

## What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?

Week 3: Chapter 10 ~ 15

### Chapter 10 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Cannot Ignore The Table.

Who we share a table with...and who we don't share a table with...says a lot about us. For Christians, as Skye points out, "*...the meal has always been central to the Christian life and any exploration of the church must consider Christ's table, its meaning, its place in our worship, and how it forms our life with God and one another...Sharing a table is how we form bonds and establish a common identity.*"

There is a lot of power wrapped up in table/meal sharing...

- The power to create and build relational bonds.
- The power to include or exclude.
- The power to form and foster identity.

These are all priorities for disciples of Jesus and all tied together in eating together. So if we say that we value relationships, that relationships are of ultimate importance, then we need to take our practice of table/meal sharing very seriously...both in our formal gathering times and in our regular, everyday lives.

- *How do you utilize a table/meals for faith formation?*
- *How has participating in the Lord's Supper formed your identity, faith, and relationships?*
- *How have you experienced the power of sharing tables/meals in your life?*

### Chapter 11 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Than A Symbol Is Never Just A Symbol.

This chapter invites us to consider and reflect upon our understanding of symbols. Further, it invites us to consider the "symbol" of the Lord's Supper/Communion. As Skye says, "*Being a symbol always makes something more important and never less.*"

If you'll indulge me for a moment...I come from a background in which the Lord's Supper was/is observed weekly during worship service. And it has always struck me as odd to hear the reason/rationale why people prefer to observe it less frequently...specifically that idea that it'll make it less special if it's observed more frequently. I gotta tell you...that does not compute in my mind.

Let's apply that same rationale to other things. Should the pre-game ritual of playing the national anthem be reserved for special games, like the playoffs, instead of before every game...because, you know, we don't want to make the national anthem less special by hearing it too often. Or maybe parents shouldn't tell their kids "I love you" too often because they might take it for granted. Or should a couple not have sex too often in fear that it'll lose its specialness?

(That one actually came from a Catholic nun...which makes me chuckle a bit...but it hammers the point home, doesn't it?)

Since the Lord's Supper/Communion is a symbol of our covenant relationship with God, why would we not want (or need) to be reminded of the centrality of that covenant as the focal point of our lives? The sharing of the Table reminds us not only of Christ's sacrifice but also of His purpose of creating a new humanity whose identity is found in Him. When we partake of the elements we are acknowledging who we are to one another. It seems we need a reminder as often as we can get it.

I'm not trying to convince you that we should observe the Lord's Supper every week (though I certainly wouldn't be opposed to that)...but rather trying to get us to examine our understanding of Communion. The point isn't the symbols (thus our feelings about the symbols are a moot issue), the point is what the symbols represent and point to. Would we really ever say something like, "*I don't want to think about Jesus too often. I don't want to think too often about all His sacrifice accomplished and its relevance to my life*"? Isn't the whole reason we gather together to remember Jesus?

- *Are you one who falls into the camp of thinking the Lord's Supper is "just a symbol"? If so, where did that idea come from, or why do you hold it? What do Skye's thoughts on the role of symbols have you thinking?*
- *What generally goes on in your head and heart when you partake of Communion? Or what do you focus on when we observe the Lord's Supper?*
- *Are there any reflections from last week's Scripture readings that you'd like to share? (This will be a standing debrief question each week to encourage reading and reflection on the suggested passages.)*

## Chapter 12 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Experience The Reality Of His Kingdom Through The Table.

Stratification and marginalization have marked human relationships and societies for most of history. It's the norm...it's expected...we get it, even if we don't like it. Think of how many stories (books, movies, etc.) are about someone breaking out of where they've been pigeon-held culturally, societally, even familially. We like stories of people overcoming the odds and climbing the ladder, making something of themselves.

Then Jesus comes along, ushering in the Kingdom of God and obliterating social hierarchy. Rank and standing are thrown out the window in the Kingdom of God. The church is meant to reflect that. Hmmm, how are we doing with that? And where that should be most visible is at the Table of the Lord. No one has to scratch or crawl or wrestle their way to the Table...all are invited and welcomed.

Sadly, those near the top of the social hierarchy don't like to mingle with those deemed lesser. They tend to be the ones who aren't too excited about God's Kingdom having come and who in various ways try to diminish the social implications of the Gospel.

- *How is social status/rank determined today? Who are those that you, perhaps, look up to, or down upon, on the social ladder?*
- *How does our table fellowship (both as a congregation and as individuals/households) reflect the presence and upside-downness of God's Kingdom here and now? How are inclusivity and abundance displayed in our table fellowship?*
- *How is your identity reflected in who you eat with?*

### Chapter 13 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Must Not Replace His Table With A Coffee Bar.

Let's be real clear here...Skye is NOT against coffee bars. As he mentions toward the end of the chapter, they can serve a purpose. What he (and I) take exception to is anything that sets aside what Jesus taught because it doesn't align with the wants of a consumeristic, market-driven audience. (Church folk should not be considered, nor consider themselves, an "audience" anyway. Again, the Church is NOT a provider of religious goods and service but a unique people group in the world centered on, guided by, ordered by King Jesus.)

The main question this chapter deals with is what are people (congregations) creating bonds and identity around? Anything less than Jesus is unacceptable. Additionally, how is our practice of the Lord's Table (or any practice for that matter) forming us?

The church is a community gathered around and centered on Jesus. It is amazing how easily and subtly lesser things can creep in and replace our focus...and the most powerful "lesser thing" is usually our own wants and preferences...i.e. the Self...which tends to constantly compete with Christ for the throne of our lives. Furthermore, while relational connection is a key part of the church, it's a very specific type of connection. Perhaps now might be a good time to circle back around to a definition of church offered earlier in the introduction—**the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.**

- *List/identify the main practices we at CUMC have when we gather together. With each listed/identified, how are they designed to form us? Or what formative effect are they having on you/us?*
- *If someone were to ask you, "What binds CUMC together?" how would you respond? Or a similar question might be, "What type of community is CUMC forming? And how so?"*
- *Do you think Skye is making too big of an issue out of this or do you see his point? Explain.*

- *How do we discern if a current cultural practice, element, style can/should be appropriated for church use or not?*

#### Chapter 14 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Person You Like Least Will Be At His Table.

Oh, the old Homogeneous Unit Principle...grrr. Friends, this seems like an ongoing battle I can't escape from. I've been railing against this for years. Quick backstory...

I typically tell people, should they ask, that my undergrad degree is in Ministry...and just leave it at that. But if we're going to be technical, I hold a B.A. in Church Growth with a double emphasis in Preaching and Youth Ministry. (The "Church Growth" part is relevant for this discussion.) The Homogeneous Unit Principle—shorthand: birds of a feather flock together—is a key component of the Church Growth Movement, which has been the driving/dominant paradigm for the majority of American churches (and beyond) for a generation now. I'm very familiar with church ministry done with that paradigm as that's what I was educated in. And, as Skye points out, does it "work"?...Yes (if the goal is to grow congregations numerically). BUT...does it reflect the Kingdom of God?...NO; does it help make disciples of Jesus?...not really. It is a very natural inclination to desire to be in community with people like ourselves. Nevertheless it must be fought. You see, my friends, the church is something supernatural. Acquiescing to natural proclivities does not become us.

In fact, to be a disciple/apprentice of Jesus requires us to unlearn many things that feel "natural" and "right". And when the church doesn't help people unlearn these things but instead uses them for the purpose of "growth" and "success", we have a problem.

The Table of Jesus is where/how we learn that what holds diverse people together is Jesus. "Success" for a congregation isn't primarily measured in numbers but in faithfulness (reflecting Jesus and His Kingdom) and love for one another...no matter how different we are from one another. As the apostle Paul says, *"...I urge you to live a life worthy of the gospel you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."* (Ephesians 4:1-6, emphasis added) Our oneness is seen and experienced at the Table.

- *What is the most diverse context you are in on a weekly basis? How do you feel about that diversity?*
- *When/how have you been tempted to change congregations because the people weren't enough like you or you weren't enough like them? Or, to ask it another way, what does it mean to "fit in" in a congregation?*
- *If we allow it to, this chapter essentially raises the questions, "Who in our congregation do you want to avoid?" and "How is the Table of Jesus a corrective to that?"*

## Chapter 15 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then His Table Is A Time Machine.

As I reflected on this chapter the question that came to mind is, “*What are my/our expectations of God? What do we hope or anticipate God’s activity in the present to look like?*” Then we can also flip that question around, “*What does Jesus expect of us as we ‘Remember Him’ through Communion?*”

Let me share a little bit of my practice and experience with Communion. When I was younger, and based on what I had been taught up to that point, I would sit, reflect, pray upon taking the elements during the Communion time. Today, while I still do a bit of that (because old habits are hard to break), I spend the bulk of that time looking around the sanctuary...taking in my church family, being grateful for y’all and remembering that Christ has made us one. Or, to say it another way, I spend more time focusing on US and Jesus instead of ME and Jesus.

- *What goes through your mind when you partake of Communion? What do you focus on, what do you “remember”? What relevance does that have to your everyday life?*
- *How do you expect the work that Christ accomplished on the cross to be made manifest today, in the present? What does His continual work of salvation, redemption, deliverance look like today? Or how does the work of the cross continue today? (Hint: it probably has something to do with transforming individual AND group identity.)*
- *What is the role of the cross in our lives today? (Hint: it probably has something to do with sacrifice as the way Kingdom work is accomplished.)*

### Soul Training Exercises

- Read & Reflect on...
  - Leviticus 11:1-10
  - Acts 2:42-47
  - Deuteronomy 5:12-15
  - Ephesians 2:11-16
  - Matthew 9:10-13
  - Luke 14:7-11
  - I Corinthians 11:17-22
  - Isaiah 55:1-3
  - Acts 10:9-28
  - Galatians 3:25-29
  - Exodus 13:3-10
  - Luke 22:14-20
- Taking Inventory of our Relationships & Influences

- Several years ago I had a friend challenge me to look over my bookshelf to see how many of the authors I read were similar to me (White, Western, Male, etc.). I broadened that and also considered the other voices who have shaped and influenced me over the years. I was shocked and embarrassed to see how similar all these voices were to me. My friend then challenged me to diversify and learn from a broader spectrum of voices. Which I have done.
- Now, I'm encouraging/inviting you to do the same. Take inventory of all the influencing voices, past and present, who have made you who you are today. How many come from the same social place as you? How many come from a different place/situation?
- It is really easy to surround ourselves with people and voices just like us, who share our outlook, worldview, opinions, and perspectives. (It's getting easier all the time due to algorithms.) So as you evaluate how you have been shaped, formed, molded, consider if you may need to diversify your perspective a bit. Keep in mind that the Church is made up of a wide cross-section of humanity all held together by Jesus. To truly love one another as Jesus calls us to, we need to hear and value one another's perspectives.