

A Deeper Understanding of the Eucharist and Agape Meals

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This article is based on a master's level capstone project involving planning, execution, and evaluation of seven meals toward deeper understanding of Agape Meals (Love Feasts) and the Eucharist, in the context of a Youth With A Mission (YWAM) Discipleship Training School (DTS) run in Cape Town, South Africa. Participants were from South Africa, the United States, Zimbabwe and Malawi, representing a broad spectrum of spiritual maturity, cultural, and economic backgrounds, and ranged in age from late teens to early sixties. DTS students, staff, staff family members and the DTS speaker for that week participated in the meal each Sunday afternoon for two hours. Group size averaged thirty-five.

Each meal aimed to facilitate enriched understanding of the table as a place of spiritual formation, addressing common misconceptions surrounding the Communion meal that hinder participation and formation. I desired that learners honestly examine their current experience and understanding of Communion and Agape Meals, that they be contributors as well as participants in the learning environment, and that they come to know the table as a place of spiritual formation and the Eucharist as life bringing.

Literature Review

In *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (2010), Parker Palmer examines the way we position ourselves for learning about the world around us, noting that "To know in truth is to allow one's self to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings. To know in truth is to enter into the life of that which we know and to allow it to enter into ours. Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known" (pg. 31). Palmer contrasts this with the modern pursuit of knowledge that assumes an adversarial relationship with others and with the world (pg. 24). Our language suggests a power we do not have: the Latin root of "objective" is "to oppose" which in German could be translated literally "standing-over-againstness"; "fact" is rooted in "to make" positioning us as creator and definer. While this language and posture puts us firmly (in our minds) in control of everything we see and touch, we gain much when we relinquish control and approach learning and knowing as communal.

Palmer thus provides a framework for exploring truth in community as means to growth and transformation. This necessarily includes an awareness of ourselves, others and Holy Spirit; an understanding of the place of community in discipleship; an understanding of the need and practice of spiritual disciplines and an understanding of the biblical metanarrative of believers becoming and being the people of God.

To approach knowledge and learning as communal has profound implications for our understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist. I believe our need for control contributes to the reduction of the bread and wine to mere symbol. When the eternal Son of God took on flesh and eternally became one with time, space and matter, something radically changed in the quality and content of creation. No bread, wine or person with all the mystery they contain

could ever be reduced to symbol. Sara Miles recounts her experience taking the wine in Eucharist in her book *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (2008, p. 61). Sara, an avowed atheist, walked into an Anglican church in downtown San Francisco, and out of curiosity took Communion. She had a profound and unexpected experience with the living Christ that changed her forever. She says this about the wine, “So, then, was it a symbol? Did the actual wine symbolically represent the imagined blood? No, because when I opened my mouth and swallowed, everything changed. It was real.”

Given this understanding of communal learning and knowing, choosing the table as the place of education made the most sense to me. Traditional classrooms with rows of chairs facing a teacher ready to fill student’s minds with information have hopelessly skewed our tacit beliefs and posture toward learning. Only a completely new environment could hope to bypass these. Palmer (2010) states, “To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (pg. 69). Our learning environment can often become a place where information is remembered rather than a space to practice obedience to truth. The job of a teacher is to create an environment where students and teacher explore a subject together.

A table/meal time is a natural part of the common culture we have inherited where all have a platform to share regardless of our individual backgrounds. This is not true of most classroom settings. As such, I embraced Palmer’s (2010) concept of consensus learning. While I did hours of research and study around the subject of Eucharist and the table as a place of formation, I went into the project knowing I had the potential to learn much myself from the practice, input and shared experience of the students. In consensus learning, the teacher is not the one with all the information while the students are blank slates, waiting to receive. The class learn by listening and responding to each other and to the subject by using an educational process that is not individualized and competitive but communal and cooperative. Howard Hendricks (2011) tells teachers: “If you stop growing today, you stop teaching tomorrow” (pg. 17). He argues “I, as a teacher, am primarily a learner, a student among students. I am perpetuating the learning process; I am still en-route. And by becoming a student again, I as a teacher will look at the education process through a radically new—and uniquely personal—set of eyes” (pg.17).

Therefore, I designed my project in a way that student and teacher could learn from each other as we experienced and participated in truth that could be evaluated and shared. Robert Capon (1989) captures my qualification and posture when he says,

Next, my qualifications. First, I am an amateur. . . . The amateur—the lover, the man who thinks heedlessness a sin and boredom a heresy—is just the man you need. More than that, whether you think you need him or not, he is a man who is bound, by his love, to speak. If he loves Wisdom or the Arts, so much the better for him and for all of us. But if he loves only the way meat browns or onions peel, if he delights simply in the curds of his cheese or the color of his wine, he is, by every one of those enthusiasms, commanded to speak. A silent lover is one who doesn’t know his job. (p. 4)

This captures what I want to bring as a teacher/student to delight in the experiences of the planning, preparation, serving, presentation, participation, evaluation of the outcomes, Meals and Eucharist itself. It is our lack of wonder and awe for the simple things that robs us of much in the practice of Communion. We overlook the mystery of yeast bringing flour and water to life or, conversely, how flour and water, left sitting, can be brought to life by collecting

yeast out of the air itself (sourdough). Our lack of wonder is so pervasive that many experience boredom or even dread in Communion instead of a reverent awe of creation. Tim Chester (2011) concurs, “The world is more delicious than it needs to be. We have a superabundance of divine goodness and generosity. God went over the top” (pg. 67).

Palmer (2010) shares that the root of the word “educate” is “to draw out” and that the teacher’s task is not to fill the student, but to draw learning from them. My goal was to create a learning environment in which to practice the truth of love feast and Eucharist together. Palmer advocates that three things are needed to facilitate this kind of learning: openness, boundaries, and hospitality.

Openness means to remove obstacles to learning, such as fear, to un-clutter the classroom and our minds. This goes for the student as well as the teacher. The teacher must be comfortable saying, “I don’t know” as much as the student has to become comfortable with the teacher saying it. Too often, both teacher and student prefer the illusion of security where an answer is always available. Further, my role as a teacher is to create boundaries and then together with the students enter and explore. Palmer (2010) says, “The openness of a space is created by the firmness of its boundaries. A learning space cannot go on forever; if it did, it would not be a structure for learning but an invitation to confusion and chaos. A space has edges, perimeters, limits” (pg. 72). My aim was to create boundaries during each meal within which we could participate and experience together.

Hospitality is perhaps the most difficult of the disciplines. Our usual understanding of hospitality is to show love and generosity to friends. The original intention is more directed toward love and generosity to strangers. This is challenging to practice, as we want to order our lives around people like ourselves. Leonard Sweet (2015) says that the table is the place where reconciliation can most naturally happen. He explains:

I used to think hospitality was a lost art. Now I’m convinced it is a lost heart. . . . How we treat a guest, according to this saying, is literally how we are treating God. Of course there’s a long, Biblical foundation for this idea, but it gets particularly interesting when you consider that the word “hospitality” derives from *hospes* (“guest, host, stranger”), which itself derives from *hostis* (“stranger, enemy”—our English word “hostile” comes from *hostis*). (p. 139)

While preparing for this project I heard of a white South African husband and wife who were, by profession, attorneys. They moved into the township of Kayamundi and for the last fifteen years have served a reconciliation lunch each Wednesday. They prepare a nice meal at a well laid-out table and open the doors for anyone to join. When Deby and I went, we found black, white and colored Africans; men and women; rich and poor; educated and uneducated, all represented at the table. At the particular meal we attended, each person was invited to talk about their favorite celebration meal in their own culture. Real reconciliation took place as we shared and heard each other’s stories.

One of my aims was to change how we “do” mealtimes and Eucharist, not just change how we think about it. Centering my teaching around a meal itself helped tremendously with that outcome. Palmer (2010) talks about the traditional classroom in this way:

First, in the conventional classroom the focus of study is always outward—on nature, on history, on someone else’s vision of reality. The reality inside the

classroom, inside the teacher and the students, is regarded as irrelevant; it is not recognized that we are part of nature and of history, that we have visions of our own. So we come to think of reality as “out there,” apart from us, and knowing becomes a kind of spectator sport. At best the classroom is a platform from which we view some subject. (pg. 33)

To change the way we “do” preparation, serving and participating in meals could have a powerful effect on changing our very affections. It can become liturgical in nature, but this takes understanding and intentionality. James K. A. Smith (2013), says:

The renewal of the church and the Christian university—a renewal of both Christian worship and Christian education—hinges on an understanding of human beings as ‘liturgical animals,’ creatures who can’t not worship and who are fundamentally formed by worship practices. The reason such liturgies are so formative is precisely because it is these liturgies, whether Christian or ‘secular’ that shape what we love. And we are what we love. (pp. 13-14)

With intentional practice and reflection, mealtimes can create life-bringing liturgy to change how and what we love, and even renew our love for creation itself.

Personal Motivations for this Project

I have personally experienced the growth that comes through the DTS experience, curriculum and values, but also recognize difficulties students have with re-entry and integration of learning and growth into their lives, families and churches after DTS. My idea was to combine values of DTS and “Discovery Bible Study” or “simple church,” which is a method of multiplying church where each person, even pre-believers, can participate and lead. I wanted to create a curriculum with intentional outcomes that would provide tools to integrate teaching into everyday life and relationships. Chester says:

Jesus didn’t run projects, establish ministries, create programs, or put on events. He ate meals. If you routinely share meals and you have a passion for Jesus, then you’ll be doing mission. It’s not that meals save people. People are saved through the gospel message. But meals will create natural opportunities to share that message in a context that resonates powerfully with what you’re saying. (2011, p. 89)

For some time, my family and friends have been making our mealtimes more intentional. The more I reflected, the more I realized the table is the perfect place to teach the discipline of having intentional times of coming together with an awareness of Holy Spirit and each other while celebrating and enjoying good food. The table is shaped in a way that we all face each other in closer proximity and for longer than any other time in the day.

It is my belief that discipleship needs to become more organic and integrated into everyday life to make it accessible for all people. I desired to break down the sacred/secular dichotomy that programs and Sunday services can propagate. Dom Gregory Dix (2015) argues that early church public gatherings such as those at the synagogue were for evangelism, while worship and anything uniquely Christian (such as Communion) was held in private homes. He says (p. 16), “The fact is that Christian worship in itself, and especially the Eucharist, was not by origin, and is not by nature intended to be, a ‘public’ worship at all, in the sense that we have come to accept, but a highly exclusive thing, whose original setting

is entirely domestic and private.” Dix continues, “Their specifically Christian worship is from the first a domestic and private thing. They met in one another’s houses for the Breaking of Bread. There was no Christian public worship in our sense at all” (2015, p. 16).

Further, scholars agree that the early church practiced Communion integrated with a full meal. Over time however, the Eucharist became separated from the meal. Robert Webber and David Neff (2009) explain:

A picture that emerges through liturgical studies is that the early Christian meal was gradually replaced by a ritual symbolizing the meal. The continual growth of the church into large communities made it increasingly difficult to share an entire meal together. Consequently, the tables were replaced by a single table, the table of the Lord; and the complete meal gave way to the symbols used by our Lord at the Last Supper — bread and wine. (pp. 109-110)

My goal in designing my meals and outcomes was to create a space to practice truth, not to merely hear or remember truthful information, as per Palmer’s (2010) conviction that “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.” Dix (2015) similarly argues that the primitive apostolic church regarded the Eucharist as first of all an action, something “done,” not something “said,” and as corporate (p. 16). As such, understanding comes through shared participation in and reflection on Agape Meals and the Eucharist.

My intent was to create meals where the participation in them would provide the lessons that later reflection would draw out, where we would be learning truth together through praxis. Jane Vella (2002) states, “Praxis is a Greek word that means ‘action with reflection.’ There is little doubt among educators that doing is the way adults learn anything” (p. 14). The class would participate in, evaluate, and learn through the process.

While studying Christian formation and discipleship, I was struck by how often Jesus taught around a meal. In addition, the consistent theme of mealtimes and food mark significant events in the biblical metanarrative of believers becoming the people of God. We see that in the Passover, the Exodus, the provision of Manna in the wilderness and more. In addition, Jesus, at the Last Supper, inaugurated an intentional mealtime with bread and wine as a sacrament and means of grace.

Curriculum and Method

Meal One: *The Eucharist and the Table as a place of Spiritual Formation*

The goal of the first meal was to establish students’ current experience and understanding of the Eucharist and develop an awareness of spiritual formation. I prepared chicken curry with naan bread and salad. We set the table in the beautiful Italian Grotto from which we were running the DTS, I blessed the food and invited Holy Spirit to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to understand the things we don’t know that we don’t know. I was grateful through the prayer to sense Holy Spirit speaking to us all and I felt a general sense of “weighty-ness” and reverent expectation at the table.

Smith (2013) argues that we do not live out of our cognitive beliefs but from our desires and imagination that are shaped by our liturgies or storied beliefs. As such, I designed a simple exercise to help bypass cognitive information and expose tacit belief. After the meal, we participated in an activity to establish where each person was in his or her understanding

of Communion and spiritual formation. I provided paper, scissors, glue and magazines and asked each person to cut out pictures that portray their experience of Communion throughout their Christian life, the emotions those experiences have stirred in them, and their understanding of how we mature to live more like Jesus.

My aim was to reveal tacit beliefs and understandings through bypassing the reasoning of the written answer. The exercise exposed common themes. First, there was a general sense of detachment when participating in the Eucharist and no connection or understanding of what the wafer and cup were supposed to represent. Second, there was fear that they were participating “unworthily” and were putting themselves in some sort of spiritual danger. When the participants shared their pictures, the answers ranged from hilarious to heartbreaking. Most of the participants could make no connection between the Communion ritual and spiritual formation. Empty, judgment, ritualistic, cold, religious, pointless, un-inspired, skin-deep and abusive were just some of the words used to describe their experiences and emotions attached to Communion. One image depicted Vladimir Putin kissing a corpse. The student explained that he always felt Communion celebrated death and little else. They did not see Communion as much more than empty ritual.

Meal Two: *The Table as a Microcosm of Life*

The second meal aimed to explore how the table can become a tool to reflect and evaluate the state of our soul, as well as practice simple disciplines to strengthen and promote spiritual growth. Our dining habits reveal much about our priorities, values, and awareness of Holy Spirit and other people. At the table, we can ask ourselves questions: Am I hurried? Am I always being served, or do I also serve? Do I value celebration? Do I eat with strangers and those unlike me? Do I practice hospitality? My second outcome was to address misconceptions people have concerning participating in Communion and lay a foundation for a more biblical and practical understanding. Eugene Peterson (2008) posits:

The preparation, serving, and eating of meals is perhaps the most complex cultural process that we human beings find ourselves in. It is a microcosm of the intricate realities that are combined to form the culture that gives meaning to the daily lives of us all. . . . Because it is so inclusive (anyone and everyone can be included in the meal), so pervasive (we all have to eat), so comprehensive (taking in the entire range of our existence, physical and cultural), and unrelentingly social (we necessarily rely on uncounted named and unnamed others), the meal provides an endless supply of metaphors for virtually everything we do as human beings. (pp. 220-221)

Since the table touches so many areas of our lives, it is the perfect place to begin to pay attention and find ways to incorporate disciplines that can be easily and consistently practiced. Chester (2011) reminds us:

The Lord’s Supper is the world in miniature; it has cosmic significance. Within it we find clues to the meaning of all creation and all history, to the nature of God and the nature of man, to the mystery of the world, which is Christ. . . . Though the table stands at the center its effects stretch out to the four corners of the earth. (p. 101)

Likewise, spiritual disciplines play an important role in spiritual growth. The practice of disciplines is not an end in itself but a way to strengthen and mature areas in which we

struggle. My intent was to introduce mealtimes as a place to practice disciplines needed in our lives to position believers for growth toward spiritual maturity. Ruth Haley Barton (2010) says that “the most hopeful thing any of us can say about spiritual transformation” is that “I cannot transform myself, or anyone else for that matter. What I can do is create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place, by developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open and available to God” (p. 12).

Thirty-six people attended the second meal, including DTS students, staff, school leaders and family members. I divided the group into four tables to enable more intimate discussion, assigned a staff member to each table to facilitate the outcomes, and provided each table with a handout to read together. Before the meal, I gave a brief teaching on how the table can be viewed as a microcosm of life as well as a place to practice spiritual disciplines. I asked each student to journal their mealtimes over the coming week and ask Holy Spirit to help them identify areas they would like to grow. I also gave examples on how to practice spiritual disciplines in ways that relate to providing, preparing, serving, eating, and cleaning at every meal. These included: if you are hurried, slow down and savor your food; if you are distracted, take time to become more aware of those around you, ask meaningful questions and listen well; if you are always being served, begin to serve others; if you fear lack, begin to give generously and practice the discipline of celebration.

The menu for the meal was Mexican tortilla wraps. It is a great dish to prepare in community because of the large amount of tomatoes, onions, coriander, peppers and chicken that need to be prepared, as well as tortillas that need to be rolled out and fried. I allowed sufficient time so the preparation would be unhurried. I posted a seating plan in order to intentionally combine introverts and extroverts, young and mature, and new in faith with those more established in faith at each table. I invited them to eat together slowly, enjoy the food and get to know others at the table. I prepared a handout with the following instructions for groups to read together:

In the earliest days when the gospel was spread, believers would meet in homes to hear the word and worship. Their meal time was a central part of the day. They would have a meal together called an Agape Meal or Love Feast at which they would also take Communion as Jesus had taught. The richest believers were the most likely to be the hosts as they naturally had the biggest homes and most resources.

Before the radically inclusive kingdom that Jesus brought, there would have been no time when a poor person would have been invited into a rich person's house except as a servant! Think about what this must have been like as people of different economic and cultural backgrounds came together as “equals.” Can you imagine some of the challenges they faced? Read 1 Corinthians 11:20-34 together. Ask Holy Spirit to highlight something to you in the text. Share something that stood out to you with the group. Have someone take notes.

In 1 Corinthians 11: 20-34, Paul offers correction to the Church of Corinth for their practice of the Last Supper. I had participants use *Lectio Divina* as a reading method in order to enter into and engage with the text through imagination and understanding and gain revelation concerning the experience of the early believers. Afterward, each participant shared at least one thing Holy Spirit had highlighted to them. The passage opened discussion on topics such as the need to come to the table ready to engage with others, the potential

reticence of the rich in not wanting to feel responsible for the poor, the need for a greater awareness of the social injustices around food, and the concept that the “sick or dying” could still be among us because of our lack of awareness of those around us.

After the meal, we came together as a class and shared things that Holy Spirit had highlighted. I was amazed at the depth and breadth to which their understanding of Communion had grown from the reading.

Meal Three: Awareness

My third meal aimed to build an understanding and practice of mindfulness. First, mindfulness of the moment you are in. Second, mindfulness of the presence and activity of Holy Spirit. John Ortberg argues, “Being open and receptive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit is a nonoptional part of transformation” (2009, p. 142-143). Third, mindfulness of the person/people you are with. This includes the unseen community around us who are affected by our everyday choices. Gordon Smith (2005) argues:

Gustavo Gutierrez rightly insists that the Eucharist is an act of identification with those present but also with the suffering and those who cry for political liberation and socio-economic justice. . . . ‘Without a real commitment,’ he writes, ‘against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the Eucharist celebration is an empty action.’ (p. 75)

Fourth, we need an awareness of our bodily experience. As David Benner (2012) states: “The first option for an organization of consciousness and self is expressed in the sense of being my body” (p. 90).

Awareness is a fundamental and important part of Agape Meals, Eucharist and spiritual growth. I was assisted in the design and facilitation of this meal by a fellow candidate in the Masters’ program who has studied and practiced methods of mindfulness. We arranged people into groups at four tables, keeping the tables close enough that everyone could hear when something needed to be shared with the group. The meal began with a starter course of fresh bread and bowls of olive oil mixed with herbs, bacon-wrapped prunes and feta, and a Ferrero Rocher foil-wrapped chocolate. Tonya gave a five-minute teaching on the need for, and practice of, mindfulness. She then led the group in a mindfulness activity where we were to observe the chocolate, smell it, and notice its texture, color, and shape. She instructed participants to take a bite of the chocolate and led us through the same observations with the chocolate in our mouths: How did it feel? What were the textures? What were the tastes? We slowly consumed the rest, enjoying the flavors and sensations. We ate the first course in the same manner: slowly, mindfully and with awareness of the food, those at the table with us, and Jesus as host. One of the students remarked after the Meal that they would never eat food in the same way again!

For the second course, we served Thai lettuce wraps with chicken and peanut sauce. I built on themes from the previous meal’s Bible reading. Smith (2005) says, “If participation in the Lord’s Supper does not foster a capacity to see and act with courage, integrity, love, and justice in the world, then the holy meal is in danger of becoming nothing more than a form of communal self-indulgence. It must be an event that turns us back to a thoughtful and courageous engagement with the world” (p. 74).

I proceeded to remind participants of the way those in the early church had eaten without regard for the others, specifically those less fortunate, and how Paul said this was a reason people were sick and dying. I researched the injustices surrounding the chocolate industry along with some of the worst corporate offenders. According to Chanthavong (2002), 45 percent of the world's cocoa beans grow in the Ivory Coast. Here, slave labor is an epidemic and boys from 12-19 years old are trafficked and enslaved. Ferrero Rocher is committed to being fair trade certified by 2020, but currently admits to knowingly selling a product produced by slave labor. Nestle is one of the worst offenders, allegedly knowing for years of the slave labor involved, but actively working to conceal rather than change it (some changes have been made since this paper was first written).

In addition, I prepared a prayer card for each person that was placed face down on the table and gave each person a piece of Nestle 70% dark chocolate. I had my sons, nine and eleven years old, stand with me while I gave a brief explanation of the injustices surrounding the chocolate industry. I wanted my sons present to illustrate how young and vulnerable the boys are that are being trafficked and enslaved. We then observed five minutes of silence, during which they were instructed to turn over the prayer card and engage with the content. I asked them to make this piece of chocolate a symbolic prayer for the pain and injustice it represents that is beyond words. As they ate the chocolate, they were to imagine they were ingesting the pain and suffering it represents so that it would become part of their very being.

After the silence, I asked participants to eat the second course mindfully, thinking about the ingredients they were eating and talking together about ways we could become intentional in our food purchases in order to empower others (and creation) around the world. It was a markedly quieter and more reflective mealtime. Some told me they could not bring themselves to eat the chocolate. One participant could not eat the meal. I had planned to do this exercise last, but Tonya had advised against ending on this note. I am glad I took her advice! After we cleared the second course, we placed ice cream at each table along with an assortment of toppings. We provided Cadbury's milk chocolate, which is certified fair trade.

Meal Four: *The Metanarrative*

My fourth meal aimed to provide students with an understanding of the biblical metanarrative and attach the Eucharist to the story of believers becoming the people of God. When we eat an intentional meal and share the bread and wine, we remember the story of Passover as well as looking forward to, and borrow from, the wedding feast of the Lamb. N.T. Wright (2013) reminds us that the story Scripture tells is for the whole world: it tells us how things were, the way they are now, the way things could be, and the way things will be. The biblical metanarrative is both a public and comprehensive story that calls each of us to find our place. But if we do not know the story, we will not and cannot find our place in it.

I purposely timed this meal for the beginning of our teaching week on the biblical metanarrative. My aim was to lay a foundation of the role food and mealtimes hold in the story of God making believers his people. Many students shared that in the past during Communion they had little understanding of what they were participating in. Without understanding the story and the role meals had in shaping, marking, and forming God's people, the thin wafer and sip of wine that is often our Communion experience seems confusing and pointless.

I arranged four tables for the students surrounding a center buffet table. The center table represented the coming feast at the wedding supper of the Lamb as shared in Revelation and was overflowing with fruits, vegetables, cold cuts, cheese, olives, cakes, breads and even chicken biryani that a student was inspired to contribute. The mealtime was three courses that consisted of lamb and flat bread, risotto and chicken (manna and quail) and fish and bread.

I explained: I would serve three courses, the center table represented the feast table we all participate in at the wedding feast of the Lamb and that at any time during the meal they could go to the table and eat from it (to symbolize the now but not yet kingdom that we participate in now, but not in fullness). Before the first course, students read together the Passover account in Exodus 12:21-30 at each table. One person then retold the account in his or her own words. The rest of the students filled in any missed details. I also asked that they intentionally engage with the experience by placing themselves in the story and asking questions such as: how would I feel? After fifteen minutes of discussion, we served the first course of lamb and unleavened bread.

I wanted to incorporate an experience of the Last Supper into the meal without “serving” Communion, but creating an experience of the meal itself. During the first course, the Passover Meal, I stood and took bread, blessed it (gave thanks), proclaimed the words of Jesus (“This is my body broken for you”), broke it and passed it to each table to share. I then gave a short explanation of how at a Passover Meal like this that they were participating in, Jesus stood and made this declaration. The Gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke indicate this. I asked them to consider the emotions the disciples may have been feeling and to compare them to the emotions the Israelites may have felt on that first Passover night – such as fear, uncertainty, and confusion.

The next course was risotto (manna) and chicken (quail). Each table read the account of God providing manna in the desert, entering into the story through their imagination, and retelling it in their own words. We shared the final course of fish and bread as we read the account of the feeding of the five thousand.

In talking to participants after the meal, most tables had significant discussion and made the connections I intended concerning the biblical focus on believers becoming and being the people of God as well as the now/not yet nature of the kingdom of God.

Meal Five: *Planning the Love Feast and Eucharist*

The outcome of the fifth meal was for the class to plan a Love Feast and Communion that we would share the following week. Until this point, I had intentionally not served Communion during the meals with the exception of breaking the bread and eating it during the Passover course of the fourth meal. Since most participants had strong tacit beliefs connected with Communion, I wanted our first sharing of the Eucharist to be in a meal planned by the group. I also wanted the means and method of sharing Eucharist decided by the group based on their growing understanding of the intent and value of Communion.

We had a simple meal of curry and after eating gathered and discussed the different experiences and revelation we had received during previous meals. One significant revelation had come on the previous Friday when God spoke to us that Jesus is to be our only source of life. When we feed off each other for our life and significance, we cause and experience death. In Communion, we take Jesus as the source and sustenance of life into

ourselves as we feed on him. This was key for the class beginning to understand this aspect of the Eucharist and how it relates to everyday life and relationships. Afterwards, we outlined a plan for the Communion meal for the following week. We decided that everybody would contribute their favorite main dish, drinks, side or dessert, some would take responsibility for preparing the table, and everyone would clean afterwards. When discussing Communion, I suggested that we pour the drink from one carafe to symbolize Jesus as the one source of life. I also suggested we break bread from *one* loaf and pass it around to signify Jesus as *one* source of sustenance. We also decided to break the bread at the beginning of the meal and share the cup at the end to remind us that the whole meal is sacrament and sacred.

Meal Six: *Love Feast and Communion*

Our Love Feast Communion meal was held the following Sunday. The tables looked beautiful. Everybody came with hearts prepared to engage with each other and Holy Spirit, and to enjoy a great meal in good company with Jesus as host. We broke the bread at the beginning of the meal as planned and ate the bread together as Jesus instructed. We enjoyed an unhurried meal as we each took turns sharing. There was laughter, tears, jokes and pain shared around the table. We shared the cup and then finished with amazing desserts.

Meal Seven: *Celebration*

The seventh meal was a simple celebration meal with no other objective than to enjoy each other and the food. I wanted the final meal to be an extravagant celebration to enjoy alongside teaching the practice of celebration but unfortunately, it was the final Sunday before outreach and we were all exhausted. In the end, we ordered pizza and everyone chose their own toppings and we had a time to sing, share poetry etc.

Assessment and Evaluation

I desired that learners honestly examine their current view, experience and understanding of Communion and Agape Meals, that they be contributors as well as participants in the learning environment, and that they come to know the table as a place of spiritual formation and the Eucharist as life bringing.

For the first outcome, the magazine project was successful in helping learners bypass their cognitive understanding of Eucharist and Meal times and reveal underlying pre-conscious beliefs and actual experiences. In class sharing, students could not only see their tacit beliefs and experience, but as others shared, they related to their classmates' experiences, which helped broaden and deepen their awareness of their current understanding. The journal assignment was not as effective due to various reasons, and a hand out with questions would have been better.

The second outcome was to exhibit methods of learning where the teacher and student were both on a discovery journey, each learning from the other. This was successful. In my introduction during the first meal, I explained to the students that we would be planning a Love Feast and Communion together during the fifth meal: the details of the meal were not predetermined, but would come out of our collective and growing understanding. By the fifth meal, the students confidently and competently planned an effective Agape Meal and Communion time.

Student feedback confirmed that they grew in every area I hoped and planned for and more. Most had previously viewed the celebration of the Eucharist (Communion) as a church

ritual and described their former participation with words such as cold, isolated, boring, dread, and guilt. All participants expressed a change in their experience for the better and moved from a view of Communion as an individual act between them and God to being deeply communal. Participating in Communion as a celebration meal replaced fear and dread with joy. Those that had previously experienced guilt when taking Communion could now participate with joy-filled freedom. Many expressed growth in the area of mindfulness and their appreciation of the need for and experience of growth in the area of being present to your body, the present moment, Holy Spirit and those around us. Students also made a strong connection with the value of creation. One of the students shared, “By participating in Communion, we celebrate the dignity of ourselves and others. We acknowledge the awesome wonder of the God who loved enough to yearn for relationship with us and we honor His work of becoming like us to restore creation to Himself.”

What Contributed To Growth?

A main contribution to students' growth was intentionally identifying the participants' previous experience and understanding of Agape Meals and the Eucharist and helping them identify any contrasts to what Jesus intended the Eucharist to be and what was practiced by the early church. Before the project I designed a questionnaire that I sent to a diverse group of people all over the world to help me identify areas of need. When I evaluated the magazine project during the first meal, it confirmed that the participants experience and understanding was similar to the (mostly Evangelical) Christians I had surveyed. My main teaching tool was to create an experience that could be participated in, reflected on, and evaluated. However, a difficulty in identifying what contributed to growth and change in the participants is the mystery of the Eucharist itself: How is eating a meal together with bread and wine from a common source a means of grace? This is a mystery. However, what is even more stunning is that it actually works! My role was to bring students to the table and address misconceptions concerning Communion, to help students develop awareness of the moment, Holy Spirit and others, to connect the mealtime to the biblical metanarrative of believers becoming the people of God, and to give simple tools for self-evaluation and the practice of disciplines around the table.

Experiencing the meals in the context of a DTS had both benefits and drawbacks. The DTS teaching weeks added much-needed foundational teaching: a better understanding of Trinity, the Incarnation, importance of the life of Jesus, the gospel and more. However, after the lecture week students were often already overloaded emotionally and physically by the mealtimes.

Conclusions and Implications

In both my experience and findings from my questionnaire, mealtimes have become increasingly hurried, often not eaten together as family nor around a table. One of the hardest things for me to overcome is decades of hurried mealtimes, that have created unhealthy habits and patterns. During the project, these unhealthy habits caused great difficulty when attempting to create unhurried, productive, intentional meals. We have created a “table culture” where it is normal to be hurried and distracted, where iPhones or television are common guests, where we lack awareness of Holy Spirit and those with us, and where we are unconscious of the food itself and finish a meal without any appreciation for what was consumed.

In losing the table as a place of connection both in the family and church, and with the

Eucharist becoming an act associated with discomfort and dread, we are losing places and means of spiritual formation that are of ultimate importance to the church body. There is little understanding of the Agape Meal the early church found so important. Although older YWAM alumni are the exception, few participate in or facilitate them outside of DTS or base life. We are also bypassing formational liturgy that shapes our loves in a meaningful way.

Regarding participation in the Eucharist, it is saddening to realize many Christians actually experience guilt, shame, and disconnection and have little understanding of what they are participating in. Chester (2011, p. 102) asks the probing question: "If your church stopped celebrating Communion, what difference would it make to your life?" From my findings I would say most Evangelical Christians would have to respond "very little."

There are foundational understandings I believe a Christian must possess to more fully participate in and experience Eucharist. One must understand God as Trinity and the importance and implications of this. If the believer does not know they were created from and for relationship, the need to relate will be seen as unimportant and Communion will not be understood as foundationally communal. If the believer does not understand the Incarnation and life of Christ and its importance, much is lost in the appreciation and awe of the actual bread and wine. If the believer does not possess an eschatology of a renewed heaven and a renewed earth and if they do not recognize the importance of the empty tomb, much will be lost in the Eucharist concerning our awe of creation and our role in it. I believe the more we understand these things, the more it will be reflected in the quality of bread and wine we choose, as well as how and by whom it came to be made. Recognizing there are fundamental teachings that would be beyond the scope of the project I created, my project was greatly served by the DTS and the content it provided. I believe the church needs more intentional teaching and, more importantly, experiences of this kind to restore this sacrament and the table as a central place of formation through fellowship.

Jesus left us a simple meal of bread and wine at a common table as one of the most foundational means of grace. I believe there is something profound to be learned from yeast and the lesson and mystery is hidden in the bread and wine for us to discover. Unleavened bread is not made with yeast. When Jesus is the source of our life, we become as unleavened bread brought to life by Christ himself.

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