

In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell

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This essay engages in an extended dialogue with James Farwell's Spring 2004 ATR article "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of 'Open Communion,'" rebutting many of his arguments against open communion and suggesting a number of theological considerations that might lend support to the practice of inviting unbaptized persons to take communion. The logic of the relationship between baptism and eucharist is discussed in light of the reference of both to the kingdom, and tied to the various forms of Jesus' meal ministry in the gospels. The essay also speculates about what in the present context of Episcopal church life might be driving the trend toward open communion. Finally, there is a review of factors to be taken into account in deciding whether the consequences of open communion for Christian life are acceptable.

In the last issue of the *ATR*, James Farwell significantly raised the bar for theological reflection on open communion, the practice in some Episcopal parishes of inviting everyone to the Lord's table whether they have been baptized or not.¹ As so often happens in liturgical reform, congregations here and there have taken the lead to alter their worship in ways that challenge church directives (in this case the church canon that only the baptized should take communion) before any sustained attention to the theological ramifications of doing so.² The time for such sustained theological reflection is now.

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¹ See James Farwell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of 'Open Communion,'" *Anglican Theological Review* 86.2 (Spring 2004): 215–238. Further references to this essay are included in parentheses in the text.

² See *Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*, Title 1, Canon 17, Section 7: "[N]o unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church."

As Farwell shows very well, the consequences of such changes are potentially quite major, and require careful theological assessment. It may well be, as Farwell rightly cautions, that the intention of hospitable inclusion in imitation of Jesus' own practices of table fellowship, which lies behind such changes, might be better served without them—by, as Farwell recommends, shifting the concern about hospitable inclusion instead to a renewed evangelism for baptism and a more engaged commitment to the kingdom in the ministry of the baptized. Baptism and the church's mission to the world are the usual and proper sites for inclusive hospitality; the changes recommended by advocates of open communion are therefore not necessary and might indeed prove harmful in that they bring along with them substantial and perhaps implausible alterations to the usual understanding of how baptism, eucharist, and mission are related to one another in Christian life.

We owe a debt of gratitude to James Farwell on both these counts—for the call to theological inquiry to which his own essay provides a model response, and for his typical Anglican caution about the burden of proof assumed by those who advocate change. I believe, however, that following Farwell's own lines of argument there is much more to be said in favor of open communion. Indeed, many of the assumptions and arguments he brings to bear against open communion can be turned around to provide theological support for the changes.

Farwell develops his case against open communion with reference to three major topics for discussion, topics, it seems to me, that are crucially important for any assessment of open communion. First is the complex question of the relationships of baptism, eucharist, and mission to the coming kingdom, as those relationships are worked out with reference to New Testament accounts of the various forms of Jesus' meal fellowship, and in terms of what Farwell calls the "logic of participation" in the eucharist and in a community dedicated to serving God's kingdom. Second is the whole question of what in church life and in the broader socio-cultural context prompts the trend towards open communion. An unfavorable judgment here brings enormous damage to the open communion cause. Third is an evaluation of the likely consequences of open communion for church life, very broadly, and for baptism and mission, more specifically. In what follows I shall take up each topic in turn, using Farwell's arguments as my starting point; like all the best theological work, his essay is good to think with!

How Do We Relate Baptism, Eucharist, and Mission to the World?

Farwell embeds this discussion within a treatment of the various forms of Jesus' meal fellowship in the New Testament, since advocates of open communion often say that they are trying to follow Jesus' own example in their eucharistic practice. Farwell defends the historicity of the Last Supper, and its connections with other forms of meal fellowship discussed in the gospels, against the common view held by advocates of open communion that stories of the Last Supper are interpolations, added to justify later forms of communion in the church that conflict with Jesus' own practices of eating with sinners and feeding the multitudes. According to Farwell, the Lord's Supper makes sense as Jesus' way of shoring up the resolve of those already committed to and informed about the kingdom, in times of trial. The wider, indiscriminate forms of meal fellowship that the New Testament says Jesus engaged in are part of the mission to the world. These are then two *different* forms of meal fellowship with different audiences and somewhat different immediate purposes. These different sorts of meals are related in ways that suggest a particular logic of participation for both eucharist and mission, and a particular understanding of how baptism, eucharist, and mission are to be related. Unless you are informed about and are already committed to the coming kingdom, it makes no sense to participate in the eucharist that is the remembrance of Jesus' own practice at the Last Supper. It is now in baptism that one comes to be committed to the mission and learns what the mission is; if the eucharist sustains one in that mission, one must obviously be baptized first in order to participate in the eucharist. Baptism and eucharist are, then, all about mission: baptism commits one to it and the eucharist nourishes that commitment. The mission to the world involves the sort of inclusiveness exhibited in Jesus' feedings of the multitudes, but commitment to that mission is for a select group that has made the costly commitment to work for it. It makes no sense to welcome everyone into the community struggling for the kingdom if in doing so the mission loses the definition that baptism as a boundary maker sets between the ways of the world and the ways of the church.

There are several problems with this line of argument. First, advocates of open communion need not argue that the Lord's Supper never happened; and they need not disconnect the Lord's Supper from the other forms of meal fellowship recounted in the gospels by suggesting that the accounts of the Lord's Supper simply function to

justify an exclusive eucharistic meal at odds with Jesus' own practices recounted elsewhere in the New Testament. All that the advocates of open communion need to say is that when translating the New Testament account of the Lord's Supper into a directive for church life it should be understood in light of Jesus' practices of eating with sinners and filling the bellies of all comers. Farwell himself admits that modeling church life on the New Testament account of Jesus' practices (leaving aside the question of their historicity) involves *some* effort of translation; reading the meal stories all together would be one way of doing that. When, for example, accounts of the Lord's Supper are read in light of Jesus' willingness to eat with sinners, what stands out about the Lord's Supper is that Jesus is eating with sinners here too—with his betrayers on the night in which he will be betrayed, with Judas who hands him over, with "all of you who will become deserters" (Mark 14:27), with Peter who will deny three times that he is Jesus' associate, with disciples who immediately begin to wrangle over which one is greatest (Luke 22:24), and who lack even the strength to stay awake with Jesus in his hour of testing and agonized anticipation of the brutal death to come.³ It is hard to argue then that the disciples' commitment is what makes them proper participants; they are neither worthy in virtue of that commitment nor well informed: the gospels are unanimous in suggesting on the latter score that the disciples really begin to understand who Jesus is and what he stands for only after his death and resurrection; Mark strongly insinuates that they never "get it." The Lord's Supper in this way takes on the quality of unconditional fellowship found unambiguously in Jesus' prior meals with sinners and outcasts, and it is this unconditionality that advocates of open communion purport to take to its logical conclusion in present church practice of the eucharist.

Advocates of open communion can also argue that, when making it into a norm for later church life, the New Testament account of the Lord's Supper is best read in light of the inclusive feeding of multitudes. Besides remembering the meal that Jesus had with his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed, in the eucharist we eat and drink with the risen Christ in a foretaste of the eschatological banquet (see Luke 22:30). Farwell admits that the eucharist is all about the kingdom and that the character of the kingdom is evident in the way

³ Rowan Williams often stresses this aspect of the Lord's Supper. See, for example, his *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 216.

the crowds are fed, with, it might be added (as recounted in John 6), the bread of heaven which is Jesus himself—a clear eucharistic reference. It is Farwell, then, not the advocates of open communion, who makes too strict a separation between the Lord's Supper and the feeding stories. The Lord's Supper is not simply the means to (the "foundation" and "reason for" (p. 221)) another sort of supper to come, but is itself to show forth the inclusive character of banqueting in the kingdom. And this is just what the advocates of open communion are trying to get the eucharist to convey more clearly.

Moreover, while baptism before eucharist, and eucharist as empowering mission, broadly conform with long established church practice, Farwell's particular understanding of the logic of participation is hard to square with the realities of church life and practice. The idea that only the informed and the committed should participate in the eucharist conflicts with the current practice of allowing infants to take communion. Are babies sufficiently informed and committed by virtue of their baptism? Farwell's logic sits uneasily with the fact that confirmation, and the catechesis that goes with it, are no longer viewed as conditions for participating in the eucharist. His logic is hard to reconcile, moreover, with the older ecumenical sense of open communion. Even if they are baptized, Christians from denominations without a sacramental view of the Lord's Supper would hardly seem sufficiently informed about what is going on in the Episcopal rite to participate properly.

Farwell's logic of participation in the eucharist is also in danger of wildly overestimating the degree to which baptized Christians—in any period of church history—are committed and informed. As the focal presence of confession of sin in the communion service strongly suggests, baptized Christians don't naturally come to communion because they are so very dedicated and faithful (and therefore so unlike the unbaptized in their changed lives), but because they are not. They come to the table for strength and encouragement because their belief and commitment are weak and wavering. They have been initiated into a mystery and into a kingdom for which they remain unworthy.

There are all sorts of ways of suggesting that baptism should come before eucharist. Lots of symbolic resonances between the rites suggest this order—for example, washing before eating, being born out of a watery womb before being fed, entering into Christ's life as a member of his body before being able to draw repeatedly on that life

for one's sustenance. But the idea that baptism makes clear the content of the kingdom to which the eucharist empowers us (p. 226) is not a particularly apt way of arguing for *the* logic of the relationship between the two. It is hardly conceivable that baptism was very clarifying on this score prior to the 1979 revisions that added the present fulsome baptismal covenant. The idea that you "already" know what the Christian life is all about before you get to the table (p. 226) oddly suggests that baptism somehow completes or finishes the catechetical process. And it completely downplays the capacity of the eucharist to inform and shape the character of Christian life through participation in it. *Pace* Farwell, the communion service is an incredibly rich, powerful, and evocative one, much more so to my mind than the baptismal service, if things like that can be compared! The idea that unbaptized persons, when the service comes to the point of invitation to the communion rail, have gotten no sense from the service itself of what has been going on—either emotionally, intellectually, or dispositionally—is too incredible to fathom.

The logic of the relationship between eucharist and mission, and between baptism and mission, on Farwell's understanding of them, are similarly suspect. Not ensuring that the eucharist obviously displays the open hospitality of the kingdom through the practice of open communion, but making it a precondition for other acts of mission to the world with that character (Farwell mentions fellowship meals, public meals, banquets for the homeless and poor (p. 221)), only plays into the corrupting disjunction between worship and mission to which Christians everywhere seem prone. One worships inside church—preparing for the mission perhaps—but one performs the mission outside Sunday services, it seems. Aren't witness and proclamation part of the mission? Where, moreover, is the church itself as the foretaste of the kingdom, the place where the kingdom comes, enters the world, so as to radiate out, or draw all within, for the well-being of everyone?

Baptism, Farwell says, sets the boundary between Christian life and that of the world; one must have a strongly defined life, marked out in this way, if welcoming people to it is to hold any attraction or power for them. No point in holding your arms wide to all comers if this welcome becomes an end in itself and people have no clear idea of what they are being welcomed into. But here Farwell conveniently overlooks what he has all but admitted before: that the refusal of hard and fast distinctions between insiders and outsiders—borne out in a

community that forms itself according to principles of radical inclusiveness and the unconditional offer of life-transforming grace—constitutes at least in part *what* the kingdom is. Radical inclusiveness and the unconditional offer of life-transforming grace become therefore features that set off the church as the vanguard of the kingdom from every other community we know; they help to define the boundaries between church and world rather than blur them.

What Prompts the Trend to Open Communion?

Farwell has a very uncharitable reading of what it is about present worship life and its non-Constantinian setting that prompts the trend to open communion. He suggests that the Prayer Book revisions of 1979 have been unevenly enacted in the church, leading Sunday eucharists to be considered outside of their proper context in the Paschal mystery and so separately from baptism. The fact that the wider society is no longer Christian confirms the generalizations about the unbaptized that Farwell draws from his parish experience: the unbaptized seek the communion table for the wrong reasons—out of the expectation, encouraged by their formation in a non-Christian society, that their desires as individuals must be immediately gratified here as everywhere else. Priests are led astray by some liberal—and quite anachronistic—Constantinianism (p. 232) into thinking that all who desire communion are doing so for Christian reasons, and in that way are tempted to make open communion an easy substitute for the really hard work of evangelization now necessary in a non-Christian society.

It is very easy, however, to give an alternative, more charitable reading of the contemporary pressures encouraging the practice of open communion. First of all, a non-Constantinian situation makes it much more, rather than less, likely that unbaptized persons are coming to church, and eager for the Lord's table, for the right reasons. In a Christian society—say, in Britain when the establishment of the Anglican Church meant civil and social penalties for nonconformity—there are many more mixed and religiously corrupt motives for wanting to participate in the eucharist than now. It is more likely now that people go to church for religious reasons of personal importance to them—for, say, spiritual sustenance—than because their neighbors will otherwise think ill of them, or because they desire full rights of citizenship or to hold high government office, or because they associate membership in a particular church with the lifestyle of the upper class, or the

like. It is in a Christian society that being a Christian is taken for granted and not a matter of widespread personal commitment even by those baptized and attending church. Read Kierkegaard's attacks on Danish Christendom! It is in a Christian society that one's guard should be up about the reasons people are crowding the communion rail.

Secondly, baptism as a condition of participation in the eucharist has much more restrictive and serious consequences now than before, for reasons having to do with both the shift to a non-Constantinian situation and Prayer Book revisions. In a Constantinian world, where the church is not a minority community and the wider society is Christian, one could presume that everyone in church grew up Christian and was probably baptized at birth. In such a situation, the rule of baptism before eucharist would not work to restrict access to the table the way it does now in a non-Constantinian world where many more unbaptized adults and children are likely to attend Sunday morning services. It is therefore hard to think that restricting access to communion has been for much of church history the rule's primary point—and therefore that the present practice of making all unbaptized visitors stay in their seats as the baptized go up for communion conforms to it. Priests attracted to the practice of open communion are then, one could argue, appropriately worried about the likely deformation of the rule's usual point arising out of the peculiarly restrictive consequences of employing it in a new non-Constantinian context.

In case a restrictive reading of the rule of baptism seems too obvious to be disputed, let me speculate a bit about possible alternatives. The requirement of baptism might have been a way of helping to distinguish the eucharistic meal (especially when it was a full meal and non-Christians also prefaced and ended their meals with religious references) from other meals with which it could easily be confused. One of the earliest explicit mentions of a rule for baptism before communion suggests as much: "this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man . . . who has been washed . . . for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these."⁴ Or another possibility. Like the case of the now discontinued requirement of confirmation before communion (which, it is well recognized, was de-

⁴ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 66, translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 185.

signed to encourage confirmation rather than discourage people from taking communion), the point of requiring baptism before communion might be to encourage *baptism*, especially where the Christian character of the wider society might have prompted people to think they could be Christians without it or when baptism was for other reasons delayed (say, out of fear of lapsing into sin after it).⁵ Proving in the perhaps parallel case of confirmation that the point was not to exclude from communion is the fact that before the late nineteenth century in Britain the mere desire to be confirmed at some point was deemed sufficient in the vast majority of cases; communion therefore in fact preceded confirmation—despite the rule requiring confirmation as a condition for communion—in order not to exclude large numbers of people from communion because of difficulties in the availability of bishops to administer confirmation.⁶

Priests attracted to open communion might also be trying to avoid novel harms. Not participating in the eucharist has much more serious implications, it carries heavier penalties so to speak, now that the eucharist has become the central service of every Sunday with the adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book revisions. The gathered community is now very clearly defined by the community gathered for the eucharist in a way that was not the case before; to be excluded from it is therefore simply to be excluded from the church. There are no other services that unbaptized persons are likely to attend (Morning Prayer, for example) in which they can participate fully. Unless the parish they attend has some well-developed catechumenate leading to baptism, visitors are unlikely to sense the possibility of any form or tier of membership short of baptism and participation in communion. The U.S. context, with its well-justified disparagement on the political front of anything less than full citizenship as “second class,” is bound to foment this sense of simple exclusion on the part of unbaptized adults not permitted to the communion rail.

Open communion is essentially turning the eucharist into some sort of preparation for or element within an initiation rite—it is

⁵ In support of the point I am making about the requirement of confirmation, see, for example, Charles Price, “Appendix: Rites of Initiation” in Ruth A. Meyers, ed., *Baptism and Ministry: Liturgical Studies 1* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 89.

⁶ See Ruth A. Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), 87-89.

viewed as helping to make people members of the church, of the Body of Christ. What lies behind this? The obvious underlying cause is not, as Farwell suggests, that people are thinking about the eucharist in isolation from baptism and neglecting baptism's proper role alongside communion within the overarching symbolism of the Paschal mystery. The more obvious reason is that the 1979 Prayer Book revisions already strongly *associate* baptism and eucharist by in effect making the eucharist one element of a more complex initiation rite—the completion of it, as Farwell himself commonly remarks. Open communion would simply be following out the lines of this established trend in the understanding of the eucharist.

Of course, in contrast to the practice of open communion, baptism remains prior to the eucharist in these more complex initiation ceremonies of the revised Prayer Book; at the end of the service to initiate new members the newly baptized receive communion. One can just as easily say, however, that baptism appears here as one element of the community's celebration of the eucharist; the eucharist is the overarching context for baptism, and therefore has a sort of primacy or priority in practice—one comes to celebrate the eucharist on a particular Sunday morning and finds in the middle of the service that people are baptized. Moreover, if one is thinking theologically about what the eucharist might be doing alongside baptism as part of the process of Christian initiation, it might make sense for the eucharist to precede baptism because, once again, of certain changes that have been made to baptism in the 1979 Prayer Book. In many ways the norm for the new rite of baptism is adult initiation; the extensive baptismal covenant is one indication of this in the rite itself. The consequence—in keeping with the new post-Constantinian situation of the church—is for baptism to be all about an informed personal commitment; it is the momentous decision for a changed way of life, marked by new renunciations and new affirmations and a commitment to a different pattern of living than one is used to outside of church. But baptism is also all about a change of status that is not the product of one's own decision and efforts; it is about the gift of a new life to the undeserving through Christ's unconditional offer of grace; it is about becoming Christ's own; it is about being incorporated into Christ's life as a member of his body, the church. That side of the complex fact of baptism is more obvious when infant baptism is the rule and when a changed way of life is clearly subordinate to—because the consequence of—God's unconditional gifts to us in Christ—something that I do not think highlighting

the baptismal covenant, especially when it precedes the rites with water, very clearly conveys. The central symbolism of the eucharist—eating and drinking understood as communion with Christ through what he gives of himself (his own body and blood)—does convey this perhaps now downplayed element of baptism: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me” (John 6:56). If so, the logic of the relationship between change of status and change of living, or between Christ’s gift and our proper response to it, would suggest that communion appropriately precedes baptism. You need the gift of a new shape of life (in the eucharist) before you can commit yourself to living it (by being baptized).

Does Open Communion Have Unacceptable Implications for Christian Life?

Farwell answers “yes” on the assumption that open communion collapses the both/and character of the church’s sacramental life (both radical gift of grace and radical call to discipleship) entirely into divine gift and thereby leads to the neglect of baptismal commitment and the need for transformation of life (p. 227). If I am right, however, that the 1979 changes to the Prayer Book and the new non-Constantinian setting for the church already put an unusual emphasis on personal commitment and change of life, then open communion with its reminder of divine gift is simply a salutary effort at better sacramental balance. In any case, Farwell’s charges inexplicably overlook the fact that advocates of open communion generally do not replace or set aside baptism but consider participation in eucharist a step towards baptism, a kind of preparatory grace exercised by the whole community for it. Even critics of the movement commonly recognize that open communion is not just about the eucharist but means a new order: table to font rather than font to table.⁷ When the eucharist is considered in this way to be part of the preparation for baptism, baptism is often viewed, moreover, in much the way Farwell himself sees it, with the same sort of stress on our need to respond appropriately to the gift of God’s grace: baptism is viewed as the decisive commitment to a changed way of living in service to Christ’s

⁷ See, for example, Linda Moeller, “Baptism: Rite of Inclusion or Exclusion?” in Paul Marshall and Lesley Northup, eds., *Leaps and Boundaries* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), 82-84.

mission to the world.⁸ Far from downplaying the importance of baptism as an initiation rite, communion preceding baptism would stress the place of baptism as the *completion* of that full initiation process which has eucharist as its first moment. This is entirely in keeping with recent liturgical reforms that have made baptism the sign of full membership rather than one's ability to take communion upon confirmation.

For all these reasons it is very hard to see how Farwell can think open communion fails to refer participants in the eucharist to the demands of the baptismal life or offers "the gift without the call" so to promote "'cheap grace' and moral license" (p. 231). If some doubt remains that an open welcome to the table is adequate to convey the intended connection with baptismal discipline and commitment, the simple remedy is to clarify that connection in the verbal invitation to communion and bulletin notice. Nor need Farwell be worried that the means to baptismal commitment here seem "undefined" (p. 227). From the table one would presumably move into the usual, more robust catechumenate for baptism that the revised Book of Occasional Services envisions. The eucharist would help propel one into that catechumenate with a logic at least as compelling as Farwell's claim that an open welcome is only effective when one is given a firm sense of the appealing new life into which one is being welcomed. Unconditional forgiveness and acceptance, here at the table as elsewhere, provide one with the psychological wherewithal to want to begin one's life anew.⁹

It is true that "table to font" means a significant revision of the "font to table" order that has been part of the documented history of the church for nearly two thousand years. Perhaps in the first century or so people were not baptized before taking communion but there is no conclusive evidence for this. The altered order, moreover, brings with it an altered understanding of eucharist (and to a lesser extent baptism, given its present dominant associations with informed Christian commitment). Are these consequences acceptable?

A decision here hinges in part on the sort of harms—theological and spiritual—one associates with the old order. I have given some rather modest reasons for thinking there *are* some significant harms in

⁸ See, for example, Richard Fabian, "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ," *Open* 40.3 (Fall 1994): 4.

⁹ Fabian, "Patterning," 4.

the present circumstances. (I have not made the much stronger argument that baptism before eucharist is always a mistake, which many advocates of open communion favor.)¹⁰ A lot also depends on just how radical one believes the changes to be. They might not, for instance, be as radical as they first appear. It is not the symbolism of the eucharist that needs to change, just the emphasis given to it—for example, communion with Christ now brings more focally to mind our union with Christ by this means, and not merely our drawing on Christ for sustenance. “Table to font” need not, moreover, simply replace the move from font to table, as a similarly general rule. Presumably infants might still be baptized without ever receiving communion beforehand. In keeping with the complex symbolism of both sacraments, they might work differently for different sorts of people at different times of their lives—in the case of those baptized as adults, baptism providing the precondition for a deeply meaningful experience of communion and its connections with the kingdom; in the case of unbaptized adults, communion becoming the first step of Christian formation setting them on the path to full baptismal commitment. Even if such changes *are* radical, this is not necessarily a disqualification in and of itself. Haven’t we, for example, seen changes just as radical in the 1979 Prayer Book revision with its new baptismal and eucharistic ecclesiology, changes introduced for underlying reasons that are no more obviously pressing than the reasons currently offered by open communion advocates?¹¹ Finally, a decision here depends a great deal on whether there are other ways—short of changing the order and understanding of baptism and eucharist—to do justice to the inclusive hospitality of the life-transforming grace of Christ and to the unconditional way Christ gives it to us. For example, Farwell suggests, as mentioned earlier, that newcomers should be welcomed with open arms to the font rather than to the table. Farwell’s usual stress on baptismal discipline makes this a less than compelling case, however. In virtue of long preparation, participants in baptism are likely to be as select a group as the proper participants in communion, according to Farwell’s logic: the condition for participating in baptism becomes an informed and well-formed commitment, just as it is for communion.

¹⁰ See, for example, Fabian, “Patterning,” and Paul Gibson, “Who May Eat and Drink?” *Open* 43.3 (Fall 1997): 6-8.

¹¹ See Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, for a thorough description of just how radical these changes to the Prayer Book were.

