

THE CHURCH OF THE BIGGER TABLE

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In his powerful and inspiring book on inclusiveness, *A Bigger Table*, John Pavlovitz shares memories of holiday meals while growing up in his Italian-American home.¹ I can relate to his stories even though I grew up in an English-Canadian home in Nova Scotia in the 1960s and 1970s. As with Pavlovitz, holidays were special times in our home. Normally, my family of six ate around a table in our small but cozy kitchen. As a child, in my mind, our dining room, separated from the kitchen by a door, was a *holy* place, reserved for special times that, in a child's mental timeline, seemed years apart. Of course, the biggest holiday of all was Christmas. I knew that Christmas was almost here when my father would open the door between our kitchen and dining room. That door, which became for me a Narnian entrance into an enchanted world of wonder, remained closed at all times except when a big event was approaching and hordes of friends and family would descend upon us.

The final and most exciting precursor to Christmas was when my father would call one of my siblings or me into the dining room and instruct us to hold onto one side of the table with all of our might while he pulled on the other side. In another proof that I was now in Narnia, the table would magically come apart. My father would then place a new leaf in the middle of the table and push the ends together, thus magically creating a "bigger table," capable of seating myriads of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other assorted relatives and friends. In all my years growing up, I cannot recall a single instance where my father or mother told a person that they could not come to dinner because there was no room a-

1. Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table*.

round our table. Somehow, we made room for as many people as wanted to join us for a special meal. Our table always *expanded* to meet the demands placed upon it.

This simple experience growing up has had a profound impression on my life that I am just now beginning to appreciate. After I grew up and left my father's table, I began the task of building my own table. How big was my table going to be? As I look back, I can see that so many of my life experiences have come together to encourage me, like my parents years earlier, to build a bigger table. In 1987, when I was twenty-three, I had an opportunity to spend a year in Chicago. This white, middle-class, Canadian Baptist worked in an African-American Lutheran church in the second poorest neighborhood per capita in the United States. What a life-changing experience for me! This was the first of many experiences I have had where I have found myself on the receiving end of unconditional acceptance at the hands of those who look very different from me and whose life experiences are nothing like my own. From the first day I arrived until the day I left, I experienced nothing but love and kindness from these wonderful people. My background, my nationality, and the color of my skin mattered not a whit to them; they embraced me and welcomed me into their community without reservation.

It was over the course of that year that I began to learn how my white, middle-class, privileged background had benefitted me in ways I had never conceived. In particular, I remember one conversation I had with the African-American associate pastor of my Lutheran church, Maxine Washington. Over the course of my year in Chicago, Maxine was a supportive mentor. She taught me, encouraged me, and, at times, challenged my thinking and assumptions. On one occasion, Rev. Washington was curious about the African-Canadian community in Nova Scotia. I told her that, as far as I knew, African Nova Scotians were well treated but tended to congregate in their own communities. "Congregate?" she responded slowly, staring intently at me. "Yeah," I said naively, "African-Canadians in Nova Scotia tend to congregate together. You know, they tend to be . . ." I hesitated, searching for the right word. Rev. Washington smiled at me and said, "Richard, I think the word you are looking for is 'segregated.' The African-Canadi-

an community in Nova Scotia is not ‘congregated together’; it is ‘segregated from.’” This was just one of many conversations I had that year that, for the first time in my life, introduced me to the concept of white privilege. And, as I said, despite our many differences, the people of that fine church and community adopted me into their family as one of their own. Intuitively, even then, I knew that I wanted my table to be big enough to seat all the wonderful people at Holy Family Lutheran Church.

My journey of self-discovery continued a few years later when I moved down to Louisville, Kentucky to continue my education at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. There were not a lot of Canadians there, so I found myself hanging out with the international and ethnic communities, which included a large number of Latinos. Again, I felt embraced by these warm and expressive people who gave me a crash course in Latino history, culture, and food. Through my conversations with them, I began to understand the hate and racism Latinos had endured and continue to endure as part of a white-dominated society. Eventually, I became an *honorary* member of the Latino community when I married a Mexican-American woman from Texas to whom I have now been married for almost thirty years. Through my experiences in Louisville, Kentucky, I again understood that I wanted my table to be big enough to embrace these warm and accepting people who had brought so much joy into my life.

A third experience was that while a student at Southern, I had the opportunity and privilege to spend two summers working in inner-city Philadelphia among African-American children and teens for an organization founded by Tony Campolo called the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education. Through my experiences there, I began to see the hurdles faced by these kids seeking to make a life for themselves—hurdles of poverty, racism, drugs, violence, and broken families. Despite this, and despite my own privileged upbringing, I experienced warmth and acceptance from these young people who wanted nothing more from me than my time and my attention. Here, too, I knew that I wanted my table to be big enough to include all of these children who are an intrinsic part of those Jesus referred to as “the least of these.”

A Revelation Church

I could go on to describe many other life experiences. Together, they worked to make me into the person I am today, and each of them helped me to build the table around which I and many others have sat. The point of this brief biographical excursion is to give some idea as to events in my life that God used to encourage me to build a bigger table and, eventually, to seek to pastor a “Church of the Bigger Table.” Beyond my own experience, I believe that God is calling all of us as Christians and as churches to build bigger tables which make room for people from different backgrounds, different perspectives, and different life experiences. Why should we do this? Well, for one thing, it is personally enriching as my brief biographical foray reveals. Beyond that simple idea, however, is the much larger truth that a bigger table is what God is building in human history. In other words, God is building not only a Church of the Bigger Table; He is building a Kingdom of the Bigger Table. Now, it is true that God’s Church exists for a lot of reasons. The foundational reason the Church exists, however, is to support God’s efforts to move the Church and the world into God’s future. What is that future? We get a glorious peek at it in Rev 7:9–10:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”²

This is the future towards which God is moving the Church and the world. This is the future for which the Church is called to give itself and its energies.

In the congregation that I have pastored for the past nineteen years, it was this vision that God gives of the church in the Book of Revelation that led us to articulate our vision statement: “Become a Revelation Church where people from all ethnicities, all

2. All Bible quotations in this article are from the New International Version.

generations, and all economic realities are challenged to be radically transformed by God.” This is not an easy vision to realize! It is a God-sized vision that can only be attained in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the point that Peter makes in the first ever Christian sermon which he delivered on the Day of Pentecost. In this sermon, Peter promises that all those who believe in Jesus will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter emphasizes that this “promise is for you and your children and *for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call*” (Acts 2:39, emphasis added). Peter reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit who will build a bigger table—a table around which will sit people from different backgrounds and with various life experiences and worldviews. Consider for a moment the potential impact of such churches. Imagine the impact our churches would have on Canadian culture if an army of “Churches of the Bigger Table” marched forth with a Revelation-sized vision of inclusiveness. Imagine the impact our churches would have on people’s lives and, yes, their destinies if we modeled this Revelation vision. This is, indeed, a God-sized vision.

There has perhaps never been a time when the need for a bigger table has been more apparent. The era of *Christendom* has passed. *Post-Christendom* has arrived. If there was ever a need (and an opportunity) for churches to build a bigger table, it is now. Why? Consider the very nature of our post-Christian culture. Post-Christendom means that we cannot assume that people connecting with our churches have even the most rudimentary knowledge of Scripture or of Christian ethics. I have experienced this numerous times in my own ministry. On one occasion I was speaking with a young woman named Ruth. When she found out I was a pastor she interrogated me as to why *her* book, the Book of Ruth, had not “made the cut.” After expressing some confusion and asking several times for clarification, I realized that Ruth was asking why the Book of Ruth was not in the New Testament. After some further discussion, it became apparent that Ruth thought that the New Testament was a revised version of the Old Testament, and she wondered why her book had not made it into the New Testament. In another conversation, this time with an eighteen-year-old new believer, I was asked whether Jesus had been born in Bethlehem.

When I confirmed that He had been, this sincere young woman then asked me if Jesus' birth in Bethlehem had been before or after Adam and Eve had lived. These stories are not unique. In our post-Christian world, it is more vital than ever to provide the time and space for people to ask questions and learn and for the Holy Spirit to work in people's lives—in his own way and at his own pace. The bigger table is, and needs to be, a safe place for post-Christian people to come to learn, to fellowship, and to grow—without fear of judgment or condemnation. At its best, the Church of the Bigger Table can become a catalyst for a more authentic expression of Christian community. At its highest, the Church of the Bigger Table can become a strategic point from which a marginalized church can engage an alienated culture in profound and meaningful ways. What an opportunity!

A word of warning, though: As Jesus once counselled, those who would like to lead a Church of the Bigger Table would do well to count the cost (Luke 14:28–30). There will be a cost to building such a church—perhaps a heavier cost than many realize. Why? Because we are living in angry times. Today, virtually every aspect of our culture is rife with conflict. Indeed, certain politicians and religious leaders have built constituencies around fueling anger, resentment, and perceived grievances against one group or another. The 2020 American presidential race may be the clearest recent example of this, but it is only one example. Whether one looks at churches, schools, or city hall, whether one reads Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, our culture is rife with conflict. In such an environment, any attempt towards encouraging dialogue through building a bigger table will be perceived as a threat and will result in backlash. Of course, to avoid this backlash, one could just keep one's head down and try not to say or do anything that might be perceived as *controversial*. Keeping one's head down may, indeed, lower the amount of conflict one has to contend with—but at what cost? What is our integrity and commitment to justice worth to us? Still, it is better not to begin the work than to look back after having put one's hand to the plow (Luke 9:62). So, counting the cost is the vital first step.

A Primer on Building a Bigger Table

Assuming one has counted the cost and decided the journey is worth the price, how does one go about building a bigger table? Let us begin by looking at what we do *not* have to do to build a bigger table. We do not have to compromise our beliefs on the essentials of the historic, Christian faith in order to build a bigger table. Of course, each of us has to decide for ourselves what our *essentials* are. For me, the essentials of my faith include four priorities: Of course, my first essential is the Revelation vision itself of a bigger table. This vision is not something I can compromise on because, as we've seen, this Revelation vision is essential to the eschatological vision of redemption; it is essential to our identity and future in Christ. My second nonnegotiable is the Lordship of Christ; i.e., the preeminence of Christ in every area of my life. My third nonnegotiable is the possibility of a personal relationship with God through the sacrificial death of Christ. And, finally, I will never compromise on my belief in the infallibility of Scripture. I do not mean to suggest that I will not discuss these doctrines with others; people who know me know that I will discuss anything. It just means that I do not foresee ever changing my mind on these doctrines. These are my *essentials*. They may or may not be your essentials. My point here is not to debate which doctrines should fall under the category of *essential* (important as that discussion is) but to reassure you that building a bigger table does not mean having to compromise your essential beliefs. So, if building a bigger table does not mean compromising on essentials, what, then, does it mean?

Building a bigger table means at least three things. First, it means *recognizing that God is working in people's lives in different ways*. God does not work in everybody's life in the same way or at the same speed. I doubt very much that your theology has remained unchanged in the past five years (at least I hope it has not—our theology should grow and develop as we deepen our relationship with God and our understanding of the Scriptures). Similarly, in five years your theology will probably not be what it is today. When we insist, however, that people believe and behave as we do, no matter their age or level of spiritual maturity, we may

find ourselves unintentionally constraining the work of God in their lives. In the past, my rigidity in this matter has gotten in God's way. For instance, in my ministry, there was a time when I would refuse to baptize people who were living together out of wedlock. To me it was simple: How can a person be baptized (a symbol of obedience to God) when they are so wantonly going against God's injunction against premarital sex? What I failed to understand, however, was that there were new Christians out there whom God had not yet convicted on this issue. Undoubtedly, God was working in other areas of their lives. And, when the time was right, no doubt God would speak to them around this issue as well. By drawing a line in the sand, however, I was inadvertently pushing people away from God and His purposes for their lives.

Second, it means being secure enough in our theology that we can dialogue with those who believe and act differently from us without judgment or anger—even with those who interpret the scriptures differently from us. The sad truth is that, whether we admit it or not, many of us are deeply insecure about our beliefs. When someone comes along who challenges long-held and deeply cherished beliefs, it can be threatening. It is almost as if we believe that our core spiritual beliefs are cards in a tower and if one card gets pulled out, the entire structure will come tumbling down. It takes a certain security in the foundation of our faith and a certain degree of emotional maturity to be comfortable with the idea of others disagreeing with us.

Third, it also means *recognizing that dissenting views are important in church life*. In fact, I would go further and say that dissenting views are *essential* in church life. How can we be sure that deeply held beliefs are truly biblical if they are never tested? How can we “be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that [we] have” (1 Pet 3:15b) if we never have our beliefs challenged? Indeed, rather than simply tolerating expressions of divergent views, a healthy church will encourage diversity in beliefs, recognizing its value to the church as a whole.

Dissent

Let me elaborate on this idea of *dissent*. If we want to be emotionally mature, there is one important lesson that we all need to learn about life: *Some of our most fiercely held beliefs will turn out to be completely wrong*. In the sphere of politics, I am old enough to remember when virtually every political expert was united in the belief that peace could never come to South Africa and Northern Ireland. They were wrong! In another example, at one time it looked as though the Cold War would last forever. Then, all of a sudden, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. In the area of theology, the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, wrote a book entitled, *How I Changed My Mind*.³ John Ortberg, Bill Hybels, and Tony Campolo have all changed their mind around the issue of women in church leadership positions. One of the most respected evangelical ethicists of our day, David Gushee, along with Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Matthew Vines, wrote a book entitled, *Changing Our Mind*, where they argued that they had been wrong on the LGBTQ2S+ issue.⁴ Now, I am not suggesting that you have to change your mind about all or any of these issues (no matter your opinion); what I am wondering is whether your table is large enough to accommodate those who may believe differently from you.

When all is said and done, the fact is that churches need dissenters in their midst to keep the rest of us honest. Dissenters make us uncomfortable. And when it comes to our theology, discomfort is good! Indeed, as a Baptist, I come from a long line of dissenters in the English dissenter tradition. Historically, we Baptists have enjoyed nothing more than a good fight—be it over believers' baptism, separation of church and state, regenerate church membership, or the priesthood of all believers. Many Baptists and other dissenters have long recognized that it is never safe to get too comfortable in our beliefs. Comfort can easily lead to stagnation and stagnation means we are no longer growing spiritually. Now, William Kaplan is no doubt correct when he writes, "Dissent is noisy, messy, inconvenient, costly, often misplaced, sometimes laugh-

3. Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*.

4. Gushee et al. *Changing Our Mind*.

able, usually badly timed, and almost always time-consuming.”⁵ But dissent is also a strong prescription against self-righteousness, complacency, and torpor. I am well aware that talk of dissent makes some pastors and church leaders nervous. On more than one occasion, I have been asked, “What will happen if we allow dissent?” My response is always the same: “What will happen if we *do not* allow dissent?” What will happen to the emotional and spiritual health of the church if dissent is not allowed? How can a church move into God’s future without healthy dissent?

Now, understand, I am talking here about *authentic* dissenters; I am not talking about those who like to argue with others for the sake of showing how smart they are and who find satisfaction in getting people riled up. That is *inauthentic* dissent. Inauthentic dissenters are not concerned about the subject of their dissent; they are dissenting for the sake of meeting their own needs for attention and influence. We all know people like that! Authentic dissenters, on the other hand, are people who dissent, not because they want to, but because they have to—people who may have been attacked or even ostracized for their dissent. People like this are God’s gift to his church and deserve our respect and deserve to be given a voice—even if we never agree with them.

Embracing “The Other”

Are you beginning to catch a vision for what this kind of healthy dissent and honest discussion can mean for our churches? Are you getting a sense as to what it would mean for our churches if pastors and church leaders built churches marked by love, acceptance, and inclusiveness—if we built bridges, not walls—if we encouraged open communication rather than doctrinal and theological uniformity? To make the decision to build this kind of church, the foundational question we need to answer is this: Do people have to earn the right to fellowship with us by *towing the line* doctrinally and morally or will we embrace those who profess to be followers of Christ no matter where they are in their spiritual journey?

5. Kaplan, *Why Dissent Matters*, xii.

What I am making here is a plea to do away with litmus tests—to put an end to deal breakers. Let us stop making statements to the effect that no self-respecting Christian can be:

- A Democrat/Republican . . .
- A liberal/conservative . . .
- Pro-life or pro-choice . . .
- Pro-death penalty or anti-death penalty . . .
- Pro-gay marriage or pro-traditional marriage

Ultimately, my plea is to get rid of the concept of *the other*—the idea that some people can be disregarded, rejected, and even dehumanized because of their beliefs. We need to throw away the crude caricatures we make of people we disagree with—caricatures that allow us to disregard what someone says because we have rejected who they are.

Former President of the United States Barack Obama knows what it is to be treated as *the other*. In the midst of a spirited and energetic 2008 presidential campaign against the late Senator John McCain and his running mate, former Alaskan Governor, Sarah Palin, Obama found himself demonized by Palin and influential conservative media personalities such as Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh. In the first volume of his memoir, *The Promised Land*, Obama describes the experience of being the focus of a fictional and shady narrative, involving Obama's former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright and others including, "my alleged fealty to radical community organizer Saul Alinsky; my friendship with my neighbor Bill Ayers, who'd once been a leader of the militant group the Weather Underground; and my shadowy Muslim heritage." Obama says, for those who believed this narrative, "I was no longer just a left-of-center Democrat who planned to broaden the social safety net and end the war in Iraq. I was something more insidious, someone to be feared, someone to be stopped."⁶ Media reports came out, describing Palin rallies where people were heard shouting, "Terrorist!" and "Kill him!" and "Off with his head!" Over against this dangerous rhetoric, Obama praised the "charac-

6. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 194.

ter” and “fundamental decency” of John McCain.⁷ In his book, Obama describes a Minnesota rally where one man said into a microphone that he was afraid of someone like Obama becoming president. McCain responded, “I have to tell you he is a decent person and a person that you do not have to be scared of as president of the United States.” In response to another question, McCain said, “We want to fight, and I will fight. But we will be respectful. I admire Senator Obama and his accomplishments. I will respect him. I want everyone to be respectful and let’s make sure we are because that’s the way politics should be conducted in America.”⁸ In these instances, McCain was modeling what it means to show respect to a person and to listen even while disagreeing vehemently. In the political arena, McCain was building a bigger table. In other words, McCain was acknowledging the “greyness” of life. For many of us who want so much to live in a black and white world, we ignore the fact that life is grey. In the end, we all pay the price for this.

Some people in Jesus’ day wanted to live in a morally polarized world of the “righteous and unrighteous” as well. In Jesus’ day, *the other* was the leper. Lepers, like many in the LGBTQ2S+ community today, were outcasts—they were ostracized from their families, their religious institutions, and their communities. Perhaps you have known what it is like to be a *leper* in a group that is important to you. Perhaps at some point in your life you’ve treated another person like a leper. In either case, it is important for us to remember how Jesus treated lepers. Look at this revealing but easily overlooked verse in Mark’s Gospel: “While [Jesus] was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper” (Mark 14:3a). Have you ever noticed this partial verse before? Have you ever thought about its implications and ramifications? What is Jesus doing? He is eating with a leper! How can this be? As we just saw, lepers were *sinners*. Yet here we see Jesus eating a meal in the home of a leper. What a powerful statement Jesus was making! Pavlovitz says of this verse as follows:

7. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 195.

8. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 195.

Can you imagine how liberating it must have been to Simon to have Jesus dine with him though he'd been the outcast in his own community, the validation of that kind of affirmation for someone so used to experiencing disdain? This is the freedom our spiritual communities should be marked by. This is the affirmation we should be giving. People should be able to ask anything and to say everything too, to be the most naked, real, vulnerable version of themselves and to know that they are safe as they do.⁹

This is what it means to be a Church of the Bigger Table. This is what God is calling churches to become. Note, too, that Jesus' meal with Simon was not an isolated incident. Indeed, according to the Gospels, Jesus loved to eat. He spent a great deal of time eating with others. For instance, the Gospels record Jesus feeding (and presumably eating with) hungry crowds on multiple occasions. On one occasion, he invited his disciples to have breakfast with him. He drank, and no doubt ate, at a wedding. He told numerous stories about people eating. And we are told time and again that Jesus invited others to eat with him, and he, himself, was invited to eat with others. Yes, Jesus enjoyed eating. But it was his choice of eating companions that was one of the things that got Jesus into a lot of trouble with the religious leaders of his day. The Gospels record Jesus eating with tax collectors, lepers, and others who are described under the more general heading of *sinners*.

So, why did the religious leaders take such umbrage at Jesus' choice of meal companions? The answer is fascinating: In Jesus' day, eating meant much more than just the consumption of food. Eating with someone said, "We are friends; I approve of this person." In many ways, eating a meal with someone was viewed as a kind of endorsement. No wonder, then, that religious leaders were scandalized at Jesus' choice of meal companions. In their eyes, Jesus, a man who claimed to be the Messiah, was putting his seal of approval on people they regarded as sinners—people who, in their view, should have been shunned. And far from repenting of the scandal he was causing, Jesus claimed that these people were the very reason he had come into the world (Luke 5:32). Yet, today, many of us seem far more concerned about offending other

9. Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table*, 80.

Christians or about sending the “wrong message” than in following Jesus’ example. Many Christians I encounter avoid people whose lifestyles they do not approve of out of concern that someone somewhere will somehow get the impression that they endorse an unbiblical lifestyle. I think it is safe to say that this was not high on Jesus’ list of concerns.

The promise I hold on to is that, despite our best (*worst?*) efforts, God’s purposes will not be thwarted. Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees on one occasion: “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt 21:31). Jesus was telling the religious leaders that, even if they continued to resist his work, his table would expand in spite of them. What a hope! What a promise! What a beacon guiding us into the future!

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is this: If we want to truly be a Church of the Bigger Table, we must look at people through Jesus’ eyes. How did Jesus look at people? Jesus recognized that people are as much *sinned against* as they are *sinners*. Now, this is not to deny the reality of original sin. All of us have a sin nature. We do not just commit sins; we are sinners. Jesus took our sin upon himself and died upon a cross so that our sin can be forgiven and we can have a personal relationship with God. These truths have been and always will be central to the gospel and to the historic Christian faith. But when Jesus looked at people, he did not focus on their sin so much as he did on their hurt and their pain. I believe we need to do the same. Yes, people are sinners; yes, people need to repent of their sin. But people are not just *carriers* of sin; they are *victims* of sin as well. In many churches, however, we are inclined to see people first and foremost as sinners rather than as victims.

Now, it is easy to understand why most of us have a natural, human tendency to focus on sin. On one level, there is a certain emotional satisfaction in focusing on a person’s sin; it cedes to us the ground of moral superiority. We are the *holy ones*, we are the *righteous ones*. *The Other* is the sinner. In addition, by renouncing sin, it reaffirms our own faithfulness to the gospel. That feels

good! There is only one problem with this. This method alienates many more people than it ever brings to Jesus. We may *feel* better but the harvest is the poorer. This has never been so evident as with the LGBTQ2S+ community, a group of people that evangelical churches have failed miserably to reach. In my own life and ministry, I have yet to meet a single gay person who had any doubt as to what the large majority of evangelical Christians think of their lifestyle. They have gotten the message loud and clear. Talk to any member of the LGBTQ2S+ community and they will tell you that some of the harshest, most judgmental, and, yes, mean-spirited people they have encountered were evangelical Christians. Now, I am not suggesting that one has to approve of the gay lifestyle (whatever that is), but I am asking if the message that this community is apparently hearing from evangelical churches is the message we want to be sending. I want to ask if you think God wants us to focus on this community's sin or on their victimhood. One road creates dialogue that may lead to understanding and perhaps even repentance (in either or both participants); the other leads to walls and alienation.

To help discern which road Jesus wants us to go down, let us look at a story that Matthew tells:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matt 9:35–38)

Look again at how Matthew describes Jesus' reaction to the crowds: "[H]e had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Now, I guarantee that every one of those people whom Jesus encountered was a sinner. I have no doubt that many of them had lifestyles of which Jesus did not approve. But Jesus focused on them, not as sinners, but as people who had been sinned against. Admittedly, focusing on people as those who have been "sinned against" is much messier than focusing on people as sinners; it involves getting mixed

up in all the broken pieces and the dirt of people's lives. It involves investing in relationships and seeing people as much more than the sum of their sin. I believe, however, that this is the messiness in which God wants us to immerse ourselves.

Understand this, however: If you choose this road less travelled, if you choose to focus on the brokenness of people's lives, God will bless you through it, but God will also push you further than you are comfortable going. He will always push you towards more compassion, more justice, more inclusiveness. God will always push you to build a bigger table in precisely those areas you want to shrink from—whether it is in the area of racial justice, sexual equality, or LGBTQ2S+ rights.

Now, I am not suggesting that we gloss over our differences with others or pretend that these differences do not exist. I am not suggesting that we embrace some kind of fantasy world of uniformity where we all think alike, behave alike, believe alike. I am suggesting the much more difficult proposition of not only tolerating our differences but welcoming them. As difficult and perhaps unrealistic as this appears, it is actually far easier than the alternative. In the long run, it is far easier and more satisfying to live our lives with an open hand than a closed fist. We stray from walking in Jesus' footsteps when, to quote Pavlovitz, "we believe or act as if [our] differences make another less worthy of love or opportunity or compassion or respect."¹⁰

The bottom line is this: To be a Church of the Bigger Table does not mean abandoning or denying our beliefs; it does mean, however, that we not use those beliefs as a reason to resist or reject those whom God is calling us to embrace. Anything less is not worthy of the one we profess to follow. Beliefs are important, but beliefs should be doors inviting people into dialogue, not walls shutting them out. Again, to quote Pavlovitz, "In the end, the thing that glorifies God isn't our belief system, but how we treat those who don't share that belief system."¹¹

10. Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table*, 94.

11. Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table*, 121.

A Word to Authentic Dissenters and Other Non-Conformists

I want to say a special word to authentic dissenters within the church. Those who are believers in Jesus but who do not feel a sense of belonging in the church may actually have a God-given mission to fulfill within the church. It may be people like you that Jesus was thinking of when he told the following parable:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. (Mark 2:21–22)

What is Jesus saying in these stories? I think Jesus is telling us that his arrival into the world was a signal that God was about to do something new—something fresh—something unexpected. Some people, like the scribes, the pharisees, and other religious leaders could not accept this new thing and they resisted. Others, like the poor, the tax collectors, and the prostitutes embraced it. God is still doing a new thing. If you feel that you no longer fit within the container that your family or your church or your denomination has put you in, it may be that you have simply outgrown the container; it may be that God is trying to do something new in you and through you. And in your journey to discover what that “new thing” is, let me encourage you not to be too quick to jump ship on your church or denomination. We need prophets (another word for *authentic dissenters*) who will help others to see a new future and new possibilities. You probably already know that this will not be easy, and you will not win any popularity contests. (Remember what happened to most of the prophets in the Bible!). If, however, you still believe in the church, and if you still believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the church is the last, best hope for humanity, do not be too quick to bail. God may just want you to help lead the church into his future. At the very least, God may plant some seeds through you.

Now, as an authentic dissenter, you may be looking for a model to follow. If that is the case, you need look no further than to the Apostle Paul. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he tells of an instance where he acted as an authentic dissenter, confronting Peter

for “shrinking” the table of the Lord. Let us take a look at Paul’s version of the incident:

When Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (Gal 2:11–14)

Now, note what Paul could have done. He could have rejected a church that would treat Gentiles so callously. He could have walked away from the church in Antioch and said he wanted nothing more to do with it. Instead of leaving, however, he challenged the church to be and to do better. And, in this instance, Paul won! My point is that leaving is always the easier way; it does not demand as much of us. But those who choose to stay may be the very ones who lead the church into God’s bright future. Will you consider staying?

Today, our world is as divided as perhaps it has ever been. Divisions mark every strata of society: Rich and poor, young and old, gay and straight, Democrat and Republican, white and people of color, and on and on. The question that confronts churches today is this: What is God calling us to bear witness to in this *us-versus-them* world? Remember, as we just saw, Paul’s world, too, was divided—divided ethnically, yes, but also divided along gender lines and socioeconomically. Indeed, in many ways, Paul’s world was as divided as ours is today. Yet, in the midst of these divisions, the early church not only survived but thrived. And the church did so not through vibrant church growth campaigns, nor through slick evangelistic programs, nor through polished and professional worship productions. No, the early church grew because in a world marked by class and division, particularly between the rich and poor, the church modeled a radical inclusiveness. This was not an inclusiveness that ignored or wished away

differences but an inclusiveness that embraced differences and made room for them around their table. Did the early church always agree on everything? Of course not! We just read of a major dispute between Paul and Peter. Additionally, a good portion of Paul's letters deal with divisions in the church. But in the midst of conflict and differences of opinion, the church modeled this radical inclusiveness and built a bigger table—particularly amongst the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised—the very people Jesus called “the least of these.”

The question I want to leave you with is this: Will you, too, model openness and inclusiveness? Will you build bridges and not walls? Like my father, will you add an extra leaf to your table to make room for fellow travelers who may look and act and believe differently from you? If so, you, too, may help to build a “Church of the Bigger Table.”

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