

Sacraments Essay  
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**"Should we welcome non Christians to Christ's Supper?"**

**Abstract**

The present essay argues that sharing in the Lord's Supper should be open to all people, not just to all Christians.

Most traditional theologies ought to appreciate the value of the Supper as a means of evangelisation, once the longstanding, but erroneous, interpretation of 1 Co 11 is rejected.

Recent trends in theological anthropology lead to the conclusion that non Christians ought to be welcomed to the Meal not because of who they might become, but because of who they already are. The meal then would not be a tool for conversion, but a sacrament of recognition.

The response of the Uniting Church to the new anthropology and its implications depends on the emphasis placed on various paragraphs in *The Basis of Union*. Neither the barring, nor the inviting of non Christians is explicitly rejected. Individual ministers are probably not free to make up their own mind, however, since this issue would most likely be interpreted as, "pertaining to the faith."

**Introduction**

During the last few decades, numerous theologians and much of the laity has called for the removing of all barriers to interdenominational communion, arguing that the closed table is contrary to the Christian image of unity<sup>1</sup>. I believe that the conclusions of much of the open table lobby pave the way for communion not just amongst denominations, but between the church and the world.

Despite this, Christian tradition is almost unanimous in refusing to invite non Christians to share in the Lord's Supper<sup>2</sup>. Wesley may have briefly toyed with the possibility of evangelising through invitation to communion<sup>3</sup>, but no denominational church has ever taken it up. This refusal has traditionally been justified in two ways. Firstly, a focus on the elements themselves, combined with an erroneous interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 (subsequently criticised by the "Open Table" lobby). Secondly, from the implications of the various traditions' theological anthropology.

**The nature of the elements**

The section in which Paul deals with church order at the communion table in Corinth is the standard proof-text for those wishing to bar other Christians and children from the Eucharist. More ecumenically minded people reject its power in that regard, but still accept it as a strong argument against the participation of non Christians in the Lord's Supper, on the grounds that they do not discern what the bread they are eating really is<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Primavesi, A. & Henderson, J. *Our God has no favorites*; Davies, H., "Bread of Life & Cup of Joy", p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> Erickson, *Theology*, p. 1112; Kung, *The Church*, pp. 221-2; Betz, J. "Eucharist, I. Theological", in Rahner, K. (ed), *Sacramentum mundi*, p. 264.

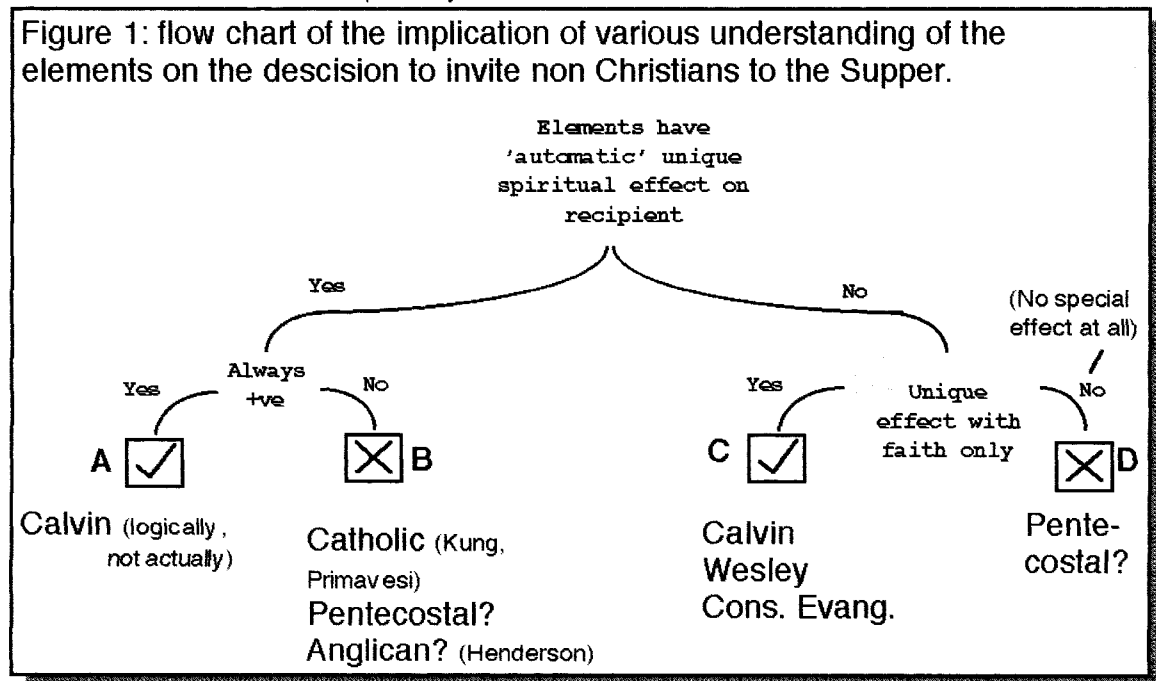
<sup>3</sup> Parris, J. R., *John Wesley's Doctrine of the Sacraments*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>4</sup> Zwingli, cited in Beckwith, R. T., "Eucharist" in Ferguson, S. B. & Wright, D. F. (eds) *New Dictionary of Theology*, p237; Erickson p. 1112, Densley, Rev E. *Pers comm*; Kung p. 229. A fuller criticism of the ecumenical movement's contradictory stance on this issue can be found in the author's unpublished review of Primavesi & Henderson, *Our God has no favorites*.

Even the briefest consideration of the passage in context ought to convince the reader that Paul is not talking about a person's cognitive ability to grasp the theological concept that Jesus is really present in the bread, but that Paul is talking about abuses of the poor Christians by their rich associates, who, in showing a lack of concern for them, reveal that they have not discerned that all those present constitute the body of Christ<sup>5</sup>.

One could argue that non Christians are incapable of discerning that the gathered Christians are the body of Christ, and are thus ineligible, but why then are Christians who refuse to recognise those of other denominations admitted, or children too young to even know what all the fuss is about<sup>6</sup>? Since most Australian adults were baptised as infants, there is no quantitative justification for barring them from communion if one accepts young children. Those who insist on doing this must be able to define when cognitive competence may first be expected of people, and particularly deal with the issue of the mentally retarded who may never interpret the Lord's Supper in anything like an orthodox way.

Having dealt with 1 Corinthians, I want briefly to consider how the traditional sacramental theologies of select denominations ought to lead one to vote on the question of non Christian inclusion. Figure 1 traces how one's view of the existence of unique, spiritual benefits in the elements themselves, and the role of faith in receiving those benefits, determines broadly how one should view their consumption by non believers.



Some of Calvin's teaching places him in category A, for example he taught that the elements may actually "beget faith" so long as the Word is also preached<sup>7</sup>. Other of his teachings place him in category D, below. Obviously anyone in category A would not only permit, but actively encourage, non believers to consume the elements.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Primavesi & Henderson p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Pridmore, J., "The Child and the Eucharist", p. 21, argues strongly that lack of comprehension should not bar children from communion, but does apply that criterion to adults, without any justification and perhaps more as a concession than as a proposition.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.14.4, cited in Bromiley, G. W., "Lord's Supper", in McKim, D. K., *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, pp 226-8.

The Catholics and Anglicans traditionally fall into category B<sup>8</sup>, and therefore also traditionally bar other denominations with an 'incorrect' theology of the elements. Once the traditional interpretation of 1 Co 11 is rejected, group B loses its scriptural support and primary justification for existence. The remaining arguments are secondary elaborations based on the assumption of 1 Co 11.

People in category C, such as Wesley, Calvin at times, and "conservative evangelicals"<sup>9</sup>, whilst not perhaps rushing to invite unbelievers, ought to have little problem with their inclusion, since the special spiritual blessing will be received by the faithful regardless of who is there, and the unbeliever will suffer nothing from taking the elements. The presence of large numbers of unbelievers may be called into question on issues such as its effect on the social cohesiveness and loss of identity for the believers, an issue which is of more concern for those in group D.

Group D, which includes at least some Pentecostals<sup>10</sup>, Zwingli at times, and the Uniting Church, hold that although God may work in a special way through the communion service, there is no unique spiritual effect bestowed on the recipient by the elements such that it is impossible to be a Christian without consuming them<sup>11</sup>. For this group, as with group C, there is no automatic condemnation for non Christians who eat the Supper, and thus no imperative to exclude them<sup>12</sup>. There is also no automatic benefit, and so there is no fundamental reason to rush out and invite them either. With no fundamental theological imperative in either direction, it is more sociological and pastoral factors that carry weight<sup>13</sup>.

Some might argue that allowing hordes of non Christians to share in the Lord's Supper will rob the meal of its distinctiveness in the minds of Christians. Since it is taken by many to be the ultimate symbol of Christian unity, allowing others to be involved may rob us of our ultimate symbol of identity. These are valid concerns, but easily allayed. The image of thousands, or even dozens, of pagans pouring in to eat a little square of bread and have a sip of wine is hardly tenable. Even in small, less formal congregations, the issue we are dealing with is whether a few guests or passersby should be invited to share in the Lord's meal. Group cohesiveness will not be

<sup>8</sup> Primavesi & Henderson pp. 80-90; Kung p. 221.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin *Inst* 4.17.33&38, 4.17.42. Wesley saw the Supper as a potential evangelistic tool for nominal Christians, but there is no evidence that he actually invited the unbaptised to share in it (Parris, pp. 69-70) It was to him not just a memorial, but "literally indispensable to the Christian life" (McCaughy, J. D., *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, p. 43). Montgomery-Boyce, J., *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, p. 596, represents conservative evangelical theology. Anglican article 29 teaches that unbelievers may eat the Supper, but in so doing they do not partake of Christ.

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, H. D., "Ordinances- Pentecostal", in Burgess, S. M. & McGee, G. B. (eds), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, p. 654

<sup>11</sup> Basis of Union paragraph 8, although it does place a very high value on the whole of the communion service.

<sup>12</sup> The preface attached to the Supper often directly excludes non Christians, for example, "This meal is for those who love the Lord a little, and would like to love him more." Though originally of admirable ecumenical benefit, it implicitly bars people who need not be. I have heard this phrase at various communion services in the Uniting Church, and other introductions which are much more explicit in barring access to non Christians.

<sup>13</sup> Is this an appropriate time to be drawing lines between Christians and non Christians? What is the impact on the excluded group, and those who do the excluding?

endangered, nor will the Supper lose its significance<sup>14</sup>.

Given that the church will not be damaged, if one accepts that the Supper conveys the love and grace of God to the recipient in some non-verbal way<sup>15</sup>, it becomes a key means of evangelising the visitor, and should be heartily endorsed.

### **New definitions of the church and the world**

Much of the modern reappraisal of the identity and nature of the church and the world leads beyond a Supper of Evangelisation to a more radical basis for welcoming all to the Table<sup>16</sup>.

Gutierrez focuses on the need for orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy as the sign of a true Christian. Pannenberg, Mudge and Schillebeeckx join him in pushing the notion of the whole world as a spiritual communion, with the church as the active sacrament of that communion, rather than being its entirety. Ethicists such as Wogaman come to similar conclusions based on the notion that everybody, not just Christians, belong to God.

#### **1) The commune defined by practise, not confession (Gutierrez)**

Gutierrez points out that the questions facing Latin American Christians are very different from those of Europe<sup>17</sup>. He maintains that, in a society where some Christians are involved in the exploitation of their poorer brothers and sisters, the Eucharistic celebration is merely empty ritual. Gutierrez does not define Christians according to their doctrinal assertions, or some fundamental spiritual change that occurs at baptism, but according to their actions in the world. He develops the ideas in the epistle of James, that one cannot claim to be Christian if one does not act like it<sup>18</sup>.

Presumably to Gutierrez, exploited Christians have more in common, more to commune about, with their exploited pagan neighbours than with those who are part of the oppressive structures, yet claim the title, "Follower of Christ". Though he does not address the question raised in this essay, his logic strongly suggests that we should rather be inviting exploited pagans than exploitative "Christians" to the Table<sup>19</sup>.

This thought pattern is foreign to many traditional middle class churches, which seem to focus on correct thinking<sup>20</sup>. When actions do receive attention, it is usually those patterns of behaviour which are easy to identify, are associated with respectability, and are little sacrifice to existing church members (sexual relationships, drug use, swearing etc.)<sup>21</sup>. More diffuse issues such as global responsibility and the first world exploitation of the third world are rarely addressed. Personal issues with potential for significant impact, such as the New Testament's teaching on

<sup>14</sup> There is a great gulf between the original meal and much of our imitation of it (Dunn, J. D. G., "Whatever happened to the Lord's Supper" pp. 41-46; Martos, J., "Eucharistic Theology", in Richardson, A. & Bowden, J. (eds), *A New Dictionary of theology*, p. 187; Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, pp. 251-5). Given this, one could argue that the meal has already lost its significance.

<sup>15</sup> e.g. Calvin in Bromiley pp. 225-8; Saliers, D. E., "Communion (Eucharist)" in Hunter, R. J. *Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to remember that even if the following arguments are rejected, the arguments above ought to challenge traditional, conservative churches to rethink their Table hospitality.

<sup>17</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 278.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* pp 137, 265, 277.

<sup>19</sup> Assuming, of course, that 'we' are not one of the oppressors.

<sup>20</sup> This trend appears to be on the rise again (Wogaman, J. P., *Christian Ethics*, p. 273).

<sup>21</sup> Based on sermons and studies I have attended at over a dozen churches, and many anecdotes from other people's experience.

personal wealth are also ignored or allegorised to the point where their original power is lost. It is a reflection of this mind set that this essay has even arisen, being basically, "Should people who don't *believe* the right thing be admitted to communion?" The students of Gutierrez, Mosala and others would probably have chosen, "Should people who don't *do* the right thing be admitted to communion?"

## 2) The Church in and of the world

As early as the sixties and seventies Gutierrez<sup>22</sup>, Pannenberg and Schillebeeckx were defining the church as itself a sacrament, not merely the bearer of the sacraments. This was based on the idea of Jesus as, "*the sacrament, the primordial sacrament*<sup>23</sup>", and the church as the *contemporary manifestation of Jesus, the body of Christ*. The church is, "a sacrament of the common future of [people] in the Kingdom of God", or "the visible realisation of this saving reality in history"<sup>24</sup>.

Schillebeeckx maintains this idea in the nineties<sup>25</sup>, and is joined by Mudge among others. This view implies, and was probably caused by, a changing view of humanity. If the church is the visible sign of God's grace at work in the world, then obviously God is at work in the world. The worship center is not the only arena for God's grace to be active, and Christians are not the only people with whom God is working.

Claiming that this is a new idea is in a sense ridiculous, since Acts particularly details the work of the Spirit on and in unbelievers, which brings them into the church<sup>26</sup>. Traditional theology too sees people's entry into the church as the result of God's work in their lives. In that respect, then, this 'new thinking' is more a shift of emphasis back to God's work in the world, away from an almost exclusively inwardly looking spirituality<sup>27</sup>.

While the old and the new could agree that the church is a sacrament of salvation and the Kingdom of God, the important difference is that the church has traditionally been seen as both *the sacrament*, and *the door* to this kingdom<sup>28</sup>. Mudge and Schillebeeckx see the church as *the sacrament*, but *a door* to the Kingdom<sup>29</sup>.

Neither believe that all religions are equal, or equally valid<sup>30</sup>. Mudge is universalistic as far as final eschatology is concerned. Schillebeeckx maintains the possibility that there may be some

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<sup>22</sup> Gutierrez p. 270.

<sup>23</sup> Schillebeeckx, E., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Pannenberg, *The Church*, p. 151; Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Schillebeeckx, E., *Church: The Human Story of God*, pp. 13,15.

<sup>26</sup> For example the healings, Paul's conversion, the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius and his household.

<sup>27</sup> This inward looking tendency has long been criticised by various Christians, though on other grounds, for example in Rose, S. C., *The Grass Roots Church*, p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> There are of course exceptions, Clement of Alexandria and Origen were universalists, and this view was being restated as early as the thirties (e.g. Hodgson, P. C., *Revisoning the Church*, pp. 36-7, 41, 94).

<sup>29</sup> Mudge, L. S., *The Sense of a People*, pp. 7 ("Humanity is spiritual communion...the space of God's dwelling, which transcends the church"), 8, 13, 38, 51("The church makes the communion of saints visible sacramentally, without claiming to be identified with that communion"). Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 13 ("The church is not salvation, but a sacrament of salvation"), 157 ("The church is not the Kingdom of God, but it bears symbolic witness to it").

<sup>30</sup> Mudge p. 8, Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 26.

people so evil that they are excluded from the Kingdom<sup>31</sup>, but draws the boundary of 'the saved' far wider than the church walls. The authors' understanding of the church as sacrament, then, is not that it gives the pagans a glimpse of the wonders of heaven which they can share in if they join the church, but that it reveals to the world the destination which is already theirs, and the reality of the already present Kingdom which surrounds them. The church is, "The celebratory sacrament of the salvation which God *brings about in the world*"<sup>32</sup> (emphases mine)". Small gatherings of Christians are called to "seek to maintain spaces where [the sense of the world as the people of God] can be seen"<sup>33</sup>.

The issue of whether non believers are already inside the kingdom is of fundamental importance. Traditional theology sees conversion to Christianity as the entrance of people into the Kingdom/family of God, involving a fundamental spiritual change with the entrance of the Holy Spirit into that person. This view has much support in Paul's epistles, Acts and John.

Mudge, and Schx to a lesser extent, appear to draw on the more Old Testament focus of all people being animated and given life by God's Spirit. All are therefore fundamentally the same, and conversion is the realisation that one's life is due to this Spirit, and a growing understanding of, and cooperation with the Holy Spirit who dwells within. Part of the sacramentality of the church is bringing about this change in understanding.

How does the church actually *function* as a sacrament? Mudge focuses on the church's actions in the world, such as being an advocate for social justice, rather than the rituals. People do not realise that they are already the people of God by sitting in on a service, but by seeing the church in action in the world<sup>34</sup>. Schillebeeckx talks about people coming to understand their identity through revelation, and the subsequent interpretation of that revelation by the religion of the revealee. The church's primary ways of helping in this process are preaching and the sacraments<sup>35</sup>.

Both, then, see unbelievers as people ignorant of their true status and nature<sup>36</sup>. Schx ought to heartily invite such people to the Supper, given that it is intrinsically linked to the church's action in the world<sup>37</sup>. Mudge's desire would depend on his optimism about the church's ability to reflect the Kingdom at worship. Though his focus is on visible, external actions, the Supper may form one of the "spaces" where outsiders can get a sense of being a people.

Neither of them would focus on the elements themselves as the sacrament which would bring about that sense, but the ritual's ability to recall something of Jesus' life, and in the sharing of the bread and wine to convey a sense of belonging and community. The benefits are contained in the Supper's ability to provide an interpretation of revelation, not in the automatic, unique

<sup>31</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 137. His position, that the totally evil (if they exist) are simply extinguished and forgotten about falls down if we accept that to a large extent who we are is shaped by our life experience. Taking away a person's negative experiences, by blotting out the evil people who did them from the memory of the world would change the person radically: their whole life from that point would make little sense without those key memories. Similarly, as Schillebeeckx himself admits, it is not only the totally depraved who do depraved things, and I doubt that anyone is fundamentally and totally evil.

<sup>32</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Mudge p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Mudge pp. 13-16.

<sup>35</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Church*, pp. 23-26.

<sup>36</sup> This is also the implication of modern Christian ethics, "Non Christians... belong to God, whether they know it, or like it, or not. That...is almost inescapable in all Christian ethics- or in the ethic of any universal religion" (Wogaman, p. 273).

<sup>37</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 14.

endowment of Spiritual benefits. The Supper is not a means of conversion (from outside to inside the Kingdom), but one of recognition. This is both the church's recognition that the recipient is also a member of the Kingdom, and hopefully the recipient's eventual recognition that there is a kingdom, and that they are a part of it.

### Uniting Church Response?

How should we, as the Uniting Church respond to these ideas, according to the *Basis of Union* on which we are founded?

The Uniting church is to, "remain open to constant reform under [Christ's] Word", and emphasises the need for the church to be, "serving the world" (paragraph 1). We accept the ecumenical logic leading to open communion, having presumably rejected the false exegesis of first Corinthians mentioned above (para 2). We hold that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, and that the world's sin has been taken away (para 3). God has reasserted his claim over the whole of creation, and pardoned sinners. Though not intentionally universalistic, this paragraph could be interpreted as such.

However, we also hold that there is a fundamental difference between Christians and non Christians, the reception of the Holy Spirit (para 3). The Spirit is active in everyone's life, awakening their faith (para 4). Theology is to be controlled by scripture. The Supper is an effective sign of the gospel, though its 'benefits' may only be accepted by those with faith, who have been baptised, and who make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving as they take part (para 5, 6 & 8). The Uniting Church listens to, but does not mindlessly obey, the teachings of the reformers, who would certainly not agree. On the other hand, we remain open to contemporary thinkers and scholars, including the ones discussed above (para 11). We are committed to a continuing exploration of the relationship between baptism, confirmation and participation in holy communion (para 12). We will keep our church law open to constant reform, looking to, "the final reconciliation of humankind under God's sovereign grace" (para 17).

So then, whether the Uniting Church receives the thoughts outlined in the preceding paragraphs is to a large extent dependent upon the importance given to each paragraph. Both very traditional and very contemporary thought can be accommodated depending on the weighting given to paragraphs five to eight *versus* eleven and twelve.

Ministers are called to, "adhere to the *Basis of Union*", thought, "this adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith." Exactly what those matters are is up to the church councils to decide, at one level surely every matter enters into the substance of faith.

Even if it appears that the *Basis* rejects communion for unbelievers, ministers may be able to hold this opinion themselves in the unlikely event that this be deemed a matter, "not pertaining to the faith."<sup>38</sup>

### My Response?

As a future Deacon in the Uniting Church, with a wife, family, and large number of friends who are not Christian, I have a keen interest in the whole area of salvation and theological anthropology. Many would say I have a vested interest in promoting the thoughts of Pannenberg and Schillebeeckx, that in so doing I am living out Paul's predictions<sup>39</sup>.

I cannot prove them wrong, but my impression is rather that being faced with the reality that

<sup>38</sup> The serious treatment of some minister's attempts to refuse to perform paedobaptism implies that the opening of the Supper to non Christians would be judged a significant issue.

<sup>39</sup> "...people will not put up with sound doctrine...they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires (2 Tim 4:3)." (I actually had this verse posted to me anonymously recently, along with \$100- charming! I wish I knew who it was so I could send the money back.)

traditional theology condemns my parents, brother, most relatives, wife and her family, and most of my friends to hell, I decided that this was an issue that needed serious thought. The need is not so pressing, I suppose, for the majority of Christians I know, who were brought up in church families and have almost exclusively church friends.

Through struggling with this issue over several years, I have come to the conclusion that the work of Jesus somehow brought about salvation for everybody, though not everyone interprets or even experiences that during their life on earth.. This is, I believe, not so much a new thought, as an emphasis on parts of Jesus and Paul's teachings that have either been so deemphasised, or so forcefully reinterpreted as to have lost their original impact. I do not claim that my views are supported by all of Scripture, but that they are just as much as the more traditional ones. It also makes more sense, and seems to be the only way of making both predestination and free choice simultaneously tenable.

Given all this, I have come to a position similar to that of Mudge and Schillebeeckx<sup>40</sup>, that Christians are the people who recognise the salvation which God has effected through Christ, and sacramentalise it so that everyone else can recognise it too<sup>41</sup>. Since sharing in the Supper is such a key element in our recognition of, and sacramentalisation of, the Kingdom and salvation, we must welcome everybody to it, in the hope that it may bring them to an understanding of God's existence and their true relationship to God. Focussing more on the sharing than the elements, I believe that we will be successful at this only in so far as we ourselves recognise and reflect the properties of the Kingdom, so far as we pray for and allow God's Kingdom to come on earth, amongst us (Congregationally, denominationally and universally), as it has in heaven.

Whether I am permitted to invite non Christians to the Supper in my ministry is something for others to work out<sup>42</sup>. What I will do if I'm not I cannot say at this stage. If it is true that we only get to fight for one or two causes, I will have to decide whether this is a big enough one. I suspect it may be.

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<sup>40</sup> Without Schillebeeckx's hell theology.

<sup>41</sup> As well as recognising and helping others to recognise where the outbreaking of the Kingdom is being opposed and inhibited, and moving to release it.

<sup>42</sup> I have already invited several at different times (see appendix 1). None of them have dropped dead yet, so I assume that the recent interpretations of 1 Co 11 are closer to the mark than the traditional one.



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