaries: time and space, language and culture, are among the factors limiting the reach of the preaching; the specificity of the gospel message implies the demand for conformity to the gospel and ultimately even the possibility of exclusion from this community. The hospitality of the proclamation of good news is only possible against the backdrop of boundaries that identify the Church as a community distinctively shaped by the gospel. Nonetheless, the preaching of the gospel is rightly interpreted as God’s primary means of grace. The public proclamation of God’s Word is the way in which he liberally extends good news; it is truly *evangelical* hospitality. We need a keen eye for the importance of preaching as God’s public gift of hospitality to the world. By recovering the significant place of the expository sermon in the liturgy, the Church will be able to recover the communal, public invitation of God among the “company of strangers.”⁸ In this way, the Church will in turn be equipped to demonstrate and extend forgiveness and reconciliation to other strangers, who will no longer feel excluded from a privatized and closed intimate family fellowship. Our congregations will increasingly lose their social homogeneity; they will no longer be “lifestyle enclaves.”⁹ The preaching of the gospel—evangelical hospitality—is the expression of God’s desire for everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

⁷ Ibid., 29; cf. *ibid.*, 8. All of this is not to say that the family metaphor is inherently problematic. As Scott Hahn has pointed out in *First Comes Love: Finding Your Family in the Church and Trinity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), it is an important biblical metaphor. The difficulty lies in the exclusion of the public sphere and in the disappearance of the public invitation of the gospel.

⁸ Cf. Parker J. Palmer, *Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

⁹ This term originates with Robert Bellah. L. Gregory Jones employs the term in his discussion on “Eucharistic Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger into the Household of God,” *Reformed Journal* 39 (May 1989):13.

Baptismal Hospitality

Baptism is the sacrament through which one enters into the Church and is united to Jesus Christ. As the prime sacrament of initiation, baptism not only signifies the universal call or promise of the gospel, but also incorporates one into Christ and at the same time into the eschatological community of hospitality. It is impossible to belong to Christ without at the same time belonging to the Church of Christ. Believing is never an isolated activity.¹⁰ To accept the invitation of the host implies that one is willing to share in the feast together with all others who have accepted the same invitation. Baptismal hospitality is by definition corporate in character.

Baptism into Christ and into his Church implies a bond of unity with all others who likewise have been baptized into Christ and his Church. We can only deny this objective bond of fellowship (*koinania*) if we radically limit the implications of baptism to the local Church. Such a limitation hardly seems justified. Incorporation into the local Church means incorporation into Christ, and so participation in his universal body as well. Walter Kasper puts it well when he says “baptism is more than inclusion in a local congregation and also more than inclusion in a particular confession. Baptism incorporates us in the one and only body indivisible of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13 and 1:13)...From its inmost nature baptism has an importance that goes beyond this or that local or confessional church.”¹¹ Baptism forges a unity that resists the sinful divisions that we have erected. It tells us that divine hospitality reaches far beyond denominational walls and calls those very boundaries into question.¹²

Recognizing this unity established through baptism, most churches in the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions accept the validity of one another’s baptism. All ecumenical dialogue partners agree that re-baptism is a schismatic act that severs the unity of the Church and as such needs to be rejected.¹³ When baptism is administered with water, in the name of the Triune God, and with the intention of doing what the Church does, this is generally considered

¹⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1994), 44–45 (§ 166).

¹¹ Walter Kasper, “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of Baptism,” *Ecumenical Review* 52 (2000):530–31.

¹² The 1982 Lima document of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, is quite right, therefore, to refer to baptism as “a sign and seal of our common discipleship” and as a “basic bond of unity” (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 111 [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982], 3 [B6].) Vatican II also recognized the basic sacramental bond of unity established through baptism: André Birmelé, “Baptism and the Unity of the Church in Ecumenical Dialogues,” in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC, 1998), 104.

¹³ To be sure, the rejection of re-baptism is not unambiguous. Churches that only accept adult baptism may readily agree to reject re-baptism, but they may still insist on baptizing people that come to them from other churches on the grounds that they don’t recognize infant baptism as a true baptism in the first place. From a completely different perspective, some of the Orthodox churches also do not recognize the baptism of other churches (see Kasper, “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications,” 532–34).

a sufficient basis for ecumenical recognition of a bond of unity.¹⁴ The essentials of the faith, as expressed in the Creeds of the early Church, constitute what the seventeenth-century Puritan, Richard Baxter, referred to as “mere Christianity.”

Of course, even a “mere Christianity” implies a community centred on a particular gospel message. The Trinitarian creeds of the Church belong to the very core of the faith. Baptism is not extended indiscriminately to believers and unbelievers alike. It is not a boundary-less hospitality. As a sacrament of initiation, baptism is a rite that takes place on the very boundary of the Church. Baptism includes particular people into the Church. Only those who are willing to have their identities shaped by the gospel are baptized into Christ and his Church. Baptizands throughout the centuries have renounced the devil and his works upon their entry into the Church. The works of the power of darkness have no place in the community of light. The hospitality of baptism implies the necessary exclusion of everything that does not belong to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Despite this exclusion, it is right to speak of “baptismal hospitality.” I have coined this term for several reasons. First, it indicates that *God* reaches out to his people with genuine hospitality, extends to them his grace, and places them within the boundaries of his Church. Second, the corporate character of this baptismal hospitality implies recognition of baptism across the various boundaries that we have erected and that detract from the witness of the visible community of faith. Baptismal hospitality as *our* mutual recognition of each other’s baptismal practices thus counters our divisions and implies unity of the baptizand with the universal Church. Finally, baptismal hospitality issues a call. Baptism is often referred to as both a gift and a call.¹⁵ God not only gives us his grace by incorporating us into Christ and into his Church, but he also calls on us to accept the responsibility of this gift. Baptism is a call to continue in faith; it is a call to respond to God’s hospitable invitation both now by joining the Church and in the future by continuing in the meal of the host and by a life of fellowship with Christ and with one’s fellow believers. This aspect of the call or invitation to the obedience of faith is a positive element in recent ecumenical dialogue. The Scriptures regard baptism as inextricably connected with the human response of faith in Christ.¹⁶ Divine hospitality only reaches its purpose of eternal fellowship through the continual faithful response of the believers. Baptismal hospitality therefore implies the need for a continual acceptance of the promise of forgiveness and life.¹⁷

¹⁴ For a balanced discussion on the relationship between Church and baptism in Cyprian, Optatus, and Augustine, see J. Faber, *Vestigium Ecclesiae: De doop als ‘spoor der kerk’ (Cyprianus, Optatus, Augustinus)* (Goes, Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1969).

¹⁵ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, p. 3 (B8): “Baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift.”

¹⁶ Cf. J. van Bruggen, *Het diepe water van de doop* (Kampen: Kok, 1997).

¹⁷ This emphasis on the call for faith does not necessarily imply a rejection of infant baptism. It is possible to speak of a common faith of the Church (or of the parents) in which children participate. Richard Baxter (1615–91) defended infant baptism on the grounds that children were associated with their parents’ faith as their “appendages.” See Hans Boersma, *Richard Baxter’s Understanding of Infant Baptism* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2002).

Eucharistic Hospitality

God's hospitality finds its climax in the celebration of the Eucharist. Evangelical hospitality and baptismal hospitality are terms that I have employed in line with the common notion of "eucharistic hospitality." As we generally associate hospitality with fellowship around meals, the term "eucharistic hospitality" has come to denote the willingness of churches to accept people from other denominations to share with them in the celebration of the communion meal. The theological rationale for this practice of eucharistic hospitality toward those of different confessional backgrounds is the baptismal unity that transcends denominational walls. If we recognize the baptism administered in other churches as establishing a common bond of unity, shouldn't we also accept all baptized Christians—regardless of denominational background—at the Lord's Table?

It seems to me that there is something fundamentally right about this argument. At the same time, the expression is not without danger. Eucharistic hospitality is hospitality that *we*—the people of God—extend to others. However, if such horizontal fellowship is justified at the communion table, then surely it must have its basis in a prior vertical relationship. Divine hospitality must precede human hospitality. As Monika Hellwig puts it, The Lord's Supper is "in the first place the celebration of the hospitality of God shared by guests who commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God. It is the celebration of divine hospitality as offered in the human presence of Jesus as word, wisdom and outreach of God."¹⁸ Eucharistic hospitality is always first God's gracious invitation to find forgiveness and life in unity with Christ and with his Church. When I speak of "eucharistic hospitality," therefore, I am not simply referring to the common idea of accepting fellow believers from other confessional traditions at the Eucharist; I am also, and primarily, referring to God's gracious invitation to share in his feast of absolute hospitality in eternal life. As Jonathan Wilson puts it: "When God welcomes us, he does not do so because we are worthy of hospitality: 'God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). If, while we were still sinners and enemies, Christ reconciled us to God, then the hospitality of God's love does not depend on our worthiness."¹⁹

Miroslav Volf tells the childhood story of a visitor who used to come and join his family every month for a Sunday meal after the celebration of Holy Communion. As a young boy, Miroslav had his reservations about the intruding stranger's monthly visits. Now realizing the connection between the common meal and the Eucharist, Volf comments:

¹⁸ Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, rev. ed. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1992), 18. Cf. Monika K. Hellwig, "The Eucharist and World Hunger," *Word & World* 17 (1997):65.

¹⁹ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith, Hope and Love in Uncertain Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 175.

Had I objected—“But must *we* invite him *every* time he comes!?”—they [i.e., Volf’s parents] would have responded, “As the Lord gave his body and blood for us sinners, so we ought to be ready to share not only our belongings, but also something of our very selves, with strangers.” The circle of our table was opened up by the wounds of Christ, and a stranger was let in. Had I continued to protest, they would have reminded me of that grand eschatological meal whose host will be the Triune God, a meal at which people of every tribe and tongue will be feasting. I had better be ready to sit next to him at *that* meal, they would have insisted.²⁰

The Eucharist is the place where God extends his lavish hospitality to his disciples. Since it is God’s hospitality that all guests experience at the Lord’s Table, eucharistic hospitality toward people from different denominational backgrounds can hardly be an option. Eucharistic hospitality is based on the baptismal hospitality that God himself has extended to all who come to him in faith. To be sure, the limitation of eucharistic hospitality to those who are baptized indicates again that the Church has boundaries, and that in her liturgical celebration the Church has an identity to guard if she wants to remain Church.

How is it possible to be united around the communion table without fully extending this unity toward a denominational merger of the various churches? Faced with this dilemma, we might be tempted to look at eucharistic fellowship as the end of ecumenical discussions rather than as the means. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, tends to be quite hesitant about eucharistic hospitality and only allows it under certain circumstances.²¹ The Orthodox churches tend to be even more categorical in their rejection of eucharistic hospitality. Paulos Mar Gregorios makes his point quite forcefully, when he comments “the term hospitality is quite offensive to us in this context, since it implies that those who do not do what some Western churches are now doing are being downright inhospitable.”²²

²⁰ Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Volf and Bass, 249. Christine D. Pohl also comments on the connection in her essay in the same volume, “A Community’s Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities,” 135.

²¹ To be sure, Vatican II has recognized that the bond of baptism creates “some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church” (“Decree on Ecumenism,” in *The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, vol. 1 of *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, rev. ed. [Northport: Costello; Dublin: Dominican, 1975], 455). But this imperfect communion only implies eucharistic fellowship in situations of “urgent necessity,” such as danger of death, persecution, or imprisonment (“Declaration on the Position of the Catholic Church on the Celebration of the Eucharist in Common by Christians of Different Confessions,” in *Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, 505). Cf. Geoffrey Wainwright, “Towards Eucharistic Fellowship,” *Ecumenical Review* 44 (1992):7; Susan K. Wood, “Baptism and the Foundations of Communion,” in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC, 1998), 44–45.

²² Paulos Mar Gregorios, “Not a Question of Hospitality,” *Ecumenical Review* 44 (1992):46. Cf. also Robert G. Stephanopoulos, “Implications for the Ecumenical Movement,” *Ecumenical Review* 44 (1992):18–28.

There is a sense in which I can appreciate these Catholic and Orthodox reservations. They stem from an ecclesiology that takes the visible communion of believers seriously, and that wants to retain the unity of believers under the office of the apostolic ministry.²³ Such an ecclesiology is a reminder that even the Church's hospitality is not yet an eschatological hospitality in the full sense of the word. The Eucharist is not distributed to all. It is those who through baptismal boundary crossing are incorporated into the visible body that receive the sacrament of the Eucharist.²⁴ Indeed, these more restricted practices should serve as reminders to Protestants that visible unity is important and that eucharistic hospitality is no panacea for the fragmentation of our churches and does not justify the continuation of denominational divisions. By refusing to extend eucharistic hospitality to believers from other denominations, however, we end up with a static ecclesiology. We need to keep in mind that Christ is still in the process of gathering his Church.²⁵ By rejecting communion with other believers we appropriate too eagerly the characteristics of catholicity and apostolicity, as though they had no extension beyond our own particular denomination. Baptism forms a common bond that calls for eucharistic hospitality.

²³ Cf. John Paul II's recent encyclical, "Ecclesia de eucharistia," 44: "Precisely because the Church's unity, which the Eucharist brings about through the Lord's sacrifice and by communion in his body and blood, absolutely requires full communion in the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance, it is not possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic liturgy until those bonds are fully re-established. Any such concelebration would not be a valid means, and might well prove instead to be *an obstacle, to the attainment of full communion*, by weakening the sense of how far we remain from this goal and by introducing or exacerbating ambiguities with regard to one or another truth of the faith" (April 17, 2003; <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html>).

²⁴ This paper does not elaborate on questions surrounding excommunication. Suffice it to say that I regard discipline and excommunication essentially as acts of hospitality in that they constitute a final call to return to the fold of the Church. William T. Cavanaugh rightly observes: "Excommunication by the community clarifies for the sinner the seriousness of the offense, and, if accompanied by a proper penitential discipline, shows the sinner the way to reconciliation with the body of Christ while shielding the sinner from the adverse effects of continued participation in the Eucharist in the absence of true reconciliation. As an invitation to reconciliation, then, excommunication done well is an act of *hospitality*..." (*Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], 243; emphasis in original).

²⁵ Miroslav Volf goes as far as to argue that on "this side of the eschatological gathering of the whole people of God, there can be no church in the singular" in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 157–58. He calls openness to all other churches an "interecclesial minimum" (*ibid.*, 157) and an "indispensable condition of ecclesiality" (*ibid.*, 156). Bernard Thorogood comments: "There can be no actions of the church on earth which are the end of the pilgrimage road, for that is the gift of glory, the ingathering of the whole body, the completion of God's gracious road....So to downgrade 'means' appears to me a lack of the eschatological dimension in worship. What we are and do cannot ever be the end....We need not be ashamed of eucharistic hospitality as a means toward God's hospitality" ("Coming to the Lord's Table: A Reformed Viewpoint," *Ecumenical Review* 44 [1992]:12–13).

The table is that of the Lord, who himself extends hospitality to those who belong to his Church. The two sacraments of initiation belong together.²⁶

Penitential Hospitality

Confession, more immediately than any of the other means of grace, draws our attention to the fact that divine hospitality is not without its boundaries. Instead of focusing our attention on the liberality of hospitality, confession—and in particular the practice of penance—tends to make us think of reluctantly owning up, of punishments, and of burdens imposed by the clergy on the laity.²⁷ Whereas preaching, baptism, and Lord's Supper all have positive connotations, penance tends to have a negative ring to it, reminding us of enforced boundaries. To speak of "penitential hospitality" may well seem to be a contradiction in terms. Penance and hospitality seem to belong to two different worlds. Indeed, preaching is first and foremost the proclamation of good news. Baptism is an expression of God's love drawing us into eternal fellowship. The Eucharist is an advance celebration of the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. The celebratory character of each of these means of grace is at the very least dimmed when we are faced with the fact that we need to admit our wrongdoings. The immediate occasion for confession lies in human sin. Apprehension and shame about having to admit my wrongdoings to someone else is a natural attitude when going to confession. In the early Church, to enter into the "order of penitents" during Lent and to receive absolution at Easter was a serious matter that made clear to all that in this sinful world God used boundaries and conditions in practising his hospitality.

It would nonetheless be theologically incorrect and pastorally ill advised to reserve the term "hospitality" for preaching, baptism, and the Eucharist, and to associate confession and penance with boundary enforcement. We have already seen that the practices of evangelical, baptismal, and eucharistic hospitality are impossible without the recognition of boundaries. God's work of reconciliation in and through the Church takes place in concrete, circumscribed activities. Confession may be more emphatically and directly concerned about boundaries, but by no

²⁶ Susan K. Wood, "Baptism as a Mark of the Church," in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 43. As Wood points out, the connection between baptism and Eucharist as rites of initiation has implications also for infant communion, which is recognized more in the Eastern than in the Western tradition.

²⁷ The terms "confession" and "penance" are ambiguous. In what follows I take "confession" to mean both the private confession of sins in front of a clergy and the public communal confession of sins in the liturgy. The sacrament of penance, in the Catholic tradition, consists of contrition (repentance), confession (of sins), absolution (pronouncement of forgiveness), and satisfaction (doing certain works of reparation to repair the harm done and restore Christian habits). Sometimes, the word "penance" is reserved for the aspect of satisfaction only. In what follows, I take penance to refer to the entire process of private auricular confession.

means exclusively so: God's Word is the good news about the victory of Jesus Christ, but this victory implies a lordship that rejects false worship and idolatry as incompatible with the gospel. Baptism speaks of the union between the believer and Christ and his Church, but this union loses its meaning when baptism is also extended to those who do not belong to the *communio sanctorum*. The Eucharist is the celebration of reconciliation and of new life, but to extend the Eucharist to those who are not baptized or to those who wilfully reject the hospitality of God is to endanger the very character of the Church as the eschatological community of the resurrection. Preaching, baptism, and the Eucharist are means of grace. Grace turns into cheap grace when we refuse to say of particular actions that they have no place in a forgiven community. Hospitality loses its character when it admits all—perhaps even the devil—to come in.²⁸

Confession and discipline should not be viewed, therefore, as something that clouds the hospitality of God, as a negative holdout from a sin-obsessed past. Penance—acknowledging one's sin and receiving divine absolution from the pastor or priest—is a practice inscribed on the very boundary between inclusion and exclusion. Without penance, our sins exclude us from the community of reconciliation and turn us into strangers exiled from home. The Church can only function as a witness to God's eschatological hospitality if, in fact, the believers commit themselves to practices of conversion and penance. Forgiveness without penance means hospitality without boundaries and an invitation to Satan, sin, and death to take over the community of grace. It is by no means a contradiction in terms to speak of "penitential hospitality." Penitence is one of the means of guarding the hospitable character of the community of the Church.

Why is it that we have such difficulty acknowledging the beneficial and hospitable character of confession? I suspect that much of this stems from the psychologizing of the faith that characterizes so much of contemporary North American Christianity. In his monumental study, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, Thomas N. Tentler traces the medieval attempt to hold the twin aspects of consolation and discipline in a balance, despite the tension that existed between the two.²⁹ I am afraid that evangelicalism, in particular, has decisively opted for the former at the cost of the latter. With Christian bookstores pampering to the insatiable desire of the laity to be consoled, our Church communities are becoming more and more concerned with pragmatic self-help strategies for people trying to cope in our late modern society. The result of this over-emphasis on consolation means that it has become difficult for many churches to display any kind of real, alternative morality. The desire to uphold Christian standards of ethics is labelled as legalism or works righteousness, while immoral practices are defended as at least

²⁸ I am thinking here of Jacques Derrida's understanding of hospitality as absolute and unconditional, so that we may have to be open to letting even the devil come in. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.

²⁹ Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

tolerable within the Church under the guise of Christ-like inclusivity.³⁰ Consolation has trumped discipline; hospitality is redefined as hospitality without boundaries. The result is an inability to appreciate the value of confession and penance.

We need to recognize, as Barbara Brown Taylor has rightly commented, that penance is not for the sake of punishment, but is a form of restorative justice.³¹ Just as we cannot do without the penal aspect in our judicial system, so it is wrong-headed to exclude the practice of confession and penance from the life of the Church. Penance gives an opening to alleviate people's consciences that are now often troubled by the heavy burden of unconfessed sins. Penance enables people to confess their sins and to receive the forgiveness of God. Confession and penance are not violent impositions on the conscience of the individual. Instead, they constitute one of the ways in which the Church safeguards and protects her character as a hospitable community.

The Church must learn the practice of hospitality not through a horizontal imitation of what, for North Americans, constitutes hospitality. Instead, since the Church is the continuation of Christ's presence through the Spirit, the Church's hospitality is the enactment of God's hospitality in Christ. It is therefore through the Church's means of grace that she extends hospitality to those in need of shelter. The public preaching of the gospel (evangelical hospitality), the baptismal bond of unity (baptismal hospitality), the reception of and participation in divine hospitality around the Table (eucharistic hospitality), and the restoration of communion through penance (penitential hospitality) make up the primary ways in which the Church embodies God's hospitality.

³⁰ Cf. J. Daryl Charles, *The Unformed Conscience of Evangelicalism: Recovering the Church's Moral Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 29.

³¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2000), 93–94. R. A. Duff discusses punishment meted out by the state in terms of the religious practice of penance in *Trials and Punishments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Brenda M. Baker, however, is correct in pointing out the limitations of this analogy: penance is primarily concerned with the restoration of the offender, while criminal justice has the larger interests of the community at stake ("Penance as a Model for Punishment," *Social Theory and Practice* 18 [1992]:322).