Introduction: Dr. Cody Whittington attempts to provide a contextually informed, culturally engaged, and theologically faithful response to contemporary church gatherings that offer little relational connection. In a relationally distant cultural climate, the church must recover its value of table fellowship as demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus and his earliest followers. Cody's thesis explores these themes by examining a church he and a few others planted in 2017 called The Table Community Church.

The following citations are from Dr. Whittington's DMin research project:

Cody Whittington, "Life Around The Table: A Theologically Faithful and Culturally Engaged Church Gathering" (DMin dissertation, Multnomah Biblical Seminary, 2023).

"The church's negligence of trinitarian theology subsequently affects its missional witness. When the church lacks a robust trinitarian theology, it will be filled with some other ontology that shapes its identity and vocation. As Colin Gunton notes, 'Where there is no explicitly Christian theological ontology, an implicit and foreign one will fill and has filled the vacuum.'[1] In other words, a failure to consider the church's true essence and being are at the root of the church's identity crisis, which tends to divorce trinitarian theology and missiology into doctrinal affirmations to be assented to rather than embodied in real-time."

"Table fellowship is both *a critique of* the cultural climate of consumer thinking and *an invitation* to reimagine our gatherings in our moment. If the church understands itself as a triune community, it cannot cater to individualism. If the church considers itself relational by nature, it cannot sit idly by while loneliness and polarization (especially within the community of faith) conspire against the wholeness that Jesus offers."

"Table fellowship invites us to see and hear one another, to bring dignity in a culture of degradation, to serve others by contributing to the meal and discussions, and to acknowledge our equal need for God's grace as we take the sacred plunge into the waters and share the sacred meal around a table. Table fellowship creates a space for us to find common ground and dialogue through, not around, differences that would otherwise divide us. Table fellowship provides an avenue for

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[1] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 71.

encouragement, not just from the one giving the sermon but from the community itself. Though this model remains susceptible to cultural allurement, it better resists and redirects the temptations of non-trinitarian and individualistic gatherings and aims for a life together in the image of the triune God. Table fellowship is a way to show people they belong to God and each other."

"The cultural issues of loneliness and relational division demand a missional ecclesiology that provides hope in the despair of isolation and challenges our tendencies to build walls of separation between those who are different. Further, the contemporary evangelical church's rather uncritical adoptions of individualistic and consumeristic inclination fill the Christian consumer while emptying the congregational witness. A table model helps reorient our gatherings towards the necessity of intentional relationships with God and each other. Table fellowship directs our attention to what the triune God is up to in and through the person next to us through a shared meal, dialogue, participation, and worship."

"In trinitarian theology, the marks of dialogue, mission, and diverse unity must find concrete visibility in a church's life beyond just gathering in the same space. Of course, we should take caution in trying to press an exact or objective trinitarian expression in a church. Still, it is vital to explore whether a gathering points to a relational and dialogical triune God who makes himself known in Christ and indwells us by his Spirit. The pneumatic Christ and his ministry are the most visible expressions of how the triune God reveals himself in visible ways."

"When the Scriptures record Jesus's resurrection appearances, we do not find him storming the gates of Rome demanding that Caesar surrender all power unto him. Jesus also does not seek to reenter the synagogue or reclaim the Temple. Instead, rather than waging war on Rome and the religious elites, Jesus shares meals with his disillusioned followers and brings them back to himself and each other."

"Bonhoeffer writes, 'God will not tolerate the unfestive, joyless manner in which we eat our bread with sighs of groaning, with pompous, self-important busyness, or even with shame.'[2] Certainly, Bonhoeffer is not saying we cannot share tears or grief at the table; instead, he implies that God is not okay with that which conspires

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[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 73.

against our communal joy as we share a meal. Sunday table fellowship opens us up to the joyful experiences of life together in Christ."

"By choosing to gather around tables instead of in rows, I am not saying, first and foremost, that tables are morally or methodologically better than rows. As stated earlier, we do not wish to moralize our model. Instead, we offer it as a faithful alternative for gathering. Second, by choosing the language of 'tables instead of rows,' we hope to communicate how I aim to decentralize the pastoral personality and the forward-facing program of a contemporary church gathering. Decentralizing does not mean the removal of leadership or preaching; instead, it is merely a rearranging of the focus. For example, coming in and out of a row-structured gathering is easy without participating or even being noticed. Tables, on the other hand, naturally drive mutual participation in the gathering every week. It is difficult, for example, to step into a table gathering and go unnoticed or be uninvolved in some capacity."

"My family grew up on the eighties and nineties sitcom *Cheers*. In *Cheers*, Norm is a character that captures the human longing to be known by others. Those familiar with Cheers will remember that Norm walks into the local pub in each episode, and everyone invitingly shouts, 'Norm!' This iconic line embodies the show's theme song: 'Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, And they're always glad you came…' Everyone knows Norm's name; there is a physical and social space for him to be known, loved, and celebrated. Relatedly, our gatherings aim at normalizing Norm's experience and to help foster an environment where the basic human needs for connection can take root and grow. In *Cheers*, Norm finds belonging at different levels, from close friends to casual acquaintances. Like Norm, people crave to be known and belong. The Table strives to normalize the Norm experience by providing avenues for belonging."

"The church is not called to merely peacekeeping but peacemaking. The difference between the two concepts is important: peacekeeping is passive, while peacemaking is active, which is complex and requires hard conversations and just actions in unjust situations. Metzger says, 'There is nothing passive about making peace. It is hard, active work. It is God's ongoing activity, as he reconciles the world to himself through his Son.'[3]"

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[3] Paul Louis Metzger, *Beatitudes, Not Platitudes: Jesus's Invitation to the Good Life* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 102.

“Dialogue is difficult, but life without it is destructive, in and outside the church. Yet, a church gathering around tables aims to build diverse relationships through dialogue to express our unity in Christ.”

“Listening situates us to see and understand situations from the perspectives of others, which increases empathy and action—listening remains rooted in a theological understanding that God has first heard us. Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘Just as our love for God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear.’[4] The incarnation of God's living Word is evidence that God has heard our cry and our need for reconciliation. So, listening to others grows from a healthy vision of God's response to our deepest needs in Christ.”

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[4] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 75.