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SEVEN
PRACTICES
FOR THE
CHURCH
ON
MISSION

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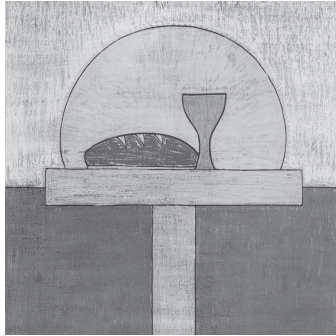
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ONE



THE LORD'S TABLE

The Lord's Table is about presence. Surely it is about eating, but ultimately it's a practice that shapes a group of people to be present to God's presence in Christ around the table, where we eat. Then, in the process, we are able to connect with the other people around the table. Our lives are then reordered socially by his presence. This practice was inaugurated by Jesus himself and given to his disciples on "the night he was betrayed." Today, almost all Christians practice it. This first practice we explore shapes a community into God's faithful presence.

Though there are differences in the way Christians practice the Lord's Table, there is a common core to what we do together. All churches, for instance, incorporate the "words of institution" as the means to remember together the meaning of the bread and wine. "This is my body that is for you." "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24-25).

There is almost always a communal invitation to peace and reconciliation prior to the table. The presiding leader challenges all believers to make sure there is no enmity between us as we come to the table. There is almost always a prayer of thanksgiving (eucharist) and a blessing that inaugurates the celebration of the table. Usually the Holy Spirit is invited to this table, making possible the living and real presence of Christ at the meal. Then there is the actual breaking and distribution of the bread and the sharing of the cup. His broken body and shed blood becomes a meal we ingest into our bodies as the very basis of life itself. Last, an offering of material goods often is taken as part of the Lord's Table. We believe that this abundance shared around the table will flow forth from the table through the whole of our lives and then return all over again.

Now, let's try to understand how the table shapes us to know and discern God's presence among us and in the neighborhood.

DISCERNING HIS PRESENCE

When we sit around this table and tend to Christ's presence, our eyes are opened and we know his presence is here in a special way. The first reported time this happened post-resurrection was on the road to Emmaus when Jesus joined the two disciples on their walk (Lk 24). On this day of his resurrection, as they came near their village, they invited Jesus to join them in their home, which always meant a meal around a table. While they were at the table, Jesus "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them," and their eyes were opened to his presence with them (Lk 24:30-32). So also today Jesus' presence is "known . . . in the breaking of the bread" (Lk 24:35). Jesus' presence historically has been uniquely real and recognizable around the table.

Each of us must come to grips again with the reality that Christ is present at the table in a real, sacramental way. We must tend to his special presence because his presence always brings the reordering of our lives together into his kingdom. This is what makes this table so revolutionary at

the core: here God shapes a people to be his kingdom in the world.

It's hard for evangelical Protestants to conceive that there is something unique happening around the table. Yet here we have perhaps the single best opportunity to train ourselves to tend to his presence for our lives. Here we can recognize and receive the forgiveness that flows from his broken body into our lives, the healing of reconciliation, the renewal of all things through the cup of the new covenant relationship we have with God the Father through the Spirit.

A KINGDOM IS BEING BORN

Around this table God's kingly rule over the whole world meets his incarnational presence in this particular time and space. There is no kingdom without subjects to the King, so we must begin by subjecting ourselves to him. As we submit to Christ's presence there, we are realigned into his reign. Our submission to Jesus spreads out into mutual submission to one another. And a new social order is birthed out of this, which is nothing less than his kingdom.

In John 13:1-17, Jesus gets down on his hands and knees and washes the feet of his disciples to demonstrate submission. He could not be more

explicit about the way we will relate to one another in this kingdom. The whole scene prefigures the kingdom and points to the new world coming (Lk 22:30). This kingdom will be founded on mutual submission to one another under the lordship of Christ, where anyone who rules does so through submission to the work of God happening in the midst of us.

Think of how earthshaking this experience of Christ at the table must have been for the early Christians. The very presence of the risen Lord is here at this table. Something so special, even dangerous, is happening when they gather around it. It's a matter of life and death (1 Cor 11:29-30). Yet as each person submits to him, our relationships with one another and to Christ are opened up. The socioeconomic relationships among us are realigned as we share mutually out of what we have and what we receive.

In this space we submit all of our divisions and personal agendas to Christ's presence. All of this must die. There we sit, tending to one another and to his presence. And an amazing social dynamic breaks forth that can only be described as a new political order subverting all other allegiances. Just as the first tables of the early Christians subverted Rome and Caesar and started a new way of life

before the watching world, so this table subverts all other politics of self-preservation, accumulation, and individualism. A profound flourishing in the kingdom results.

It is essential then that we lead one another into submission to Christ at the table. Because God will not impose himself on us or overwhelm us, our submission to his reign opens up space for him to work. The people who carry the most power must submit first, just as Christ did when he washed the disciples' feet. By example, the leader will lead the community into a place of submission to the one Lord and to one another under his lordship.

THE TABLE IN THE THREE CIRCLES

Most people think of the Lord's Table as being practiced only on Sunday mornings by committed Christians. But the life of Jesus and the pattern of the primitive church reveals multiple spaces where the table is practiced. These spaces can be summarized in terms of three circles: the close circle, the dotted circle, and the half circle.¹

The Lord's Table in the close circle. The close circle represents the first space of the Lord's Table. We carefully discern our relationship to God in Christ before we dare approach it. Are we in full

submission to Christ? Is there any enmity between me and someone else around this table? Because of this discernment, there is the closest of fellowship and unity with one another.

This closeness around the table is evident on the night when Jesus was betrayed. Here, at the celebration of the Passover, *Jesus is seated as the host*. He presides, and yet he washes his disciples' feet in a display of utter and total vulnerability. Intimate conversation is happening. The disciple "whom Jesus loved" reclines next to Jesus in closeness (Jn 13:23). And the one who eats the bread unworthily walks out in disdain, to his own doom (Jn 13:27-30). He cannot stand the intensity of the closeness. It is almost as if we are forced to deal with who we are and our submission to Jesus and his mission. The presence of Christ, by the Spirit, reveals our brokenness. It forces renewed commitment. It orders our lives intensely, either further into or away from the kingdom.

This closeness marks the table after Christ's ascension as well. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is shocked at the Corinthians' disregard for one another in Christ's presence. The Lord's presence there is so intense that they indeed get sick and die because they have disregarded him. This table therefore requires discernment. At this table the

closest of fellowship is experienced with the resurrected Jesus.

The Lord's Table in the dotted circle. But the table doesn't stop there. It extends into the neighborhood. Here, around our neighborhood tables we gather to eat regularly. We start with Christian friends, and then, over time, our neighbors, as they look on, are welcomed around our tables. The dotted circle represents this second space for the table. It is constituted by Christians forming a circle of those submitted to Christ's presence. Yet there are openings in the circle, where strangers are welcomed in. So the circle is porous or dotted.

In this dotted circle the Christian in the world *becomes the host*. Typically, this table takes place in homes in neighborhoods. But it can happen wherever Christians meet regularly to share a meal in the hospitality of Christ's presence. This meal is initiated by a Christian, hosted by a Christian, and yet is always open and hospitable to strangers who are becoming regular parts of our lives. Christ's special presence is extended into the neighborhood.

In Mark 6:30-44 we see thousands of people gathering around Jesus. They were not yet part of the kingdom. In many ways this is a circle of

Christians (“the apostles gathered around Jesus” [v. 30]), yet with people “from all the towns” gathering as well. In other words, this is a dotted circle.

The disciples come to Jesus and report the need to send the crowds away so they can get something to eat. Jesus directs them in no uncertain terms to host the “table,” saying, “You give them something to eat” (v. 37). Here is where the dynamic of the dotted circle kicks in.

The disciples immediately ask, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” (v. 37). They assume that they must do everything, take control, and provide out of their own resources. But this is not what it means for the Christian disciple to host the Table in the dotted circle. So Jesus shows them how to host. He asks them to bring him what food they have. Nothing more, nothing less. They find among the crowd five loaves and two fish, and bring it as an offering into the abundance of the kingdom in Jesus. He *takes* the loaves and fish, *blesses* and *breaks* them, and *gives* it to the disciples for distribution. These four words signal that this indeed is a Eucharistic celebration around the presence of Christ. In the midst of this meal, people meet the abundance of the kingdom as “all ate and were

filled,” and there was an abundance of food left over (vv. 42-43).

In this stunning story we see how the table extends the presence of Christ into places where curious onlookers are invited. We see that Christians are to host these tables. However, there is no presumption that all who partake are reconciled. Certainly the Christians around the table are practicing the reconciled life. But there is no discernment required of the onlookers. We send no one away, including people in conflict. We invite them to be with us among Christ. The host does not somehow take control of the table but facilitates the table around the presence of Christ, who reorders the world into his kingdom. The host allows the space to be opened for Christ to meet all our needs and more. This is what Christ was trying to teach his disciples at the feeding of the five thousand.

This dotted circle happened at our home every Friday night. Every one of us would bring food as our offering, place it in the kitchen, hold hands, gather as a circle, and pray a prayer of thanksgiving (eucharist) and invoking of Christ’s presence (*epiklēsis*). Then we would sit and eat and talk. Sometimes the talk became egocentric and self-serving. Sometimes mayhem erupted as everybody

scurried for attention or the need to be seen and heard. We would gently calm all this down, generously admonishing one another to be present and listen to the other person.

Some would move to another room and sit and talk while in front of the TV. They did not yet know or understand Eucharist. We had to make a rule: Everyone, no matter how many in the group, must always sit around the table. Smartphones were not allowed. We ate together, aware of the forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal of all things that we had shared as a result of Sunday Lord's Table. As months rolled on, we learned how to be present with each other and to Christ among us. We discovered a different dynamic shared across a table between me and another person. It was the presence of Christ.

It took months to cultivate mutual submission and tending to Christ's presence. And I had to learn how to model as best I could a posture of submission and presence to each other and Christ around the table. (The one perceived in power always submits first.) When I spoke, it was to direct attention to someone other than myself, and (generally) I did not speak unless spoken to. It took months to cultivate trust, listening, and paying attention to the Spirit. A year later the presence

around the table was so intoxicating, people's lives, attitudes, and physical health were transformed by the interactions.

At the time for dessert, the host would pose a question to center some conversation around what was going on in our lives. We sometimes focused on our personal lives or struggles with God, sometimes what was going on among us, and sometimes our lives with God in our neighborhood. The gifts of the Spirit were set into motion among us. After an hour or so, we all prayed, submitting these things to God and his kingdom. The presence of Christ became real among us as we became present to one another.

One time a couple in the neighborhood of one of our members was going through disruptive times with their teenage daughters. They knew about our Friday night group and wanted to attend. They were welcomed. In a way that was more comfortable than any of us had felt for the first six months of our table fellowship, they immediately began to share their wounds with us. I asked our guests if we could include them in our prayers. They hesitated, but said yes, and we did. They saw an unmistakable glimpse of the kingdom that night.

The Lord's Table in the half circle. The table however does not stop with the dotted circles of our neighborhoods. The table extends further through the half circle into the world, where the hurting and marginalized people live. Into these half circles Christians go, imitating Christ as he enters the homes of the outcast, the publicans, and the sinners. Here we no longer serve as hosts; instead, *we come as guests*, giving up all control. In all our weakness we submit to Christ's presence among us and allow him to work. We pay attention to what God is doing as we listen, tending to his work.

Something marvelous happens in this space. Christ's presence is here too. The question here however is, will he be recognized? Will Jesus be received? In Luke 10, Jesus sends the seventy-two into mission to "every town and place where he himself intended to go" (v. 1). He instructs them to enter a home and become present there, sitting around the table "eating and drinking whatever they provide" (v. 7). They are to go needy, be present as guests, and be vulnerable, "like lambs into the midst of wolves" (v. 3), giving up control. They are to take the posture of receiving before offering anything. They were not to move from house to house but to be present long enough to discover

persons of peace (v. 6). In these postures of the guest, the space is opened for the presence of God in Christ to become manifest.

Jesus taught the seventy-two to sit with people around the table before he mentions proclaiming the gospel. Verses 8-9 say, “Eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and [then] say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”” So, as we sit *with* people, the occasion arises when the gospel will be proclaimed.

When we point to the kingdom and announce it is here, Jesus says, “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me . . . [and] the one who sent me” (v. 16). Through the half-circle table then, the visible presence of Christ is extended. When Christ is received, when his lordship is submitted to, his presence is made visible; his kingdom comes.

One time my friend Gordon and I took an evening walk on the streets of Westmont, Illinois, where we live. As we walked the town’s downtown streets, we stopped at the entrance to a bar and noticed the people gathered around tables drinking beverages; they were seeking communion. I was so struck by it I said to Gordon, “Look, there’s Eucharist going on in that bar. It just hasn’t been discerned yet.” As we walked further, we noticed

the same phenomena in the restaurants; the Magic gaming store, where teenagers gathered to play games; and Uncle Jon's Music, where people were playing banjo together.

In all these places we might be tempted to see only the signs of hunger and hurt. We easily recognized the brokenness because we see it and know it in our own lives. It was painfully obvious to Gordon and me how segregated the tables were. White people sat with white people, and Latinos with Latinos. Few African Americans were sitting in any of these places even though we had many black friends and acquaintances in the neighborhood. What was evident in all of these observations was the incompleteness at these tables. The fullness of Eucharist was missing.

Tragically, in many if not most of these places no one is tending to Christ. It takes someone who is there, who knows the stories around this table, who lives in Christ's presence, who knows his story, who can simply sit and be present, to recognize his presence. This is why the church must extend table awareness into the places of brokenness. This *presence* is what makes possible all proclamation of the gospel. This is what faithful presence requires.

**THE CHURCH IS
ALL THREE SPACES TOGETHER**

The Lord's Table happens every time we share a meal together with people and tend to the presence of Christ among us. Granted the formal Lord's Table only happens at the close table. But that table extends from there. The table is never merely *in here* or *out there*. It is the continual lived space *with* and *among* the world.

The three circles together are inextricably linked. When we practice the table only as a closed circle, we in effect close it off from the other two circles, and the table becomes a maintenance function of the church. In a similar vein, when we practice the table as only the half circle in the world, we in effect close off ourselves from discerning the presence of Christ in the world. Devoid of Christ's presence in the world, the church falls into exhaustion.

When we no longer practice the table in the dotted circles of our lives, we lose the space to extend Christ's presence as witness to our neighbors. We lose the place where neighbors can be acclimated to the ways of the kingdom. Rarely can a new believer go from the half circle directly to the close circle. New believers must catch a glimpse of normal, everyday kingdom life at the home in their

neighborhoods. From there they will go to the close circle. And in the end, if one is not to fall into either maintenance or exhaustion, every Christian, new or mature believer, must live in all three circles.

RECOVERING FAITHFUL PRESENCE AROUND THE TABLE(S)

The church regularly defaults to maintenance mode. When the church gets overly comfortable in society, believing its place is secure in a Christian society, it is easy for a church to lose its mission. Likewise, when a church tries to defend its position against a society that is non-Christian, here too it can drift into doing the disciplines correctly and fall into maintenance mode.

The New Testament church, as best we can tell, practiced the table in all three circles as part of their everyday life together (Acts 2:46-47). There was a regular eating of the agape meal, which was differentiated from the Lord's Table (see Jude 12). These two practices together comprised the dotted table and the close table. In addition, the early church was known for its excessive hospitality in the neighborhoods—eating meals with the poor, the hurting, and sinners, and so we can conclude that the New Testament church, for at least its first two hundred years, functioned in all three circles of

the Eucharist. And the kingdom of God was spreading throughout Rome.

In the fourth century, the Christian church was eventually sponsored by the Roman Empire. Millions of new believers were entering the churches. Somewhere along the line the practice of the table was organized for efficiency. It was taken out of the neighborhoods and brought into the church buildings. The leadership of the table shifted from the leaders among the people to the priest above the people. By the fifth century only the ordained priest could preside. We could say the table became managed for maintenance.

In fifteenth-century Europe, the focus of the presence of Christ around Eucharist moved from being in and among the community of the church around the table to being in the actual elements themselves on the table.²

Today, in evangelicalism, many churches practice the Lord's Table as a mere remembrance for a few short minutes after a Sunday morning service. We've lost the social reality that binds us together into the presence of Christ and the remaking of the world into his kingdom.

We therefore need to recover the table for the church's faithful presence in the world. Just as there have been countless other times when the

church has fallen into maintenance (and exhaustion), only to find renewal around the table fellowships of its people, so we too can begin anew to intentionally reinvigorate the practice of the Lord's Table for mission in our churches today. Starting with the close-circle table, let us lead one another into the encounter with Christ's real presence. And then let's cultivate the practice of the table in our neighborhoods. Let's teach leaders how to tend to his presence at these tables by being present to one another. Then let's shape our people around the table to become guests among the tables of the hurting and lost. Let's lead people into a formative encounter with the living Christ at the table and then cultivate the extension of his presence into the rest of our lives. This is the beginning of faithful presence.

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