

## who will set a table for the Lord?

For many years, the notion of the Lord's table/Communion/the Lord's Supper has intrigued me and puzzled me, not so much the theology of it, but the experience of it!

My Baptist friends insist that the elements of the bread and the cup are important symbols of an unseen reality, Christ with us. My Catholic friends feel that there is special grace imparted whenever one partakes of the 'sacrament' of the bread and the cup, and that there is literally a partaking of more of Christ in this process. To some Catholics, the Protestant's version is a travesty. To some Protestants, the Catholic Mass is a blasphemy.

Standing in the tension of such divergent historical church traditions, one must wonder if it all has not all become a massive exercise in missing the whole point.

With one's Bible open, and momentarily suspending one's church tradition(s), can we find what is at the root? Or at least, can we begin the quest ... a quest which links and overlaps everything from the Passover of the Jews who fled Egypt<sup>1</sup> to the Upper Room with Jesus and His disciples,<sup>2</sup> to the Banquet Supper of the Lamb<sup>3</sup> which is our hope to come.

What was *the original intention?*

My purpose is not to exegete the relevant passages as much as to raise ideas and questions for the quest we are all on, whether we realize it or not.

That is, the quest for meaning and connection in Christian community. The quest to live out as the people of God, what we have been called to in Christ, and before a watching world. And, the quest to lead with greater meaning for those who are called to exercise the leadership gifts of ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Where do we begin?

Let's start with the meal.

The table in the Upper Room was a meal. It was not ceremonial. It was a full meal. The elements were not minuscule pieces nor

exclusively for one assigned leader to partake of on behalf of the people. Jesus set the example.

Paul found himself trying to bring order out of the chaotic gatherings of young, messy believers in Corinth. His instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 provide a sense that to gather was a time where past, present and future were to be lived under a sense of *God with us*, our Emmanuel, and *God in us*, as our personal saviour through faith in the person and finished work of Christ. The problem is that people were showing up without examined hearts, there was neglect of those who had no food and a general lack of awareness about how present Jesus could be with them in the reality of their daily experience which in the context of Corinthians was replete with sex scandals, court threats, disorderly worship, you name it.

Now, let us consider, what has this meal evolved into over time?

### **tables too remote for relationship?**

I recall communion services in congregational churches over the years, when the real fellowship in Christ happened at someone's house over lunch *after* the morning service! For too many years, I sat waiting for something to happen during communion, then getting up and greeting people, pretending that something had happened. Was I waiting for Godot?<sup>5</sup> Or maybe I was waiting for God. There were rare times of a special sense of God's presence and new insights as I examined my heart, but, He usually did not show up there. He seemed to show up at lunch, which was about 45 minutes later. Why is that?

At least one reason for this which I speculate on is that I never once saw anyone publicly go and be reconciled to a brother in those anti-septic public ceremonies, nor in the more flamboyant expressive settings that some preferred. Yet, this is almost a given assumption in 1 Corinthians 11.<sup>6</sup> This Scripture assumes and addresses disorder among those who are in Christ, and part of His body. Failure to discern the 'body of the Lord' led to sickness and even death.

Now, about table sitting.

When sitting at a table, I must 'belly up' and almost touch the table with my body to enjoyably share what is being offered. Even a

table where my chair sits 3 or 4 inches back, because the legs of adjacent chairs entangle me from getting closer, is not a pleasant experience for dining.

I wonder, does not the 'far away table of the Lord' in most church building auditoriums create an experience which is inversely proportionate to one's distance from the table?

### **a mixed metaphor for 'community in Christ'**

And so, when we sit at an ordinary table with our brothers and sisters, what is it that we share besides the food, some fun and connection? It is a deep, abiding sense that we are in union with Christ individually and together. Persons in relationship, connected vertically to the Son of God and horizontally to each other.

At the Lord's table, we are invited to transcend the temporal and the superficial. We are invited to think of the Lord's death and its impact for our lives and our faith communities.

Paul, I believe, created a mixed metaphor between chapter 11, where he uses the term "body of the Lord,"<sup>7</sup> and chapter 12 of Corinthians, where he uses the term "body of Christ."<sup>8</sup> I believe that the 'body' we are to discern when we 'break bread' is not just the flesh and bones body of Jesus but also the new 'body' or 'company' of believers who make up the new covenant people of God, under Jesus, who reconciles all things to himself,<sup>9</sup> and thus all things to each other. Our focus is not only a dead body, but a new kind of body under one risen, living, unifying Head, who is Christ.

Certainly, in all of this there is mystery and wonder, and praise that comes from such a new life as we can experience in Christ.

As an observer of nature I am intrigued that God has built the biological necessity of eating into our daily human experience. That which is biologically essential has been designed by God to also be profoundly social, and even spiritual in its full orbed potential. It takes production, preparation and presentation to bring meals to a table and invariably they are consumed and enjoyed in the presence of others. The table is where bodies are fed, where people connect and where the Lord is more or less present, proportionate to the spiritual condition and anticipation of those present.

I believe that what Jesus was trying to do was get his people, his followers, to live a lifestyle of 'remembering Him until He comes,'<sup>10</sup> around every table they met at.

'As often as you do this' .... as often as you 'eat' ... remember Him.<sup>11</sup>

## reconciliation and relational covenanting

When you eat, if you recall that there is something to make right or deal with, you do that before you enjoy the food and fellowship. This has often happened at our family supper table ... that is the place where dad has to acknowledge an oversight to mom, where a child may need to be challenged on some wrongdoing, etc. We make things right first. Then we eat.

Two very important passages cover this matter of relational covenanting, or relational "agreements." Matthew 5:23-24 and Matthew 18:15-17. These ought to be highlighted in our Bibles in bright yellow. They are guidelines for building and recovering great relationships. They are powerful and insightful ... and they can really work!

When I sin against my brother, it is good for my soul, and his, for us to agree on what happened. To do so is to be in 'relational covenant' or 'relationship connection' in today's language.

A helpful distinction has been made between reconciliation and (working) resolution.<sup>14</sup> We must make every effort to be reconciled to our brothers. Some brothers, once reconciled, might be well to not try and work together because chemistry, culture or talents are not a good mix. We see that even the Apostle Paul and Barnabas separated over a matter concerning John Mark and they parted ways but continued in their mission.<sup>15</sup> Personally, I believe that these men would have *reconciled* with each other before moving on, recognizing it was not an ideal match for a *working resolution*.

"There must be disputes among you, to show which of you has God's approval."<sup>16</sup> Now, that too, is an interesting thought to ponder, but a little beyond our scope here.

## tables of the Lord

The other day I thought about how many kinds of tables we have in our home and how many kinds of tables I touch in a week.

A family supper table might be simply a quick pitstop before soccer practice but it **becomes** a table of the Lord as the family unifies around the things that are Godward. Sometimes this is simply the joy of being together, laughter over funny incidents during the day, and light banter among siblings. Sometimes, it must go deeper to address underlying issues where there are strains or blocks in relationship.

A bar room table where a glass of wine, and peanuts, is served is inherently a table for relaxation and connecting with friends. However, it can regress from there to become a table of drunkenness, gossip and aggression and all manner of vice. But, it also has the potential to become a table of the Lord. I wonder if that is why Jesus was scorned by the Pharisees so readily because of his association with sinners. He lived out the kingdom everywhere he went. He showed that the central message of the kingdom was about loving God (a relational connection/covenant) and loving your neighbour (a relational connection/covenant).

A board room table is inherently a table where stakeholders come together and steward the past, present and future of a business or organization. However, it can regress into a table of expediency. A table of manipulation. Whatever. It becomes a table of the Lord as employees or other stakeholders get true access to leadership thinking.

Some may ask, what is my position on the Lord's Table? I say, "I am 100% in favour of it ... everywhere, at every table, as often as possible!"

What of my Brethren Assembly friends with their weekly event or my Catholic friends, with weekly, or even daily, mass? Is this really get what is inherent in 1 Corinthians 11 and the pattern of Jesus in the Upper Room?<sup>17</sup> I do not think that weekly meetings are necessarily bad, but I do not believe they can touch the power and potential of daily 'tables of the Lord' being created at McDonalds, at Board Room tables or with the family at the supper table.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a ceremonial, large Communion experience. Nor is there anything inherently superior about two or three believers getting together ... when the potential for gossip and gluttony at Swiss Chalet may be just as present as the potential to unify and connect under the things of Christ.

Jesus did say that he would be present in a special way when 2 or 3 are gathered in his name.<sup>18</sup> However, I believe that to set this kind of table takes intentionality.

There have been times when I tried to set a table for the Lord, but it was rejected. It was as if Matthew 18:15-17 does not work! It causes me to want to look very deeply inside myself ... do I create an environment where others can come to me with their burdens or offences about me? Do I make this Scripture work for others?

As an aside, it is interesting to note that Matthew 18:18 talks about binding and losing. Does this mean that if I ignore reconciliation with my brother that I am somehow binding myself to certain consequences in God's economy? Matthew 18:19 talks about the importance of agreement together. And then, verse 20 goes on to speak of the power of Christ's presence among even two or three ... the context of this passage has a flow. (1) Reconciliation steps (2) God binds how we handle it (3) The power of agreement together (4) the special presence of Christ experienced.

What happens if I feel I have an offence and seek to go to a table with another who may not accept my approach? It might well have been that I was **the offender**, not the offended. The denial to let me 'come to the table' means that we cannot really explore who should own what. If I was the offender, why would the other not want to take 30 minutes to establish that in a godly way, allow me the opportunity to ask forgiveness and then extend fellowship to me ... preferably over a latte and biscotti? To me, this is the essence of breaking bread together. This would be a table of the Lord.

In this case, **whether I am the offender or the offended, doesn't really matter** to God, or to me. It is only that there might be reconciliation, and the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace that follows. Let whomever own what must be owned. Let each one make things right, as needed. This is a way to glorify God.

By not welcoming me as the **possible offender**, I am suspended from the possibility of my being and feeling forgiven and released by men. By not welcoming me as the **possible offended**, the other party avoids the possibility of owning their need for forgiveness and release.

It has caused me to ask, “**where have I refused someone** to come to my table to process a grievance, an offence ... real or perceived ... whatever ... so that we can be reconciled?

If so, I am the poorer man. I miss the chance to be forgiven, or to forgive. And, I risk dishonouring my Lord, and bringing discipline on myself. I wonder how Joseph’s brothers could live with their thoughts, over so many years, and how this would have affected the quality of their relationship with their dad, Jacob, with whom they lived in deception for so many years.

Further, I should not be surprised that my tokenism to the person I am refusing to welcome to (or ignoring at) “my table” is rejected as insincere and unjust. Is this what Paul meant when he said, some of you are sick and even die ... for want of a reconciling spirit?

The person who is ‘coming to me with an offence’ may be completely wrong, completely right or only half and half. That is not the point that really matters. It is the *process* of dealing with whatever it is that matters. One Head who is Christ, draws His people into unity, wherever he can ... if we will respond.

If I am the one who cannot come to the table of another, then my reconciliation and resolution is ‘suspended.’ Lost in space, for now. This, I think, was the pain of Joseph. His brothers were offended by the display of his coat of many colours and the dream that he shared with them. They iced him, a kid. Threw him in a pit. One could say it was ‘excommunication’ from the family, of God. “Ex-communication!” His was not only the pain of separation, but I believe it was also the pain of *not processing* whatever they had against him in terms of the coat or dream or how he handled them.

Reuben was the only one with a tweak of trained conscience.<sup>19</sup> He at least came looking for Joseph.<sup>20</sup> Too little, too late, Reuben. It would be many years later when this family would be reunited at a table and things made right. If only CSI Jerusalem could have done a DNA test on the blood stains and found it out to be the blood of a

goat, not Joseph, in the pit ... but we know that "if only" doesn't replay history, and that God's larger purposes are not thwarted by the errors and omissions of men.

I have a friend who was refused a hearing at a table of brothers at a pivotal juncture in his life and work. Years later they came back to offer him a tribute at a table of honour. In the world on non-believers, we understand that this might even be an olive branch or a gesture of goodwill. Among brothers, this was an obvious avoidance of a table of reconciliation, as pre-requisite to a table of celebration. My friend felt he could not comply with the honour step unless there was first a reconciliation step. Neither happened.

This introduces a whole other discussion, how and why the Lord allows lack of reconciliation and communion among his people to work into His larger strategy for the growth of His body! But that also is not our subject here.

**What we are wrestling with is the very identity and nature of church itself! And, it fundamentally revolves around how we see and set "our tables."**

Is the New Testament church era not era of the 'table among the people'?

If "the table" is formal, austere, pristine and at the front of a designated auditorium for special services and far from where I sit, is there not a risk that it is no longer the table of the Lord, but becomes to me the 'table of religious behaviour'?

Why is it that the old TV program, *Cheers*, seemed to capture relationship and connection so much better than most churches? .... remember the jingle, "where everyone knows your name?"

How can churches bring 'the table' back to the relational centre of the body of believers as they gather?

### **church as a 'movement between tables'**

What if we could imagine that **every table** we ever sit at can become a table of the Lord?

This notion propels in me the notion of **simple churching** as merely the sum total of all of my movement as a Jesus follower from one table to another.

Simple church, places the table of hospitality at the centre of what we are about. The Lord's Table is central because it affirms our union with Christ and our identity as the new people of God.

From the bedside table, to the kitchen table, to the office desk/workshop table, to the operating table, restaurant tables, leadership tables, picnic tables, etc. I have the opportunity to embrace the presence of a living Christ **within AND among**. Our movements between tables of each day are the dynamism of the church in action, the context for Jesus to reign and rule in our hearts and lives, not theoretically, but practically ... as we remember Him, break bread and make every effort to be truly reconciled and thus maintain the unity of the Body in bond of peace.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the challenge of large scale churching in what we know of as cathedrals, mega-churches or even mid-sized congregations is that the Lord's table can quickly become 'high and lofty,' quite removed from the relational centre of the body of believers themselves. An 'add on,' not the centre.

This is why in our simple church which gathers in our home we engage in lots of hospitality and relationship and relational covenanting as our expression of the Lord's table. We do not ceremonialize it and thus make it a mystery or a remote part of the experience of our people together in community.

Ceremony in itself is not wrong. But the failure to maintain covenanting relationships through the exercise of Matthew 5 and 18 can make our ceremonies a farce. And, of course, the farce is even more serious if it happens on a small scale where people can get to know each other, but do not.

The table of the Lord is a table of celebration. It is hard to celebrate when the cup is a plastic thimble full of Welch's grape juice or if the food is a small morcel of cracker or a wafer. Even less so if the only partaker is at the front of the room 'celebrating' on my behalf.

This little paper is not intended to be a history of the Lord's table in church history, or a critique of any traditions, but an invitation to

every reader to refocus what is central in the Scriptures. And what is at risk, if we fall short in appropriating the heart of the Lord's table.

Consider these essentials ...

1. Jesus within and among us as His people.
2. The central place of hospitality in gatherings of God's people.
3. The indispensable role of 'being reconciled' to one another in order that there may be a unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
4. Love and relational covenanting as a foundation for moving forward in mission to reach others around us, with a ministry of reconciliation.<sup>22</sup>

None of us is worthy of the table of the Lord, but we can partake in a worthy manner.<sup>23</sup> That means I must not miss the fundamentals in the original intention. I must quest after that. And press on to discover the unity among brothers which the Lord loves to see. It is in the unity that the Lord bestows his blessing.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps **my view of church must be informed by my theology and practice of "the Lord's table," and not the other way around.**

If the church is poor in spiritual health, perhaps it is because I have failed to be faithful "at the table."

"Lord, help me to be more faithful."

Maybe it starts with resetting a former table. Bringing back together parties among whom there were offences or even the perception of offences. Start there. God will surely honour it.

**Who will set tables for the Lord ... today and tomorrow and ... will I? ... will you?**

## References:

- 1 Exodus 12:1-30
- 2 Matthew 26:17-30
- 3 Revelation 19:1-9
- 4 1 Corinthians 11:26
- 5 Two hobos in a classic play by Samuel Beckett wait for an non-descript character to arrive. They are not sure of it is a person named Godot , or God, or whomever, for which they are waiting.
- 6 1 Corinthians 11:17-33
- 7 1 Corinthians 11:29
- 8 1 Corinthians 12:27
- 9 Colossians 1:20
- 10 1 Corinthians 11:25
- 11 1 Corinthians 11:26
- 12       Matthew 5:23 (KJV)
- 13 1 Corinthians 4:4
- 14 Insights by Dave Legg, People Resources Group, US Navigators
- 15 Acts 15:36-41
- 16 1 Corinthians 11:19
- 17 Matthew 26:17-30
- 18 Matthew 18:20
- 19 Hebrews 5:14
- 20 Genesis 37:21, 29
- 21 Ephesians 4:3
- 22 2 Corinthians 5:18,19
- 23 1 Corinthians 11:27-28
- 24 Psalm 133:1

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