

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

Week 4: Chapter 16 ~ 21

### Chapter 16 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Table Is Where We Glimpse The Future

The image that came to my mind as I read this chapter is one of a photograph with four generations represented in the photo...the past, present and future of one family in one picture.

*“When we come to the table as Jesus did, we will discover it is where the past, present, and future converge into a single point of grace.”* as Skye says.

- **The past:** Roughly 2000 years ago Jesus inaugurated the Lord’s Supper by transforming the Passover meal (the Passover itself had been instituted about 1300 years prior to commemorate the Exodus when God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt) into a commemoration of His own saving work on the Cross.
- **The present:** The Lord’s Supper or Communion or the Table or the Eucharist (whatever you prefer to call it) reminds us that, through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, a new era has dawned. Christ reigns as King; new creation and a new covenant have been initiated. The Church is meant to live out, to be a living picture of, this new reality.
- **The future:** The Table also points to the future when Christ’s Kingdom will be fully consummated. Or, as some have said it, we live in the “*Now AND Not Yet...*” But of all the possible symbols Jesus could have used to point to this glorious future, He chose a table, a meal...a picture that anticipates a Great Banquet, the Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

As Skye put it, “*...the meal represents the fulfillment of God’s redemptive work in history when all evil is vanquished, the innocent are vindicated, and the world is made right.*” Friends, this is our hope. Our confidence is in King Jesus to bring this about as we live lives of obedience to Him. And as we remind each other of this glorious future when we gather regularly to worship and to partake from His table, we are formed and prepared for that future.

- *As a Christian, a follower of Jesus, what gives you hope, what are you looking forward to? What reminds you of that hope when you’re down, discouraged, dismayed, or disillusioned?*
- *How does our future hope guide and impact your present life?*

### Chapter 17 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then His Table Is About Church Unity, Not Personal Purity

Do you remember the first time you ever took Communion? I do. I was in 4th or 5th grade. My family and I were attending a very large church. I was in Sunday School, and the teacher or youth pastor or whoever it was was preparing us to take Communion and admonishing/warning us to “*examine ourselves*” to make sure we weren’t partaking in an “*unworthy manner*”...or there might be divine consequences. I was scared to death. Honestly, I don’t know why I actually

ended up taking the elements. I do remember confessing in prayer everything I could possibly think of that I had ever done wrong. Perhaps somewhere deep, deep down I trusted that God wouldn't smite me.

And that sort of "examining" myself and prayers of confession marked my childhood partaking of Communion from then on. It wasn't until college, when I took a class on I Corinthians and had a professor lay out for us what Paul meant (which is the same as what Skye lays out in this chapter), that I understood that Communion isn't about ME and God but rather about US and God. Friends, that was a game-changer.

With that understanding, and as we look at how most congregations observe Communion, it seems that more often than not it ends up being an exercise in missing the mark. What do I mean by that? Well, first ask yourself (as you likely already have through this series) what you focus on when you partake of Communion. Is it about your "personal relationship with God" or something broader than that? Because of the sheer fact that any outside observer would notice that it seems to be the most somber and introspective/reflective part of the worship service, it's safe to conclude we're not focusing on the Body (i.e. each other) enough. Friends, may I dare say that Communion ought to be the most interactive part of the entire service. (I realize this is way outside the norm...but I believe closer to the heart of what Paul, and more importantly Jesus, had in mind.) You and I can do "me & God" anytime, anywhere. But when we are gathered together in the name of Christ we should do what we can only do when we're together. Give it some thought...

*(\*\*\*It should be noted that when the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper/Communion, it was actually part of a full meal. In the nature of our practice today, by partaking of a tiny cup and little piece of bread and calling it a "meal" that's just one component of a worship service, we could say that we've made a symbol of a symbol. Dare I say that our Big Ask Dinners are closer in line with what the early church understood as the Lord's Supper/Communion than what we typically experience as communion. Additionally, the way we gather for worship has a way of hiding divisions that may exist within an individual congregation. We end up seeing divisions between congregations because the congregations are segregated from one another based on various factors such as race, socio-economics, worship style, etc.\*\*\*)*

- *Share about the first time you took Communion.*
- *How does our practice of Communion demonstrate/express our oneness in Christ (i.e. how does it break down divisions that exist between people and unite us to each other in Christ?)*
- *What would you be willing to or interested in changing in how we celebrate Communion, or how we gather for worship more generally, in order for it to be more unifying, more interactive, more formative?*

## Chapter 18 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then His Table Will Confront Evil And Establish Justice

So how, exactly, does the Table of Jesus confront evil and establish justice? Quite simply, everyone is **welcome**—the high and low, the rich and poor, the popular and the outcast, Black and White, etc.--and all are **equal** at the Table.

Evil and injustice begin with exclusion and are sustained through inequality (as well as other misuses/abuses of power). But when we all gather together around Jesus at His Table—on no merit of our own, mind you—we have the foundation for a just and good community.

Sadly, far too much Church/Christian history demonstrates a failure to grasp this fundamental truth. When we allow human differences to take precedence over the will of Christ, and when we find our identity or significance in those differences as opposed to finding it in Christ, and when we segregate instead of unite, then the foundation for evil and injustice is set.

I've intentionally used the word "foundation" twice above. Our theme for this year is "*Rooted and grounded in love.*" (from Ephesians 3:17) The word "grounded" in Greek is an architectural term meaning to lay a foundation. Just because a group of people call themselves Christians or a church doesn't mean they are building on the foundation given to them by Jesus. So as we partake of Christ's Table in Communion let us practice radical, revolutionary love and in so doing become the community Jesus designed us to be.

- *In your own words, how does/can partaking in the Lord's Supper dismantle evil? How can something as simple and seemingly benign as bread and wine (or juice) be a foundation for demolishing injustice?*

When we consider confronting evil and establishing justice it is common to think in terms of things we need to do, issues or causes that need to be addressed in some way. But what if it begins with simply receiving and accepting a different reality, which looks like receiving and accepting one another as equals?

- *It's one thing to say "all people are created equal". It's another thing to actually live, function, and relate to others as though it's true. Who do you have a hard time accepting as an equal?*
- *What are subtle and nuanced ways in which you/we segregate yourself/ourselves from others?*

## Chapter 19 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Don't Just Remember At His Table, We Celebrate

Can I let you in on a little secret? Personally, I rather enjoy it when we have little hiccups during our worship services—you know, little things like microphones not working right, technical difficulties, miscues, misspelled words on slides...those sort of things. (Though mistimed slides is a different matter...that's annoying 😊) The reason why these little things humor me is because it's a good reminder not to take ourselves too seriously. We gather as a family to

worship our God and King. On one level that sounds like serious business. But here's why the symbol of a table (a meal, even a banquet/feast) is so instructive. It's an image of a party. If Jesus had wanted pomp and circumstance, procedure and protocol, He would have given us different symbols to remember Him by.

Now don't get me wrong, yes, there are times and occasions when sadness, grief, and lament are in order when we gather together. Why? Because in life tragic, unjust, terrible, lamentable things happen, and healthy families share and express that together. But, generally speaking, the mood and tone of a worship gathering (like a typical family gathering during the holidays) is meant to be festive, celebratory, filled with thanks and praise (with appropriate awareness and sensitivity to those who might be hurting on any given Sunday). As Henri Nouwen said, *"Still, the great mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist and live in a Eucharistic life is precisely that through mourning our losses we come to know life as a gift."*

Remember, the reason we gather is because we have the greatest, the most exciting, the most momentous news ever...Jesus Christ reigns, His Kingdom is open and available to all, new creation has begun! Hallelujah! Let this celebration transform us into a new kind of people. We are a people of hope even amidst suffering. This does not mean we "put on a happy face" when we gather together. We can be real, authentic, hurting when we gather. In our gathering we find strength and solace to deal with pain and suffering...our own and that of those around us...which is grounded in Jesus. This foundation that brings stability to our lives is what (Who) we celebrate.

- *Why do some people find church "boring"? Considering the message we have to share, why aren't people beating down the door, and why aren't there lines around the block?*
- *Do you live a life of gratitude, as if it's a gift? How so?*
- *How does Christ's victory offer perspective on our losses? How has faith in Christ brought you strength and solace when you were hurting?*

#### Chapter 20 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then His Table Is Where The Wounded Find Healing

The Table demonstrates the healing power of acceptance and inclusion. A good relational definition of joy is what we experience when someone is glad to see us, when people are happy to have us around. By sharing His Table, Jesus is saying that He's happy to have us around.

As Skye points out, the world's acceptance is very conditional...based on achievement, performance, appearance, etc. The church, who are the people called to represent Jesus—His love and acceptance—ought to welcome people simply because they exist and are valued by Jesus. The church, at her best, is the community where strangers become friends and friends become family. The Table of Jesus reminds us of this goal and that only relationships can bring healing. (Or to say it another way, the primary wounds we carry are relational, so the primary healing we need is also relational...and the church and the Table are all about relationships.)

- *Do you believe that Jesus enjoys your presence, your company? How do you share company with Jesus?*
- *How have you been accepted by the church? Do you experience joy (as defined above) from your church? Explain.*
- *How has Jesus (and hopefully His church) healed wounds of rejection you've experienced and accumulated in life?*
- *How confident are you that if you brought someone to a church service or activity they would experience acceptance and joy?*

### Chapter 21 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Table Should Be More Revered Than The Pastor

In this chapter Skye brings up a specific problem and a general principle. The specific problem is pastors being viewed too highly. The general principle is that sacraments have a place and function for a reason.

Let's make sure we have a good understanding of what a sacrament is. A good working definition of a sacrament is a physical reminder/representation of a spiritual reality that functions as a means of grace...a way to encounter/experience God.

But, as with all gifts, humans have a tendency to misuse them...anything from dismissing them or taking them for granted to making idols out of them. This is not an issue with the object or means itself; it's a problem of the human heart. Pastors/leaders are a gift to the church; sacraments are gifts to the church. Both have a role to play in pointing people to Jesus.

The main point is that Jesus, and nothing else, should be the focal point of the church. And we must beware of our tendency to allow other things to take precedence...even good things, like the pastor, the sacraments, the music or style of worship, etc..

- *Does Skye's concern/issue in this chapter resonate with what you've seen or experienced in churches? If so, how? Or how have you seen pastors/leaders elevated to an unhealthy level, or in an unhelpful way, in church life?*
- *What elements of a worship gathering help you experience the presence of Christ?*
- *Are there any reflections from last week's Scripture readings that you'd like to share?*
- *The reading this week brought up how a number of different issues/topics come into focus at the Lord's Table:*
  - *Hope (and confidence in the future)*
  - *Unity*
  - *Justice*

- *Celebration*
- *Healing (of relational wounds)*
- *The point/focus of Sacraments*

*Which did you resonate with most? Or which did you need to hear? Explain/elaborate...*

### Soul Training Exercises

- Read & Reflect on...
  - Luke 22:14-20
  - Revelation 19:1-9
  - I Corinthians 11:17-34
  - Matthew 5:23-24
  - Galatians 3:26-28
  - John 6:31-40
  - Colossians 2:13-15
  - Matthew 9:9-13
  - Luke 22:14-20
  - Luke 24:13-31
  - I Peter 5:1-5
  
- The past couple of weeks have been focused on the Table, the Lord's Supper, Communion, the Eucharist...whatever you prefer to call it. Next Sunday (Feb. 2) is our next scheduled Communion service. After reading, reflecting, and discussing the topics raised around Communion, how are you/we going to prepare yourself/ourselves to partake?

The exercise this week is to consider all that has been mentioned in Part 2: The Family Meal (or chapters 10-21) and what God might be inviting you to change in your approach to Communion. What new/different perspective or practice might you consider exploring in our communal observance of the Lord's Supper?

Take this week to prayerfully consider that question and to prepare yourself to participate in Communion. Perhaps there's something fresh for you to experience in this means of grace. Are you open to that?