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Come to the Table: An Ancient-Future Ecclesiology

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

COME TO THE TABLE:
AN ANCIENT-FUTURE ECCLESIOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
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BY
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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To those who long for another way.

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ABSTRACT

The medium of the contemporary evangelical church in North America is incongruent with the gospel message. Where the gospel message invites people into a family, the evangelical church invites people into pews; while the gospel invites beggars to a feast, the evangelical church invites people to partake of a thimble of grape juice and a tasteless wafer. The Millennial generation values family and authenticity and longs for the alignment of mediums and messages.

Millennials are the largest and most diverse generation in North American history and it is vital for the evangelical church in North America to connect with them. The early church met around tables and food and participated in agape feasts. Gathering the church around tables and food aligned the medium and message in a powerful and effective way in the early church. Recent ecclesial research shows the modern church is going to need to make dramatic changes if it is going to reach the millennial generation. Using the medium of tables and food resonates with the millennial generation because it aligns with millennial values of family and authenticity and it simultaneously aligns the medium and message of the North American church and effectively communicates the gospel to the millennial generation. This dissertation will focus on the table being an effective medium for the gospel message to be commutated to millennials. Section 1 outlines the problem of the church being unable to reach North American millennials and how the practices of the early church align with the values of the millennial generation. Section 2 outlines other diagnoses and solutions for the problem with the North American church that have been suggested by Phillip Tickle, Leslie Newbiggin, and Alan Hirsch. Section 3 proposes future church gatherings reflect a medium similar to that of the early

church around tables and food. Section 4 provides a description of the artifact, a non-fiction book written as a memoir to help inspire millennials to gather as church communities around the table. Section 5 consists of the book proposal. Section 6 is the postscript. The appendix is the artifact itself.

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Chris is a millennial who grew up in a North American evangelical church. After spending a few years away from the church as a teenager, he returned with a newfound devotion. He spent a significant amount of time in study and preparation to enter the ministry. Over the years, Chris realized the structure of church is betraying its message—the medium and the message are incongruent. The message is “we are family” but the medium is watching professionals; the message is “come to the communion feast” but the medium is a thimble of grape juice and a tasteless wafer; the message is “hospitality, sacrifice, and service” but the medium is an ecclesial structure that supports power, control, and hierarchical authority. The message is, “all are welcome” but the medium is to look, act, and vote like us. As a millennial, Chris understands how important authenticity is as he has witnessed his peers walk away from the church feeling judged and misunderstood by many churchgoers. He is tired of a church that gestures the gospel message instead of forming a faith community where the gospel message and medium are congruent.

This is a common experience for a number of millennials who were raised in church. Many of these millennials are looking to embrace the ancient values and practices of the church but find many North American churches look very different from what they are longing for. To best understand the issues facing the North American church, it is important to analyze the values that are most important to the millennial generation and those that were espoused by the early church. This will help North American Christians learn how to live as faithful witnesses of the gospel, equipped with the early church’s

timeless values and the ability to unite the medium and message to best communicate the gospel message to the millennial generation.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH MILLENNIALS?

A Google search for “What do we do with millennials?” reveals over 18 million results.¹ Results range from political articles to business strategies to sociological surveys concerning this highly-researched generation. In an effort to connect with them, churches, marketing firms, and employers are trying to figure out how millennials think. The recognition of a seismic shift in how millennials think and operate when compared to other recent generations is a common thread among search results. In the book *When Millennials Take Over* authors Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant illustrate the generational shift among millennials by suggesting, “Once every four generations (roughly 80 to 100 years), there has been a major war that marked the end of one era and the beginning of a new one...If you skip ahead 80 years from the Depression and World War II, you end up in the present, rather than the past. It’s right now. Today.”² Though currently there is no event happening that compares to the magnitude of a world war, the United States is living in the midst of a massive generational shift.

Churches in the United States are trying to find ways to connect with and increase church participation among millennials. Unfortunately, for current churches in North

¹ “What do we do with Millennials,” Google search, accessed April 23, 2016, <https://www.google.com/webhp?hl=en#hl=en&q=what+do+we+do+with+millennials>.

² Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant, *When Millennials Take Over: Preparing for the Ridiculously Optimistic Future of Business* (United States: IdeaPress Publishing, 2015), 17.

America the strategies do not appear to be working.³ According to the Pew Research Forum, one in four North American millennials are not affiliated with any religious faith.⁴ It is important to explore the current research on the millennial generation, critically engaging their findings and highlighting not simply the challenges that millennials bring to the twenty-first century church but the strengths and gifts they offer the North American Church as it is reordered for the future.

The Generational Landscape

Millennials (sometimes called Generation Y or Echo Boomers) were born between the years of 1980-2000. According to the US Census they represent over 83 million Americans or a quarter of the entire population of the United States, making them the largest generation in American history.⁵ They come after the generation called “Gen X,” a relatively small generation who were born between the years of 1965 to 1979. The Baby Boomers are the generation before Gen X, born between 1946 to 1964. Until millennials, the Baby Boomers were the largest generation in American history. Generation Z comes after the Millennial Generation and were born 2001 to the present—all of which are still youth.⁶

³ Christian Chiakulas, “Churches Could Fill Their Pews with Millennials if They Just Did This,” *Huffpost Religion*, last modified September 30, 2015, accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-chiakulas/churches-millennials-if-they-just-did-this_b_8215846.html.

⁴ “Religion Among the Millennials” Pew Research Center, last modified February 17, 2010, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

⁵ “Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse, Census Bureau Reports,” *United States Census Bureau*, last modified June 25, 2015, accessed April 23, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>.

⁶ Sociologists disagree as to the exact dates generations start and end, but for the purposes of this dissertation I have averaged the majority of opinions to come up with this date structure.

The Millennials Ethos

Millennials are the most diverse adult generation in American history with only 44 percent being non-Hispanic, single-race white.⁷ Millennials are also the most educated generation entering the American work force with over 34 percent holding a college degree.⁸ This number is still increasing as the younger millennials are still in college and the youngest have yet to start. Millennials are also getting married much later in life. According to Tom and Jess Rainer in their book *The Millennials*, “In 1970 about 44 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-old boomers were married. Today only 15 percent of millennials in that age group are married. The average age of the first marriages has gone up from 20.8 for women in 1970 to 25.5 today. For men the average age of first marriages has increased from 23.2 to 27.5 over that same period.” Millennials are also waiting much longer to have children. The Urban Institute reports, “Between 2007 and 2012, birth rates among twenty-something women declined more than 15 percent. A dramatic decline in birth rates among unmarried women is the most important factor in the overall reduction in childbearing among African Americans and Hispanics.”⁹ Due to a combination of these factors, millennials have popularized the relatively new

⁷ “Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse, Census Bureau Reports,” United States Census Bureau, last modified June 25, 2015, accessed April 23, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>.

⁸ “Amid the Stereotypes, Some Facts About Millennials,” NPR, last modified November 18, 2014, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/18/354196302/amid-the-stereotypes-some-facts-about-millennials>.

⁹ Nan Marie Astone, Steven Martin, and H. Elizabeth Peters, “Millennial Childbearing and the Recession,” Urban Institute, last modified April 28, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/millennial-childbearing-and-recession>.

term “Emerging Adulthood” (ages 18-25), meaning the postponement of many markers, which have traditionally defined adulthood.

A major factor contributing to the current “every fourth generation shift” mentioned above is the internet, specifically the social internet. Notter and Grant suggest, “The social internet has permanently shifted the balance of power between individuals and institutions.”¹⁰ For centuries, institutions (the church included) were the proprietors of ideas, entertainment, resources, and people. Josh Allan Dykstra argues public access to these four sectors of society was scarce before the social internet and was, therefore highly valuable. Dykstra suggests ideas, defined as access to the best knowledge and information, were distributed through elite universities and libraries; entertainment was primarily accessed through means of television, radio, and theater; resources, defined as access to financial or physical resources were mediated through banks and transportation networks; and access to people was only as good as one’s personal network.¹¹ The social internet, which is native to millennials has either stripped much of the power away from institutions and/or made resources more accessible to the general public than ever before. Notter and Grant posit, “The more that individuals experience the new power that the social internet is delivering, the more confused and frustrated they become trying to operate in traditional bureaucracies and hierarchies.”¹² While other generations have also experienced frustration at the hands of institutions, thanks to the social internet, millennials are the first generations that have easily accessible tools to subvert them.

¹⁰ Notter and Grant, 23.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 24.

Another major factor contributing to the shaping of the millennial generation is the way their parents raised them. Millennials were the first generation driven around in minivans sporting yellow “baby on board” signs. The “baby on board” sign is just one illustration of how millennials were raised in a world focused on them. Millennial parents scheduled play dates and often actively participated in sporting events and birthday parties for their children. Parental involvement in the life of their children hit an all-time high with millennials. Notter and Grant suggest, “In previous generations, when children and adults were together in the same space, the children were largely ignored while the adults discussed adult topics. Today, adults interact directly with millennial children in mixed settings.”¹³ The blending worlds of millennials and their parents have blurred many of the traditional boundaries between themselves and authority figures and many millennials view their parents as friends or peers. In fact, eighty-eight percent of millennials suggest their parents had a positive influence on them.¹⁴ The shift from authoritarian social structures to more relational structures are fundamentally changing the way millennials interact within institutions, leading one millennial to comment, “I do not feel like the top-down approach will be an effective leadership strategy moving forward. That worked with the Baby Boomers, but it can definitely not work with us. Our generation is different and we want to feel like we have a voice at the organization that we work for.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴ Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 19.

¹⁵ Notter and Grant, 92.

The shift from parent as authority figure to parent as friend has brought an intriguing value change amongst millennials. According to Thom and Jess Rainer's extensive study on millennials, when asked about what is most important in their life, sixty-one percent, an overwhelming majority, stated family; friends came in second at twenty-five percent.¹⁶ With more ways to stay connected to family and friends, millennials are taking advantage of all their options. The Rainers' argue, "This generation is truly a relationship generation. If anyone fails to grasp that reality, they have failed to understand the Millennials."¹⁷ In fact, their research shows a shift away from the materialism so prevalent amongst boomers and a move towards desiring more flexibility and social connections.¹⁸

With the world changing at a rapid pace and the necessity of learning to navigate ever-increasing globalization and complexity, one might think millennials would be fearful or apprehensive of the future. The research shows the opposite; millennials are highly optimistic and motivated to make a difference in the world. According to Thom and Jess Rainer, when asked whether millennials agree with the statement, "I believe I can do something great" sixty percent strongly agreed and thirty-six percent somewhat agreed—ninety-six percent finding agreement with that statement.¹⁹ Some argue that optimism is not a millennial trait but a life stage distinction. However, the oldest millennials in their thirties, many of which have children and homes, have they retained

¹⁶ Rainer and Rainer, 74-75.

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 134.

¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

their optimism. According to Jeffery Arnett, a developmental psychologist who polled more than 1,000 people aged 25-39 (over half were millennials and the rest were young Gen Xers), their optimism was astonishing—seventy-seven percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, “At this time in my life, it still seems like anything is possible.”²⁰ Notter and Grant submit that, “they maintained their optimism despite trying to get jobs during the great recession and despite carrying the burden of unprecedented student-loan debt. In other words, they are fighting the fight of the revolution, but they remain ridiculously optimistic.”²¹

Religious?

There has been a precipitous decline in religious involvement amongst millennials, especially within the Christian faith. The Pew Research Center indicates that millennials are less religious than older Americans. One-in-four millennials are unaffiliated with any faith (five percent more than Gen Xers and twelve percent more than Baby Boomers).²² Millennials also attend less religious services than older generations and significantly less millennials say that religion is very important in their lives.²³ In fact, The Pew Research Center found an eight percent decline in self-identified

²⁰ Notter and Grant, 12.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Pew Research Center, “Religion Among the Millennials.”

²³ Ibid.

American Christians between the years 2007-2014; from seventy-eight percent in 2007 to seventy-one percent in 2014.²⁴

The Barna Group found that nearly six in ten millennials who grew up in church have stopped attending. They also found that seven in ten millennials say that church is either not important at all, somewhat important, or somewhat not important. Among this majority, they found two main reasons: thirty-nine percent say they can find God elsewhere and thirty-five percent say that it is not relevant to them. Among those millennials who do not attend church, eighty-seven percent see Christians as judgmental, eighty-five percent perceive Christians as hypocritical, ninety-one percent view Christians as anti-homosexual, and seventy percent recognize Christians as insensitive to others.²⁵

Although Millennials are not attending church and are considered by many to be the least religious of any generation in modern North American history, they have not lost their spirituality. Three out of four millennials say they are spiritual but not religious.²⁶ There has been criticism towards how millennials define their spirituality or religious views. Christian Smith, professor of sociology and the Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, conducted one of the most extensive and diverse studies on millennials and faith. He started interviewing millennials when many were still in high school and has followed them throughout young

²⁴ “US Christians Numbers ‘Sharply Decline’ Poll Finds.” BBC News, last modified May 12, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-32710444>.

²⁵ “What Millennials Want When They Visit Church,” Barna Research Group, last modified March 4, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/711-what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church#.V2myrFc47wy>.

²⁶ Rainer and Rainer, 47.

adulthood. He coined the term, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” to describe the religious faith of teenage millennials, years ago. Smith defines Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in five parts:

First, a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. Second, God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Third, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Fourth, God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Fifth, good people go to heaven when they die.²⁷

Smith suggests his latest wave of research shows that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is still the prominent religious view held by 18 to 23-year-old American millennials, meaning the majority of millennials have not changed their religious beliefs from their teenage years.²⁸ Clearly, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism does not follow the God of the Christian Bible or the god of any major world religion; this is a relatively new god.

Christian Smith continues critiquing millennials by suggesting they are morally adrift. He suggests, “Six out of ten (60 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed expressed a highly individualistic approach to morality. They said that morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision.”²⁹ Smith continues by saying, “The problem is that many of them are simply lost. They do not adequately know the moral landscape of the real world that they inhabit. And they do not adequately understand where they themselves stand in the real moral world.”³⁰ Living in the midst of

²⁷ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁹ Christian Smith, Kari Chrisoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

the ever-increasing complexity of the global world and living in the middle of the most diverse adult generation in American history, the task of finding common moral ground seems to have driven millennials away from universal truths and towards moral individualism.

Millennials are also native to the consumeristic world handed to them by their baby boomer parents. Christian Smith points out,

Nearly all emerging adults in America today have fully bought into mainstream economics and culture. Indeed, they may be even a little behind the curve on where social change seems to be heading with regard to a greener future. Very many emerging adults we interviewed could not even understand the issue or problems that we interviewers asked them. The idea of having questions or doubts about shopping, buying, consuming, accumulating, discarding, and more shopping appeared to be almost unthinkable to them. Most seemed quite consumed with consumerism.³¹

While environmentalism has grown in popularity over the last number of years, it has grown out of a culture deeply steeped in materialism; millennials have a long way to go in order to shift the generational mindset and posture away from consumerism. Some companies, popular among millennials, like Toms Shoes, have harnessed millennial consumerism to support charitable work around the world and have thriving businesses.

Millennials are also highly civically and politically disengaged, uninformed, and distrustful, especially of large institutions. Smith argues that most millennials, “feel disempowered, apathetic, and sometimes even despairing when it comes to the larger social, civic, and political world beyond their own private lives.”³² Speaking of those who argue to the contrary concerning the activist spirit of millennials, Smith states,

³¹ Ibid., 108.

³² Ibid., 196.

The idea that today's emerging adults are as a generation leading a new wave of renewed civic-mindedness and political involvement is sheer fiction. The fact that anyone ever believed that idea simply tells us how flimsy the empirical evidence that so many journalistic media stories are based upon is and how unaccountable to empirical reality high-profile journalism can be.³³

Much has changed since Smith wrote these words in 2011, including the Black Lives Matter movement, which has garnered huge support from millennials. However, Smith's perspective highlights a common theme emerging among millennials, called "slacktivism." According to the Oxford Dictionary, slacktivism refers to the "actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement, e.g., signing an online petition or joining a campaign group on a social media website."³⁴ So-called slacktivism is prevalent amongst millennials who hold strong opinions but have no desire to join an institution or group to enact change.

Every generation has both positives and negatives but the research on millennials shows there is much to be learned about the type of church they long to be a part of. While religious participation is declining among millennials, the question must be asked, are millennials rejecting the Christian message or are they rejecting its medium? As millennials enter a globalized and social internet world, unlike anything seen before, it is vital to understand the beginnings of the ancient Christian church, which also existed in a period of dramatic social and technological change, to see the congruence of their message and medium.

³³ Ibid., 224.

³⁴ "Slacktivism," Oxford Dictionary, accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/slacktivism.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Acts 2 depicts the disciples of Jesus gathered in an upper room on the day of Pentecost waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. In dramatic fashion, the Holy Spirit came and filled everyone gathered in the room. Luke, the author of Acts, records that signs and wonders followed the disciples as they lived and shared the gospel. Luke also records that the early disciples faced intense persecution and resistance.³⁵ In the midst of the miracles and persecution, the early church remained a faithful witness to the gospel through their love and care for God and each other as recorded in Acts 2:42-47. It says,

⁴² And [the early church] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.³⁶

The picture of hospitality, sacrifice, and service that Luke captures has captivated the hearts of Christians ever since. Christians have long understood Acts 2:42-47 to be normative for the life of the church, yet the current picture of the church in North America looks very different.

From the time of Christ to Constantine's signing of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the early church became a large and formidable movement in the Roman Empire. There are many positive characteristics concerning early ecclesial structures that the current ecclesial institutions and movements in North America can learn from. Unfortunately,

³⁵ For example: Acts 4:5-22; Acts 5:17-18; and Acts 7:54-60.

³⁶ Acts 2:42-47 (ESV; emphasis mine).

most current churches in North America have been formed from a post-Edict of Milan perspective and their medium is reflective of the Christendom arrangement instituted by Constantine in 313.

Despite its best efforts, the North American church is declining rapidly—more North Americans live in “post-Christian” regions than ever before, church attendance has been steadily declining for years, and an ever-increasing number of North Americans identify as having no religious affiliation.³⁷ Churches are aware of this problem and have made efforts to change it. However, their approaches to influence cultural change have not worked. For example, some churches have diluted their doctrine to the degree that there is not much that distinguishes them from a non-Christian gathering, others have responded by spending lots of money on aesthetic changes in churches with the hope of becoming appealing to outsiders, and many have responded by trying to gain power through the creation of a “moral majority” in their attempts to force cultural change. North American Christians have much to learn from the early church in order to faithfully engage culture in a loving and lasting way because the early church engaged its surrounding culture while remaining a faithful witness to the gospel in a diverse world.

In order to appreciate why the early church is a crucial resource for the North American evangelical church and specifically with regards as to how to connect with the millennial generation, it is vital to gain a deeper understanding how and why the early church grew. After Peter’s first sermon in the book of Acts, Luke records that, “...those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three

³⁷ “US Christians Numbers ‘Sharply Decline’ Poll Finds,” BBC News, last modified May 12, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-32710444>.

thousand souls.”³⁸ From this, it could seem that the early church was catapulted into popularity quickly. However, historian Rodney Stark argues that church growth in the first two centuries represented a slow but steady growth. He suggests that if the church experienced a growth rate of 40-50 percent per decade, there would be as few as 10,000 Christians in the Roman Empire by the year 100.³⁹ While the percentage of growth is high, the *realized* numbers remained low. Continuing at a 40 percent growth rate, by the end of the second century, Stark suggests there would have been around 217,000 Christians in the Empire. Based off an estimated total population of 60 million within the Empire, Christians only made up a meager .36 percent of the total population.⁴⁰ Stark goes on to note that while the first two centuries of the church experienced slow and steady growth, the third and early fourth centuries experienced explosive growth. Author Alan Hirsch estimates that by the year 310 there were up to 20 million Christians in the Roman Empire, or about a third of the entire population.⁴¹

What could have caused such dramatic growth? There were a few major contributing factors that aided in the explosive growth. One well-documented cause in the first three centuries is often attributed to the persecution it faced. According to Kenneth Scott Latourette, “...in the first three centuries Christianity met persistent and often severe persecution, persecution which rose to a crescendo early in the fourth

³⁸ Acts 2:41 (ESV).

³⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 6-7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 18.

century, but it spread in spite of opposition and was even strengthened by it.”⁴² Latourette divides the persecution into two eras: from the birth of the church to the year 250 and from 250 into the early years of the fourth century. He suggests that the first era of persecution was largely localized and entailed no great loss of life but the second era of persecution was Empire-wide and brought about major loss in life.⁴³ While there were clear seasons of persecution, Stark argues the persecution was not as bad as many think. He says,

I reject claims that the state did perceive early Christianity in political terms. It is far from clear to me that Christianity could have survived a truly comprehensive effort by the state to root it out during its early days. When the Roman state did perceive political threats, its repressive measures were not only brutal but also unrelenting and extremely thorough... Yet even the most brutal persecution of Christians were haphazard and limited, and the state ignored thousands of persons who openly professed the new religion.⁴⁴

This shows that even though the church experienced some intense bouts of persecution during its first two hundred years, it was not crushed and it was still able to spread and grow throughout the empire. Stark goes on to say, “The actual number of Christians martyred by the Romans was quite small, and the majority of men who were executed were officials, including bishops.”⁴⁵ While persecution of early Christians is indeed well documented, it was most likely not as widespread and severe in the first two centuries as many have suggested.

⁴² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* Vol. 1. (New York: Harper, 1975), 81.

⁴³ Latourette, 85.

⁴⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

Another reason some have suggested why the early church experienced dramatic growth has to do with early Christianity's relationship with Judaism—especially in the very early years. In its first years, Christianity was seen as an appendage to Judaism that gave great benefits. Mark Noll suggests,

For several decades after AD 70, the church continued to enjoy the legal status that the Jews had won through hard and difficult trial. Normally in the Mediterranean world of that time, nations conquered by Rome were forced to adapt local religions to Roman religion; they had to recognize Rome's gods along with their own. The fierce monotheism of the Jews had therefore been a source of ceaseless conflict in the first century BC, when Rome reached out to enfold Judea. Eventually Rome came to recognize Judaism as a legal religion, despite Jewish refusal to acknowledge the Roman gods. This status as a *religio licita* protected the Christian church through its association with Judaism, even after the destruction of Jerusalem had in fact driven two religions apart.⁴⁶

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire it lost a lot of its Jewishness but its early connection with Judaism proved vital in keeping the growing faith alive. Stark argues, "...it was the Jews of the diaspora who provided the initial basis of church growth during the first and early second centuries, and Jews continued as a significant source of Christian converts until at least as late as the fourth century..."⁴⁷ Mark Noll suggests that many people in the Roman Empire were ready for a new faith because a lot of the inherited religions of the Mediterranean had become stale, philosophical, and political.⁴⁸ Christianity had a vibrancy and excitement that called people into a different way of living that was rooted in ancient Jewish tradition, proving attractive to many.

⁴⁶ Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 18-19.

⁴⁷ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 49.

⁴⁸ Noll, 19.

A persecuted minority, like the early church, often creates a vibrant and committed core of followers. The church's connection to the deeply established Jewish faith tradition helped set the stage for dramatic church growth in the first four centuries. There are two notable factors that provide a helpful blueprint for how the current landscape of the North American church can be positively influenced by the early church and reach the millennial generation. First, Christians responded to the devastating plague that swept through the Roman Empire around the year 250 AD with mercy and sacrifice. Second, Christians highly valued women in an Empire that was merciless to them. Both of these examples not only strengthened the early church, but also caused the church to grow dramatically in regards to followers and in cultural influence within the Roman Empire.

The Christian Response to the Plague

Because the early church flourished mostly in ancient Roman cities, it is important to briefly explain the environment where Christians distributed their love and mercy.⁴⁹ Ancient Roman cities were horrible places to live. Rodney Stark suggests that, “the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity.”⁵⁰ Stark goes on to suggest that cities were “repeatedly smashed by cataclysmic catastrophes: where a resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, providing that he or she was among the

⁴⁹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 147.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

survivors.”⁵¹ Epidemics, fires, and earthquakes were among some of the common disasters that would visit ancient cities at various times: ancient city living was unbelievably difficult when compared to the modern western world.

These squalid conditions helped to provide a robust environment for disease and infection. Around the year 250 AD the second major plague since the turn of the millennium struck the Roman Empire. At its height, five thousand people a day were dying in the city of Rome alone and some suggest that the death toll was worse in rural communities.⁵² In an Easter message during the epidemic, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote that “out of the blue came this disease, a thing...more frightful than any disaster...”⁵³ Clearly fear spread throughout the Empire and people were not sure how to handle the plague or each other. It was during this trial that Christians were given the opportunity to live out their faith by loving and serving those who were afflicted by the plague. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage wrote in 251,

How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsman as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted... Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death...⁵⁴

Christians were being encouraged by early church leaders like Cyprian and Dionysius to live a life of sacrifice: they were being called to love their neighbors in the face of danger

⁵¹ Ibid., 161.

⁵² Ibid., 77.

⁵³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 81.

and death. Christians were being asked to extend a hand of mercy to the suffering. This was a radical call to action in a world where mercy was not considered a desirable virtue or something commonly dispensed in the ancient world.⁵⁵

History reveals that Christians heeded the call to action. Around the year 260 AD, while the plague was at its worst, Dionysius wrote a tribute to the many Christians who lost their lives in service to others. He said,

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.

The early church met the extreme challenge facing the empire. They chose to figuratively carry their crosses and the crosses of others. They did not fear death as much as they loved their neighbors; they deeply cared for those in their church communities and outside of their communities. Jesus' command to love your neighbor was lived out sacrificially by the early church.⁵⁶

While Christians experienced the horrors on the plague, Dionysius suggests that the pagans experienced it much worse.⁵⁷ He said,

At the first onset of the disease, [the heathen] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Me and We: God's New Social Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 7.

⁵⁶ Mark 12:31 (ESV).

⁵⁷ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 83.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

The Christian response to those with the plague was significantly different than the pagans; Christians lived mercy and sacrifice while the pagans lived with selfishness and fear. This kind of pagan response was not uncommon in the ancient world. Seven centuries prior to this plague there was a plague that swept through Athens. Thucydides, who survived that epidemic said, “They died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all inhabitants perished through lack of any attention.”⁵⁹ Stark argues that Christian doctrine was markedly different than many pagan religions, which influenced their response to the plague. For example, God loves humanity and is pleased when they love others, God showed his love for humanity through sacrifice and calls his church to love the same way, and sacrificial love is not reserved for family but is to be extended to all people.⁶⁰ These were radical ideas that were very different from other ancient religious beliefs or civic practices. As Paul Johnson said, “The Christians... ran a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services.”⁶¹

Christian care and sacrifice during the plague did not go unnoticed. A century after the plague in 362 AD, emperor Julian launched a campaign to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the way Christians cared for each other during the infamous plague. Julian wrote a letter to the pagan high priest in Galatia whereby he complained that the recent growth in the Christian church was caused by their moral

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁶¹ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 113.

character and benevolence toward strangers.⁶² Julian later suggested, "...when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans [Christians] observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence...The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."⁶³ The significance of Julian's actions are highlighted by the fact that although Julian reigned after the Roman Empire had come under Christendom from Constantine fifty years prior to his reign, Julian infamously tried and failed to convert the Roman Empire back to paganism.⁶⁴ The sacrifice, care, and love from Christians made an impression on Julian's pagan leadership a century later. The unknown names of Christians who sacrificially loved their neighbors during the plague had now reached and influenced the highest political office in the world, the Roman Emperor.

The Christian Treatment of Women

The other major distinguishing mark of the early church that brought Christian growth and cultural influence was how the early church treated women. There was significantly greater equality between Christian men and women than there was between pagans. For example, Stark notes that,

⁶² Ibid., 83.

⁶³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 84.

⁶⁴ Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 94. Latourette goes on to suggest, "On his march against Constantius, Julian threw off any remaining pretense of being Christian and openly acknowledged his paganism. He did not undertake a violent persecution of Christianity, but he deprived the Church and its clergy of some of the privileges accorded them by his recent predecessors, restored pagan temples, and in appointments to public office gave preference to pagans. He endeavored to purge the revived paganism of its more palpable weaknesses and attempted to incorporate in it some of the institutional features of the Christian Church..."

A study of Christian burials in the catacombs under Rome, based on 3,733 cases, found that Christian women were nearly as likely as Christian men to be commemorated with lengthy inscriptions. This ‘near equality in the commemoration of males and females is something that is peculiar to Christians and sets them apart from the non-Christian populations of the city.’ This was true not only of adults, but also of children, as Christians lamented the loss of a daughter as much as that of a son, which was especially unusual compared with other religious groups in Rome.⁶⁵

Christianity empowered women and offered them a much higher social status than the rest of the Empire offered women, which attracted many women to the church. Stark says that women were more likely to join a church than men and there were significantly more female church attenders than males: this was in large contrast to the general pagan population where there were considerably more males than females.⁶⁶

There were a few reasons the female population was rapidly declining in the Roman Empire, the first being infanticide. Fathers were given the power to decide whether to expose an infant and considering females were not valued in the empire, female babies were often left exposed.⁶⁷ Secondly, pagan girls were often married to older men before puberty and sexual relations before puberty commonly led to infertility later in life.⁶⁸ Thirdly, women were often killed while undergoing abortions, as ancient abortion methods were gruesome and brutal. Starks suggests there were a few reasons that would bring a woman to risk her life with an abortion. He says,

⁶⁵ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 125.

⁶⁶ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 96.

⁶⁷ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 126.

⁶⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 106. Stark notes “French historian Durry first reported his findings that Roman marriages involved child brides normally were consummated even if the bride had not yet achieved puberty, he acknowledged that this ran counter to deeply held ideas about the classical world. But there is ample literary evidence that consummation of these marriages was taken for granted. Hopkins noted that one Roman law did deal with the marriages of girls under age 12 and intercourse, but it was concerned only with the question of her adultery.”

...Concealment of illicit sexual activity receives the greatest emphasis – unmarried women and women who became pregnant while their husbands were absent often sought abortions. Economic reasons are also cited frequently. Poor women sought abortions to avoid a child they could ill afford, and rich women sought them in order to avoid splitting up the family estate among many heirs.⁶⁹

If a woman survived an abortion she was often left infertile. Between the lack of care for women, infanticide, pre-pubescent marriage, and abortions there were a lack of females in the Empire and high infertility rates among the living. This ultimately led to a population crisis in the Empire that “...began to decline noticeably during the last years of the Republic, and serious population shortages had developed by the second century, before the onset of the first great plague.”⁷⁰

Because the church condemned infanticide, pre-pubescent marriages, adultery, and abortion, women could flourish in a way that was not the cultural norm in the pagan world. While the Empire was struggling with a population shortage and an overall female shortage, the Christian church was rapidly growing and had more females than males. The early church remained faithful to their belief that all people are created in the image of God, including females. This belief brought prosperity and fertility for women in the church that was unmatched in the pagan world, which only brought more women into the church.

Practices of the Early Church

The early church faced incredible difficulties yet it remained committed to the gospel. Their commitment to be faithful witnesses of Jesus in Greco-Roman culture

⁶⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 116.

brought hope and life to the church, even in the face of persecution. As seen through the ridged faith practices of early church father Hippolytus, the early church was known for being committed to their often-strict rules within their faith community.⁷¹ Their commitment to relevance was being committed to serving the poor, suffering, marginalized, and diseased. Instead of seeking power to promote their beliefs and influence culture they simply lived their beliefs, giving value to women and sacrificing their own lives to care for the sick and dying. Luke's picture of the early church in Acts 2, loving and caring for those around them was an authentic observation of the church through the early fourth century.

The early church showed a commitment to sacrifice, service, and surrender in a world that valued power, self-protection, and self-promotion. John Howard Yoder suggests, "The Christian church has been more successful in contributing to the development of society and to human well-being precisely when it avoided alliances with the dominant political or cultural powers. Why should we not expect it to be the same in coming years if the church is going to make a worthy contribution?"⁷² When it comes to influencing North American culture and reaching the millennial generation, the church has the opportunity to incarnate themselves in their communities and let their service and sacrifice be their rule.

⁷¹ Hippolytus, and Stewart, *On the Apostolic Tradition* (Location: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2001), 98. For example, Hippolytus wrote that, "If there is somebody [pagan] who does not live with a wife he should be taught not to fornicate but that he should either take a wife in accordance with the law or should remain <as he is> in accordance with the law. But if there is one who has a demon, let him not hear the word of teaching until he be purified."

⁷² John Howard Yoder and Michael G. Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 202.

SUMMARY

The church in North America is facing the massive problem of failing to connect with the millennial generation. Millennials are increasingly losing interest in the institutional structures of the modern church. While they remain deeply spiritual, they reject the institutional power structures of the North American church. Their values of family and authenticity align with historic Christian commitments but they do not see the medium of the North American church aligned with its message. They often hear messages of family and authenticity in churches where the medium speaks of power, control, and celebrity status. Nonetheless, there have been times when the church's message and medium aligned, creating a powerful witness of the gospel. The early church is exemplary, and remains a period in church history that uniquely resonates with millennials.

The early church embodied the message of family and authenticity by living sacrificially for others while growing and expanding rapidly. This was largely because of two main factors: how the church cared for people during the plagues that swept through the Roman Empire and how they cared for and gave value to women, despite dominant cultural norms. Both of these resonate with the deeply held values of family and authenticity held by millennials. The strength of the community can be seen through their flourishing during an empire wide population decline. Unfortunately, the church in North America is declining in population in the midst of a growing general population.

For the North American church to be vibrant among the millennial generation they must learn the posture of sacrifice and service seen in the early church. They are the generation that places family and a friendship as their highest values and they reject

hierarchical institutional structures. The medium seen in the Christendom arrangement beginning with Constantine in 313 and the hierarchical structures that later blossomed shifted away from a medium that encouraged sacrifice and service and created an environment of power, control, and hierarchy. The medium and gospel message started to separate during this time, and for millennials who value authenticity and family, the medium and message must once again come together. How does the North American church structure itself in a way that attracts the millennial generation who hold similar values as the early church?

SECTION 2: OTHER SOLUTIONS

Jesus was born into the first-century Palestinian Jewish culture with its own complex rituals and customs. He was raised within a religious system and understood what it meant for the Jewish people to live under the oppression of the Roman Empire. In fact, Jesus understood his culture so well he could effectively contextualize his message and ministry to his audience.¹ Not only was Jesus God incarnate, but Jesus' ministry was *incarnational*.

With the North American evangelical church in decline and millennials increasingly disinterested in contemporary church mediums, it is imperative to learn how to meet people where they are. Though much of the North American church today proclaims Jesus was God incarnate, lost are the implications of the incarnational nature of Jesus' ministry. Many Christians dwell within a sub-culture, inviting outsiders into their world rather than entering into the outsiders' world. Therefore, it is important to understand the society in which millennials are living in today and how the church can effectively incarnate the gospel through compelling and faithful mediums.

In this section, three texts will be reviewed that explore the history of the church, Jesus' incarnational ministry, and future expressions of the church. The order of texts reviewed is important to note because each book will move from descriptive arguments to prescriptive solutions. The first book, *The Great Emergence* by Phyllis Tickle provides a broad overview and history of the relationship of church and culture. This text is vital for anyone who believes church history is the best way to predict future movements of

¹ For example, many of the parables Jesus told effectively communicated Kingdom principles to an agrarian community by speaking of seeds, soil, and harvest time.

the church. Tickle is a widely-respected voice in both historical and current religious trends.² The second book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Lesslie Newbigin explores how the gospel can effectively be communicated in the pluralistic society of the western world today. This text is essential for those who long to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the western world as it moves away from modernity and into post modernity—from a baby boomer world to a millennial world. Newbigin has been a respected voice for decades in the field of Christian missiology.³ Lastly, *The Forgotten Ways* by Alan Hirsch notes how the evangelical church has ineffectively engaged culture and suggests a dramatic break from many of the current church structures proposing an ancient medium for the future church. This text is vital for those who desire to take many of the themes mentioned by Tickle and Newbigin and build a robust ecclesial orthopraxy. Hirsch is appreciated as a forward-thinker, as someone who desires to recreate ancient ecclesial structures for the future of the church.⁴

Beginning with *The Great Emergence*, Tickle suggests the church has a rummage sale every five hundred years, meaning the church goes through an immense reconfiguration where it decides what to keep from the past and what to discard.⁵ Five hundred years before the twenty-first century, the church of the sixteenth century found itself in the middle of the Reformation. Five hundred years before the Reformation was the Great Schism. Five hundred years before the Great Schism was the fall of the Roman

² Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

⁵ Tickle, 22.

Empire and the emergence of Pope Gregory I, or Gregory the Great, who helped navigate and hold the western church together through the fallout from the Council of Chalcedon and the beginnings of the separation of the western and Eastern Church. Five hundred years before Gregory the Great was the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian church. According to Tickle, “When Christians despair the upheavals and reformations that have been the history of our faith—when the faithful resist, as so many do just now, the presence of another time of reconfiguration with its inevitable pain—we all would do well to remember that, not only are we in the hinge of a five-hundred year period, but we are also the direct product of one.”⁶ The struggle for the church to find its footing in a changing landscape is nothing new—it has been occurring since the advent of the church.

After setting the stage for the current five hundred year “rummage sale” or reconfiguration, Tickle asks what brought the church to its current crossroads. She gives the cocktail of names like Darwin, Freud, and Jug who helped shift western culture into a more modern worldview. The advent of radio and television played a major role in changing the way our society communicates and the great advancements in travel dramatically changed how humans moved around the earth. These major technological advancements and modern thinkers brought major changes to the world. Tickle notes,

As these thinkers and experimenters, and many, many other gifted scholars like them, pushed farther and farther into the interior, their efforts attracted the interests of whole coterie of other scientists—of biologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, physicians, linguists, anthropologists, artists, physicists, and philosophers—all of whom in one way or another began to question the old, standing definitions of “self.” Equally important is the fact that these experts in these fields of relatively established sciences were joined by men and women who were experts in fields of science that had not existed two or three human generations earlier... experts in electronic computation, in computer science, the

⁶ Tickle, 26-27.

Internet/the World Wide Web/www 2.0, in chaos math and network theory, in nanotechnology, in artificial intelligence, in host human theory and ethics.⁷

While not an exhaustive list of major societal changes in the last number of years, Tickle uses these examples as illustrations to set the context for what has shaped modern Christians.

Tickle moves from asking what brought about this current “rummage sale” to asking what the characteristics are of what she calls “emerging Christians.” Tickle quotes Donald E. Miller as saying,

I believe that we are witnessing a new reformation that is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium. This reformation, unlike the one led by Martin Luther, is challenging not doctrine, but the medium through which the message of Christianity is articulated ... these “new paradigm” churches have discarded many of the attributes of established religion. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, these churches are creating a new genre of worship music, reconstructing the organizational character of institutional religion, and democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers.⁸

Tickle sees the church moving from away from a hierarchical institution toward a more relational approach to leadership. As is often the case in the church’s 500-year intervals, the current ecclesial authority structures do not have the power and influence they once did. One of the reasons for this is because millennials do not value authority structures as previous generations have. This is key to understanding the future configuration of the church as increasing numbers of Christians want to move toward relational and incarnational ministry expressions and away from ecclesial structures that support power and control by a few.

⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁸ Ibid., 155.

Lastly, Tickle explains how Judaism's holistic theology was lost in Christianity after the Constantine era of the Roman Empire. She sees the church moving back to a holistic theology. Tickle says, "If...the Great Emergence really does what most of its observers think it will, it will rewrite Christian Theology – and thereby North American culture – into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything the church has had for the last seventeen or eighteen hundred years."⁹

Tickle does a masterful job arguing how Christianity has encountered a major shift every five hundred years. She clearly makes the case that the church is again undergoing a major shift. Her conclusions about the return of a holistic faith that breaks out of the institutionalized church connects with many other authors who specialize on the future of the church.¹⁰ The historical perspective is helpful and serves as a broad overview of changes in the church throughout history.

While Tickle's book was thorough in its history, it lacked insight concerning concrete examples of future ecclesial structures. She does take time to unpack her quadrilateral diagram that argues the future of Christian faith will be found in a blending of four quadrants: Social Justice Christians, Renewalists, Liturgicals, and Conservatives.¹¹ Tickle argues the future church will include aspects of each of these quadrants, which have been traditionally seen as dissimilar to each other. While the quadrilateral is a helpful image and the discussion of the factors bringing change is

⁹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁰ For example: Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press, 2007).

¹¹ Tickle, 131.

insightful, Tickle spends little time giving a concrete vision for the ecclesial future. It would be helpful for church leaders to hear about specific ways Tickle sees ecclesiology structures changing. What will future gatherings look like? Where will they take place? And how will leadership be structured? Tickle never explicitly answers these questions.

Although Tickle keeps her personal preferences private, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin openly tells his readers his cultural perspective. He sets out to discuss how the gospel can effectively be communicated in the pluralistic western world, drawing from his years as a missionary with Hindus in pluralistic India. While Newbigin's text is somewhat dated his thesis remains relevant.¹² Newbigin asks, "Is it not more honest as well as more humble to stop preaching and engage rather in dialogue, listening to the experience of others and offering our own, not to displace theirs but to enrich and be enriched by the sharing of religious experience? Only an open mind can hope to reach the truth, and dogma is the enemy of the open mind."¹³ Using Michael Polanyi's terminology, Newbigin argues that Christians are invited to, "indwell the (*scripture*) story, tacitly aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but focally attending to the world we live in."¹⁴ By indwelling the scripture story, Christians are able to live as faithful witnesses of the Gospel in the world while engaging and attending to the surrounding culture.

¹² Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* speaks to different ways of engaging culture but many have critiqued his points for being biased and outdated – Although it is still considered an authority on the topic. Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

¹³ Newbigin, 7.

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi was a Hungarian-British man who made important theoretical contributions to physical chemistry, economics, and philosophy and someone who Newbigin quotes often; Newbigin, 38. Emphasis mine.

For Newbigin, narrative is a major component in understanding the world and individual lives. He says,

...the answer to the question ‘who am I?’ can only be given if we ask ‘what is my story?’ and that can only be answered if there is an answer to the further question, ‘what is the whole story of which my story is part of?’ To indwell the Bible is to live with an answer to those questions, to know who I am and who is the One to whom I am finally accountable.¹⁵

According to Newbigin, the goal of Christian witness is to be faithful to God by living in such a way that the individual is indwelling the narrative found in scripture.¹⁶ This then drastically changes how Christians are called to engage the world. For example, Newbigin says, “Almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the church.”¹⁷ Accordingly, Christian mission and proclamation is explicitly linked to the Spirit’s work in individual lives and the initiation of a non-believer’s inquiry, not by the initiative of the believer. To push this concept further, Newbigin states that when Jesus sent his disciples out, their preaching was seen as an explanation of healings.¹⁸

If the Christians’ job is to remain faithful to her Lord and proclaim the gospel when inquired, what then should believers think of culture? Newbigin says that, “...we are called neither to a simple affirmation of human culture nor to a simple rejection of it. We are to cherish human culture as an area in which we live under God’s grace...but we

¹⁵ Newbigin, 100.

¹⁶ Ibid., 119. “...Where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer. And that, I suppose, is why the letters of St. Paul contain so many exhortations to faithfulness but no exhortations to be active in mission.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹⁸ Ibid., 132. See Matthew 10:5-8.

are also called to remember that we are part of that whole seamless texture of human culture which was shown on the day we call Good Friday to be in murderous rebellion against the grace of God.”¹⁹ Newbigin argues believers must critically engage culture and learn nuanced discernment when approaching cultural issues. They should also not fall into despair over the apparent secularization of culture because there is actually great hope for revival.²⁰ Christians can create an environment for revival by embedding themselves in their neighborhoods, their families, and their culture—learning to live the abundant life the gospel provides.²¹

To learn how one is to engage the surrounding western pluralist culture with the gospel, Newbigin’s text is a vital read. He does a masterful job finding the incarnational heart of the gospel in a pluralist society that can often be intimidating to Christians and modern church leaders who still live under the worldview of Christendom. There is much to glean from his text for the North American Church, which has arguably been damaged by the evangelical culture wars. Newbigin’s text is hopeful because it opens new possibilities for how to express faith and leaves the reader excited for the future ecclesial expressions which connect to Newbigin’s perspective.

Newbigin’s insight about how preaching in the book of Acts usually came after an inquiry from a non-believer is illuminating because it reveals a misunderstanding in contemporary western Christian practices of evangelism. Many Christians practice evangelism as street corner preaching, handing out tracts, or through argumentative

¹⁹ Ibid., 195.

²⁰ Ibid., 213. According to Rodney Stark, the evidence, “leads to the conclusion that secularization will not usher in a post-religious era. Instead, it will repeatedly lead to a resupply of vigorous otherworldly religious organizations by prompting revival.”

²¹ Ibid., 229.

apologetics—often “offering the gospel” before an inquiry from a non-believer. For Newbigin, the goal of the believer is to remain faithful to God by living a life of faithfulness in one’s sphere of influence and by following the leading of the Spirit.

While Newbigin masterfully lays the theological framework for mission in a pluralist society he could have spent more time discussing a Christian orthopraxy that supports his theological insights. His argument would be stronger if he provided some practical examples regarding how best to structure the future of the church—facilitating environments where Christians can practice living as faithful witnesses of the gospel in a pluralist society. Secondly, Newbigin’s text would have been strengthened if it gave historical perspective on how western society arrived in its pluralistic culture and how culture is created and shaped—it would have given the reader a better framework to understand what culture is and how people participate in culture making.

If Christians are commissioned to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth, how can they utilize the power of the Spirit to bring the gospel to the western world that is living in a post Christendom culture? Alan Hirsch attempts to answer this question in his text, *Forgotten Ways*. Echoing words first spoken by philosopher Marshall McLuhan, Hirsch suggests, “The medium always becomes the message.”²² Hirsch argues that consumerism runs rampant in middle class churches and many church buildings even speak to the consumerism in the way they are designed—focusing on pulpit and program ministry. In the end, the design becomes the message. As Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.”²³ The church that Hirsch envisions is an

²² Hirsch, 43.

²³ Ibid.

organic movement that looks similar to the early church or the modern underground Chinese church—often meeting in small house or cell group settings.²⁴

Hirsch points out that the worst thing that ever happened to Christianity was when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. In so doing, the faith moved from an organic house church movement that saw tremendous growth²⁵ to a religious institution that destroyed the most attractive and dynamic aspects of the grass roots movement.²⁶ Instead of being a minority movement, Christianity became the state religion of the empire, which gained power, control, and enforcement of values. The cross shows the Gospel is strongest when power and control is emptied.

In order to rediscover organic church Christians need to “...adopt a missionary stance in relation to the culture. And partly that will mean adopting a sending approach rather than an attractional one, and partly it will mean that we have to adopt best practices in cross-cultural mission methodology.”²⁷ Hirsch suggests that underground missionaries often need to travel light. This means that institutionalized concepts of ecclesia are shed and the gospel is condensed to the core message—the simplicity of Jesus. Hirsch posits, “At the heart of all great movements is a recovery of a simple Christology (essential conceptions of who Jesus is and what he does), one that accurately reflects the Jesus of New Testament faith – they are in a very literal sense Jesus movements.”²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

²⁵ Ibid., 18. Rodney Stark says that according to best estimates, there were around 25,000 Christians in AD 100 and around 20,000,000 Christians in AD 310 – right before Constantine became Emperor of Rome.

²⁶ Ibid., 60.

²⁷ Ibid., 62-63.

²⁸ Ibid., 85-86.

Hirsch's "missional ecclesiology" places Christology as the starting point. He suggests Christology determines missiology and missiology determines ecclesiology and says, "By my reading of the scriptures, ecclesiology is the most fluid of the doctrines. The church is a dynamic cultural expression of the people of God in any given place. Worship styles, social dynamics, liturgical expressions must result from the process of contextualizing the gospel in any given culture. Church must follow mission."²⁹ As Hirsch focuses on Christology as the blueprint for mission a large amount of time is devoted to unpacking an incarnational lifestyle, which includes learning how to "exercise a genuine identification and affinity with those we are attempting to reach."³⁰ Hirsch also lays out a compelling vision for cell churches or house meetings. While this will be a painful prescription for a church that has been given a difficult diagnosis, Hirsch leaves his readers compelled, if not convicted, to make some major shifts in how Christians view ecclesiology.

Unfortunately, Hirsch's greatest strength of a compelling vision for the future is also his greatest liability. He turns the current evangelical approach to ecclesiology on its head without creating space for a slow and realistic transition. Pastors will find it difficult to implement the prescriptions Hirsch prescribes. Many church leaders will wonder how to create these types of communities when many congregants, especially older congregants, are committed to the current ecclesial structures. Another reason that Hirsch's ecclesial vision might be difficult for church leaders to embrace is that livelihoods could be effected. Pastors may need to find new ways to make money

²⁹ Ibid., 143.

³⁰ Ibid., 133.

because home based cell groups usually do not bring in the same level of financial support that a traditional congregation does. Although Hirsch's vision would require major changes structurally to the church and possibly vocationally for its leaders, it is important to wrestle with his prescription for the problem.

SUMMARY

After reading through these texts, it would be challenging for church leaders not to seriously consider making shifts in ecclesial structures of hierarchy that dominate the American Church. It can clearly be seen through the texts reviewed that change is coming and the church must ask itself if it is prepared. It will be vital for the future of the church to engage new ways of gathering as community. If the medium is the message, as Hirsch suggests, it does not seem the current medium of the church aligns with Newbigin's framework for engaging the gospel in a pluralist society. As Hirsch suggests, the current structure of the church is built around consumerism and proclamation. In order to engage Newbigin's suggestion that Christian mission and proclamation is explicitly linked to the initiation of a non-believer's inquiry and Tickle's suggestion that the future of the church must take seriously the belief in the priesthood of all believers and the democratization of power and leadership, ecclesial structures will need to change. Ecclesial structures will need to become more intimate in their gatherings and most likely shift to home or cell groups. It will be imperative to create space for questions and doubt. And congregants will need to feel like they have a voice in the direction of the community as together they grow to become faithful witnesses to the gospel in their cities and neighborhoods.

While making changes to the current ecclesial structure is imperative to reach the millennial generation, finding sustainable ways of bringing about these changes will not be easy. Church leaders will need to rethink how they will receive an income and they will need to redefine success away from congregational size metrics. Churches will also need to learn how to relationally engage their neighborhoods to effectively incarnate the gospel in a way that is not proclamation based but rooted in inquiry and service.

We live in a new era of the church and in order to engage culture around us it is vital to start creating new ways of gathering as a community to reach millennials. Christians are to follow the example of Jesus and live as faithful witnesses of the gospel in their cities and neighborhoods, finding the fingerprints of God in their culture. Jesus was born into a specific culture with unique rituals and customs; will North American Christians learn to live like Jesus and effectively contextualize the gospel within their own culture?

SECTION 3: THE THESIS

“The medium is the message.”¹ This phrase was coined by the late philosopher of communication theory, Marshall McLuhan. He argued the medium itself, as opposed to the content it carries, should be the focus of study. Contextualizing McLuhan’s argument with regards to the medium and message of North American Christianity gives profound insight into why many congregations are losing congregants—namely millennials. Millennials’ deep disconnect with the church as evidenced in declining church attendance within the generations of people under 30 years old has gained attention and become the focus of much research to figure out how they can best be reached. This disconnect is largely associated to the medium in which the gospel message is communicated; people no longer connect with the contemporary North American ecclesial medium. For example, the message of the church is “we are family” yet its medium is often an auditorium with rows of chairs facing the powerful paid professional on stage; the message is to “keep the feast” yet the medium is often a thimble of juice and a tasteless wafer. While the message of the gospel is focused on sacrificial living and service to others, the medium in which the message is presented is often one of power and control, which is confusing and counterproductive. Millennials place a high value on community and authenticity and with an incongruent medium and message it only makes sense that many are choosing to find God outside of the church.²

¹ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, The Gospel, And Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 29.

² Karl Moore, “Authenticity: The Way to the Millennial's Heart,” *Forbes*, August 14, 2014, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/karlmoore/2014/08/14/authenticity-the-way-to-the-millennials-heart/>.

This section will explore the medium of the early church: the agape feast, a liturgical worship gathering around the table. I will argue gathering for worship around a table rather than in an auditorium helps to provide an environment for intentional discipleship and encourages intimate community. Following the ancient example of agape feasts, modern liturgical worship around the table bonds the medium and message of Christianity in an authentic way. It is historically rooted in ancient tradition and authentically connected to the North American millennial ethos and is therefore a much more effective medium for our message.

AGAPE FEASTS

Food and the table are common motifs seen throughout scripture. The Jewish people were known for their feasts and celebrations as seen in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus initiated his church around a table in an upper room. Leonard Sweet suggests,

The story of Christianity didn't take shape behind pulpits or on altars or in books. No, the story of Christianity takes shape around tables, as people face one another as equals, telling stories, sharing memories, enjoying food with one another... Food was the building block of our Christian faith. We are a part of a gourmet gospel that defines itself in terms of food and table.³

Gathering around a table was a common practice in the ancient world. In fact, coming together around a table in brotherly love was not a Christian innovation. John D. Zizioulas in his text *Being As Communion* explains, "In the Roman Empire it was so common to form 'associations' that there was need for special laws concerning such

³ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community is Formed and Identity is Found*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), xvi, xviii.

associations signified under the name of *collegia*.”⁴ *Collegias* were private associations with specialized functions that were very common in the ancient Roman world. Zizioulas suggests that, “relationships were often so strong in *collegias* that it was common practice to contribute to a shared fund and they’d often refer to each other as “brethren.”⁵ Some ancient Jewish groups like the Essenes had such strong brotherly love that they built their communities on the principles of common property. While ancient Christian communities held high value in brotherly love and common property as seen in Acts 2:44-45, that is not what set their gathering apart from Jewish and pagans meetings.⁶ Christian table gatherings were profoundly different than anything the people in the ancient Greco-Roman culture had ever seen because of their diversity. Zizioulas explains this diversity in Christian gatherings by saying, “The Jews based the unity of their gatherings on race (or, in the later years, on a broader religious community based on this race) and the pagans with their *collegia* on profession, the Christians declared that in Christ ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek,’ ‘male or female,’ adult or child, rich or poor, master or slave, etc.”⁷ Zizioulas goes on to say, “To be sure the Christians themselves soon came to believe that they constituted a *third race*, but this was only to show that in fact it was a “non-racial race,” a *people* who, while claiming to be the true Israel, declared at the same time that they did not care about the difference between a Greek and a Jew once these

⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 150.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Acts 2:44-45 (ESV) “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

⁷ Zizioulas, 151.

were members of the Christian Church.”⁸ The ancient table was meant for all people created in the image of God. This was the gospel message and it was deeply embedded in the medium of the table.

The diversity of the ancient Christian table created a unique type of community which allowed the gospel to be experienced by many in practical ways. The church Father Tertullian (155-240 AD) described the Christian Agape in *Apologeticum* saying,

Every man places there a small contribution on one day of the month, or whensoever he will...for no man is constrained, but contributes willingly. These are, as it were, the deposits of piety. For expenditure is... for feeding and burying the poor, for boys and girls without fortune and without parents, for old men now confined to the house; for the shipwrecked likewise, and any who are in the mines, or in the islands, or in prison; provided they are (suffering) there for the sake of God’s way, they become the nurslings of their creed.⁹

J. F. Keating in his book *The Agape and the Eucharist in the Early Church* suggests that while pagan associations offered help and good will to group members to a certain degree, “There is nothing to show their funds were regularly employed to give bread to the poor, to educate the orphan, to succor the aged.”¹⁰ The nature of the ancient agape feasts offered radical hospitality that was new to Greco-Roman culture. Hospitality, in Ancient Greek literally meaning, “love for the other or stranger” became the hallmark of the early church.

Concerning Luke’s account in Acts 2:42 and 46 of the early church breaking bread together, John Howard Yoder in his book *Body Politics* explains the radical economy of the common table. Yoder says, “Only because that meal was at the center of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J.F. Keating, *The Agape and the Eucharist in the Early Church: Studies in the History of the Christian Love-Feasts* (London, UK: Methuen & Co., 1901), 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

their life together could it extend into the formation of economic community: ‘no one claimed for his own use anything that he had’ (4:32). The ‘common purse’ of the Jerusalem church was not a purse: It was a common table.”¹¹ Yoder argues the common meal was not an innovation of the early church, rather a resumption of the way the disciples had lived together with Jesus for years.¹² The common table was understood as a place of sharing. Yoder says, “Bread eaten together is economic sharing. Not merely symbolically, but also in fact, eating together extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity normally obtained in the family.”¹³ Jesus knew many of his disciples would suffer economic consequences for following him and therefore understood the table to be a place of provision. For example, in many of his post resurrection appearances, Jesus took the role of the head of the family and host. Yoder reflects, “[Jesus] projected into the post-Passion world the common table of the pre-Passion wandering disciple band, whose members had left their prior economic bases to join his movement.”¹⁴ The table provided, protected, and formed communal identity; it was the heart of this burgeoning movement.

Because radical hospitality was a hallmark of the early church, it is no wonder the Apostle Paul reserved some of his strongest judgments for the church in Corinth with regards to participating in the agape feast in an unworthy manor. Paul says,

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk... Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person

¹¹ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.¹⁵

Paul understood the importance of the Eucharistic meal and what it communicated about the Christian faith. It concerned Paul to see the Corinthian congregation with an incongruent medium and message. John Howard Yoder posits, “If their meal failed to reflect the overcoming of social stratification, Paul told the Corinthians that the participants would be celebrating their own condemnation. In celebrating their fellowship around the table, the early Christians testified that the messianic age, often pictured as a banquet, had begun.”¹⁶ The imagery of dining around the table symbolizes God’s Kingdom throughout the Bible and therefore this imagery was important to protect and keep sacred.

Worship fashioned around the agape feast created a beautiful imagery of family. Gathering around the table practically cared for the needs of the community and historically rooted this new movement into ancient Jewish tradition. Like the Jewish feasts from which these meals originated, the table gatherings were rich in symbolism and therefore it is important to understand what they looked like. Ancient Christian groups practiced the agape feasts differently, but there are at least two rough examples of these ancient worship gatherings, one from Justin Martyr and one from Tertullian.¹⁷ See

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 11:20-21, 27, 30 (ESV).

¹⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 18.

¹⁷ The Eucharist and the agape meal were starting to be seen as separate in the western church as early as the end of the second century and almost universally separate by the end of the fourth century.

Keating's table¹⁸ below for the liturgical flow of these gatherings—starting from the beginning of the meal and moving to the end:

| Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) | Tertullian (155-240 AD) |
|--|---|
| Lections (selected readings) | Preliminary Prayer |
| Sermon | Conversations |
| Intercession (said by all) | The Meal |
| Kiss of Peace | Ablutions (Ceremonial washing) |
| Oblation of Elements (Meal offered to God) | Lights brought in |
| Long Thanksgiving | Psalm Singing (Scriptural or otherwise) |
| Consecration with words of Institution | Final Prayer |
| Intercession by President with Amen | Distribution to the poor |
| Communion | |
| Subsequent Distribution to poor by President | |

The table above shows these gatherings had scripture readings, sermons, eating, singing, cultic rituals like the distribution of the communion elements, prayer, and care for the poor.

According to Justin Martyr's liturgical order of the evening, the agape feast started with selected readings, most likely scriptures like Psalms. After the scriptures were read someone would give the sermon—usually someone with a teaching or pastoral position or gifting. After the sermon, the congregation would move into prayers of the people. One can only imagine what their requests were; due to the dating of this liturgy, there must have been much prayer regarding persecution and sickness from various plagues. From the intercession, the community would move to passing the kiss of peace. This kiss would have highlighted the reconciliation in this diverse community. Outside of the church community one would never witness a master kissing their slave or an Israelite

¹⁸ Keating, 66.

kissing a Gentile. This would have been one of the most powerful and redemptive components of the gathering. After the kiss of peace, the community would gather and break bread together. Towards the end of the meal, the celebrant would lead the community in prayers of thanksgiving for the blessings of God. After this time of prayer, the celebrant would consecrate the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine. After consecration and intercession the community would partake of the Eucharistic bread and wine. At the end of the meal, the leadership of the community would distribute the leftovers from the meal to the poor and both within and outside of the community.

Tertullian's liturgy around the table was similar to Justin Martyr's. Tertullian's liturgy started with a time of prayer. After the opening prayer, the community would have time to converse and share life together. After taking the time to intentionally share life together, the meal would be distributed. While Justin Martyr's liturgy separates the Eucharist from the meal, thus distinguishing it from the full meal, Tertullian's liturgy would have likely incorporated the Eucharist into the mealtime. Once the meal was finished the community would participate in a washing ceremony. This most likely would have been modeled after Jesus washing the feet of the disciples in the upper room after the Last Supper. After the washing, the lights were brought in. This suggests the meals began in the early evening (as seen through the lighting of candles) and would often last late into the evening. The lighting of the candles would have been practical but they would have also been symbolic of the Spirit entering the room, as on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were gathered in an upper room. After the room was lit the community would sing songs and pray, often late into the evening. Like Justin Martyr's liturgy, the

evening would culminate with distributing the left overs to the poor both within and outside the community.

As the early church grew in numbers and authority, worship around the common table began to fade. Gathering around the table was replaced with a symbolic table reserved for the Eucharistic elements. People started to move into the medium of audience (congregants) and performer (priest) as seen in the architectural development of churches. The value of the communal gathering and shared life together was replaced with pulpits and pews. Keating argues that by the end of the fourth century the agape feast model had died out in most parts of the western church.¹⁹ One of the reasons congregations stopped practicing agape feasts was because church leadership was becoming less convinced in its benefits. Even Tertullian who lived during the most popular period for agape feasts understood the benefits and pitfalls of these meals. In sarcasm Tertullian said, “At your house love is warmed up with saucepans; faith is fomented in kitchens, hope rests on dishes. But an agape is all the more important because by means of this young men sleep with their sisters.”²⁰ St. Ambrose prohibited these gatherings in Milan and St. Augustine thought these gatherings created “opportunity for debauchery...[for] the intemperate and because this kind of *Parentalia* resembled very closely the superstition of the heathen.”²¹ One of the challenges of these gathering was effective oversight to protect the communities from heresy and unhealthy dynamics. Augustine used his influence to convince Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage as well

¹⁹ Ibid., 152.

²⁰ Ibid., 68-69.

²¹ Ibid., 153. (*Parentalia* - the chief annual festival of the dead in ancient Rome.)

as his own region of Hippo to end these feasts.²² Finally these meals were outlawed in the third Council of Carthage in 397 with the instructions; “no bishop or clergy should hold banquets in a church unless it should happen that the needs of hospitality required that they take refreshments there when on a journey. And that their flocks should also, as far as possible, be debarred from entertainments of this kind.”²³

Due to problems the agape feast communities faced, church leadership believed they were justified to phase out these meals by the end of the fourth century. These meals were replaced by gatherings with hieratical leadership and structure to ensure Christians did not end deceived by bad teaching and lifestyles. As Christendom began to develop after Constantine’s Edict of Milan in the early fourth century, Christianity began to significantly evolve and it became more universally popular and acceptable—ultimately and unfortunately it started being used for political gain. When the Roman government officially recognized and supported Christianity, the mixing of Christian and pagan elements became common as seen for example through the justification of Imperial power and violence. Church leaders at the time thought it best to simply end these types of gatherings. It became more important to preserve the purity of doctrine than it was to preserve the ancient and initial medium through which the church doctrine was practiced, as seen in the agape feast. It could be said that orthodoxy became more important than orthopraxy. Keating muses, “The further history of the agape, as gathered from undoubted writers of the fourth century, and afterwards, unfolds a sad picture of the

²² Ibid., 154.

²³ Ibid.

gradual decay, partly consequent on the increasing admixture of Christianity with pagan elements, which its official recognition in the Roman Empire tended to promote.”²⁴

There were certainly issues with agape feasts in the early years of the church. For example, the agape feasts did not have the necessary oversight to keep to keep the communities from straying from right doctrine and into heretical beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, when these gatherings were outlawed much of the strengths of these gatherings were also lost. The table created the environment for shared leadership in the context of an incarnational worship setting and it communicated the gospel message through the very practice of simply meeting together. If Marshall McLuhan is right about the medium being the message, changing the medium away from the table arguably did more harm than good. James K.A. Smith in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, exhorts the church to pursue love over perfect doctrine—clearly something that was not highest priority for many church leaders at the time Christendom started to flourish and the agape feasts started to disappear. Smith says, “Being a disciple of Jesus is not primary a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who *loves* rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love.”²⁵ The table provided the space to learn the hospitality of Christ towards others.

According to Letty Russell in *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, “The table itself recalls the altar of the Hebrew Testament, both as a symbol of

²⁴ Keating, 164.

²⁵ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 32, 33.

covenant and of sacrifice.”²⁶ The medium of church buildings created an environment that separated leadership, making it easier to create power dynamics. Unfortunately, power became a major issue as the church has become more politically powerful under Christendom. Power and authority quickly took the place of sacrifice and hospitality.

Letty Russell argues for the importance of the table, saying,

A lot of community takes place at the table, and the Christian heritage already has a long tradition related to table community, table sharing, table talk...the place where the feast is spread is a key metaphor for God’s hospitality. At this table there is no permanent seating, and whatever chairs of authority exist are shared. Christ is the host and bids everyone to come.²⁷

Allowing the medium of the table to be the message of Christianity creates an intimate space for people to intentionally share life together—something that Millennials long for.

The Gospels consistently attest to Jesus inviting the rejected and offering a diverse group of followers a seat at his table. The egalitarian nature of the table subverts power dynamics and creates a space of honor for the rejected. According to Smith, “...the methods, as well as the message, must be cross-shaped through and through.”²⁸ The agape *sets the table* for sacrifice and service in a posture of hospitality. This helps to create the space to love people who are in the margins. Russell argues, “Jesus’ preaching is constantly directed towards the invitation of those who are the rejected ones of society, those on the margin, to share the feast of God’s new household (Luke 19:10).”²⁹ If the diverse nature of the table set the early church gatherings apart, the table is a great tool to

²⁶ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 165.

²⁹ Russell, 25.

create diversity. Russell posits, “The ultimate goal of God’s household is to do away with the margin and the center by joining the one who is at the center of life in the church but dwells on the margin where he lived and died.”

The work of reconciling those on the margins is built into the DNA of American millennials. According to the Pew Research Center, millennials are America’s most ethnically and racially diverse cohort ever and are known for their high levels of tolerance.³⁰ Millennials want to gather in diverse spaces because of the diversity they were raised in. Because millennials value relationships and authenticity, the table provides the space for those on the margins to have a voice and a common space to share stories. Worshipping God through breaking bread and sharing life together is to actively participate in the work of reconciling those on the margins.

ST. LYDIA’S CHURCH

St. Lydia’s Church is a community in Brooklyn, New York that has recovered the ancient agape feast as they worship around a sacred table.³¹ They meet in a one thousand square foot storefront and have two gatherings a week. At each meal there are around thirty-to-forty people worshipping. They begin each gathering with a few ancient hymns and then distribute candlelight to all the tables. After gathering around the tables, appointed congregants read the scriptures lessons aloud and the pastor leads the community through breaking and sharing of the Eucharist bread. After eating the bread,

³⁰ “Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change,” Pew Research Center, February 24, 2010, accessed December 7, 2015, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/?beta=true&utm_expid=53098246-2.Lly4CFSVQG2lphsg-Koplg.1.

³¹ For more information visit: www.stlydias.org.

the community enjoys a delicious feast cooked by someone in the congregation. Towards the end of the meal, the pastor shares a short message with follow up community conversation and prayer. After the congregational prayers, the pastor leads the community in drinking and celebrating the cup of the Eucharist. Following the completion of the Eucharist, part of their liturgy includes cleaning up the meal. After cleanup, a few hymns are sung and an offering is taken to support the church as well as a local initiative to care for the impoverished in their neighborhood. Following the offering, the benediction is given and the sacred meal is finished.

St. Lydia's sacred meal is a profoundly intentional gathering where everything holds symbolism and meaning. They connect the medium and message in a deeply unique and ancient way. Leonard Sweet in his book, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* suggests the best way to connect with the post-modern world is through the acronym E.P.I.C., which stands for experiential, participatory, image-driven, and connective.³² The medium of the table creates a space for people to engage all four aspects of E.P.I.C. People are able to *experience* the gospel through the meal and the congregation is invited to *participate* in the liturgy; the table becomes the *image-driven* place for the sacraments; and there is no better place to *connect* than around a table. St. Lydia's accomplishes the four aspects of E.P.I.C. through gathering around the table. Participating in their sacred meal gives the participant the sense they are partaking in an ancient/future expression of faith.

These table gatherings do not always create a comfortable environment for millennials but the table offers something many are looking for by way of intimate relationships. Gathering at the table and encouraging conversation amongst congregants

³² Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 28.

can be seen as messy when perfection is a value because sometimes dinner conversations are messy and uncomfortable. When I visited St. Lydia's the topic of conversation was human sexuality and what it meant to be born again—a weighty dinner topic! While it was uncomfortable at times, the medium created the space for people to be heard, known, and accepted, regardless of their views. After interviewing several members of the congregation, the consensus is that St. Lydia's is a safe place to wrestle with faith and the complexities of life in the twenty-first century. The pastoral leadership of St. Lydia's act more as highly respected coaches who work to create a safe place for community to flourish rather than a vision driven orator speaking from the front of a room.

Study after study shows that people are leaving the church—especially Millennials.³³ Tony Kriz in his book *Welcome to the Table: Post Christian Culture Saves a Seat for Ancient Liturgy* suggests, “[Americans] are rejecting the institutional constructs that have defined (or at least represented the primary stage of) the life of faith for much of religious history.”³⁴ Congregants are tired of the power dynamics seen in many churches today. They long for a better distribution of power, richer liturgy, and hands on approach to faith. Kriz argues this post-modern generation is “longing for the unique sort of meaning that comes from the sign and symbol of historical forms.”³⁵

The ancient agape feasts provided an environment for the beauty and subversive dynamics of the gospel to be experienced around the medium of the table. St. Lydia's re-

³³ “America's Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/?utm_expId=53098246-2.Lly4CFSVQG2lphsg-Koplg.0&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2015%2F05%2F12%2Fliving%2Fpew-religion-study%2F.

³⁴ Tony Kriz, *Welcome to the Table: Post Christian Culture Saves a Seat for Ancient Liturgy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 126-127.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

creates this ancient medium in the modern world. Considering most congregants at St. Lydia's were millennials raised in contemporary evangelical churches, this reveals how the medium of the table is an effective vehicle to communicate the gospel to this generation.

SUMMARY

Millennials are longing for a new type of church community that places a high value on relationships/family, authenticity, and diversity. They are increasingly leaving the contemporary models of church and not finding something that compliments their values. While the gospel communicates the values millennials long for, the contemporary medium of pulpits and pews in which that message is communicated is incongruent with the message. Because millennials long for authenticity, it is very important for the medium and message to be in alignment. The medium of gathering around tables and food, as seen in the ancient agape feasts of the early church, provides the marriage of medium and message in a profound way that speaks to the millennial values of relationships/family, authenticity, and diversity.

Phyllis Tickle in her book *The Great Emergence*, suggests the church goes through a massive reordering every 500 years. With the church being on the cusp of the next 500-year season, Tickle sees the future of the church moving back towards a holistic faith, similar to ancient Judaism, greatly complimenting the work of building a church community around tables and food.

Lesslie Newbigin in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, argues that following the gospel in a pluralistic society requires the church rediscover the

incarnational heart of Jesus through living as faithful witnesses of the gospel. Newbigin's suggestions align with gathering communities around tables and food. In fact, I would suggest that when Jesus broke bread with humanity, he was showing his followers how to incarnate his gospel in a diverse world—everyone has a table and everyone needs to eat; the job of Jesus' disciples is to live faithfully to the gospel in a spirit of incarnation.

Alan Hirsch suggests in this book, *The Forgotten Ways*, the church must get back to the model of small home group meetings. He argues the church needs to move away from construct of power as seen after the Edict of Milan in ancient Rome and back towards small, organic movements of faithful presence in our communities. Hirsch also suggests that ecclesiology should be built of a robust Christology. Considering Jesus establishes his Church around tables and food, Hirsch's suggestions greatly compliment gathering church communities around tables and food.

Using the model of the ancient agape feast as a framework for the future of the church connects with the values of the millennial generation and compliments the work of Phyllis Tickle, Lesslie Newbigin, and Alan Hirsch. Dinner church communities like St. Lydia's are reaching a diverse group of millennials, many of which are tired of contemporary models of church. Modeling future church gatherings around the ancient agape feast align the medium and message of the church in a profound and compelling way.

However, no model of church will ever be perfect because people are not perfect. The early church fathers shut down the agape feasts because they lacked oversight and became a liability to orthodox Christian doctrine and behavior. Nevertheless, I believe this is not a reason to end these feasts, rather it provides the opportunity to amend them.

An easy solution for the problems of the early agape feasts would be to grow these communities out of different denominations, which would give helpful oversight and necessary accountability. For example, St. Lydia's is a part of the ELCA Church of North America.

In order for the church to thrive in today's society, the medium and the message need to reflect one another. At the last supper, Jesus set the table and invited his followers to dine with him. Today is no different; the table has been spread by God and hosted by Christ and each of us have been invited, including millennials.

SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The attached artifact is a non-fiction book proposal that: (1) introduces the reader to the problems plaguing the contemporary model of church in America, especially with the lack of millennial engagement; (2) familiarizes them with the authors story about finding church around various tables and food; (3) informs the reader with churches that are currently utilizing the table as the dominant medium of their worship gatherings; and (4) asks the reader how they might be able to find their way back to church through the medium of the table. Although worship around the table is applicable for all generations, this dissertation addresses millennials and how the table aligns with their generational values in ways that allow the transformative power of the gospel to be experienced.

Worship in the early church was experienced around the table through an ancient liturgy around food. The early church was marked by service for others, diverse gatherings, and care for those within the community. Around the fourth century the church moved away from gathering around tables and shifted into gathering in auditoriums and sanctuaries that separated the congregants from the leadership. The medium through which the gospel has been communicated in the western world has largely remained in this same format. The millennial generation no longer connects with this medium. This has left increasing numbers of millennials disconnected from religious communities.

This book proposal takes the reader on a journey through the discovery of finding God and community around the table. In the format of a memoir, I share the stories of different tables where I have experienced God and the church community. The purpose of each vignette is to help the reader see where they might be missing church that has been

happening right under their noses. After sharing fourteen places outside of contemporary church gatherings where I have experienced church, I share two examples of churches where I see the table as the central medium through which the community worships God.

Lastly, I ask the reader about the different tables in his or her own life. Upon reflection, where are some of the places where the reader has experienced church around the table? For those who are looking for a way back to church, especially millennials, this last section of the book will help the reader see how they have experienced church around the table in their past and how they might posture themselves to find community around the table in the future. My hope is that this book will be a first step for those who feel disconnected from contemporary churches to reconnect with the Christian church that gathers around tables and food.

SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

January 10, 2017

Kimberly Shumate
Living Word Literary Agency
PO Box 40974, Eugene OR 97404

Dear Ms. Shumate:

As I first got to know you and share my passion regarding the future of the church, I found we have both been asking similar questions. Our initial connection was inspiring and helpful, as you helped to push me forward in this project.

Not only have I been inspired by your genuine passion and investment, but also your reputation as a literary agent who represents authors within this same genre has persuaded me to contact your firm.

Church futurist Leonard Sweet writes in his book *Table to Table*, “The story of Christianity didn’t take shape behind pulpits or on altars or in books. No, the story of Christianity takes shape around tables, as people face one another as equals, telling stories, sharing memories, enjoying food with one another... Food was the building block of our Christian faith. We are a part of a gourmet gospel that defines itself in terms of food and table.” My conviction is that the future of the church will be built around tables and food. In many ways, the future of the church will look similar to the early church’s gatherings around tables.

Sociologists and anthropologists have been researching the millennial generation for years and found they are leaving the institutionalized Christian church in unprecedented numbers. The church has struggled to find a way to attract this generation to the church and is finding that better produced services and flashier technology are not bringing them in the doors. However the research on what this generation values shows millennials deeply value family, community, and relationships.

The medium of gathering the church around tables and food connect with the values of millennials, the ancient practice of the church, and the gospel message. If the church is going to reach this powerful generation with the gospel message, it will need to learn to communicate its message around tables and food.

As a millennial I have spent ten years pastoring in churches and deeply understand the current belief system and culture behind the modern institutional church. While working on a DMin degree at George Fox Seminary, I have thoroughly researched my subject under the mentorship of Leonard Sweet. While studying millennials, I felt like it was important to better understand how highly successful companies were reaching for my generation. I have therefore stepped out of paid pastoral ministry and have been working

in a very desirable tech company in Seattle, which strongly caters to the millennial audience.

I have the greatest of respect for your opinion and deeply appreciate your help. Thank you for your time and your consideration of this proposal.

With highest regards,

Chris Lapp
21810 82nd Ave W.
Edmonds, WA
425.772.7893
clapp3@yahoo.com

NON-FICTION PROPOSAL

Title: Come to the Table: A Memoir of Christian's Journey Back to Church

Author: Christopher Lapp
 21810 82nd Ave W.
 Edmonds, WA 98026
 425-772-7893
clapp3@yahoo.com

Hook: A millennial pastor who spent years in the church left pastoral ministry only to find his way back to church through the table. He realized the church never left him; he simply needed to rediscover that the church was always there, around the table. This is his story.

Overview: When Jesus started his church, he did so around tables and food; he did not start the church in auditoriums with pews. The setting of this world changing movement was intentionally anchored around the table – something that every home has a form of.

Millennials are increasingly tired of authoritative structures and long for their voice to be heard. The table speaks to the value of family while creating a space friendly for people to be heard. The future of the church must return to tables and food.

Instead of writing a book about a new model of church, I would rather reframe church for the reader, showing them that church has always been there, right under their noses, at the table.

The intention of this book is to tell my story about how I have found church around the various tables in my life. The goal is to invite the reader into my story so they might find church around their own tables.

Purpose:

- Address the loss of millennial participation in our churches
- Reframe church gatherings to be understood around tables and food
- Share my stories of finding church around tables and food
- Give examples of where I currently see this happening
- Ask the reader about the tables in their life

Promotion and Marketing: Every major study on millennials and church attendance shows a rapid decline in participation and attendance in church. However the research also shows that millennials are not giving up on faith; they have rejected the medium but not the message. This book is about returning to the ancient medium of tables and food as the gathering point of the church; which arguably more closely aligns the medium and the message.

This book does not offer easy answers or a formula for success. It does offer insights towards a solution by autobiographically sharing my story for the reader to think about ways the table can be seen as church.

Having served as a College minister in the Seattle area and in growing church in Long Beach California, the author understands the current climate of millennial engagement with churches. His Facebook and Instagram pages as well as his blog would promote this book. Several influential church leaders the author has relationship with would also promote the book.

Having pastored in two churches and studied at Northwest University, Fuller Theological Seminary, and now George Fox Seminary, he has contacts in several groups and denominations.

Competition:

- Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith by Barbara Brown-Taylor, HarperOne, 2012.
- Tablet to Table: Where Community is Formed and Identity is Found by Leonard Sweet, NavPress, 2015.
- Welcome to the Table: Post Christian Culture Saves a Seat for Ancient Liturgy by Tony Kriz, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011.

Uniqueness: There are many books that focus on millennial engagement with the church and there are many books making the case for various models of church structures. However there is not a book that clearly discusses millennial engagement with church modeled around a table. I believe this book would be unique in that regard while speaking into the growing subject of food and faith. The autobiographical nature of the book speaks to the topic in a new and refreshing way.

Endorsements: Leonard Sweet might consider giving his endorsement to the book when a publisher is found and has Blaine Charette, professor of New Testament Studies at Northwest University has also suggested he would give his endorsement.

Chapter Outline:

Part 1: No Change, No people

In this first section of my book, I will discuss the need for change in the American church today. This section will lay the foundation for my memoir to follow. It is vital to set the stage for the need for change and I will do so by roughly following the first and second section of my dissertation. This section will have three chapters.

Chapter 1:

Millennials are increasing not attending churches in America. The research shows they are spiritual but they no longer desire to gather in contemporary church settings. They are longing for communities that value authenticity, intimacy, and justice. Millennials are the most diverse generation in American history and the first to grow up with the Internet and because of the virtual world they live in, they long to engage their spirituality through the physical world. Gathering as church communities around the table provides the space for Millennials to engage their spirituality through the physicality of the table. Opposed to the contemporary medium of churches gathering around a pulpit and stage, the table offers a medium for authenticity and intimacy to flourish.

Chapter 2:

The early church knew how to engage the surrounding culture with the gospel. This can be seen through the way they cared for each other and in the diversity of their gatherings. They deeply valued community and knew how to thrive in a pluralistic world. As the future of the church considers how to live as faithful witnesses of the gospel in the post modern pluralistic world, it is vital for the church to consider the fruit the ancient church experienced gathering in communities around tables and food.

Chapter 3:

Looking to those who have spent considerable time researching the future of the church, they understand there will be major shifts in the way churches gather in the future. This chapter will explore three respected voices that have done considerable research in the field of the future of church gatherings: Phyllis Tickle, Leslie Newbiggin, and Alan Hirsch. Their research points to gatherings that create space for conversation, authentic connections within the context of smaller gatherings.

Part 2: My Tables

Introduction: Right Under Your Nose

The Disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 did not know Jesus was with them until he broke bread with them at the table. Sharing this story helps to ground the reader in the importance of the table and the recognition that we might not realize our answer to our problem is right under our noses. The church has been struggling with how to reach the millennial generation for years. My solution to the problem is that the ancient medium of the table that has been long forgotten in the church. The table is the anchor point in every home. It is also the place that Jesus established his church, and it is the place he modeled community.

Chapter 4: Shema

In this chapter I open by discussing my childhood table. I share what the table meant to me at our family gatherings. I also share about growing up in a Scandinavian Lutheran Church and how church was really formed for me after church during Coffee Hour. I intentionally start with an overview of how the table became a place of meaning and belonging. The chapter is wrapped in the story and centrality of the Shema to the expression of our faith.

Chapter 5: The Blue Formica Table

Everyone has sacred places. The goal of this chapter is to connect the reader with one of their sacred places by sharing about mine. I write about Samantha's family cabin and what this place has meant to me. I share about adoption and how we have been invited into a faith story that was not ours. I frame the entire conversation around the table and the table being the place where the adoption is complete. I complete my conversation by suggesting that all the sacraments of the church can be reinterpreted around the table, or any number of sacred places.

Chapter 6: Kirk's Table

Learning to slow down in a fast paced world is a challenge—especially as a teenager. Using the scripture of story of Mary and Martha, I discuss the importance of slowing down around the table. Mary was present in the moment; Martha was not and her worries robbed her of being present. In this chapter I talk about my mentor Kirk who has cerebral palsy. I share stories about learning for him as a teenager around the table. This chapter ends as I share with how Kirk taught a lot about church, namely, slowing down and being present around the table.

Chapter 7: The Family Table

One of the best places to learn about a culture is around the table. From one's ethnic culture to one's family culture, the table sets our cultural foundation. Just like the Israelites relearned their culture through the table after the exile, I learned about my friend Ennio's family culture after being invited to join around his family table. The table is built to communicate the value of community and family. Unfortunately, many of our churches are set up like auditoriums, which don't communicate the value of family. When the earliest Christian's gathered around tables it created the environment to invite people into one's family culture. This chapter ends with me being reminded that when we gather as a family God is with us.

Chapter 8: The Table of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is central to Christ's table. We learn in the gospels how Jesus washed the disciples feet, including Judas'. Jesus knew that Judas would betray him yet he choose to live in a posture of forgiveness. I learned a lot of Christ's table of forgiveness as I choose

to fly across the country and forgive my grandfather for the pain he caused my family at a Denny's Restaurant table. After sharing this story, I end this chapter by suggesting that the table of forgiveness becomes an altar to the Divine.

Chapter 9: Tire Rims

Jesus's prayer in the Gospel of John 17 is for the unity of the church. Unfortunately, that prayer does not seem to have been taken to heart by the majority of the Christian church; there are incredible divisions in the church today. This chapter discusses the importance of being able to look into the eyes of those in our communities and learn how to vulnerably share life together. If the medium of the church were around table and food, it would give congregants a better opportunity to know and love their neighbor. Sadly, most pastors are viewed as brands or figureheads of a movement instead of flesh and blood people. I learned the important lesson of learning from those who are different than me while cooking around an old tire rim in Africa.

Chapter 10: Thanksgiving

Millennials highly value friends and family. Although they are a transient generation, they remain connected to others through new mediums of technology, namely social media. Millennials long for places they feel at home. The table creates a place where people feel home. In this chapter I share the story of feeling homesick while living in Southern Mexico over the American Thanksgiving Holiday. I share how gathering around the table provided a sense of home. The church can offer a seat at the table to a generation who deeply longs for home.

Chapter 11: Not Alone

In this chapter I share the story of serving with my friend Mickey dinner outreach to the homeless. While serving with Mickey I met a homeless man who shared the same grief as me. It was a powerful reminder of getting to know those around us. In an increasingly lonely and addicted society, the table provides an opportunity to get to know others. The Hebrew Scriptures remind us that God knows us intimately. Our churches should be formed around the understanding that God knows his children intimately.

Chapter 12: Janitors and Tables

While working as a janitor at a mega church, I befriended a fellow janitor at the church, a Pakistani Muslim woman named Yasmine. As I tried teaching her about God, I quickly learned that she was the one teaching me about love and hospitality. Jesus always shared meals with outsiders. In this chapter I ask the question, what outsiders have prepared their table for you and what would it mean to accept their invitation?

Chapter 13: The Order of Good Cheer

Staying in community takes sacrifice. In this chapter, I discuss the importance of participating in community even when we don't feel like it. I share the story about celebrating the Order of Good Cheer with some close friends and the surprises I encountered at the celebration. Feasting always requires sacrifices and gathering around a table for a feast reminds the community of the sacrifices needed to continue to sacrifice.

Chapter 14: The Sacred Table

Making the table a priority in our culture can be difficult, especially for young families with little children. In this chapter I discuss the value of gathering around the table as a family. I share about the difficulties our family has faced as we have tried to gather around the table. For as challenging as it can be, it is important to fight for what we value. All the research shows that gathering as a family around the table creates healthier environment for children to be raised in. It can be hard to fight against the cultural pull towards eating in isolation but the gathering makes it worth it; even if it is messy it is sacred.

Chapter 15: The Neighborhood Table

In this chapter I discuss the lessons I learned from my neighbors Belkis and Karen and my invitation to their wedding reception. As a gay couple, they wondered if I would attend their wedding reception. It turns out their invitation provided me the opportunity to learn about Christ's table. I discuss the importance of gathering around the table to see each other's humanity. The table provides the place to see people beyond their labels and allows us to see people with the infinite value they were created with.

Chapter 16: The Fancy Table

Learning how to be served is one of the first steps in learning how to serve. In this chapter I share the story about being invited to a fancy meal hosted by some good friends of mine. I share the story of learning how to be served by our friends and allowing them to step into that role. I use the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet as an example of learning how to accept one's service. The table provides the perfect space to learn how to be served and to serve others. No wonder Jesus established his church around a table.

Chapter 17: The Table of Blame

Not all our tables are good. For some people, the table triggers painful memories of abusive or absent family members. In this chapter I share the story of Samantha being raised in a home with an absent father. While she has been able to blame him for the bad things in her life, she must also blame him for the good in her life. For example, due to his absence growing up, Samantha wants to provide a place of hospitality for others. Instead of shunning the disciples after they abandoned him after the Last Supper, Jesus is creating a table for them in the world to come. Jesus takes the table, the place where he

was abandoned and turns it into a place of redemption. Who can you blame for your desire to redeem the table?

Part 3: Churches Around the Table

Up until this point, I have spent a significant amount of time discussing ways that the current structures of many evangelical churches do not align with the message they desire to share. Thus far I have given examples of places I have found church around the table outside of the contemporary understanding of a church gathering. With that said, there are many churches that use the table as a central medium of their worship. Here are a couple examples I have experienced.

Chapter 18: The Eucharistic Table

In this chapter I discuss my experience in the Anglican Church. I share about the importance of having the table be the centrality of focus for worship. Building theology around tables and food is ancient; both the ancient Jewish people and the early church shared their beliefs through food and table. The ritual of participating in the Eucharist weekly creates a helpful rhythm that centers me on what is important.

Chapter 19: The Storefront Church

When Jesus established his church around a table, I can only think that St. Lydia's Dinner Church is what Jesus had in mind. In this chapter I share about St. Lydia's Dinner Church community in Brooklyn, New York. I discuss the values of Millennials and how St. Lydia's connects with them. I explain my experience worshipping with them. This chapter helps to cast a vision of what it might look like to gather a church community around tables a food.

Part 4: Your Tables? [Not Yet Written]

Up until this point, the reader has learned about the big problem facing the church in America, specifically with the millennial generation; they no longer want to attend our current churches. While this generation is spiritual, they do not connect with the contemporary medium of church. The reader has also learned about the tables Chris has experienced in his life that have illuminated the importance and value of gathering as a church community. This last section will ask the reader what tables they have in their life that could help draw them back to the church.

Chapter 20:

In this chapter, I will ask the reader to look into the mirror. The whole point of sharing some of my experiences around the table was to help expand the reader's mind and to be able to see different tables in their own life that have helped to nurture and grow their faith. This chapter is all about application; how might the reader live differently and engage the church with renewed passion and commitment when they consider what it might look like to gather around tables and food.

Intended Readers:

The primary audience would include:

- Pastors
- Millennials who no longer attend church
- Those who are looking for a new expression of church
- Church planters
- Church leaders
- Seminary students

The secondary audience would include:

- The “nones” – those who claim no religious affiliation.
- Those looking to practice better hospitality in their life.

Manuscript: Section 2 and section 3 are completed. The completed book should be around 30,000 words. Four months will be needed to complete it.

Author Bio:

Christopher Lapp began his career as a College ministry minister in the Seattle area. He later moved to co-pastor a non-denominational church in Long Beach, California while completing his Master of Arts Degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. Upon graduation, he continued serving his congregation and community in Long Beach. He started his Doctoral Studies at Portland Seminary and began studying gathering church communities around tables and food.

In 2015, his family moved back to the Seattle area after the birth of their first child to be closer to their extended family. Since moving, Chris has served as an adjunct professor at a local university and currently works in the Seattle tech industry while worshipping and serving at the local Anglican Church in whatever capacity is needed. He is expected to complete his Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies from Portland Seminary under the tutelage of Leonard Sweet in 2017.

Chris has been married for 8 years to Samantha Lapp, Director of Children's Ministry at Holy Trinity Church in Edmonds, WA. They have two young children. He is an avid reader and writer, a want-to-be traveler, and committed to making and eating healthy food.

Publishing Credits: Lapp and written several blogs on his website and has been featured on Portland Seminary's blog.

Future Projects:

The Weakness of God: Rediscovering the Path to Inner Healing

Jesus redeemed the world through his death. In God's weakness, strength was brought to humanity. We live in a world that is always looking to boast in our strengths. However, the apostle Paul understood there was power in weakness – something he learned from his own life and from the life of Christ. In this book, Lapp unpacks the life-giving irony that weakness leads to strength.

The Gift of Pain: The Redemption Found While Living with Chronic Pain

After being diagnosed with a debilitating form of chronic arthritis, Lapp has been faced with the sorrow of suffering. In this memoir, Lapp takes the reader on a journey through the journey of his diagnosis and the lessons he has learned from it. While the pain has not left, his perspective has shifted to be able to find the gift in the pain.

Fathered: Lessons from the Fatherless

Losing his father at the age of twelve was one of the most devastating experiences Lapp has ever faced. In this memoir, Lapp takes the reader on the journey through the losing of his father at such a pivotal age. He discusses the lessons he has learned on his journey from being a fatherless teenager to beginning his own journey into fatherhood. Through the stories, we learn that Lapp was being Fathered all along by the one who calls Himself, "The Father to the fatherless."

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

I initially started this program with the intention of discussing more effective ways the church could engage with popular American culture. The church has been losing the culture wars for years in America and it has been turning my generation, the millennials, away from church. With this in mind, I started my research. They spent a considerable amount of time researching the early church and how they engaged culture. My studies led me to learn more about the ancient agape feast, or love meals, which was the hallmark of early church gatherings. I quickly began to see how these communities shaped the congregants' perspective toward loving and serving the other – especially through ancient Roman plagues and persecutions. This showed me the value of rediscovering this medium for future church gathering.

As I began to research my generation I quickly began to note how the values of the millennial generation would greatly compliment the rediscovery of church communities gathering around the table. With this in mind, I refocused of my dissertation to further study how the medium of ancient agape feasts compliments the values of the millennial generation and how agape feasts speak the language of a generation who has not rejected faith but the medium through which faith is presented. Studying semiotics under Dr. Leonard Sweet helped to reinforce the importance of building a framework for faith in the postmodern world that is experiential, participatory, image-rich, and connected. The table is one of the best mediums I know to connect all four of those aspects of faith in a way that effectively communicates the gospel to the millennial generation.

This dissertation, then, represents what it might look like to construct our church gatherings around tables and food instead of pulpits and pews. Using research from the early church's engagement with culture and the millennial disconnect from contemporary churches, I build the problem this dissertation seeks to find a solution to. After walking through other approaches to this issue, as seen through Phyllis Tickle, Leslie Newbigin, and Alan Hirsch, I offer my thesis of the table being an effective medium to communicate the gospel to the millennial generation in America.

I believe that by engaging the conversation about changing the medium through which the gospel is communicated by structuring the future of the church in the framework of the ancient Agape Feasts, my original topic of how the church can best engage with popular culture is answered. Around the table the church will learn to look into the eyes of the marginalized, the outcast, and the "other" and see that everyone is human. It is hard to have a fundamentalist binary belief system while eating and communing with people who don't see life the same way. The table provides the perfect environment to gain compassion and love for God and his image bearers.

I believe this dissertation is a great first step into exploring how the ancient Agape Feasts can be implemented in the future of the church. There has not been much study in this specific area and I believe this dissertation is a great contribution to a thin area of study and expertise. A helpful future area of study would be to research more in depth the liturgy of these ancient gatherings. Although I make mention of a few examples of the ancient table liturgies, it would be helpful to gain a fuller picture of what these gatherings looked like. Another area of future study would be to engage the effectiveness of Agape Feast type gathering currently happening in different parts of the world.

This dissertation has taught me a lot about the ancient church and it has also given me great hope for my generation, the millennials. More than ever, I believe the church needs to begin to look at how it can gather around tables and food. While this might not be a lucrative profession for my pastors, I believe this will create dynamic church communities that will be better equipped to love and serve an ever-diversifying world with the hope that is found the gospel of Jesus Christ. My hope is that my artifact, which is a book proposal, will open millennials to the conversation of church around the table and that it will inspire people to begin to reflect how they might create church communities around tables and food.

APPENDIX

**COME TO THE TABLE:
A MEMIOR OF A CHRISTIAN'S JOURNEY BACK TO CHURCH**

By Chris Lapp

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Part 1: No Change, No People

In this first section of my book, I will discuss the need for change in the American church today. This section will lay the foundation for my memoir to follow. It is vital to set the stage for the need for change and I will do so by roughly following the first and second section of my dissertation. This section will have three chapters.

Chapter 1: What Millennials Can Teach Us

Millennials are increasing not attending churches in America. The research shows they are spiritual but they have no desire to gather in contemporary church settings like the generations that have gone before them. They are longing for communities that value authenticity, intimacy, and justice. Millennials are the most diverse generation in American history and the first to grow up with the Internet and because of the virtual world they live in, they long to engage their spirituality through the physical world. Gathering as church communities around the table provides the space for Millennials to engage their spirituality through the physicality of the table. Opposed to the contemporary medium of churches gathering around a pulpit and stage, the table offers a medium for authenticity and intimacy to flourish.

Chapter 2: Learning from the Early Church

The early church knew how to engage the surrounding culture with the gospel. This can be seen through the way they cared for each other and in the diversity of their gatherings. They deeply valued community and knew how to thrive in a pluralistic world. As the future of the church considers how to live as faithful witnesses of the gospel in the post

modern pluralistic world, it is vital for the church to consider the fruit the ancient church experienced gathering in communities around tables and food.

Chapter 3: What Have Others Said?

Looking to those who have spent considerable time researching the future of the church, they understand there will be major shifts in the way churches gather in the future. This chapter will explore three respected voices that have done considerable research in the field of the future of church gatherings: Phyllis Tickle, Leslie Newbigin, and Alan Hirsch. Their research points to gatherings that create space for conversation, authentic connections within the context of smaller gatherings.

Part 2: My Tables

Introduction: Right Under Your Nose

For years they had followed Jesus; they listened to him teach, watched him live his message, and experienced both the joys and challenges of everyday life with him. They dreamed about what their life would be like as this movement grew and they wondered what their role would be in it.

However, when we meet some of these disciples in Luke 24, their dreams have come to a crashing end. These disciples were leaving behind everything they had committed themselves to for the last several years. They were literally walking away from Jerusalem—the place Jesus was crucified and killed just days prior.

The years spent with Jesus were life changing. They experienced a love unlike anything they had ever known. Watching Jesus be crucified elicited the bittersweet mingling of horror and inspiration within them—horror at the violence of the act and inspiration at Jesus' commitment to his message. But what were they left with? Changed hearts? Yes—but what about this movement? Could it really continue? If so, what would it look like?

As the disciples walked away from Jerusalem and headed home to gather their thoughts they met a man along the road who was curious about their conversation. He began to ask them questions about the events that had taken place in Jerusalem days before. The disciples were flabbergasted that this man had not heard the news. Did he live under a rock? After schooling the stranger with what had happened, the man began to talk them

through the scriptures, encouraging them by telling them that none of the events of the past few days should have taken them by surprise because the scripture stories point to these events. The disciples intended to give the stranger a lesson in current events and the stranger ended up giving them a lesson in their own scriptures!

By the time the disciples and their walking companion entered the town of Emmaus, the disciples were most likely dreaming about going home, putting their feet up, and either trying to forget about the last few days or trying to figure out who this mysterious stranger was. When it was time to turn off the main road to head into their neighborhood, the disciples followed the ancient Jewish culture of hospitality and invited the stranger over to their home and to eat with them. He agreed.

By the time the food was prepared it was late. They all lounged around the low-slung table filled with food and illuminated by flickering candlelight. When it came time to give thanks for the food, the stranger jumped in to become the host—something a guest would never do.

He took the freshly baked loaf of bread on the table, still warm with steam rising out of it, and lifted it into the air. As he lifted the bread into the air the heavy and dirty sleeves of his robe fell back to his elbows, exposing his hands and wrists. It was in this moment of sitting at the table, breaking bread, and exposing his wounded hands that the disciples recognized who had been with them all along—this man was no stranger, this man was Jesus.

The disciples didn't know that Jesus had been with them the whole time.

Up until this point, everything they had hoped for and anticipated was going to happen had not come to pass. The church they thought would be built was not going to happen. The future of the movement they had committed their lives to seemed in trouble—as if it died when Jesus died.

But the church did not die when Jesus was crucified. Just like the disciples did not know Jesus was with them the whole time on the road, the setting for Christian worship was always with them—at their dining table. The future of the church was not going to be modeled around a temple/synagogue but around a table and a meal. Christian worship was going to incarnate around the gathering point of every family—the table.

The Latin word for wound is *vulnus* or vulnerable. When Jesus showed the disciples his wounds around the table he chose to be vulnerable. And it was in his vulnerability that the disciples experienced a divine revelation of God and a renewed hope for the church. It is with this in mind that I would like to open myself to you, the reader, and be *vulnerable*. I want to share my own story about how, after pastoring for ten years, I discovered that church was less about meeting in auditoriums and much more about gathering around tables. Church had been happening right under my nose my whole life and I didn't even realize it—church had been happening at the table.

My belief is that Jesus is always closer to us than we think and I believe the same about church. Here is my story about food and tables and some of the different tables I have experienced in my life. My prayer for you is that in hearing my story about finding church at the table, you too, will be able to find Jesus and his church around the tables in your own life.

Chapter 4: Shema

For thousands of years, the Jewish people have prayed the Old Testament prayer called the *Shema*, which in Hebrew literally means “*listen*”. In many ways this prayer is at the heart of the Jewish faith—spoken before bed and upon waking up. The prayer is often sung and invites the Jewish people to center their hearts through listening to the prayer, learning to listen to their own hearts, listening to each other, and listening to the whispers of God.

The prayer goes like this:

Hear [listen], O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.¹

¹ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 [Emphasis mine].*

The prayer calls people to love God with everything by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Then the prayer calls people to hold this commandment to the closest part of them by saying, “And these words that I command you today shall be *on your heart*.”

The prayer then invites people to speak of their faith to their children by saying, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

There are many ways people of faith communicate their faith to their children. Christian churches often use Sunday school and Catechism or confirmation classes to help teach children about the faith. While I learned a lot of principles about God in these classes, it was not the place I experienced God. It might have been the place I learned *about* God but not the place I learned to love God.

As a child I often experienced God in nature and the same is true today. And while I believe this is the case for most people, I also believe that ritual and liturgy is important to do together in groups where we learn to love God in the context of community.

Although reciting the Shema was not a practiced ritual in my childhood, there was a prayer ritual that I remember very clearly that was often practiced at my grandparents’

home. It was a Scandinavian table prayer that we'd often sing as a family as we gathered for meals. It goes like this:

Be present at our table Lord

Be here and everywhere adored.

These mercies bless and grant that we

May strengthened for thy service be.

Amen.

As our family sang this prayer we'd gather around a table filled with food, eating my grandfather's famous Swedish meatballs and homemade creamy mashed potatoes. I can still hear my grandfather's gentle bass and my grandmother's cheerful yet calming alto lead the family in singing this Scandinavian table prayer. By the time we reached the "amen" there was a hollowed resonance that filled the room. From the youngest child, simply watching, to the younger parents honoring their older parents' tradition, the whole family ended with the "amen" in perfect unity and tenor.

It was rituals like this that nurtured my faith as a child. This was not only the practice of singing a prayer, it was the practice of *listening* to my family pass along their faith to the next generation.

As we gathered around the table to taste the goodness of God's blessings, we also had the opportunity to *listen* to God's blessings. I believe experiences like these are what the

Celtic Christians had in mind when they spoke of thin places, places where heaven is near to earth. Growing up, my grandparents' table was a thin and sacred place.

Having my childhood faith nurtured in a Scandinavian Lutheran church in Seattle, I remember trying to keep quiet in the pews while listening to the sermon and worshipping through the liturgy. My cousins and I would draw pictures, poke each other, and sometimes (okay, if I'm being honest, more often than not) our parents would give us the eye or the subtle elbow jab in the side demanding our quiet. Though I didn't understand much of the liturgy I began to learn an important life lesson: patience—patience until we could run out of the sanctuary and scurry our way down to the basement where Scandinavian treats like krumkake waited for us. Our sticky fingers would fill our plates while elderly church ladies watched to make sure we never took too much, although they rarely enforced a limit.

After gathering our loot we would assemble around a table. We no longer had to be quiet and orderly like we did in the sanctuary. We were able to talk, laugh, eat, swing our legs under our chairs, and even *listen* to our parents share stories with other congregants while smelling the remnants of warm coffee on their breath.

It was at the table that I would *listen* to Captain Dale share stories of being a fisherman.

It was at the table that I would *hear* my parents share stories about themselves that I had never heard before.

And it was at the table that I would ingest meatballs, krumkake, and lefse – and while my taste buds were overwhelmed with the flavors of this goodness, I was reminded with each bite that this bountiful feast was made with love and grace.

Growing up I often found that church was what happened after “church;” it was the space where I learned to interact with adults, play with my peers, and feast on the best of foods with a deep abiding knowledge that Jesus was near.

Church often happened either at my grandparents’ table or at coffee hour. It was in these places where I learned to *listen* and to love the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my might. *Shema*.

Chapter 5: Blue Formica

The New Testament often speaks of adoption. The early Christians believed that God, through the person of Jesus, was reaching for both Jewish and non-Jewish people. In fact the apostle Paul penned the following words in his letter to the Roman church. He said,

“This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What’s next, Papa?” God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what’s coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If

*we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!"*²

Part of the good news of the Gospel was that the invitation was open to all people to accept the adoption offered to them. No longer would the characters in the bible simply be removed religious figures; Abraham, among others, would now be one's great, great, great... grandfather. The invitation was to join a family and the central gathering point for that family was Christ's table. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he offered a seat at the table for all who wanted to join. The offer of adoption includes a seat at the table.

What if we formed our churches in such a way that we invited people into a family and gave them a seat at the table? One of those tables for me is my family cabin. Located about an hour and a half outside of Seattle, it is the perfect distance from home. My wife Samantha's grandfather and his family built this sanctuary on an island only a few feet from the beach. From the outside, it is nothing to speak of; the cabin is tiny. However, don't let this one bedroom, one bathroom (outside showers only) fool you – this place has hosted a countless number of large events and sleepovers.

At the cabin the smell of the beach is intoxicating. The scent of the salty air combined with seaweed and driftwood fills the air. In the summer you are greeted by the smell of warm blackberries roasting in the heat of the sun on the hill behind the cabin. You can

² Peterson, *The Message Remix: The Bible In Contemporary Language*, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress, 2003), Romans 8:15-17.

hear the consistent soundtrack of seagulls circling above and the sound of waves lapping against the bulkhead during high tide. And in the evening, the smell of smoke from the fire and the crackling of the wood become the smell, light, warmth, and chorus of this sacred space.

The tables at the cabin are nothing fancy. Outside a few old picnic tables rest in front of the beach; inside there is a large blue Formica table with blue benches on either side. When there are lots of people spending the night this table has functioned as a sleeping surface—below it and sometimes even on top of it.

In the morning the table is surrounded by quiet, sleepy, and groggy voices waking up to the day around them. Some are helping in the kitchen to make breakfast, some are sitting and staring off into the distance, others are reading, and some have gone for an early morning beach walk. Wherever people are, that old blue Formica table is the cabin's anchor point. Sometimes we'll eat around it, other times it will become the buffet—but everyone always circles back to it.

We have blown out the candles of countless birthday cakes on that table, we have given words of encouragement, shared memories, played games, laughed, and cried all around this old table. I'm sure any designer would walk into the little cabin and suggest a different table but what they might not know is that this table has roots—roots that travel deep into the collective soul of our family. Some tables simply serve their purpose, others become altars of life and grace.

Unfortunately the tables in many of our churches are simply utilitarian—not altars nor portals to the Divine.

During my doctoral studies I had the opportunity to participate in a study visit to Cambridge University in the UK. One night after a long day of class some classmates and I decided to go for a walk around town. We walked around Jesus College and found a non-descript little door with a small almost unnoticeable sign above it that said “Chapel”. Curious, we tried to open the door and to our surprise, the door opened. The room was dark so we felt around the wall for a light switch and upon finding it we turned on the lights. As the space began to slowly illuminate, we realized to our great surprise that we had just stumbled into a huge old stone chapel.

The stone around the threshold of the door was deeply worn by years of feet passing through it. After walking around we learned that this was the chapel where Thomas Cramner, author of the Book of Common Prayer, attended church. We also learned that the chapel was completed in 1245.

As I walked around I was deeply moved by the sense of gravity I felt in the floor. It was as if I could feel the years of prayers, years of struggle, and years of celebration that took place within these walls. It was as if the building had *roots*.

In a very real way, our old blue Formica table at our cabin has the same feeling. The events that take place at that table become sacraments and it is very easy to see each of the seven sacraments of the church happening around it.

Inviting those who don't have a tight-knit family to join in around the table becomes the sacrament of baptism – immersing them in the grace found at the table

Breaking bread around the table becomes the sacrament of Eucharist – filling us with thanksgiving for all God has given.

Laughing hysterically during a game becomes our sacrament of confession – confession that we are only human.

Being able to call this table my own becomes the sacrament of holy matrimony – because this table became mine through marriage.

Singing happy birthday becomes the sacrament of confirmation – confirming one's place in our family tradition.

Engaging in deep conversations about God and wrestling through faith and doubt becomes one's first steps in engaging the sacrament of ordination – ordained to help set the table for others.

Gathering around the table in prayer for those in need becomes the sacrament of anointing the sick—praying for God’s mercies and loving kindness.

The old blue Formica table is not just a table.

It’s the place where the people of God, both through birthright and adoption, gather to meet with the Divine.

It’s a place with gravity and it’s a place with roots – roots that go deep enough to tap into the divine spring of living water.

And it’s the place where, *“God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what’s coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance!”*³

Chapter 6: Kirk’s Table

I have always been intrigued by the story of Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke. As Luke records it, we learn Jesus was passing through the village of Bethany when he stopped by Mary and Martha’s home for a meal. I’m always struck by how Jesus finds a way over to people’s homes for a meal. The story goes like this:

Now as they [the disciples] went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat

³ Romans 8:17.

at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."⁴

From the story we learn that Mary sat and listened to Jesus' stories while Martha worked to prepare the meal in the kitchen. Martha is usually given the bad rap for working hard in the kitchen. However, I don't think Martha's problem was cooking a meal and I don't think Mary was right for spending time with Jesus. I believe Martha's issue was in how she engaged the situation. Martha's problem was that she was not enjoying the very gift she wanted to give. Jesus was more concerned that Martha live an unhurried life. Jesus was using Mary as a model of someone who was choosing into a posture of peace and rest.

We have all had the experience of being inspired by someone like Mary, someone who was true to him or her self and did not let anything or anyone rob them of being fully alive.

⁴ Luke 10:38-42 [Emphasis Mine].

When I was a pimply-faced, insecure sixteen year old I walked into an evangelical youth group for the first time. Days prior, I had what many evangelicals call the born-again experience. My friends thought I had gone off the religious deep end and I felt they would not be able to understand my recent faith experience. Therefore, I found one of my few evangelical acquaintances and asked him to bring me to church with him. The following Sunday night I walked into a mega church for the first time. I was used to the Scandinavian Lutheran Church of my childhood where fisherman modeled the ceiling of the sanctuary after the haul of a boat; I was used to stained glass and the smell of old rooms. When I walked into this mega church I was greeted by cinder blocks, glossy posters of upcoming events, and projector screens. It felt foreign and a little uncomfortable.

My friend and I walked into the youth group room, which was full of teenagers. The music was loud, the people were mostly beautiful, and lots of them were playing foosball. I was excited that there were lots of people who I figured would understand my recent religious conversion and equally terrified by the newness of this unknown culture. To make it more uncomfortable, a few minutes after walking in the room a middle-aged man in a motorized wheelchair rolled up to me. He seemed to have uncontrollable muscle spasms and food stained jeans – I later learned he had Cerebral Palsy. He rolled up to me

with a large smile on his face as if he had something to say. Confused, I stood there trying not to make eye contact for more than a second. To an insecure sixteen year old who felt out of his element and who was trying to make a good first impression on this newfound group of mostly beautiful religious peers, having my first experience with a severely handicapped man made this moment feel like a nightmare. He started eagerly moving his head around with different gestures and I simply stood there not sure what to do. A guy who was with him told me to follow his nose because he was trying to talk to me by spelling letters with his nose. It took me the next five minutes to read, “Hi my name is Kirk. What’s your name?” He was in not in a rush and never became impatient with me taking so long to read him. This was the beginning of a long friendship and mentorship.

Over the next several years, Kirk taught me a lot about life, God, and church. With Kirk things take longer and feeding Kirk takes time. When I was seventeen Kirk invited a group of friends out to eat at a nice restaurant. As we gathered around the table Kirk looked at all of us and said with his nose, “Take your time, order whatever you want, we will be here for a long time.” This was no special occasion; this was a meal around a table to simply and slowly celebrate the goodness of God and I have never forgotten it.

I've been on several trips with Kirk, from all over the Seattle area to driving around the States, to visiting and providing aid to impoverished communities in Mexico. These times with Kirk were life changing and life slowing. Some of my favorite times were those around a table.

I remember the first time Kirk asked me to feed him. How would I do it? I'd watched several others do it but would I be able to feed him without choking him or accidentally jabbing him in the back of his throat with a fork if his muscles contorted? With extreme focus I lifted a bite of burrito into his mouth. After a number of bites, it was time to give him a drink. Sitting around the table Kirk would often ask who wanted to give him a drink of water by asking, "Who wants to drown me?" My first time giving Kirk water was nerve-racking to say the least. Pouring the cup into his mouth was like a baptism of immersion. After he could not swallow anymore he looked at me with eyes saying, "Stop now!" It wasn't graceful but over time I got better. Feeding Kirk took time. Slowing a teenager down by choice isn't an easy task but at the table with Kirk I wanted to take my time.

Countless times waiters and waitresses were moved to tears as they saw a group of teenage boys spending time with and learning from a middle aged man with Cerebral

Palsy who could not verbally speak or physically feed himself. There is also the myriad of times at Mexican restaurants where we secretly told the wait staff it was Kirk's birthday. Towards the end of our meals the singing would start, the giant sombrero would be placed Kirk's head, and we'd be crying with laughter while Kirk would be shaking his head; rolling his eyes at us. I think we celebrated Kirk's birthday a few times every year.

Kirk would take a ragtag group of teenage boys to churches all over the world to help with ministry and learn about God. I've gone on many of these trips with Kirk and many were life changing. But as I reflect on these trips the most valuable times were not those in churches, listening to sermons and singing songs in an auditorium. The most valuable times with Kirk were those where I simply spent time with him, learning to feed him and give voice to his words.

When I picture church with Kirk memories of church services don't rise to the forefront of my mind. Reflecting on those years, I now see a group of teenage boys gathered around a table at an Applebee's eating way to many boneless barbeque buffalo wings with Kirk at the head of the table. We'd sit for hours and listen to Kirk, through the nearest peer translator, he'd slowly tell us stories about the goodness of God and at the end he'd often pay for our meals. He was never in a rush; he lived an unhurried life.

Gathered around the table I learned how to listen, how to be generous, and how to slow down enough to love this middle aged man with Cerebral Palsy and the God he worshipped.

Chapter 7: The Family Table

Sometimes we are given the opportunity to meet a person whose very life is a profound inspiration and a living sermon – someone that chooses life while the reality of death looms. My friend Ennio is one of those people.

Ennio has leukemia but lives like he has been handed a golden ticket – a ticket to live life to the fullest and help others do the same. We met when my wife and I moved to Southern California to take a pastoral position in Long Beach. Ennio was a longtime member of the church.

We weren't at the church long when Ennio and his wife Dawn invited us over for dinner with a group of others from the church. We gladly accepted and were anticipating the opportunity to have dinner at their house because we had heard just how amazing their cooking was. Being that they are Italian, we were looking forward to an amazing Italian meal.

When we arrived, the small group of six greeted us with hugs, aprons, and red wine. Music was playing and the big kitchen was a beautiful mess. We weren't coming over to

simply eat; we were invited to help create the meal. Spaghetti and Italian salad were on the menu with pizza as appetizers.

Ennio taught us how to kneed and role pizza dough and we experimented with different prosciuttos and cheeses as toppings. We drank wine and ate our pizzas around the kitchen island while we learned how to make the perfect spaghetti sauce – Ennio’s family recipe.

When the sauce was perfect, we moved to the table where we communed around the best spaghetti I’ve ever tasted. In traditional Italian fashion, we finished dinner with our salad. For dessert we poured sweet port wine over vanilla ice cream. After the meal we gathered in the kitchen to clean and sing. When my wife and I drove home that evening, we felt like we were part of their family – a family we didn’t know well before dinner that evening. I don’t recall ever saying grace over our meal, although we probably did. But this meal didn’t need to be graced; the whole evening was graced with joy, love, and gratefulness.

Spending years in seminary and going too countless church conferences didn’t teach me what I learned that night. As a pastor I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to make new people feel welcome; I spent a significant amount of time trying to make church feel like family. All the work I put into this endeavor was accomplished around an Italian’s family table in one evening.

When many of our churches are set up like auditoriums or concert halls we have to fight the near impossible battle of communicating a message different than the message people receive when they simply walk into the building. Auditoriums are hard pressed to communicate the value of family, to communicate that you belong here. Auditoriums communicate that one can passively watch a show. The pastor often spends more time proclaiming from a pulpit instead of inviting the congregation into participation and engagement.

However, the table was built to communicate family. At the table you look into the eyes of others – not the backs of heads. At the table you share stories and struggles; at the table you eat the food you have just worked to prepare. The table becomes a fragrant worship offering to the Creator of all the wonderful smells, tastes, and textures sitting before you.

The earliest church communities gathered around tables and food. For the first three hundred years of church history, church gatherings consisted of breaking bread, praying, singing, giving to the poor, and sharing stories. Churches shifted away from table gathering to meeting in church buildings and auditoriums between the years 300 and 400AD. While churches have continued to gathered in a fairly similar ways since then, I believe the future of the church will return to this ancient way of gathering around the table. This will not be the first time followers of God have returned to the table.

After suffering years of exile in Babylon, the Israelites were learning to reestablish their life in Jerusalem in the mid 400s BC. They had spent years living in a foreign land. They were away from their traditions and culture. Life was challenging and the elders worked hard to make sure the younger generations didn't lose their family stories and traditions. Through a series of miraculous events, the Israelites found themselves returning to the land they loved and knew so well. However, things were not the same. Their homes were destroyed and their city wall was demolished. The book of Nehemiah in the Hebrew Bible recounts the story of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and its culture. Nehemiah tells the reader the motivated Israelites rebuilt their city astonishingly fast. Once the wall was rebuilt the people gathered together in the town square to commemorate and celebrate they were finally home and their city was rebuilt.

After reading publicly from their sacred scriptures, something they were not able to do while living in Babylonian exile, Ezra the priest and scribe, Nehemiah the governor, and the Levites, who were the religious teachers, ordered the people with the following instructions,

*“Go home and prepare a feast, holiday food and drink; and share it with those who don't have anything: This day is holy to God. Don't feel bad. The joy of God is your strength!”*⁵

⁵ Peterson, *The Message Remix*, Nehemiah 8:10.

Culture is often tasted and experienced through the table, through the meal. The Israelites first command was to go home and celebrate through feasting. The people needed to be reminded that they were apart of a family.

When the church invites people to the table, it reminds us that we are part of a family and a story. Our family recipes create the fragrance that embeds into the fabric of our very being telling us who and whose we are.

When Samantha and I left our friend Dawn and Ennio's house, we had praise on our lips and our fragrant offering of tomatoes and garlic embedded into the fabric of our clothes. It was then that we remembered the gift of the family of God and that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is with us.

Chapter 8: The Table of Forgiveness

The flickering flames illuminated the meal on the table and the faces of those sitting around it; Jesus had gathered with his disciples around the table for what would be the last time. The time had almost come for him to walk the road of the cross – to suffer and die. However, before it was time to take the physical suffering of the cross and its torture, Jesus needed to face a different kind of suffering; one of Jesus's twelve closest friends and apprentices was going to betray him and Jesus knew it. Many of us in this situation would crumple under the pressure. However, in the midst of the sorrow of betrayal, Jesus served Judas.

In an unprecedented act, during their meal, Jesus rose and took off his outer garment, essentially leaving only his undergarments on. This was a sign of intimacy or into-me-see. In the midst of betrayal, instead of protecting himself, Jesus exposed himself – he became vulnerable.

Jesus grabbed a bucket of water and put a towel around his waist; he was going to wash the disciples feet around the table. In ancient tradition, no Jewish person could ask another Jewish person to wash his or her feet. This was reserved for a slave; someone you regarded as lesser. With the full knowledge that Judas would betray him, Jesus still washed Judas' filthy feet; feet caked in dust, mud, sweat, and animal excrement. Jesus gave Judas the dignitary of honoring him as human and would treat him no differently than any other friend. Showing humanity the power of love, Jesus reached for and honored for someone who did not have the ability to reciprocate the sacrifice.

It had been 15 years since I had last seen my Grandfather; I was 27 and working hard to heal my inner self and build a healthy foundation to start a family without unforgiveness living in my heart. I had seen the damage that unforgiveness does to the heart and I did not want to pass that kind of baggage to my future children. I knew I was still holding my grandfather in contempt for the pain he had caused my family fifteen years prior. I wanted to be free from the burden of bitterness and the stickiness of unforgiveness.

The last time I had seen my grandfather was when my father died when I was 12 years old. My paternal grandfather treated my family horribly during the already painful season

following my father's death. Through my teenage years and into my twenties I had worked to release the contempt I felt towards him but I still believed there was more work to be done – I wanted to engage a better and more redemptive story of forgiveness.

I woke up one morning and decided it was time to try to find a way to contact him. I'm not sure what pushed me to action, I just knew it was time to begin the process. I didn't have a phone number, an address, and I didn't even know if he was still alive. I searched online and found nothing so I decided to call a mutual relative to see if they had his contact information. Our mutual relative gave me the number they had but told me that they hadn't communicated with him in years and frankly didn't even know if he was alive. My search ended that day with nothing but dead ends and I wondered if it was meant to be.

The next day I was driving home from church in the late afternoon and my phone rang with the number being a from a Florida area code. I answered, only to hear the voice of my grandfather – a voice that only existed in the recesses of my memory. It felt like I was hearing the voice of someone I thought had died long ago. We awkwardly talked on the phone for about a half hour and while he still sounded like the angry old man I knew all those years earlier, it was fairly pleasant.

Apparently the day after I called our mutual relatives, he called them out of the blue for the first time in years simply to catch up. Shocked, they told him that I was trying to reach him and they gave him my number.

After getting off the phone I wasn't sure what the next step would be. After 15 years of no contact it was hard to imagine building a relationship over the phone with a man in his eighties who lived in on the other side of the country; especially with someone I had no common memories with since I was 12 and most of which were not pleasant.

After a few months of processing this phone call, Samantha and I decided we needed to go to Florida to visit him. I didn't know the condition of his health and I figured I had a window to visit so I could release the burden of unforgiveness I had held since being a child. I called to ask if we could visit. Surprising, he told us we could come to visit in a few weeks. We quickly bought our hotel and plane tickets and once the date was set the fear set in.

Once we arrived we called him and told him we were in Florida. Apparently I was not alone in feeling fear – he started to back out of wanting to see me. After being in Florida for two days and not seeing him, I began wondering if it was going to happen. In the middle of the afternoon on the third day of our trip, I got a call; he was ready to see us. He asked to meet at a Denny's Restaurant and we agreed. I find it amazing that some of the most important conversations of our life happen around tables and food.

We pulled up into the Central Florida Denny's and saw him waiting for us. My stomach sank but I pressed forward. I had 3000 miles between here and home pushing me into that restaurant – I wasn't going to turn back now.

We walked in and sat at a non-descript beige table in an almost empty dining room at two in the afternoon. As we exchanged awkward pleasantries I examined his face; a face I knew well as a child; a face that represented the wonderful memories of my father and a face that represented the pain he caused our family. I examined him in the way I would if a dead person was brought back to life. I can't remember the food I ordered but I can remember the table. I remember sitting with my elbows on the table, observing him as he shared.

About halfway through our time I felt it was time to move beyond pleasantries into the deeper purpose of this meeting. I started to share why I had traveled across the country to see him. I told him that I was choosing to forgive him for the pain he caused our family. Even though my voice was shaky and my palms were sweating, I gave him the dignity of looking into his in the eyes as I opened my heart. It felt like I dropped a heavy backpack of unforgiveness on that table, never to pick it up again. He looked at me and was dumbfounded. I don't think he was expecting me to say that, and although the guilt and pain was shouting through his eyes, he couldn't muster the strength to receive the gift I had just given him. It was as if the pain was too great so he changed the subject.

We sat and talked at that table for almost two hours. When we got up to leave, he shook my hand and I said good-bye and we walked back to our car. I watched him get into his car through my rearview mirror as we drove away. I never saw him again; he died three months later.

Some tables are beautiful because of how they are decorated and others are beautiful because of the people around them. This was different. This table with its laminate top, half used ketchup bottle, and glass salt and pepper shakers looked the way you would expect any Denny's in Central Florida to look like and the person on the other side of this table represented years of pain, sorrow, and fear.

However, this table became the sacred place that allowed me to look into the eyes of my enemy. It allowed me to notice the beautiful blue color of his eyes and it allowed me to examine his face –a beautiful gift because parts of his face reminded me of my own father's face - a man that I still miss with all my heart.

This table gave me the opportunity to look at my grandfather and for the first time, exchange my anger with sympathy, pity, and love. I learned forgiveness at this table and I will never be the same because of that nondescript *alter*, I mean table, in Central Florida.

Chapter 9: Tire Rims

When I was pastoring in Long Beach California, our church decided to restart our global missions outreach. We had several possibilities of places we could go and one of them was Zambia, Africa. We had a congregant, Robb who was a Doctor and had moved there years earlier to work with AIDS patients and his wife Naomi was working with churches to help encourage pastors. This seemed like a perfect place to partner and assist in their work. The church sent my wife Samantha and I to scout out different ministry opportunities – it would both be our first time going to Africa and we were thrilled.

We had a busy schedule filled with meetings with pastors and ministry leaders. We were also leading a few church conferences and spending time with our hosts to discuss what our partnership in their work could look like.

One of the pastors we met with was named Bruce. He was the pastor of a church named Center of Grace in the slums outside of the capital of Lusaka. One of our church conferences was going to be held in Bruce's church. It had a few cinder block pillars holding up an incomplete corrugated metal roof. The walls were a mix of straw floor mats and black garbage bags. There were plastic chairs for seats on the dirt floor and huge speakers that always had the volume maxed out – causing distortion even when simply talking into the microphone; I'm sure my voice was heard throughout the whole neighborhood.

During one of the early afternoon sessions at the pastor's conference that I was not speaking, I decided to sneak away and walk around, getting to know the neighborhood, the lay of the land, and simply soak up the fact that I was in Africa – a place I had always dreamed of going. I walked around the grounds of the church and decided to take a quick stop at the bathroom. There was a small house near the outhouse where the church caretaker lived. As I walked past the house I saw a group of women huddled around a fire on the backside of the house. Curious I walked over to them. They were cooking a large pot of Nshima, a thick porridge made from maize flour, over the fire. They were busy making lunch for the participants of church conference.

Because English is the country's primary language, I could understand the women well. They were sharing life with each other and talking about the struggles of daily life living in the slums. They invited me to sit and talk with them. We talked about life in Zambia and life in the United States. Some of the women had children wrapped around their backs while others were stirring the giant pot of Nshima. Some of the women looked middle age or older but none of them were over thirty—life in the slums is just that difficult.

From where I was sitting, I was able to have one eye on the conference happening in the church. I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing something that I was needed for. As I sat and talked with the women, I felt relaxed and comfortable. However, within the conference, there was an expectation as a minister to deliver a gripping message and captivate the people's attention with a "word from the Lord." Yet out around the backside of the church caretaker's house the only expectation was to be present and occasionally help stir the giant pot on Nshima. We sat in a circle, looking at each other and we shared stories; in the conference people sat in rows, watching the speaker.

In the Gospel of John chapter 17, Jesus prays that his children would be one like He and the Father are one. He prayed,

I'm praying not only for them

But also for those who will believe in me

Because of them and their witness about me.
The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.
Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you've sent me and loved them
In the same way you've loved me.⁶

Unfortunately, there have been more divisions in the history church than one can count – people oftentimes seem more committed to their ideas about God than the people or the God behind those ideas. It is easy to become divided when we gather in rows and listen to the professional tell us what to think. It is easy to become committed to an idea and detach it from the flesh and bone reality of our interactions with others.

As a pastor I experienced many times when people thought of me as a brand that stands for an idea or worldview; I was a living representation of a “belief.” An example of this happened during a recent election cycle when I spoke critically about a candidate in one of my blog posts. I was met with many different kinds of responses but most notably I

⁶ Peterson, *The Message Remix*, John 17: 20-23.

received a lot of feedback from former congregants along the lines of, “I would have thought more of you.” While nothing I said would have come as a surprise to my friends and family, it was responses like this that made me realize that although I had journeyed with many of these congregants for years, they did not know me. Many assumed I thought just like them.

I wonder if one of the reasons we don’t have unity in our churches is because we don’t spend the time to sit around the table with each other. We spend so much time boosting up our beliefs through the proclamation of ideas that we don’t spend the time engaging the difficult work of getting to know our brothers and sisters in Christ around a table and a meal.

When people go on dates, they often go to a restaurant; they sit at a table, eat, and share life together—they get to know each other. Most people don’t go to concerts on first dates because it doesn’t provide an environment to get to know the other. Unfortunately, many of our churches look more like concert venues than restaurants.

When I sat with the women around the fire, I looked into their eyes and listened to their stories. As I shared, they listened and asked questions. I sat with the women for over an hour and we got to know each other. I was able to be *me*. I was not “pastor,” I was simply and liberatingly *Chris*. I think it is a lot easier to fulfill Christ’s prayer of being one when we spend time getting to know the people behind our ideas and beliefs.

Even though I was one of the Pastors speaking at this conference, I found myself grateful to have stumbled upon the women cooking the conference meal. As I talked with the women, I watched the people sitting in the conference and I thought about how much more I would rather get to know these women than speaking to a large group of people who will never get to know me.

Towards the end of my time with the women they said it was time to take the vat of porridge off the fire. Three women picked it up off the fire only to expose that it was sitting on an old tire rim filled with hot coals. God's people circled around a tire rim filled with coals—it is a picture I will never forget.

This table in Africa did not have four legs and a top; this table look like an old tire rim filled with coals, sitting in the dirt. This tire rim became the medium by which I was able to peer into the soul of the other and become *one* with a group of women I didn't know hours earlier. I wonder if our churches would be more united if we spent the time to get to know and love our neighbors through investing in tables instead of auditoriums? Even tire rims in the dirt work.

Chapter 10: Thanksgiving

For a lot Americans Thanksgiving is the time of homecoming. It's as if there is a homing device planted on us that starts to beep near the fourth Thursday of November. I love Thanksgiving; in fact there is a part of me that enjoys this holiday more than Christmas. Thanksgiving has remained mostly pure, focused on family, thankfulness, and feasting unlike the extreme commercialization of Christmas.

When I was eighteen a friend and I decided to move to the Southern Mexican state of Oaxaca to work at a Mission Base for five months. We both did manual labor and I taught English courses to indigenous middle school aged children. It was one of the most difficult and transformative experiences I had at that point in my young life. I had multiple bouts of terrible illness, which only compounded the feeling of extreme homesickness I already felt.

As the calendar neared the holidays, the pain of homesickness increased. I missed my family, I missed cold weather, and I missed American food. We came up with an idea. What if we gathered all the Americans who lived on the mission base and celebrated Thanksgiving together? It would be a feast and we were so excited - finally a meal without tortillas and beans. We started to come up with a menu for the evening. Laura, one of the nurses who lived at the mission base was from Mississippi and offered to host our dinner at her house and she offered to make baked apples with cinnamon and sugar. Someone else offered to make mashed potatoes. Each part of the menu came together, except for the turkey. Buying a butterball turkey at a Southern Mexican grocery store was out of the question.

There was one place we could get a turkey but it wasn't going to be conveniently wrapped in plastic with the bag of gizzards tucked nicely inside. We had a number of turkeys that lived on our property; they were ugly, noisy, and completely awful to live with. They would gobble outside my widow at 5am every morning and I spent most

mornings dreaming about sending these birds to poultry heaven. But now I had a justifiable reason to make my mornings more restful: Thanksgiving.

We decided to kill a turkey and somehow I became the one tasked to do it. I had never killed anything bigger than a fish before, how on earth was I going to be able to kill a warm-blooded bird. Sparing the details, this killing became a group effort with me “completing the task.” My friend Tyler cleaned the carcass and prepared it for cooking. I felt horrible for killing the turkey for a good 10 minutes afterwards and then my male ego began to inflate to an embarrassing level and I began to believe I could scale mountains.

It was the smallest and saddest turkey I had ever seen. It could have easily been mistaken for a large chicken. But it didn't matter; we contributed an offering to our Thanksgiving meal.

That evening I put on my nicer clothes and walked to Laura's house. We joined the group of people cooking. We basted our bird with pride and chopped vegetables. After the sun had set, the meal was ready.

We joined together around the table and thanked God for his blessings in our lives. We feasted on gamey turkey, creamy casseroles, mashed potatoes, and baked apples. For a busy mission base with lots of work to be done, we postured ourselves in a lounged position; we took our time. We laughed and told stories and we joked about the size of our turkey.

I felt at *home*. For the first time in months I didn't feel homesick.

My generation, the millennials are one of the most transient generations in American history, yet ironically we value family above most things. Many come from divorced families and live far away from home. We want a home. This would seem like a great opportunity for churches to become places of family and rest for a homesick generation. However more millennials are leaving churches than those who are those coming into them. Why?

I don't think we are interested in being handed a gift bag after our first visit to a church with a coffee card in it. We are tired to being told what to believe by a preacher who we don't know. And while we enjoy singing songs, we are weary of sitting in the back of an auditorium with no time to get to know the person sitting next to us.

We already live in a virtual world and we are not impressed by the technology used in sanctuaries. We are also exhausted of being told that we are the problem with the church. And for as much as we are told that we are a selfish generation if we are invited into a compelling story of justice and reconciliation and we will open our hearts and wallets, we really will.

What we really want is a seat at the table; we are homesick. We want the opportunity to be known and to be *home*.

In Psalm 107, a psalm that became particularly loved by many Israelites after their return from exile in the sixth century B.C.E., the Psalmist proclaims,

Some wandered in the wilderness,

lost and homeless.

Hungry and thirsty,

they nearly died.

“Lord, help!” they cried in their trouble,

and he rescued them from their distress.

He led them straight to safety,

to a city where they could live.

Let them praise the Lord for his great love

and for the wonderful things he has done for them.

For he satisfies the thirsty

and fills the hungry with good things.⁷

For the Millennial generation lost in the wilderness of information overload, virtual overstimulation, and a paralyzing amount of choices, we are longing to be led to a place of reality. We are longing to be filled with good things, real things. In the virtual world we are already used to talking about non-tangible things – we don’t want to talk about faith as a non-tangible idea. We are tired of theologizing and longing for theolo-doing. We

⁷ *Holy Bible: New Living Translation.* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), Psalm 107:8-9.

want to feel our physical thirst quenched and our stomach's filled. We want a physical faith—a grounded faith. Let us learn about the Ancient of Days while feeling the grooves of wood of the table. Let us learn about the Spirit through the fragrance of our meal. And let us learn about the risen Christ through the eyes of those sitting around the table.

I found church on Thanksgiving night in Southern Mexico and I found myself at *home*. How might we model our churches to become places of family and rest, places where we are given seats at a table and invited into the physicality of our ancient faith?

Chapter 11: Not Alone

My friend Mickey runs a local homeless outreach for the Salvation Army. Every Wednesday he opens the doors of the center to homeless people who come for a warm meal, a bible study, and a hot shower. He invited me to join one of his ministry nights. I agreed and was excited to see what his ministry was like. I arrived a few hours before the event started and drove around with him picking people up from various parks around the city. We mostly stopped and asked people if they wanted to come to our evening event. I quickly found out that everyone knew and loved Mickey. I was amazed that he knew everyone's name and story. He loved these people and they loved him.

After several pick up runs, I helped him set the room up for the meal and bible study. Once we started letting people in the doors I asked Mickey what else I could do to help; he simply encouraged me to sit, eat, and get to know the people. I figured I would spend the evening making small talk.

As people began to funnel into the room, I was shocked by the diversity. Most were addicts but they were people of all races, ages, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

The meal was spaghetti and garlic bread. Once I filled my plate I looked around for a table with an open seat. There was a small table for two in the back of the room where a middle-aged man was eating alone. I asked if I could join and he welcomed me.

We started with small talk as we ate our meals. As the conversation continued, I was curious about his story. He was open and excited to talk. I have found that many addicts tend to be some of the most honest people. Unlike many regular churchgoers, these addicts often have no pretense and no image to maintain. They often recognize their woundedness and are not afraid to talk about it. This man was no different. He shared about his childhood and college years. He got his bachelors degree and worked as an airplane engineer for many years. And a number of years ago he was laid off at the same time his brother got sick and died.

After giving him my condolences I asked him what sickness his brother died from. He told me that it was a very rare disease that I most likely had never heard of it. He continued, "He died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a disease that less than 1,000 people die of per year in the U.S. It is an awful disease where you watch your loved one quickly deteriorate. There is no cure. It was horrible to watch him suffer through it."

I almost dropped my spaghetti in my lap. I looked at him as tears quickly filled my eyes and said, “You won’t believe this but my father died from Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease when I was twelve and I have never met another person outside of my family who knows of anyone who has had this disease.” As I shared, his eyes filled with tears. We both sat speechless; two people having been deeply affected by the same extremely rare disease sitting across the table from each other.

Ashamed to say, outside of this context, I would have most likely never started a conversation with this man. Yet as I sat to eat a meal with him I learned that we shared a wound from the same knife. There was such an overwhelming sense of divine providence that it was pointless to even point it out in the moment; our tears spoke for our hearts.

As the evening progressed we sat at a table singing songs of worship, sharing scriptures, and breaking bread with impoverished addicts and cross-dressers. By the end of the night the labels began to fall away and I was left looking at people who faced battles and enjoyed victories just like me.

Our churches and our communities are riddled with addiction – whether or not the people are homeless. We invite people into our churches but once they come in they are invited to listen to a preacher and sing songs. They need connection with others and they often don’t find it. When people are invited to watch a religious performance, often called Sunday morning in America, we spend more time watching the show than engaging with

each other. Sitting at a table with this man opened my eyes to the importance of being able to get to know the person sitting next to me.

Living in a individualistic culture only reinforces feelings of isolation and loneliness. Journalist and author Johann Hari has spent years researching addiction and found some surprising results. He argues the way we have been handling addicts only reinforces bad behavior. Our society punishes addicts when they fail, only further isolating them from the rest of society. Johann suggested in a recent TED Talk that the way to combat addiction is much different. He says,

...What I've tried to do now, and I can't tell you I do it consistently and I can't tell you it's easy, is to say to the addicts in my life that I want to deepen the connection with them, to say to them, I love you whether you're using or you're not. I love you, whatever state you're in, and if you need me, I'll come and sit with you because I love you and I don't want you to be alone or to feel alone.

And I think the core of that message -- you're not alone, we love you -- has to be at every level of how we respond to addicts, socially, politically and individually. For 100 years now, we've been singing war songs about addicts. I think all along we should have been singing love songs to them, because the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.⁸

⁸ "Everything You Think You Know About Addiction Is Wrong," Johann Hari, TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, Last Modified July 2015, Accessed October 20, 2016. http://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong/transcript?language=en

What if our churches were designed to be places of connection and belonging? Packing as many people as possible into a sanctuary might allow all those people to hear the Gospel but there is a good chance they will walk out the doors without ever experiencing to intimate connection the Gospel brings. They will most likely miss the opportunity of a fellow congregant looking them in the eyes and saying, “I love you whether you're using or you're not. I love you, whatever state you're in, and if you need me, I'll come and sit with you because I love you and I don't want you to be alone or to feel alone.”⁹ Whether we are addicted to drugs or our smart phones, isn't that sense of belonging and connection something we all long for?

The scriptures remind us that God knows our inner most parts; God is intimately connected to our deepest parts. The deepest longing of connection can be satisfied through God and His people. The ancient Israelite King David wrote Psalm 139 as a song to be sung in worship gatherings, reminding people of the intimacy God offers. The Psalmist proclaims,

O Lord, you have searched me and known me!

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down

and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁹Hari, “Everything You Think You Know About Addiction Is Wrong.”

Even before a word is on my tongue,

behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is high; I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light about me be night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is bright as the day,

for darkness is as light with you.

For you formed my inward parts;

you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;

my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.¹⁰

As Johann Hari muses, what would happen if we started singing songs of love over people? And what if gathered in such ways to best reveal the truths of this Psalm?

What if we invited them to the table?

Chapter 12: Janitors and Tables

While in college I attended a mega church with multiple janitorial job positions. I figured it would be a good job to get me through college and allow me to get my foot in the door at my church. I took the job and worked as a janitor for two years.

¹⁰ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Psalm 139 1-18.

While working as a janitor I was volunteering in different ministries. I would have never admitted this at the time but I wanted to be a “cool” pastor. I wanted to be the hip guy with stylish jeans and perfect hair. I wanted people to like me; I wanted to be a big fish in the small pond of my mega church. While volunteering in different ministries, I worked hard to be the well-liked and well groomed minister in training. However, for 20 hours a week I wasn’t the “cool” guy; I would wear a maroon polo with the church logo on the right corner of the shirt, carry a huge ring of building keys, and push garbage cans around – I was a janitor.

I resisted the janitorial image for a long time. I just wanted to practice all the ministry training I was receiving in Bible College. I wanted to preach more, counsel more, and plan more events but the only opening for me was in the janitorial department.

It would take Yasmine, a newly hired janitor to begin to transform my arrogant and immature heart. I was surprised my fundamentalist mega church hired Yasmine because she was a Muslim. Yasmine was from Pakistan and spoke very little English. I became her janitorial trainer and we worked together every night.

To help teach Yasmine English I would point out objects as we walked the long halls of the church and speak them aloud in English and she would repeat after me. At the times I was feeling extra evangelistic, I would point out posters of Jesus and have her repeat after me.

The longer we worked together the closer we became and the better her English was. Yasmine also loved my wife Samantha. For Christmas one year she bought my wife a beautiful necklace – we were shocked by the intentionality and generosity of the gift. We quickly learned that she showed her love through giving gifts.

I knew Yasmine loved cooking because she talked about all the traditional Pakistani food she would make at home. Occasionally she would bring leftovers to work that smelled amazing. One day her food smelled so good that I asked her if she would be willing to make a Pakistani meal to share with me. She looked at me as if she won the lottery! She was thrilled that I would ask. She set a date for our meal and told me to invite Samantha. I agreed. We set the date for dinner right before one of our evening shifts. She said that we would eat in the janitorial office. I asked her where and she simply responded, on the desk.

The janitorial closet was a large room filled with tools, storage equipment, and cleaners. There was a desk in the room filled with files and papers; for whatever reason this was where Yasmine wanted our meal. She was excited and simply declared when and where this meal was going to happen. I dared not try to change her mind.

I few weeks later Samantha and I showed up to the church about an hour before my shift for our meal. Walking down the hall I could smell the aroma of an amazing meal coming from the janitorial office. As we walked in, Yasmine had just finished setting up all types of Pakistani dishes that she had spread all over the desk; from savory kababs to fresh

chapatis bread to sweet gulab jamun. We were shocked; we thought she might have prepared a few dishes wrapped in foil that we'd munch on before my work shift. We could not have been more wrong. Yasmine had prepared a feast and invited us to receive. At the janitorial desk in a large suburban evangelical mega church sat two white evangelicals and a Pakistani Muslim woman around a Pakistani feast.

Some tables we set for others and some tables we are invited to. Yasmine set a table for us and we were invited to receive. At the time, I thought it was my job to help lead Yasmine to Christ's table. Yet it was Yasmine who led me to her table. Her table was filled with love, care, intentionality, and hospitality.

The New Testament book to the Hebrews talks about the importance of showing hospitality to the stranger or the "other" because in so doing we might be entertaining angels. The author says,

*Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it!*¹¹

The author reminds God's people to live as faithful witnesses of the Gospel through acts of love and service. Hospitality has become an overlooked discipline in much of the modern expression of American Christianity. As the world has become more socially

¹¹ Peterson, *The Message Remix*, Hebrews 13:1-2.

tribal we are quickly loosing the ability to effectively reach out and love different tribes or people.

The ancient Greek word for hospitality comes from the compound of “love” and “stranger” – literally meaning, “love for the outsider or stranger.” Practicing hospitality is something the scriptures continually speak of because this is exactly how Jesus treats us. As the scripture says, “ But now in Jesus Christ, you who were far away from God are brought near through the blood of Christ’s death.”¹² The People of God are called to live like Jesus to love and sacrifice for the outsider.

While hospitality is a right and noble practice, it is incredibly humbling to be on the receiving end of the very hospitality we are called to practice by someone considered an outsider to many. As I walked into the janitorial room and where Jasmine had prepared our feast I needed to accept that she had loved and cared for me in a way that I had not loved her. Instead of me trying to be her guide to what is loving and true, as I sat down at the feast she has prepared, I let her become my guide as to how to practice hospitality.

The scripture in Hebrews reminds us in practicing hospitality we would be entertaining angels. However, until that evening with Jasmine, I never thought that it could go the other way too. I never thought that I would need to look out for the stranger or the “other” showing me *their* hospitality. Sometimes an “angel” looks like a Pakistani Muslim woman preparing a feast in the basement of an evangelical mega church. As we

¹² *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Ephesians 2:13.

joined the table of the “outsider,” God was glorified, the angels rejoiced, and we were changed. Who are the outsiders in your life and what table have they prepared for you?

Chapter 13: The Order of Good Cheer

My good friends Brandon and Rebecca went on vacation to Nova Scotia, Canada a number of years ago. While there they were introduced to a special winter feast that many Nova Scotians still celebrate today called The Order of Good Cheer.

The order was started in the early 1600s by a group of French colonists who experienced a very difficult winter in the harsh Canadian landscape. Many were stricken by scurvy but at the time the settlers thought they were stricken by “land sickness” caused by the winter blues. To bring some joy to the people, Samuel de Champlain started The Order of Good Cheer. It was to be a feast that was regularly practiced in the winter months which included good food and entertainment.

The Order of Good Cheer is an order that one must be invited to participate in and the rules of membership are simple. On May 11, 2001 the Nova Scotian Speaker of the House introduced resolution 1111, which makes the minimum condition for membership a simple pledge to visit Nova Scotia.

After coming home from vacation Brandon and Rebecca decided they wanted to invite some of their friends to an Order of Good Cheer celebration in Southern California. Hosting an Order of Good Cheer in eighty-degree weather with palm trees gently

swaying in the wind is significantly different than a Canadian blizzard, however the sentiment that mattered.

Our friends invited three couples to their home for the meal. We started the evening feasting on delicious food and listening to Stan Getz. The table, the meal, and the music created an idyllic setting. After the meal we moved to the living room where each person brought some form of entertainment offering to the group. A couple people read their favorite poems, someone played a song on their guitar, another person did an interpretive dance to music, and I shared one of my favorite short stories. While I knew each person before the evening, I felt like I got to see a side of him or her I didn't previously know.

As we neared the end of our evening entertainment, our friends Aaron and Janice had yet to share and it was their turn. They told the group they needed to go into the other room to prepare. We waited with anticipation for over five minutes before they came back into the living room.

When they walked into the living room Aaron was wearing a black suit and Janice was in her wedding dress! We were all shocked. Aaron said, "this is our ten year anniversary, and after years of raising children and walking through the highs and lows of life, we would like to renew our wedding vows to each other in front of our friends." We were all stunned and most of us had a few tears in our eyes. Aaron handed me a piece of paper with the outline of a vow renewal ceremony and asked if I would be willing to officiate the ceremony. Honored and overwhelmed, I agreed. I got up off the couch and stood

before our friends and officiated their vow renewal ceremony in Brandon and Rebecca's living room.

In many ways it was a magical evening. We laughed, relished good food and music, enjoyed each person's entertainment contribution, and even watched a couple renew their marriage vows. That night when Samantha and I got home we were filled with gratitude for our friends and a deep and abiding joy that we had just participated in something greater than ourselves.

However, I must confess as we were driving to our friend's house that evening, I really did not want to go. I had been in a low and mildly depressed state for a few weeks and was not in the mood to spend an evening with a group of friends. I wanted to be alone and I was looking forward to sitting on our couch and watching television. I was certainly not in the mood to celebrate an obscure Nova Scotian holiday and I was definitely not in the mood to bring some silly form of evening entertainment to the group. However, after significant pressure from Samantha, she was able to peel me off the couch to go to dinner.

The author of the New Testament book to the Hebrews invites God's people to engage worship outside the Jewish Temple or the synagogue. This was a significant shift for a people who learned to worship God within the confines of the Temple or synagogue. The invitation was to learn to worship on the context of everyday life – holistic worship. This

holistic worship is not based of if one feels like participating; the invitation is to engage in a posture of communal sacrifice in all we do. The author of Hebrews says,

Let's take our place outside with Jesus, no longer pouring out the sacrificial blood of animals but pouring out sacrificial praises from our lips to God in Jesus' name. Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of "sacrifice"—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets.¹³

A feast always involves a sacrifice; plants and animals had to die for us to eat, people had to make the meal, someone needed to pay for the meal, the table had to be offered by someone, and everyone needed to clear their schedules to participate. When Jesus gathered his disciples around the table for the last supper he was showing them the great sacrifice he was about to make and He was modeling the posture of sacrifice the foundation on which his church would be built off.

There are many days when I don't feel like gathering with my church community and there are times I don't feel like participating in the worship. However, celebrations and feasts are not always practiced when you feel like it. Sometimes we celebrate around the table to step out of our own narratives and enter into a new story. I can only imagine sick French colonists did not want to gather regularly in the dark winter months to celebrate and entertain. I mean, what was there to celebrate? However, as they gathered they found

¹³ Peterson, *The Message Remix*, Hebrews 13:13-16.

they were invited into a posture of sacrifice that helped them to recognize the gifts around them.

I wonder what gifts are around us right now. I guess it's time to start planning my trip to Nova Scotia.

Chapter 14: The Sacred Table

Having children is difficult, especially a two year old. For as difficult as it sometimes is, Samantha and I have made it a value to introduce our son to our family eating around a table together. Let me make it clear that this does not look anything like the Norman Rockwell image of a family eating together. Oftentimes I have just walked in the door from a long day at work. Samantha is trying to finish dinner while a two-year-old is running around her feet. And my journey from the front door to the dining table includes dodging toys while trying to chase down our son to give him a hug and a kiss. It is usually fairly chaotic.

When I finally catch my son long enough to get a hug and a kiss, I swoop him up, wash his hands and face, and put him in his highchair at the dining room table. Getting our children to the table is only the beginning of the battle. As many parents know, the process of getting our children to eat what we offer them is the next battle. In fact, as a testimony to this, an entire industry of kids' food has been created to try and get our children to eat! While we sometimes feel like it is not worth the battle to feed our children the same food we parents eat, we believe in instilling the value of our family

eating the same meal. We believe that by breaking the same bread, it shows our son that we are a part of the same family and we do things together.

Getting to the place where we are all eating together is not easy but study after study points to the importance of this time together. Writer and historian, Cody C. Delistroy says,

Americans rarely eat together anymore... and the majority of American families report eating a single meal together less than five days a week. It's a pity that so many Americans are missing out on what could be meaningful time with their loved ones, but it's even more than that. Not eating together also has quantifiably negative effects both physically and psychologically.¹⁴

The effects of not eating together as a family are numerous. For example children who do not regularly eat with their families are more likely to be truant in school and significantly more likely to struggle with obesity.¹⁵ Within our American culture the idea of the family meal no longer holds the same value it once did. Delistroy suggests, "...eating alone can be alienating. The dinner table can act as a unifier, a place of community. Sharing a meal is an excuse to catch up and talk, one of the few times where people are happy to put aside their work and take time out of their day."¹⁶

¹⁴ Delistraty, Cody C., "The Importance of Eating Together," The Atlantic, Last Modified July 18, 2014, Accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/the-importance-of-eating-together/374256/>.

¹⁵ Delistraty, "The Importance of Eating Together."

¹⁶ Ibid.

Many countries and cultures around the world still see mealtime as sacred. Delistroy writes, “In France, while it is acceptable to eat by oneself, one should never rush a meal. In many Mexican cities, townspeople will eat together with friends and family in central areas like parks or town squares. In Cambodia, villagers spread out colorful mats and bring food to share with loved ones like a potluck.”¹⁷ While other parts of the world still view breaking bread together as a sacred and sacrificial act, America is increasingly viewing meal times as an individual act.

Once Samantha and I have done the hard work of getting our family together at the table and convinced our son to eat his dinner, it is time to pray and our son knows it. No matter how challenging he has been, he knows when it is time to pray; he is our resident prayer warrior. He looks at us and grabs our hands with a smile on his face as he bows his head in prayer. Sometimes we will sing the table prayer passed down from my grandparents and other times we will just quickly thank God for his blessings. Regardless of whether we have sung or spoke our prayer, after we have finished, our son wants to pray again... and again... and again. For whatever reason, he loves praying at the table.

The author of Hebrews encourages the early church to gather continually together. The author says, “...*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not*

¹⁷ Ibid.

*neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*¹⁸

The value of gathering together cannot be overstated. The table roots us in the traditions of our families and helps form our identities. Gathering around a table helps create an environment that shows us how to love one another because it carves out space to share stories from our lives. While trying to convince our son to eat and discipline him to keep his food on his plate, Samantha and I are engaging a fragmented conversation recounting each of our day—the significant parts, anyway. While we often don't make it far in conversation, our son listens to us and learns from us; he learns that in our family we share our lives around the table.

With life getting busier all the time and so many things competing with this time frame, creating this space is increasingly difficult. Most young families, including mine, require that both parents work. Finding time to make a meal feels almost impossible. It only gets more challenging as families grow and the kids get older with school and extra curricular activities—it's no wonder families don't eat together any more!

I don't have an easy answer to the problem of finding time to gather at the table. What I do know is that we always make time for what we value the most. My hope is that in casting a vision for this sacred space, it would begin to become something we value above other things. I began to value table time as I started to understand the sacredness of the table. Susannah Heschel, daughter of the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel, reflected on

¹⁸ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Hebrews 10:24-25.

her family's weekly Shabbat meal while growing up in the introduction to her father's book on Sabbath. She said,

When my father raised his kiddush cup on Friday evenings, closed his eyes, and chanted the prayer sanctifying the wine, I always felt a rush of emotion. As he chanted with an old, sacred family melody, he blessed the wine and the Sabbath with his prayer, and I also felt he was blessing my life and that of everyone at the table. I treasured those moments.¹⁹

It is pictures like this one by Susannah Heschel that helped to make me want to create this kind of space for our family. I want my children to reflect back on the tables of their childhood and treasure those moments. I want to pass on the sacredness of gathering together.

By the end of our family meal our son is usually covered in food, the table is a mess, our dog has licked up every piece of food that has fallen on the floor and we are exhausted. Although we are out of energy, we believe every ounce of struggle to get around our young family around the table is worth it. Table time might be messy but the struggle is sacred. Sometimes we have to fight for what we believe to be sacred; if it were easy to gather our family around the table, it would most likely not hold the same value.

¹⁹ Heschel, Abraham, *The Sabbath*, (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), Loc 23-24, Kindle.

What pushes us to continue to fight for our tradition around our messy and sacred table is the sweet voice of a two year old asking to pray for our meal again and again and again.

Chapter 15: The Neighborhood Table

For years Samantha and I pastored in Long Beach, California. We lived on a narrow little street lined with little beach bungalows from the early 1900's. The neighborhood was technically part of the city's historical society. It was an idyllic little neighborhood with very friendliest neighbors. I'm not sure what made our neighbors so neighborly and kind—it might have been the sunshine, beach, and salt air; it could have also been that we all lived so close to each other.

Some of our closest neighbor friends were Belkis and Karen. We had spent a significant amount of time getting to know them and enjoyed their company. They were engaged and planning their wedding. I'll never forget the day when Belkis invited Samantha and I to their wedding reception. The actual wedding was just their closest family and friends but the reception was going to be a large open house at their house. I was doing yard work in our front yard and Belkis was also doing yard work, preparing her yard for the wedding reception. She walked over to me and struck up a conversation. I could tell she had something on her mind that she wanted to talk to me about. With a palpable sense of hesitation, she invited Samantha and I to her and Karen's wedding.

Belkis knew I was a pastor in an evangelical church and was uncertain what I thought about her and Karen's relationship. Did I approve? Although we had spent a lot of time

getting to know each other, this was never a topic we discussed. I felt heartbroken that my job title created this leave of uncertainty within her.

I told Belkis that we were thrilled to receive their invitation and I shared that we would be honored to share with them in their special day. With a sense of relief, she gave me a hug and told me how happy she was that we were coming.

We celebrated with them about a month later. Their wedding reception was a beautiful evening to celebrate with two people we loved and cared for. They had a friend grilling different meats on the barbeque in their front yard and put tables everywhere they would fit on their tiny beach lot. We laughed and heard stories about Karen and Belkis as the sun set on the warm Southern California evening. At the end of the evening Samantha and I crossed our narrow little lane to our house. As we laid in bed we reflected on how much fun we had and how happy we were for them.

In the middle of the night I woke after having one of the most realistic dreams I have ever had. This is very uncommon for me; I rarely even feel like I dream and I certainly never wake up from a dream and vividly remember it. In my dream, I was at Karen and Belkis' wedding reception, standing in line to get a piece of meat from the barbeque. As I was waiting, a massive plate started descending from the sky and slowly lowered until it was hovering over the middle of the road. The plate was filled with all kinds of different meats. As I looked at all the different types and cuts of meat, I heard a voice fill the air

and say, “take and eat.” Immediately, I woke up and knew the scriptural reference my dream evoked.

The Gospel writer Luke shares a story in his book about the Acts of the Apostles in Acts chapter 10 about the apostle Peter staying at Cornelius’ house. The story goes like this:

The next day, as they [Peter and company] were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.²⁰

As a good Jewish man, Peter was committed to eating kosher. He did not want to break the laws of God while staying at Cornelius’ home. The law was not only the traditions Peter grew up with; these laws helped to craft and form his identity. It was in this place of going to visit with Cornelius, a well-regarded Gentile that God completely upended Peter’s understanding of right and wrong and those who were understood as “in” and those were “out.”

²⁰ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Acts 10:9-16 [Emphasis mine].

God invited Peter to a barbeque and he didn't even know it. Peter thought it was his job to set the table and invite Cornelius into his story. To Peter's great surprise, the table had already been set and he simply needed to learn to dine with those who were once regarded as outsiders.

As Peter went to meet with Cornelius, Luke accounts of how their meeting went. He records,

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean."²¹

Peter understood that to God, all people had infinite value. It was not Peter's job to assign value to a person based on their background or choices. God was inviting Peter into the larger story of love and redemption.

I knew that in my dream, God was inviting me into a larger conversation about Karen and Belkis. He was inviting me to see them as having infinite value before God; I was being asked to honor their lives beyond any kind of label. I was invited to engage all people as *humans*—those who have been formed from the dirt of the earth with the breath of the divine infusing every corner of their being. God's table was big and expansive. My job is

²¹ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Acts 10: 25-28.

not to say who could and/or should be invited; my job is to enjoy and love all those who have been invited. Unfortunately, much of the church has gotten stuck in the place of policing the table.

In her book *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* author Barbara Brown Taylor says,

I know that the Bible is a special kind of book, but I find it as seductive as any other. If I am not careful, I can begin to mistake the words on the page for the realities they describe. I can begin to love the dried ink marks on the page more than I love the encounters that gave rise to them. If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my Bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book to go outside will involve the very great risk of taking part in stories that are still taking shape. Neither I nor anyone else knows how these stories will turn out, since at this point they involve more blood than ink. The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God's sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.²²

The longer I journey through this life of faith I am increasingly interested in engaging what God is doing in my own time and place and less interested in trying to defend drying ink marks on a page. Faith is relational; faith is trust. Unfortunately, in recent years many have experienced people of faith defending and arguing doctrine and policing

²² Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2006), Loc. 1285-1286, Kindle.

who someone can love. Part of the reason this kind of faith is this so upsetting to a growing contingency of Christians is because it is way to small of a conversation.

The table is the place where faith is refined; it is the place where we move from dried ink marks on a page to real flesh and blood. At the table we are able to look into the eyes of the other and see humans—full of joy and sorrow. It is the place where we mutually lay down our arms and acknowledge the sacrifice of food before us—sustaining our very lives.

I'm grateful that Belkis and Karen took the risk of extending an invitation to their wedding reception.

I'm grateful that God took the risk of inviting me to His table.

I'm grateful that the invitation is extended to all people, regardless of sex, race, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status.

And I'm grateful for the sweetest words of this invitation, "come to the table."

Chapter 16: The Fancy Table

The church I served at for years has an annual Christmas event for the women in the congregation. It is a beautiful evening celebrating the women in the congregation and the women in each of their lives. A large part of the evening is the huge raffle with all kinds of wonderful prizes. All women who attend are given a ticket and given equal opportunity to win. Samantha and my friend Lindsay won a fancy dinner for eight at Barb's house. Barb is a woman in the congregation who is famous in the community for

her hospitality and cooking. For those who know Barb's cooking, this was one of the best prizes of the night. I was really hoping Samantha would win it. However, the next best thing happened, Lindsay invited Samantha and I to be two of the eight people to come to the evening. We were thrilled!

I looked forward to our evening at Barb's like it was Christmas morning. When the day finally came, we got dressed up in our best and drove to Barb's. We arrived with our friends and we were all excited to see what Barb had prepared. Barb and her husband John live in a beautiful 1950's modern rancho style home in Long Beach, California. We walked in the front door and were greeted by John and one of his friends who were dressed in suits. They welcomed us and led us to the table. All of us started laughing because we all knew Barb and John well and they were breaking from the context of our relationship. They engaged us as their highly esteemed guests. This relational shift was uncomfortable at first because it would have been more comfortable if they treated us how they always did. However, I realized this was their opportunity to serve us the best they knew how. It was important to honor them by accepting them in their new role for the evening as those who were there to serve us.

The atmosphere of the room was spectacular. Music playing quietly, candles flickered around the table, and the pool and palms glowed through the floor to ceiling windows. We were each sat at a specific place setting while we all grinned from ear to ear. This was better than any fancy restaurant; we knew the chef and the hosts and they had prepared their best for us.

After a plethora of appetizers, the main course included a Chilean Sea Bass wrapped in parchment and the tastiest vegetable melody I've ever had and a wonderful wine pairing. The meal ended with a dessert platter that included Barb's famous chocolate chip cookies and a sweet port wine. We sat and chatted for hours. Every aspect of the night was thought through. The meal was amazing, the servers were perfect, and the atmosphere is idyllic.

As I reflect back on that evening, I realize how special it was to be served by someone I love dearly. It is always humbling to be served—especially by those you love. I can only imagine how the disciples felt as Jesus started to wash their feet during the last supper. Something shifts in our brains when a friend and mentor gets on their knees and begins to wash our feet. Accepting their service is pivotal to learning the heart of God's kingdom. The Gospel writer John records in his Gospel the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet. He says,

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you

will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”²³

It was imperative for Peter to learn to accept the love and service of Jesus. If Peter did not learn how to accept this service, he would never be able to give it to others. For as fun of an evening as it was, the lesson was unmistakable and vital. It was important to recognize that the service, the meal, the intentionality of every candle and place setting was to show us that we were deeply cared for and worth serving. The table provided the context for us to learn how to serve and be served.

If we are going to learn to dine with Christ, we must learn how to serve and be served. We must learn to cherish the needs of others and allow our needs to be seen. Unless we learn to dine with Christ, we will not understand the heart of his kingdom. No wonder Jesus establishes his church around a table.

Chapter 17: The Table of Blame

Over the past several chapters I have shared with you some of different tables I have experienced in my life. I have written about some tables that were beautiful and others that were painful. I recognize we each have different experiences with tables in our lives and for some people this conversation might trigger painful memories. Some people grew up without tables, others with absent people sitting around them, and some with abuse.

²³ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, John 13: 3-8.

When my wife and I were discussing the different tables in our lives, she shared with me what it was like growing up in her family with a father who rarely ate with the rest of the family. She remembers eating with her mom and brothers while her dad ate on a television tray in the other room while watching T.V. She recalls how he usually ate a completely different meal—separately and graciously prepared by her mother.

Samantha's childhood table was filled with good memories of her brothers and her mom. Her mom tried her best to create a loving environment in the midst of a distant and alcoholic father. As Samantha reflects back on those years of pain her father's absence was the source of significant pain and blame in her life. A few years ago, Samantha and her brothers faced the sorrow of walking down the difficult road of caring for her father as he died of alcoholism. Ironically, when they were children and couldn't take care of themselves he was absent in their lives, yet as he was dying and was unable to take care of himself, they were present—a beautiful picture of love and grace. It was during this time that Samantha faced the grief of an absent father who was not going to get better. She had always held out the hope that he would turn his life around but now she had to face the reality that her hopes would not come to pass in this life. He died in December of 2014.

Over the past several years we have spent a lot of time unpacking the story of her dad's life and walking through the hurt and the pain. Samantha started the necessary process of blaming her dad for the life he lived and the sorrow he caused her and her family. She blamed him for his selfishness and pride. If she didn't get this off her chest, it would fester for years to come.

For all the pain Samantha experienced around the table growing up, now as an adult, she loves to cook meals for our family and practice hospitality. She loves inviting people to our home and creating an environment of love and rest for all our guests. For all the blame Samantha assigned to her dad, she never blamed him for her love of hospitality. She never blamed him for all the positive things his absent life brought her. If we are going to blame, we should at least blame effectively.

If you come from a background where the table is a painful subject, who could you blame for your longing to redeem it? When Jesus sat with his disciples in the upper room for what would be the last supper, all the men who had journeyed with him for the last several years were about to betray him after dinner. In fact, the Gospel of Mark records that shortly after their meal, “they all left him and fled.”²⁴ The sorrow of having all your closest friends abandon you and leave you for dead in your darkest hour would be soul crushing. However, Jesus does not shy away from the sorrow he experienced at the table, he runs to redeem it; for at the table Jesus sees all things redeemed.

As John starts to close his apocalyptic letter of Revelation in the New Testament he speaks these prophetic words,

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said

²⁴ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Mark 14:50.

to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb "'
And he said to me, "These are true words of God."²⁵

Although Jesus leaves this earth betrayed at the table, our entrance into the world to come is an invitation to sit with him at a new table; a wedding feast. I guess it could be said that Jesus blamed effectively; because his disciples left him in his darkest hour, he can now blame them for his love to redeem the table!

Who could you blame to help you redeem the table?

²⁵ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version, Revelation 19: 7-9.*

Part 3: Church Around the Table

Introduction:

I have spent a significant amount of time discussing ways that the current structures of many evangelical churches do not align with the message they desire to share. Thus far I have given examples of places I have found church around the table outside of the contemporary understanding of a church gathering. With that said, there are many churches that use the table as a central medium of their worship. Here are a couple examples I have experienced.

Chapter 18: The Eucharistic Table

Even though I was raised in a Lutheran congregation, I spent the majority of my formative teenage years and twenties in charismatic congregations. Being raised in the Lutheran Church, I came to love the regularity of the liturgy; something I didn't know until it was no longer apart of charismatic services I led.

When my family moved back to our hometown we decided to attend and serve in a little Anglican Church my friend Ryan recently started. Our first few weeks felt like water to our thirsty souls. We were looking for something different than the charismatic churches we had spent years serving. So much of our experience in charismatic congregations was doing everything to create an “atmosphere of worship.” While I agree with the sentiment, this was unfortunately often a code for loud music, special lighting, and seamless productions—something I believed and championed for years. After participating and encouraging this type of gatherings for many years, I came to the point where I started

longing for something very different. We found our new Anglican Church to be just what we were looking for.

We hadn't been at our church for more than a few months when on a cold stormy night during our evening service I noticed the sounds of rain pounding on the roof. I could actually hear the rain from inside the sanctuary; the service created enough space for silence and reflection to hear the pitter patter of the rain. Within the Anglican worship environment, the goal was not to remove the outside distractions through loud music, lighting, and fog machines. Rather the goal became to learn to embrace the outside noises while being present and aware of God all around us. As the rain fell on the roof, I found myself present enough with the moment to savor it; it was some of the most beautiful church music I had heard in a long time.

While the silence and reflection were a gift to my soul, the table of the Anglican Church became transformative for me.

Over the years in many evangelical contexts I found myself in, communion was often the time to feel guilty over my sin or feel extra pious. However in Anglican liturgy, confession and forgiveness of sins happens at a separate time from the Eucharistic table in the liturgy. This intentionally separates confession from Eucharist and reminds the congregation that Eucharist is a time of celebration and thanksgiving and the Eucharistic table becomes the celebratory climax at the end of the worship gathering. In many

evangelical contexts the pulpit or the band is focal point of the room but in our Anglican context, the table is the focal point of the gathering.

During worship the priest intentionally sets the table, praying over the bread and the wine. He washes his hands, sets out the bread, and pours the wine into the cup. The whole process evokes very particular table manners to retell the story of the last supper and set this gathering apart as a sacred meal. One of my first times in the church I was deeply moved by what happens after the wine is poured; the priest took some water and poured it into the wine. The water poured into wine reminds us that when Jesus was crucified he bled both blood and water. It also reminds us that Jesus is the living water and that paradoxically, even in the face of death, life is always present. After the table is set, the words, “come to the table” are spoken over the congregation.

As we make our way to the table, we sing songs of worship. When it is my turn at the table, I open my hands, one laid on top of the other in the shape of a cross and listen to the words spoken over me, “The body of Christ broken for you. Preserve you in body and soul to everlasting life.” I then receive the bread—I would never reach for it because I cannot take the gift from God, I can only receive it. After marking myself with the sign of the cross, I come to the cup. The words “The blood of Christ shed for you. Preserve you in body and soul to everlasting life” are spoken over me and I receive a sip of the sweet wine and again mark myself with the sign of the cross.

The weekly rhythm of celebrating the Eucharist table aligns my heart with the reality of life and death, joy and sorrow, God's sacrifice and my selfishness. The Eucharistic act recreates the life changing narrative of the cross and Christ's victory over death. The table holds both the suffering and joy of life.

The Jewish people have wonderful rituals to recreate their history in a participatory way. The Passover celebration and the weekly Shabbat are theology experienced through food around a table. Before the Jewish people had a developed theology, they were a nomadic people who expressed their faith through shared stories about their God around campfires and food. This later developed into feasts where the people shared the stories of their faith around tables and food.

Early Christian church accomplished the same Jewish storytelling genius through sharing the story of Jesus around a table. These churches gathered weekly for the Agape Feast as it was called, or the sacrificial love feast—with food around the table. The early Christians recreated the stories of God by bridging the Jewish stories, which had always been shared around tables and food with the Jesus story, which culminates in a feast around the table. Breaking bread with people from all different backgrounds around a common table was the most powerful expression of the gospel to the first century world.

As the early church grew, it began to shift away from these types of gatherings, favoring the oversight of doctrinal purity through the medium of preaching and teaching over the communal, home based worship gathering. Gathering large groups of people around less

preachers would make the oversight of doctrinal purity easier to manage. This style of worship gatherings has continued in most western churches to this day. While the church benefited from clearing out false teaching, it also lost the organic appeal of the earliest Agape Feasts.

Now that the church has endless options to help it from straying into heretical waters, it has the great opportunity to shift back towards the medium of sharing the gospel around food and tables. Even though I sit in a pew, I'm grateful our little Anglican Church sets the table for us every week. In an uncertain world, I can always count on this Eucharistic Table to become the portal to the gospel that has both changed the world and my life.

Thanks be to God!

Chapter 19: The Storefront Church

Spending the last several years researching early church gatherings and churches that currently meet around the table has been a rich and insightful experience. My studies led me to research a church that meets in Brooklyn, New York: Saint Lydia's Dinner Church. They gather in a small storefront in the Gowanus neighborhood in Brooklyn. The more I researched, the more I felt compelled to visit. So I made the trek from the West Coast to New York.

As I researched this community, I began to feel this was the closest example of my vision for the future of the church. I was thrilled to visit but a little nervous that it would not meet my high expectations and excitement. My nerves turned out to be completely unsupported.

The church meets Sunday night and Monday night and I decided it would be important to visit both nights to take in the fullness of the experience. I took the subway from my hostel in Williamsburg to Gowanus and walked the short distance to the church. The pastor who was welcoming people into the church from the sidewalk greeted me as I entered. The church was small and unlike any church sanctuary I had seen before. It was one big room that started with a small and welcoming foyer that moved into 4 large tables, which then ended with an open kitchen and small bathroom. The whole space was no larger than 1,000 square feet. The decorations were minimal and warm and everything felt intentionally placed.

After meeting lot of people it was time for service to being. We gathered standing in a circle in the front of the room and sang a song as the Christ candle was lit. We were each handed a candle from which we passed the flame from the Christ candle to each of our candles. Once each of our candles was lit, everyone walked around the dinning tables singing a hymn while lighting all the candles on the tables. After the candles were lit we stood in a circle around the tables holding hands and sang another song.

After singing, the pastor led the congregation in the first part of the Eucharist. After we had finished breaking the Eucharistic bread, we sat to enjoy the meal prepared in the kitchen. Dinner was a simple and tasty lentil soup with salad and bread. Throughout the meal I enjoyed conversation with those I was sitting around. I had to remind myself this was the middle of our church service, not “coffee hour” after church.

Towards the end of the meal the pastor got up and shared a message. After the message we prayed for each other and drank the Eucharistic wine as a celebratory dessert cup. Before dismissal each person was tasked with a cleaning job; cleaning is part of the liturgy. This church community finds great value in both eating together and cleaning together. I was tasked to sweep the floors. Even though this was my first time attending this church, cleaning with others also gave me the opportunity to get to know people better and feel a sense of ownership in the community. By the end of the night my soul and stomach were full and I had made new friends—not bad for the first time visiting a church.

Worshiping at St. Lydia's was an experience that made me feel like I was part of the earliest church communities. The liturgy was ancient and grounded me in an ancient tradition. From the candles to the chants to the prayers to the food—it felt I like could have been transported to an ancient Christian Agape Feast. For as ancient as it felt, it also felt prophetic with regards to the future of the church. The majority of the congregants were in their twenties and thirties who grew up in evangelical churches and were left longing for something different and something ancient. Many of them found the contemporary evangelical church filled with ego driven pastors, flashy services with little depth, lack of real relationships, doctrinally ridged, and politically aligned with the Republican Party. For a millennial generation who highly values family, desires to fight for justice, and longs for authentic relationships in an artisanal and experiential setting – St. Lydia's provided the perfect millennial environment to taste and see that God is good.

St. Lydia's has many of the same components of a contemporary church including, singing, praying, preaching, Eucharist, confession, and giving—yet the medium in which these things takes place is around tables and food. This church community is a place to get to know your neighbor and allow your neighbor to know you. It is a place to tangible experience being filled with both the gospel and food. It also allows the congregant the ability to give something as simple as cleaning the building afterwards.

I flew three thousand miles across the country to attend a church I had never visited and I left New York feeling I had joined a family. I can only imagine what it would have been like living in the crushingly harsh environment of the ancient world and stumbling across a family like this—it would have been a salvation experience. Perhaps this was what Jesus had in mind when he established his church around a table.

Part 4: Your Tables?

Up until this point, the reader has been learned about the big problem facing the church in America, specifically with the millennial generation; they no longer want to attend our current churches. While this generation is spiritual, they do not connect with the contemporary medium of church. The reader has also learned about the tables Chris has experienced in his life that have illuminated the importance and value of gathering as a church community. This last section will ask the reader what tables they have in their life that could help draw them back to the church.

Chapter 20: Looking in the Mirror

In this chapter, I will ask the reader to look into the mirror. The whole point of sharing some of my experiences around the table was to help expand the reader's mind and to be able to see different tables in their own life that have helped to nurture and grow their faith. This chapter is all about application; how might the reader live differently and engage the church with renewed passion and commitment when they consider what it might look like to gather around tables and food.

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