

Session to Session

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Leave Well Enough Alone

by O. Palmer Robertson

Concern over the ambiguity of the present form of invitation to the Lord's table in the Presbyterian Church in America led to the formation of a study committee a few years ago. At the General Assembly in June of this year, the committee offered a proposed change in the form of the invitation, which was adopted by the Assembly to be sent down to the presbyteries by a vote of 328 to 235.

But the revision now before the presbyteries introduces several new ambiguities without clearing up the old ones. According to comments in the report, this new form intends specifically to allow believing members of liberal denominations to commune in the PCA (*Commissioner's Handbook*, p. 1802, par. 7). According to a "concurring opinion" of some members of the committee, the new form of invitation would also allow people who are not currently members of any church to participate in the Lord's supper (*Handbook*, p. 1803). In addition, the altered form could be interpreted as leaving open the possibility for members of the Roman Catholic church to participate in the communion services of the PCA. None of these circumstances prevail with the present form of the invitation.

The form currently used in the PCA invites to the table of the Lord all those who are "communicants in good standing in any evangelical church." Think about some of the good things associated with this simple form of the invitation:

(1) First, it is a generous invitation. Presbyterians are rather distinctive in their communion practice. Many other churches allow only members of the local congregation to participate. Even visitors from their own denomination are excluded. Some congregations "sneak off" to a private place for communion to avoid the embarrassment associated with excluding obvious brethren in the Lord from his table. But the presbyterian church always has been an "ecumenical" church in the good sense of the word. It has recognized that it is not the only true church, and has invited members of other evangelical churches to join them about the Lord's table.

(2) But at the same time the presbyterian church has insisted that the communion service must be seen as the focal point of discipline in the church. It represents the highest privilege of ongoing fellowship in the body of Christ. As a result, the communicant must manifest by his way of life that he is continuing to walk with the Lord and his people. At the celebration of

the supper, each member must satisfy himself by self-examination that he is currently walking in true repentance and faith before the Lord. Past professions cannot alone determine a person's readiness to take communion. Gathering about the Lord's table is the great celebration that calls all God's people to "keep current" in their relations with God and men, with their faith and their life, with their doctrine and their morals.

It is not enough once to have been in fellowship with the body of Christ. Before joining other baptized disciples who are under the discipline of the church, a person must himself meet the same requirements.

The proposed revision of the invitation does not give full recognition to this necessity. It only speaks of those who "have professed [at some time in the past?] the true religion." Nothing is said of the current relationship to the body of believers.

On some occasions a believer may have a legitimate reason for having no current connection with a branch of Christ's body. But the far greater number of cases will involve circumstances of neglect in keeping current a status of fellowship with the church.

(3) The current form of invitation is also distinctly ecclesiastical in its orientation. It is not purely and simply a matter of personal judgment that qualifies a person for communion. Self-examination is vital to proper preparation for the Lord's table. But a person's stand before the church is equally important. The prospective communicant must appear in a satisfac-

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Testimony of a "Ten Most Wanted" Man

The following testimony was recently written by a prisoner while serving a double life sentence. The "lady" he mentions at the end of the testimony was Mrs. Medora Rau of Providence Christian Ministries, an affiliate ministry of Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church.

I am a prisoner of the Maryland Correctional Institute in Jessup. This is my testimony.

I was reared in a nonreligious family. I did not know God or Jesus, although I knew of them. My father was an atheist, an alcoholic, and a brutal person toward me and my two brothers. He was also responsible for starting me on my criminal career.

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tory light before the fellowship of believers. If he is known to be at odds with a brother, or guilty of a public sin, then reconciliation with God and man must first be realized. Otherwise he makes mockery of the meaning of "communion."

This public affirmation by the church concerning readiness for communion can provide needed encouragement to the faint-hearted as well as needed discipline for the presumptuous. Are you so aware of your sin that you hesitate to come to the table? Christ's church has heard your confession of repentance and faith, and invites you to come. Have you become careless in your relations with the brotherhood, delinquent in church attendance, or lax in moral behavior? The eldership may advise you to refrain from communion until matters are made right with the Lord. A good balance is struck when it is stated that "communicants [currently] *in good standing*" with the church are invited to share in the Lord's table. The phrase covers a number of areas in a nice summary fashion.

(4) But what about this word "evangelical"? What does it mean that a person must be a communicant in good standing in an "evangelical" church? How is an "evangelical church" to be identified?

Inherent in the phrase is a certain clarity and a certain ambiguity. Both of these elements can be seen as serving a good purpose.

The phrase "evangelical church" is clear in its exclusion of members of the Roman Catholic church from the Lord's table. For the Roman Catholic communion cannot be regarded as an "evangelical church." In some places in that fellowship the gospel may be preached. But the Roman church as a church cannot be regarded as "evangelical."

But assuming that some true believers remain in the fold of the world-wide Roman Catholic fellowship, should these people be excluded from communion in the PCA?

Until a person has come under the discipline (discipling) of a true church of Christ, his acceptance for communion in the body of a true church would seriously mislead him. His Roman Catholic confirmation in a fellowship based on the anti-gospel condemned by the scriptures would then receive tacit recognition by the PCA. This misleading action we cannot afford to take.

But the proposed new form of invitation does not have the same safeguards. An invitation to those who "have professed the true religion in the fellowship and discipline of other communions that proclaim the gospel" is quite a bit more ambiguous. Here and there in the Roman Catholic church it must be admitted that the gospel may be proclaimed. A true believer who is a member of the Roman Catholic church and who has heard the gospel proclaimed in that church could contend quite convincingly that he was included in this new form of invitation to the Lord's table. It would be far easier to show him that a church endorsing the statements of the Council of Trent could not be an "evangelical church" than to convince him that he never had heard the gospel preached in the Roman church.

Members of a liberal denomination where some remnant of

gospel-preachers remain also would be encouraged to think they were included in this proposed new form of the invitation. It may not be that we should formally declare all such denominations apostate. But neither should we provide a blanket approval to these liberal denominations as places of legitimate church membership where a person may qualify for communing fellowship in the PCA. Particularly in the case of denominations toward which we have exercised the discipline of ecclesiastical separation, it would not be appropriate to offer an open invitation for their members to commune with us.

But, it may be contended, ambiguities in the current form of the invitation still remain. Which pastor has not been asked, "but what is an 'evangelical' church?" Is the denomination from which the PCA has separated evangelical? Does the phrase intend to include members of evangelical congregations within a liberal denomination?

The matter is complex, and for that very reason every option may not be neatly resolved at the time an invitation is issued to the Lord's table. At the same time, it is good for a person whose church membership is in a liberal denomination to be forced to consider whether or not their church is "evangelical." It is good that people are stirred to inquire of a PCA pastor or elder as to whether or not his church may be regarded as evangelical. The fact that the same answer will not be given in every case indicates that the matter is best dealt with on an individual basis.

But the proposed revision tries to answer the question uniformly, and cuts off the opportunity for dialogue. For in almost all protestant fellowships it may be said the somewhere or another the "gospel is preached."

An invitation offered at a high and holy moment in worship demands a certain linguistic flow, a simplicity of form, brevity and succinctness.

The current invitation meets all these criteria. To proclaim an open invitation to all who are "communicants in good standing in any evangelical church" is a joy and a delight. It adds a triumphant, climactic note to the proclamation of the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes.

But compare this simple, crisp statement with an invitation directed to: "all who not only have confessed the Lord's name in our fellowship and oversight, but also those who have professed the true religion in the fellowship and discipline of other communions that proclaim the gospel."

Let us leave well enough alone. The current form of invitation has been used for many decades. It is broad yet precise. It is generous while requiring appropriate accountability. It is comprehensive yet succinct.

The diligent work of an excellent committee should be appreciated. The report has helped in clarifying a number of issues related to the form of invitation to the Lord's table. But perhaps the end result has been to demonstrate that the present form of invitation, though having its limitations, is actually a good one that ought to be retained. Ω

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"Ten Most Wanted Man," continued from page 1

At the age of nine with my brother Thomas (eleven), my father said "Alright you little heathens, come with me and bring two burlap bags." We had no idea where we were going. As it turned out, it was to rob an Esso gas station in Baltimore. It was exciting to see my Father holding a shotgun and holding the two men at bay as we filled the bags with money, cigarettes and candy. We were never caught.

I progressively climbed up the ladder of crime, starting with the Maryland Training School for stealing a car at fifteen—serving six months. I was arrested at sixteen for stealing a bicycle—serving sixty days in jail. Again at sixteen for having a blank starting pistol—serving sixty days. I was arrested again at age seventeen for shooting a man calling me a name—receiving a \$2,700 fine. In 1961 at age nineteen, I was in jail for murder—receiving a life sentence—serving fifteen years.

In 1977, I began robbing banks, ending up being caught and serving time until July 21, 1988. I served time at Lewis Federal Prison, Leavenworth, Lompac, and most of the time at U. S. P. Marion in Illinois—considered the hardest prison in America.

On July 21, 1988 I escaped from the Baltimore City Correctional Center while working at the State Use garage. After escaping, I went back to doing what I knew best—robbing banks and stealing everything not nailed down.

On February 18, 1989, while still a fugitive, I looked over on my kitchen table at \$302,000. I thought about my \$30,000 custom van, and smiled to myself that I had over \$150,000 worth of cameras, TVs, and VCRs. I said out loud to myself, "Man you have made it; why do you feel so depressed and alone?" For some reason a thought entered my mind: "What should it profit a man if he should gain the whole world but lose his own soul." I knew I had read it somewhere but dismissed it immediately.

Then on February 21 at five A.M., while I was half-crippled on drugs, the fugitive squad arrested me. I was taken to the Maryland House of Corrections and thrown into a dirty cell with nothing but a blanket and mattress.

I became depressed and the idea of suicide entered my mind. It was a way, I thought, of escaping the years I was facing. And besides, I was a complete failure in life. I hated myself and I wanted to die.

I managed to find a razor. I broke it apart to get the blade out. I felt at the end of my rope—no friends, no family alive, no one to turn to. I found a bread bag with some bread in it under the bed, and while eating three slices, I thought about my life or lack of it. Thinking about how best to kill myself, I even managed a laugh. For I thought of the bread as a last meal, like men get on death row.

After finishing the bread, I tied a string around my arm so the veins would become swollen, and began to cut and cut. I awoke at the University Shock Trauma Unit, and after being told I had died for about four minutes and had to be revived via electrical shock.

Still depressed, I cursed because I was alive. I felt cheated

and managed a sarcastic laugh out of self pity and said, "I can't do anything right—not even suicide." After spending a couple of days at the Unit, I was brought to Maryland Correctional Institute and put into a bare cell. I wanted to finish the bungled suicide job as soon as possible.

Then on February 28, while curled up on the floor in paper sheets—feeling alone and afraid—I heard a lady's voice talking to someone about God's love. I listened to her words and how sincere she sounded. I got up off the floor, and as she walked by, I pleaded with her to talk to me about Jesus. I thank God that He brought this lady into my life. She helped me to meet Jesus Christ, and thank the Lord I no longer want to die. I want to live for Christ!

Three silent crosses,
Standing on a hill at Calvary
Two thieves and Jesus,
Dying in misery
One thief was dying *in* sin
The other dying *to* sin
While Our dear Lord Jesus,
Was dying *for* our sins.
What a precious gift God gave us,
That all the world will know
That all we have to do is to have faith in Him,
And our sins would be washed—
As white as snow.

—Roy Cantler, March 1989

What Is Man?

by Kenneth A. Myers

In 1947, C. S. Lewis published a book called *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*. The subtitle of the book is unfortunate, as it makes it sound as though the book is intended just for English teachers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Lewis's book is about the perils of subjectivism, the modern belief that all values and all feelings are purely the product of internal and arbitrary urges. If the subjectivists are right, Lewis argued, if there is no objectivity involved with our sentiments, we are on the way to abolishing the idea of man as a unique creature.

While it is perhaps the least favorite of Lewis's book among evangelicals (in part because it was more philosophical than theological, and also because many object to some of the philosophy there), *The Abolition of Man* may well be Lewis's most helpful volume in explaining modern culture.

And it was an amazingly prophetic book, because now, more than forty years later, there are signs that one of the chief ends of modern man is to abolish himself and enjoy that abolishing forever. Our culture is increasingly characterized

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by intellectual movements and popular fads that deny the reality of human nature. This takes many forms, some of them explicitly theological (yes, there is a Death of Man Theology, a logical sequel after all to the Death of God), but most of them in the realm of politics and public policy.

One example: in March, *The New Republic* published an article by their science editor Robert Wright on the animal rights movement which argued that the idea of *human* rights was a totally arbitrary "deal struck for mutual convenience" among beings who would rather not be tortured or otherwise abused.

So if there are really no such norms in the nature of things as human rights, but we behave as if there *ought* to be, why can't we cut animals in on the same deal?

This sort of argument has been made in more esoteric settings by thinkers such as Peter Singer for some time; it is the first time such ideas have appeared in as mainstream a setting as *The New Republic*, which is an extremely disturbing omen.

Christians should prepare for a serious public battle for the objective reality of human nature, rooted in the image of God. It is not a battle we have fought before, since the entire Western tradition has presupposed that man is a "higher" and distinctive being. If we fail to counter on all fronts the growing movement to abolish the idea of man, all of our efforts on issues of public policy such as abortion and euthanasia it well become increasingly marginal and meaningless. Ω

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