

Family Supper: Reclaiming Community Through Communion

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In recent years, sociologists and educators across the political spectrum have encouraged families to do one simple thing to maintain connection with one another: eat. The issue isn't just eating, of course. That's a non-negotiable for all biological organisms. The issue instead is to eat *together*. The family dinner might seem cute and outdated in a mobile, crazy-busy current age, but there's something of importance here. Parents often wolf down, in a car seat, a bagged meal they've ordered through a clown's mouth, in order to get to another soccer practice. Children often eat dinner from a desk, alone, in their rooms, texting friends and playing video-games. A family dinner, though, creates a connection. As Christians, we ought to know this, from the church.

Too often, when we speak of "creating community" in our churches, we're talking about some new program, a new set of small groups we've copied from some other church doing such things well. The Bible, though, says little or nothing about "small groups." The focus of community is instead more often around the table, around a common meal. The Apostle Paul, from start to finish, warned the church at Corinth about their divisions, divisions that didn't just inhibit their mission but also proclaimed something false, at the most primal level, about the gospel itself ([1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#)). That division showed up significantly in the perversion of the communion table ([1 Corinthians 11:18](#)). The people were using the Lord's Supper to feed their own individual appetites rather than caring for one another (11:20-21). When this happens, the act of communion becomes something other than "the Lord's Supper you eat," the apostle warned. To restore their fellowship with Christ and with one another,

the church had to gather at the table, the way King Jesus invites.

This has everything to do, I think, with the alienation and loneliness we see among so many Christians today. For too long, many American evangelicals have defined communion inordinately in terms of what we *don't* believe about it: that the elements metaphysically become the body and blood of Christ, and so on. We've emphasized the "remembrance" aspect of the Supper (which is significant) without emphasizing the communion aspect of the Supper. But an overemphasis on memorial can easily turn the Supper into an act of individual cognition. The believer sits, alone, in the privacy of his own thought world, trying to think about the gospel of a broken body and poured out blood.

But there's something in the way that God designed us that won't allow us to evacuate our need for a communitarian supper. Evangelical churches that "celebrate" (and, if you've been to very many of these typical services, you'll know why I put quotes around that word) a curt communion every three or four months will try to find something to replace it. There might be a "Family Night Supper" before a mid-week service, or a Sunday after-church "Dinner on the Grounds." At the very least, there will be coffee and doughnuts before the Sunday school classes, and gatherings of believers eating in some restaurant after worship at the local steakhouse. These moments of fellowship are important, part of the hospitality the Bible calls us to, but they can't replace the Supper Jesus has given to us. In the Supper, we confess ourselves to be sinners, together, and we proclaim, together, the gospel that restores us to right fellowship with God and with one another. We experience Jesus in our midst, serving us the kind of meal that connects us with the upper-room in Jerusalem past and with the marriage feast of the New Jerusalem future.

Part of the problem is with the way we present the elements themselves. Most contemporary evangelical churches distribute chewing-gum size pellets of tasteless and oppressively-textured bread along with thimble-sized plastic shot glasses of grape juice. This practice

hardly represents the unity maintained by a common loaf and a common cup. It also strips away at the reality of the Supper as a meal for a gathering, not just a prompt for individual reflection. The meaning of the Supper would go a long way toward recovering a biblical focus on gospel community if we asked our churches to tear apart a common loaf of bread and to drink from a common cup, practices that were common in New Testament communities.

Now, I recognize that such a thing would prompt wrinkled noses from many in our pews. They would find it "gross" to get that close to someone's saliva and whatever germs might dwell within. But that's precisely the kind of Western individualism communion is meant to tear down. The church isn't an association of like-minded individuals. The church is a household of brothers and sisters. Indeed, the church is an organic system, a body connected by the nervous system of the Spirit of Christ himself.

As we serve the table of Christ's communion each week, we are calling the church to a different kind of community. The kind of community that cannot be dissolved by petty conflict or disagreement. As we eat together around the table of Christ, we're called to a recognition that we are at the table of a kingdom. And we are called there to recognize the presence of the King — not so much in the elements themselves or in our individual spiritual reflection but in the body he has called together, a body of sinners like us. Only then will we really get what the Scriptures mean when they call us to "fellowship."

Perhaps if our churches intentionally recovered the communitarian focus of the Lord's Supper, we might have less and less need for professional conflict resolution experts called in to consult with us on how to overcome our divisions. After all, for Jesus and for the Apostle Paul, the starting point for unity in the church, and for the sanctification of the Body together, was a common gospel and a common table. It could be again.

In order to get community right, we must reclaim communion.

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