

Why We Need an Altar Call to the Font

By Benjamin M. Stewart | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

Author's note: A number of people were helpful conversation partners in thinking through this essay. I am especially grateful for extended conversations with Susan Briehl, Jennifer Davidson, Paul Hoffman, and Gordon Lathrop.

The impetus for this essay comes partly from the open communion, or open table, movement.^[1] At the heart of that generative and provocative movement is an invitation. The invitation is to communion, but it is especially provocative because it implicitly or explicitly invites those who are not baptized. This essay is not about the open table movement. However, I propose that we think further about invitation from a locus that has been surprisingly little engaged in conversations about open table: Christian baptism. A few recent essays, particularly among Lutherans, have addressed some of the baptismal issues raised by open communion.^[2] As one response to those essays, this article proposes a modest but pivotal reform in contemporary baptismal practice: a regular practice of liturgical invitation to baptism.

Ecumenical context

A Sunday invitation to baptism is also a logical outgrowth of wider ecumenical work on baptism. The past century of ecumenical collaboration has produced significant convergences between evangelical and catholic streams of baptismal theology and practice. Specifically, ecumenical documents and worship resources now approach baptism as normally a public event on Sunday, mutually recognized across denominations, conducted with ample water, serious about discipleship and formation, emphatic about God's grace, normally (even if not typically) for adults in addition to children, and an enduringly meaningful beginning-point for a lifetime of Christian vocation.^[3] This is a profound change from the mostly private perfunctory baptisms of less than a century ago. Liturgical historian Maxwell Johnson writes that the current ecumenical convergence in baptismal theology and ritual offers "to modern Christians, as never before in history, the opportunity to recover a profound Christian spirituality, a way of living in Christ, which is consciously and intentionally rooted in Christian initiation in water and the Holy Spirit."^[4]

For all of this ecumenical baptismal prominence and promise, however, it is remarkable that relatively few worship services publicly invite anyone into the path toward baptism. In many places, there is not even any public *information* about how to begin the path toward baptism, much less a regular, liturgically integrated *invitation*. In many congregations, one might hear dozens or hundreds of liturgical invitations to confession, communion, and offering—and more prosaic invitations to committees and fundraisers—before hearing a single invitation to baptism.

Evangelical patterns of invitation

American evangelicals have been especially interested in speaking the language of invitation in worship. While the altar call may have its roots in invitation to the communion table, today the altar call (or invitation to discipleship, or opening the doors of the church) is more associated with individual

commitment or recommitment to the life of faith. Many churches in the revivalist tradition include a time at every Sunday service that culminates in an invitation to discipleship, in which individuals who respond are supported by conversation and prayer with ministers, elders, and others. This ritual event sometimes occurs near the end of the service so that the time of prayer may extend for as long as needed.[5]

The specific practice of evangelical invitation to discipleship now often takes place within an emphasis on creating an ecclesial and liturgical environment of hospitality. While American cultural accents on inclusion and growth certainly influence contemporary practice, many of today's evangelicals articulate calls to discipleship that are grounded in the radical hospitality of God. Thus, in many places the general concern for hospitality—from accessible websites to worship resources—may be understood as reaching its most concentrated and culminating form in the invitation to faith and discipleship. While the evangelical practice of altar call may not serve as a direct model for invitations to the font, it nevertheless represents an example of a clear, liturgically integrated open door for adult entry into the Christian life—something that mainline Protestant and Catholic liturgies rarely achieve.

A new option for the gathering rite from the Lutherans

Lutherans in North America now sometimes anchor the Sunday gathering rite in baptism—even when no baptism is celebrated. The new worship book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), provides the option of beginning Sunday worship with a newly created rite, “Thanksgiving for Baptism.”[6] It is an alternative to a brief order for confession and forgiveness with which recent generations of Lutherans have often begun Sunday worship. The option for Thanksgiving for Baptism arose out of the ecumenical recovery of baptismal practice and the classic Lutheran understanding of confession as a subspecies of baptismal renewal.[7]

The Thanksgiving for Baptism rite is fairly simple and already includes something of an invitation. It begins with a Trinitarian invocation, including an option phrased in expansive baptismal imagery: “Blessed by the Holy Trinity, + one God, the fountain of living water, the rock who gave us birth, our light and our salvation.”[8] The presiding minister then leads a concise ritual pivot: “Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism, we are clothed with God’s mercy and forgiveness. Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.”[9] Thus, in just a few words, there is a brief *proclamation* (of the promise of baptism) and an *invitation* (to give thanks for the gift of baptism).[10] This is followed by a thanksgiving prayer over the water that is a slightly modified version of the water blessing used at baptisms. The rite concludes with a gathering song, perhaps with baptismal imagery, during which “as a reminder of the gift of baptism, the assembly may be sprinkled with water.”[11] The rite is both baptismal and invitational, yet the invitation seems to be addressed to the already baptized.

Toward an invitation to baptism

Baptism, writes Lars Hartmann, is “the door into a new human community.”[12] While this door has undergone great ecumenical renovation and restoration in the past century, it remains ritually closed on most Sundays in many congregations. Thus, a number of factors make this moment in North American Christianity especially right for introducing a Sunday-morning invitation into baptism, as rehearsed above: an ecumenical convergence around a robust baptismal theology and practice, an open table movement pressing the question of how those who are not baptized are invited into sacramental participation, some newly created rites around baptism that begin worship with a thanksgiving for baptism, evangelical practices of liturgical invitation to discipleship, and the North American cultural

reality of increasing percentages of seekers (as opposed to life-long Christians) in Sunday worship.

An example of an invitation extended

The occasion for this invitation to baptism was the closing eucharist for a national worship conference in Atlanta, *Jubilee 2015: Called to Be a Living Voice*, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, with approximately 600 people participating. The event was held in a hotel ballroom, with Gordon Lathrop presiding and Nadia Bolz-Weber preaching.

Worship began with an adapted version of ELW's Thanksgiving for Baptism rite. The planners of the conference assumed that there would be only a small number of people present who had not been baptized (perhaps most likely a guest musician or one of the employees of the hotel attending or helping with logistics during the service). However, the planning team committed early in the process to offering an authentic open door into baptism preparation[\[13\]](#) at this worship service partly because it would be much observed by such a large number of worship leaders.

The gathering rite began with singing as the assembly gathered around a central baptismal font.[\[14\]](#) A number of people came forward carrying glass pitchers and generously poured water into the large central font. The presiding minister spoke a Trinitarian baptismal invocation:

Blessed be the holy Trinity, + one God,

the fountain of living water,

the rock who gave us birth,

our light and our salvation.[\[15\]](#)

The presider then directly addressed the assembly:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.

The waters of God's mercy promise

freedom to those in slavery,

forgiveness to the sinners,

new birth to the weary,

and a royal anointing for all people.

The font is open to all,

and the promise is for you, for all who are far away,

everyone whom God calls.

At these waters, you are invited to the way

of baptism into Jesus Christ,

*and, for those who have been baptized,
you are invited to renewal in the grace
that washed over you on the day of your baptism.*

I am quite serious about this invitation. If you are not baptized and if you desire now, here, to begin to come to these waters that join you to Christ and to life with Christ's people, then please come.

During the entire liturgy of the word that follows, two pastors will be standing here by the font, identifiable by their clerical dress. You may know them by name. They are Pastor Susan Briehl and Pastor Benjamin Stewart. Come to them. They are prepared to help you begin the way of baptism, to find a congregation and a catechumenate, and to be your sponsors as you begin. These waters are for you.

And, if you are baptized, then once again hear the promise of Christ that has been spoken to you in these waters and once again stand in the daily dying and rising that was first made your way on the day you were baptized.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Let us give thanks for the waters of baptism.[\[16\]](#)

The rite continued with a prayer of thanksgiving for water and for baptism,[\[17\]](#) after which the assembly processed, singing, to the east end of the ballroom for the beginning of the service of the word. During the entire service of the word, the two pastors stood near the font, including throughout the intercessory prayers. The time for intercessory prayer in this service was called Open Space. The prayers were stational, modeled on what some know as the Thomas Mass.[\[18\]](#) During this time, a third minister stood at the font with an ewer, lifting and pouring water through the entire course of the prayers.

All of the ministers were prepared to welcome a candidate for baptism during Open Space. Each had become familiar with an adapted version of the rite of Welcome to Baptism[\[19\]](#) to use with anyone who responded to the invitation.

Reflections on the invitation

From the beginning, the leadership team understood that the demographics of this worship conference meant that the odds of someone presenting themselves as a candidate for baptism were statistically low. However, since we were speaking a public invitation, we knew that the odds were not zero, and this realization was both unsettling and energizing. Extending the invitation made us newly vigilant to the margins of our gathering, attentive to the open-door nature of baptism, and serious about the actual details of welcoming someone to Christianity and a local congregation.

In the end, no one presented themselves as a new candidate for baptism. However, many people came to the font to remember their baptism, a number of people came to the ministers at the font for some form of individual prayer and counseling, and the font itself seemed to stand newly in the center of our gathering as an open—and gently disruptive—invitation to the newcomer and outsider.

As I thought about how many liturgical, programmatic, and ministerial adaptations were needed in order to make an apparently simple invitation to baptism, I remembered Aidan Kavanagh's description

of the far-reaching and as-yet-unfinished baptismal reforms of the twentieth century:

One may turn an altar around and leave reform at that. But one cannot set an adult catechumenate in motion without becoming necessarily involved with renewal in the ways a local church lives its faith from top to bottom In this area, when one change occurs, all changes.[\[20\]](#)

Kavanagh was rarely guilty of understatement, and this essay can hardly address the reform of church life “from top to bottom.” However, Kavanagh’s observation is consistent with the experience in Atlanta: opening the way of baptism to newcomers in liturgy calls for an engaged rethinking of a number of liturgical and ecclesial practices. Toward that end, and aware of their necessarily preliminary nature, I offer some concluding suggestions for introducing liturgical invitations to baptism.

Into the way of baptism. The invitation modeled here is to “the way of baptism,” not simply immediately to baptism. This phrase recognizes the journey-nature of baptism and baptismal preparation, and eases unrealistic pressure for and undue emphasis on unplanned individual decision. The invitation might mention an upcoming baptismal festival at Epiphany or Easter. In order to invite someone on a journey, a way, toward baptism means that a way must be prepared. There needs to be something into which to invite people. Susan Briehl imagines a congregation being transformed by taking months to wrestle with the question, “How can we prepare to welcome people who respond to such an invitation?”[\[21\]](#) Answering this question might lead to the formation of sponsors, mentors, catechists, service projects, baptismal festivals, outreach efforts, and ministers prepared to pray for and with candidates.[\[22\]](#)

Beauty is an invitation. The aesthetic dimensions of a welcome to baptism are integral to any invitation. Beauty itself, Edward Farley writes, testifies to the benevolence of God and invites people into a journey of self-transcendence.[\[23\]](#) Some considerations include: the inviting sound, sight, and touch of clean, abundant water; language that compellingly reimagines life, God, and the world through biblical images; music and song around the font that nurture ritual participation; and ritual action and elements that are beautiful in their simplicity (laying on of hands and prayer, anointing, addressing, candle lighting, signation, robing, pouring and immersing, applauding).

But we still need clear directions. Biblical images and layered metaphor are central to sacramental rites, but sometimes people just need to know where to stand. As the example rite above demonstrated, clear and blessedly concise directions for how to respond to an invitation makes the invitation more authentic and hospitable. Inviting people to respond during an open time of prayer, such as during a Thomas Mass or Open Space, is more flexible and forgiving as it allows further directions and conversation to occur individually while members of the assembly are at different stations for prayer.

Both welcome and warning.[\[24\]](#) Baptism into Jesus Christ is a pure gift—an immersion in what Martin Luther called “a flood of grace.”[\[25\]](#) Because such grace is radically for *all*, it is never cheap, but is costly.[\[26\]](#) Therefore, invitations to baptism are most truthful when they speak of baptism not simply as an individual gift, but rather also as being swept into a landscape wholly altered by a flood of grace. Susan Briehl once phrased words of simultaneous welcome and warning at the font in this way: “Deeper than these waters is the mystery and mercy of God that waits for you.”[\[27\]](#)

The invitation comes from God. The waters of baptism, Christians say, flow toward humanity as an

invitation from God. To speak an invitation in God's name at the font is first of all simply to give voice to the nature of baptismal water. This means that invitations are not reminders of a religious to-do list nor are they one more strategy for institutional growth or survival. Invitations to baptism are proclamations of God's expansive but partly hidden workings in history, of God's present-day offering of promises, and of the holy thirst for God placed within all creatures. Thus, invitation is integral to the meaning of the font. Baptism stands among us as a door for the newcomers. To the extent that the door is closed on Sunday, we can open it with a simple invitation when we pray or sing beside the water.



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FOOTNOTES

[1] For introductions to the movement see the online collection of various articles from *The Anglican Theological Review*, <http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/read/conversations/1/>; Charles Hefling's "Who Is Communion for? The Debate over the Open Table." *The Christian Century* 129, no. 24 (2012); and Sara Miles's influential *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine, 2008).

[2] See especially these essays in the 2014 collection "Table and Font: Who is Welcome?" published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, available under the "Table and Font" tab at <http://www.elca.org/Resources/Worship>: Gordon W. Lathrop, "Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord;" Melinda A. Quivik, "'Butter in the Sunshine': The Fragility of Faith and the Gift of Baptism;" Thomas H. Schattauer, "Exploring the Baptismal Foundations of Eucharistic Hospitality;" and Benjamin M. Stewart, "Invitation and Open Table."

[3] Two documents from the World Council of Churches chart the progress of the past half century: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); and *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, Faith and Order Paper 207, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, World Council of Churches Publications, 2008). Substantial resources for baptismal preparation and catechumenal formation are increasingly available from denominational, ecumenical, and congregational sources.

[4] Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Exp Rev Ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 450.

[5] For descriptions, see Daniel E. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 165-174, 253-259.

[6] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Leader's desk edition. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 169.

[7] The primary companion volume to ELW describes the rite as making "the baptismal character of our coming together even more explicit . . . [Thanksgiving for Baptism] may be the preparatory act . . . for this service of word and sacrament." Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 119. In ELW, both the confession and forgiveness and thanksgiving for baptism rites are optional. Martin Luther framed confession and forgiveness as a baptismal practice. "Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to baptism, to resume and practice what has earlier been begun but abandoned." Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 4.77-79.

[8] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leader's desk edition, 169.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Notice that, because this proclamation phrases the state of being baptized in the present tense, it implies that the initiating event has occurred.

[11] Ibid. The order, in sum: Trinitarian invocation, brief proclamation, brief invitation, prayer, and song, perhaps with sprinkling.

[12] Lars Hartmann, *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus: Baptism in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 46.

[13] The planners did not rule out the possibility of encountering a sort of Ethiopian eunuch occasion in which an immediate baptism was called for. However, given the planning team's commitments to catechumenal formation, individual discernment, and local congregational relationships, the invitation was phrased to invite people into "the way of baptism" in order to signal support for immediately beginning catechumenal preparation for baptism.

[14] The ballroom was arranged around three central spaces: on the far west end a platform with leaders' chairs and ambo as a place for the word, with seats for the assembly facing the platform; on the far east end another raised platform for the table, designed for the assembly to stand around (along with a few of chairs for those who needed to sit); and in the middle third of the ballroom a large area of open space with ten dispersed stations for various forms of prayer, in the center of which was a large, clear, elevated, baptismal bowl filled with water.

[15] As noted above, this is one of the invocations offered as an option in Thanksgiving for Baptism in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leader's desk edition, 169.

[16] This text was drafted by Gordon Lathrop and Benjamin Stewart.

[17] Using an adapted version of ELW's Thanksgiving at the Font V, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 589.

[18] While the musicians led Taize-style chant, participants visited prayer stations to which they were drawn, moving at their own pace between one or more stations. The stations included baptismal remembrance at the font, footwashing, offering for a local ministry, letter-writing for advocacy, confession and forgiveness, anointing for healing, labyrinth prayer walk, candle-lighting and contemplation at a station with icons, prayers on fabric woven into a tapestry, prayers for those named in the weaving.

[19] In the adapted rite, the candidate marked the beginning of preparation of baptism, one or both pastors promised to accompany the candidate in preparation for baptism (essentially becoming baptismal sponsors), the candidate was signed with the cross, offered prayer with laying on of hands, and a blessing. See "Welcome to Baptism" in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leader's desk edition, 592.

[20] Aidan Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Roman Catholicism: A Brief Report," in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, A Pueblo Book, 1995), 8.

[21] Susan Briehl, phone conversation with author, September 16, 2015.

[22] Paul Hoffman's recent writing evocatively describes how his congregation was transformed by practicing a robust baptismal ministry to adult newcomers. See his *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. One example of Hoffman's parish practice: among the other weekly intercessory prayers, his congregation regularly prayed for the newly baptized, and then prayed ". . . that you might send yet others to this font of grace to join us in the mission of Christ, we pray. . ." Paul Hoffman, email message to author, September 15, 2015.

[23] Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

[24] On the pairing of welcome and warning see Lathrop, "Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord," and, regarding invitations to Holy Communion, see especially Chapter 5: "Access to Holy Things" in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). I have written elsewhere about the need for invitations to communion not simply to speak of *receiving* the Body of Christ, but also, drawing on Augustine's famous image from his sermon 272, of communicants *becoming* the Body of Christ in the eucharist. This latter image—while being an astonishing promise—is also a bracing warning to those who would avoid being transformed by ritual participation. See Benjamin M. Stewart, "Listening for the Accents: Noticing Patterns in the Conversation about Table and Font" in *Let's Talk: Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod*.

<http://mcsletstalk.org/communion-and-community/listening-accents-noticing-patterns-conversation-table-font/>.

[25] Martin Luther, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism (1519)," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Theodore Bachmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 32.

[26] Bonhoeffer linked the phrase "cheap grace" to inadequate sacramental discourse and practice: "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living,

incarnate Jesus Christ.” But note that for Bonhoeffer costly grace is not first of all about a more rigorous of baptismal discipleship: “Above all, grace is costly because it was costly to God.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44-45.

[27] Susan Briehl, phone conversation with author, September 16, 2015.

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