

The Lord's table

One of the characteristics of worship in the early church was eating. For those of us who like food this sounds rather promising! We often associate worship with singing, just as the early church did (Eph 5:19), yet there is another aspect of worship which was regularly practiced in the early church. Put simply, it was the Lord's Table, Holy Communion, Breaking of Bread or, as Tom Wright calls it, "the Jesus meal".

When our Lord had risen from the dead, He went back to His Father and left us with a meal to share with one another. This simple fact is, sadly, often overlooked in some quarters of Christianity. He didn't leave behind a clear doctrinal statement, nor a church membership course, nor a huge pot of money with which to 'resource' our mission, nor even a church growth strategy! He simply left behind a group of people whom He had promised the Holy Spirit to. He commissioned them to take the gospel into all creation and also gave them a meal to share.

Eating together is central to true, authentic Christianity, and eating the meal Jesus gave us to share is crucial for our discipleship and church life together. The early church recognized this and very quickly, after the Spirit came, they broke bread together from house to house. The Scriptures say they devoted themselves to it. In fact, one early criticism of the early church was that they were into cannibalism because it was believed that they kept eating Christ's body! It showed that they shared the Jesus meal often enough for people to be talking about it! So, what does this meal tell us and what can it contribute to our contemporary understanding of worship? I believe that the Jesus meal broadens and deepens our worship towards the Living God and enriches our gatherings. I'll mention two ways in particular that the Lord's Table does this, physically and spiritually.

Firstly, as we break bread together, all of our senses are touched and involved. Often in corporate worship we will engage our voices (singing) and our ears (listening to the Word preached) but here, at the Lord's table, we have an opportunity for our whole being to engage in worship. Paul speaks of true worship as offering our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord (Romans 12:1). We use our hands to break the bread, our eyes focus on the wine, symbolizing the blood shed for us, we smell the bread (if it's freshly cooked!) and the wine, and most importantly we eat and drink. Christ's body and His blood becomes part of us; we take it into our bodies. With all the junk food we eat, here, we feed on something excellent - Christ!

Secondly, the meal enables us to focus more clearly on Christ's life, death and resurrection. The Spirit can (and will!) speak to us through the meal by drawing out fresh revelation of Christ which will minister to our present needs. For example, the Spirit may highlight the future aspect of the meal; the promise that Jesus will come back again. He may bring out the resurrection, if we have a need for power and hope at the time. It could be His death, as a reminder that sacrifice builds the Church, or even His life, as He shared it in the flesh with His disciples. All these aspects of Christ, and many more, are available through the Spirit as we share this meal together. In taking the time to share the bread and wine together we will see Christ afresh through this meal, the meal that Jesus Himself left us with.