

# How the Lord's Table Defines Its Dinner

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by David Schrock

A number of years ago, as I ate dinner with friends at an outdoor café, I was wrongly identified as a famous race car driver. It was more than a little awkward, as the mistaken gentleman belted out: "Dale!! Dale Earnhardt, Jr.?!? Is that you? Awww . . . I love you, man!"

With sorrow and embarrassment, I had to say: "Sorry, you've got the wrong guy." He quickly recognized his mistake and passed on, as we continued to laugh about the boisterous error.

Misidentification is common in our world. Who has never misidentified a friend in a crowd? Or drunk from the wrong glass? Or put the wrong beverage in the glass? In our fallen world harmless mistakes like this abound. But so do more serious ones.

## Sin is a Case of Gross Misidentification

In 1 Corinthians Paul constantly reminds the church who they are. In chapter 3, he tells them "You are God's field, God's building . . . God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (vv. 9, 17). Likewise, in chapter 6 he says of them individually, "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v. 11). In the context of deciding who will inherit the kingdom of God, he says that those who persist in their sin—i.e., who define themselves by their greed, drunkenness, or immorality—will not enter the kingdom. But you, beloved children, Paul says, are new creations in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Throughout Paul's letters, he gives ethical imperatives that depend on and flow from the saints' new identity in Christ. Never does Paul give an imperative (a command) without the underlying indicative (gospel truth). And often he simply calls Christians to be who they are—who they are in Christ.

In this way, the first step of sanctification is learning to identify as a child of God, a royal priest, a redeemed sinner who has been set apart for a life of good works. Accordingly, sin becomes a case of spiritual amnesia, a gross misidentification of one's new identity in Christ. And personal righteousness becomes a case of living, deciding, and desiring the things which comport with our new identity.

So how do we remember who we are?

## The Lord's Table as Identity-Defining Meal

Among the many means of grace ordained by God (e.g., Scripture reading, singing praise, prayer, fasting, etc.), the Lord's Table is a regular meal designed to remind God's people who they are. Just like the food of a nation shapes a culture and the cost of a meal confers a place in society, so the Lord's Table defines the identity of its participants. For this reason, it is not

an all-inclusive buffet. The gospel invites all people to come and feast on Christ, but the church ordinance is limited to those who have publicly identified with Jesus Christ.

As Jesus says in Matthew 26:26–28,

*Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'*

The Lord's Supper is for Jesus' disciples. It's seating restriction is meant to press unbelievers (children and those outside of Christ) to long for access to Christ's Table by means of believing the gospel. Simultaneously, it lifts the eyes of Christ's followers from the daily grime of life, to the glory that is theirs in Christ. In short, the Lord's Table repeats the promise of pardon and the security of eternal life with Jesus.

## **The Church: Christ's Authorized Identity Dealer**

Because local churches administer the Lord's Supper, they are called to "fence" the table—meaning elders have the responsibility to "admit" to the Table those who are visibly Christians and "withhold" the elements from those who are under discipline or outside of Christ. Odd as it may sound in our "choose-your-own identity" age, believer's baptism and faithful church membership are the normative means for recognizing true disciples. While many subjectively feel that they are part of God's universal church, Christ authorized local churches to be royal embassies who identify disciples and confer membership through baptism—and yes, through the glad acceptance of baptized believers from other royal embassies.

In concord with this, the Lord's Supper is the regular ordinance that baptized believer's receive to remind them of who they are. Just as we do not choose ourselves in salvation, or baptize ourselves into the church, so we do not identify ourselves by our own swerving predilections. Rather, like all followers of Christ we receive his justification ("not guilty"), his sonship ("This is my beloved son"), and his commendation ("Well done, my good and faithful servant").

Immersed in a world where we are tempted to deviate from our identity in Christ, the Lord's Supper is a gracious gift entrusted to the church militant. It calls individuals to slow down and sit with the king; and it calls churches to remind their members—"You are one of his!"

The Lord's Supper speaks the good news of Christ's body broken in our place; his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins; and his promise that he will not eat of this vine until he shares it with us in his coming kingdom (Matthew 26:29). It is not a meal like others where we seek to get full on complex carbohydrates. Rather, it is a mere but meaningful sample of the main course.

In this way, the Lord's Supper is a vital way God's people remind themselves who they are. Indeed, to forsake the bread and wine is to forsake the most important meal you can eat. For, the Lord's Supper renews our citizen papers and strengthens our hearts with the news that we are his. In this way, the Lord's Supper protects us from mistaken identity, and in turn empowers us to live as vibrant witnesses of King Jesus.

This Sunday, as you prepare for the Lord's Supper, let it remind you of what Christ has done and what he is now doing, of who you are and whose you are.