

# ascribe

A Series on Worship

## Ascribe Part Five: Worship and the Table

By Pastor David Fields

The repeated practice of “remembrance” at the Table roots us in the *true story*, reassures us of Jesus’ presence with us, and reorients our lives to act in a cross-shaped ways.

### I. The Table Roots us in the True Story

“The mall is actually an intensely religious site, because it invites you into this set of routines and rituals that, at their root, are trying to tell you happiness is found in stuff, and meaning is found in acquisition. The way we become consumerist is not because someone has argued us to that conclusion but because our hearts are captured by these cultural liturgies that pull us into a rival story of the world.” – James K.A. Smith

Smith is saying that the ‘secular’ world is in fact, deeply religious and ritualistic. The shopping “experience” is aimed at shaping our *loves* in a certain direction.

Everything is telling us a story about who you are and what you are supposed to be. And this Table is meant to tell you a different story, to disciple you in another direction. And in the text, we read today, Jesus gives us just that.

“And he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

– Luke 22:19-20.

Jesus takes these familiar elements of the meal, things that these disciples knew since childhood, and he totally recasts them – he infuses them with new meaning. Basically, he says, “The whole story of God – including the exodus from Egypt, and the Passover meal that commemorates that – all of that is coming to it is fulfilled in...me. I am leading the final exodus, the way of slavery...to sin and death, forever.”

To “take” and “eat” of what Jesus offers here, this is a reversal of the “taking” and “eating” of when humans first rejected God and God’s ways in Genesis 3. This is how we are welcomed back to our true “home” with God. The whole story of the Bible ends with God coming to transform the world into the place where we can once again “walk with God” just like Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden.

## *Communion as a Subversive Counter-practice*

See, if the liturgy of the “mall” is to whet your appetite for things, for purchasing, Communion whets our appetite for grace, for life with God, for the loving leadership of Jesus.

“The tangible display and performance of the gospel in the Lord’s Supper is a deeply affecting practice [meaning, it generates “feeling”]. Its sights and smells, its rhythms, and movements, are the sort of thing that seep into our imaginations and become second nature. Just as a song makes words stick in our memory, so the sights, smells, and rhythms of the Eucharist seem to make the story both come alive and wriggle into our imaginations in a way it wouldn’t otherwise.” – James K.A. Smith

When we “do this” – when we “take” and “eat” of these elements – we are retelling and rehearsing this story. We are rooting ourselves again in the true story.

### **II. The Table Reassures us of Jesus’ Presence with Us**

When we gather here, to this space that Jesus has invited us to – it’s his Table, after all. This is his idea – he is the “Host” of this meal – and when we gather here together, he is “with us.” By the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent to be with us, and in us, he is really made present to us.

We are not merely looking back to the event of Jesus’ death. We are looking at...Him. Jesus, in this present moment; with you, and me, and us together.

The warning of Paul not to “eat in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor 11:27) is about how the rich folks in the church were going ahead and having this meal – they were eating and drinking – before the working-class poor were off work (1 Cor 11:17-22).

The Table brings us to Jesus, and as we do, it’s like a funnel – coming near to Jesus brings us closer to each other. This practice transcends the spaces we often set up between ourselves – the way we guard ourselves from closeness with each other. It tells us “We belong to God, and to each other.” Jesus is present to us; and present in the midst of us.

### *Tasting Transcendence*

Meals can transcend time. Taste, and particularly smell, can evoke intense memories and take us immediately back to a time and place where we had experienced it before. Ritual meals – repeated meals, like Thanksgiving or Christmas, with a repeated set of food, drink, and format – ritual meals connect the dots between decades that way nothing else can. And so, borrowing this idea from Charles Taylor, a Canadian family celebrating Thanksgiving in 2023 is closer, in many ways, to Thanksgiving 1923 than to the previous Tuesday.

In that same way, when we come to the Table, to this memorial that Jesus tells us to repeat together, we are closer to that Day of Unleavened Bread where Jesus sits down with his disciples that we are to last Tuesday. This meal transcends time, and space. It places us in communion, in

connection, with Jesus at that first Last Supper, and it places in relation to the communion of saints all throughout Christian history who have gathered at this table.

### III. The Table Reorients our Lives to Live in a Cross-Shaped Ways

In Hebrew thought, to “remember” is not only to call that thing to mind, but to *do something about it*. As Jesus hands out the bread, as he passes around the cup of wine, he says to his followers – and he says to us, still, today – “Do this in remembrance of me.” From Jesus’ Hebraic perspective, you remember by *doing* something. Remembering is not just an “Oh yah” thing you do in your mind. It’s a function of your body. It’s an action. And by “doing this”, taking these elements into ourselves, ingesting them, we are “doing something”, that leads to more doing too.

#### ***Formed for Peacemaking***

This “remembrance” shapes how we get to work as agents of God’s peace, his *shalom*, in the places we live and work. This is what energizes us for “worship”, which includes pursuing justice in the world, that work of “shaping” the world in a way that loves God in the other six days.

“When we speak about ‘following Christ’ it is the crucified Messiah we are talking about. His death was not simply the messy bit that enables us to be forgiven but that can then be forgotten. The cross is the surest, truest, and deepest window on the very heart and character of the living and loving God.... And when therefore we speak...of shaping the world, we do not – we dare not – simply treat the cross as the thing that saves us “personally,” but which can be left behind when we get on with the job. The task of shaping the world is best understood as the redemptive task of bringing the achievement of the cross to bear on the world, and in that task the methods, as well as the message, must be cross shaped through and through.”

– N.T. Wright

#### **Life Group Discussion:**

##### **Open Up**

In the message, we looked at the idea that “ritual meals” (like Thanksgiving, or Christmas dinner) can transcend time. These kinds of repeated, formalized meals have the ability to place us in close proximity to other times and places through the memories they invoke.

Describe any of the ways you’ve sensed this to be true about, say, your Christmas dinner traditions? Like, do they “bring you back” to other years, even other decades?

##### **Dig In**

1. **Read Luke 22:7-23.** Why do you think Jesus chose a meal (or particularly *this meal, the Passover*) as a primary framework for presenting the meaning of his death?

2. Has the practice of communion enriched your commitment to Jesus or deepened your faith in him? Why or why not?
3. This week we've looked at how worship is also about memory – about “remembering” what God has done for us through Jesus. But as we saw memory, in Hebrew thought, is not just the opposite of “forgetfulness”; it leads to action. God “remembered” Noah (Gen 8) and “remembered” his covenant with Abraham when his people were enslaved in Egypt (Ex 2). God’s remembering was not because he had forgotten but is another way to say he acted.

How might following Jesus’ instruction to “do this in remembrance of me” – eating the bread and drinking the cup – lead us into more “action” in the real world? How might this relate to the connection between worship and justice that we looked at early in the series? And how might it influence our approach to working for peace in the real world (see also the quote from N.T. Wright in the study above)?

4. In what ways that you have been challenged from this study, or from the series as a whole? What changes might this lead to in terms of how you approach your own practice of worship?

(Bonus questions for groups that have time to go a layer deeper)

5. **Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.** What is Paul’s concern here? In what ways might believers today fail to recognize the value of each person in the community or act with favouritism (see also **James 2:1-8**)?
6. How do Paul’s next instructions/warnings in the next section (**read 11:23-34**) address that tendency? How do these instructions inform how we approach worship in our setting today?

### Prayer

Take time to share any requests with your group. Pray also for our broader community – that we would worship God in Spirit and in truth (John 4) – and that we would be formed into a community that reflects and resembles God and his heart for the world.