

Approaching the Lord's Table "Together"

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For the last century, entertainment has becoming increasingly individualized. From the inception of record players, to drive-in theaters with individual speakers, to the release of headphones, and now the ever-common individualized playlist, we are a people trained to consume the world as individuals.

And when we bring that approach to God, we can easily think of our spiritual lives as "me and Jesus" time. We are encouraged to devote time to our personal devotions, to listen to our favorite iPod teachers, and make confession in journals (which we may never share with others). And while there is something good about a personal relationship with the Lord, it can train us to be far too individualistic when we approach the Lord.

And if this is true in general, it is especially true at the Lord's Table.

How Do You Approach the Table?

Ask yourself, when you come to the Lord's table, is it an eyes-closed, personal time for you and the Lord? Or is it a corporate experience of worshiping God together? And if it is more private than corporate, why is that? Is it because Scripture has led you to such an approach, or is it the way our culture has trained you to "draw a box around yourself" and worship God from our heart?

Interestingly, in the Bible we find that worship is regularly a corporate event. The covenants of the Bible were always inaugurated with a communal meal (see Gen 31:53–54; Exod 24:9–11). The exodus was a large-group event, as was every other sacrifice and festival in Israel. Moreover, when we hear the heart of Old Testament saints, they often long to be with the "thongs" going to worship at the house of God (see Psalm 42:4; 55:14).

Again, without denying the place, purpose, and priority of personal devotions and private worship, I believe we would all do well to remember the corporate nature of the new covenant Christianity. At least it offers a needed corrective in our individualistic age. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, we learn how important corporate worship is.

In his teaching about anger, Jesus goes so far as to say that if on the way to worship you remember that someone has something against you, leave the gift at the altar and go and be reconciled to them (Matt 5:23–24). Clearly, horizontal reconciliation is as important to the Lord as vertical praise. In fact, maybe even more so. Peter says a husband's prayers are hindered when he has mistreated his wife (1 Pet 3:7), and throughout the New Testament, stress is laid on making peace with one another.

In fact, Jesus says peace-making is what proves that a disciple is a child of God (Matt 5:9). And there is no more practical place to do that than at the Lord's Table. In fact, in 1

Corinthians, Paul teaches the divided church of Corinth that they must examine themselves before taking the bread and the cup (see 1 Corinthians 11:27–32).

Jesus's Unity-Making Meal

Though we often miss the covenantal themes of the Bible, Matthew 26:28 and 1 Corinthians 11:25 make it plain, the Lord's Supper is a "new covenant" meal which remembers the death of Christ. In this way, it is not a privatized meal that individuals share with Jesus. It's not some kind of "date night with Jesus." Rather, it is a communal meal, where all those in covenant with Christ worship him for what he has done, and, just as importantly, we worship him together as brothers and sisters unified in Christ.

Indeed, the Lord's Supper has a vertical and a horizontal axis. The vertical focuses on Christ, his finished work, and the promise of redemption that forgives us our sin and reconciles us to God our Father. The horizontal focuses on the community of reconciliation God has created by Christ's death and resurrection. And in truth, when we chew the bread and drink the cup, we need both a heart of thanksgiving towards God and towards one another. That is to say, our joy should be increased by hearing the chewing and swallowing of the man, woman, or child sitting next to us.

Again, so great is this horizontal aspect of the meal, Paul says we must examine ourselves lest we eat the meal in an unworthy manner (11:27–28). Now, I suppose, this unworthiness could be eating the meal with hidden sin in our heart (cf. Ps 19:12–14). But in the context of a divided church in Corinth, I suspect the unworthy manner has far more to do with broken relationships and offenses held between brothers and sisters in Christ.

Therefore, to apply Jesus words in Matthew 5:23–24 to the church today, the Lord's Table is the place to remember Christ and to remember if there are any people we've offended. Has my anger injured another? Have my words brought division to the church? Am I in fellowship with all those around me at the Table? Or, do I need to repent and seek reconciliation?

Clearly, there is a place to worship God with eyes closed. But at the Lord's Table there is also a need to have eyes wide open. Those whom we eat with are the ones God has given us to love, forgive, and seek forgiveness from. Rather than simply have a privatized faith, the table with its physical elements and bodily movements calls us to give attention to Christ and his body.

Preparing for Sunday

Therefore, as we prepare to take the Lord's Supper this Sunday and hear from Jesus words about anger in Matthew 5:21–26, let me ask---Is there anyone with whom you need to be reconciled? If so, don't wait. Leave your gift at the altar, go to them and seek peace. Remember, this is what the children of God do, and this is what the Lord's Table calls for. When we remember what Christ has done for us, it empowers us to move towards others in reconciliation.

Truly, the Lord's Supper is more than just a privatized meal with Jesus. It is a communal meal where we proclaim the gospel to one another with the bread and cup. And thus, as a meal that recalls the new covenant reconciliation of Christ, it beckons us to move towards one another with the grace we have received.

To that end, let us pray and prepare our hearts for gathering together for worship this Sunday.