



**TABLE MANNERS**  
**SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 28: 5-9; MATTHEW 10: 40-42**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
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If you and I were gathered on a Communion Sunday in the 1500s in Geneva or in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland or even today in some Church of Scotland congregations or some Presbyterian congregations in this country, this homily preceding Communion would have one purpose and one purpose only—to make sure no one gets to this Communion Table who shouldn't be here.

It's called fencing the table and it was how the early Reformers protected the sanctity of the sacrament. In Reformed theology it is the communal aspect of the meal in which the Spirit moves with transformative power. The purity of the meal was protected by making sure no one ate the meal who was an unrepentant sinner.

The purpose of the proclamation before Eucharist was to fence the Communion Table—to keep some out, and to keep others in.

For John Calvin and John Knox, our theological forefathers, this moment in worship was exhortation for all in the congregation to examine themselves for readiness to receive the sacrament. And readiness had to do with the moral status of your heart.

For if you receive it wrongly, they warned, “you are eating and drinking your own damnation.”

Our forbearers in the faith sure knew how to roll out the red carpet didn't they!

Just listen to Calvin's Service Book in Geneva:

*And therefore in the name and authority of the Eternal God and of His Son Jesus Christ I excommunicate from this table all blasphemers of God; all adulterers; all that be in malice or envy; all disobedient persons to father and mother, princes or magistrates, pastors or preachers; all thieves and deceivers of their neighbours; and finally all such as live a life directly fighting against the will of God.<sup>1</sup>*

There are tales of sermons that went on for a LOOOOONG time to assure readiness. Some preachers complained that these exhortations could result in even they themselves not being able to take the sacrament when everything was said and done.

After an extended time of exhortation and verbal flagellation, the Eucharistic door might be cracked. Calvin's directory put it this way:

*“Let us consider then that this sacrament is a singular medicine for all poor, sick creatures, a comfortable help to weak souls, and that our Lord requireth no other worthiness on our part but that we unfeignedly acknowledge our naughtiness and imperfection.”<sup>2</sup>*

Acknowledging without reservation our “naughtiness and imperfection” can perhaps get people on the inside of the fence—depending on who gets to say who has adequately acknowledged said “naughtiness and imperfection.”

Fencing was and is not without its politics, of course. That’s what gatekeeping is all about. So it fell to the Session—in some early European Reformed contexts, including in Scotland, Elders would visit homes and grant tokens for entry. In other situations certain people and groups were literally blocked by more than verbal barriers—actual walls or fences were built to protect the Table from defilement.

Calvin, Knox, and other Reformers understood their sometimes-extreme acts of fencing the Communion Table as an extension of the Apostle Paul’s exhortations to the Corinthian church when he scolded them for the chaos of their Communion meals. This chaos was characterized by some starting to eat before others arrived, and some eating way more than their share while others got nothing.

Paul’s exhortation grew out of an impulse to make sure the sanctity of the sacrament was protected from behaviors that defiled it—like hoarding, exclusion, grasping, dismissing, and devaluing each other.

The fencing practices of the Reformers, however, took an exclusionary turn. Instead of protecting the sanctity of the Table by making room, by including, for them protecting the sacrament became a practice of excluding, of turning away, of shutting out—however the Elders saw fit.

Born from a impulse to prevent violence and harm from diminishing the power of the Lord’s Supper, Eucharistic Table Manners developed into a tool of violence and exclusion themselves—far from protecting the Table from defilement, these fencing practices have functioned as instruments of defilement of a meal Christ instituted to welcome the world back home.

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“What do I do with all these [darned] forks? I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s JD Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, calling his girlfriend during an interview dinner with a prestigious law firm while they were students at Yale Law School. When he sat down to dinner and saw nine utensils, including 3 spoons no less, he had no idea how to navigate the table manners that were obviously expected.

“I was seeing the inner workings of a system that lay hidden to most of my kind.” His kind were poor white people from Appalachia. He was learning that “successful people are playing an entirely different game.” And it’s a game defined by who you know and the connections you have—old college buddies of an uncle, coaching about what to wear and what to say from parents who have been there before, networks of friends, the “the right people” who provide the social capital necessary for separating yourself from the rest.

How he navigated the table manners was one litmus test for acceptability among the wealthy.

Table manners in their earliest form were a response to the violence and chaos that often defined meal times—where there was grabbing and gorging and stealing. Some would take; others would go hungry. Sitting down at a table set, using utensils (which by the way were, themselves, often symbols of affluence—especially the fork, which was at times seen as something only the well to do had at their meals) were ways to take the chaos and even violence out of the meal.

In Victorian England, where Table Manners were highly valued and the class system was well-established, manners became a “social weapon” to assist in social advancement and social exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

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The Prophet Jeremiah lays out the conundrum presented in contradictory visions of what God is doing in the world presented by different prophets.

Jeremiah knows full well that people will act differently according to who they listen to. Jeremiah didn’t enjoy having to share his prophecy of pain, but he warned people against listening to the prophets of ease and quick fixes.

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The Gospel writer of Matthew knew how to adapt old wisdom to new situations. Jesus’ adaptive power translates into a prophetic and practical word for all disciples across situations, even across centuries, even across cultures.<sup>5</sup>

And so all of us current day disciples, current day prophets, the “righteous” (for Matthew probably highly esteemed Jesus followers), and the “little ones” (for Matthew probably your every day run-of-the-mill Christians who didn’t hold a church office) can listen for how Matthew’s Gospel, these words about welcome, reverberate in our complicated moment in the human story—when there are prophets of exclusion and prophets of inclusion vying for our Christian souls.

The Gospel writer is reminding us that being a Jesus follower is not easy, nor is it a clear road to social acceptance, favor, or safety. The words of our passage today follow verses that speak of persecution, humiliation, estrangement from family, and

a transient lifestyle that leans on the kindness of others. Following Jesus is a process that brings with it both peril and promise.

Would you rather be the one extending welcome, or the one seeking welcome?

This passage is really about how Jesus' early followers had to risk trusting that they could find welcome in the world. This Gospel message calls on us to put ourselves in the position of hoping that we, too, will be welcomed. That welcome would define who we are Jesus followers.

Welcome as a disposition toward vulnerability and a tool of justice is something we can trace back to the Exodus in the Abrahamic tradition. This heritage of radical and risky welcome stitches its way through moments of truth for Jesus' disciples like slavery in the United States of America when some churches risked welcome as a stop on the underground railroad, to the Holocaust in Germany when many churches failed to stand up to the horrors of the Third Reich—now a template for what Christians should not do in the face of a morally corrupt state, to the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, born along the southern borders of the United States when churches responded to a humanitarian crises of thousands of Central American refugees fleeing violent conflicts in many cases fueled by US government policies.

Recent eruptions of anti-immigrant sentiment and violence have resurfaced a call among many Christians about the moral necessity of welcome. Jesus followers are again invited to take risks in our welcome, to be sanctuary in the way we make space for “the stranger,” the vulnerable, and those in need.

The power of Christian welcome in our contemporary moment is that it rekindles our openness to Jesus' transforming impact on the whole world—including our openness to Jesus' impact on us.

Welcome is not simply about politics, it is not simply about piety, it is about power—the capacity to have an impact on the world around us and to be impacted by that same world.

Radical welcome is not an extreme act; it is an expression of our root identity. The word “radical” literally means from the roots, or growing from the roots. Jesus' radical welcome expresses his integrity; his very roots, his very core is welcome. How does our core identity shine through in the way we welcome, in the way we welcome what life brings us, in the way we risk believing that the world will welcome us, too, when we tell the truth about own vulnerability.

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Jewish law held that the one who comes as a messenger for someone is legally standing in for the person who sent him or her. For all intents and purposes the messenger *is* the person who did the sending of the messenger.

If contemporary Christians understand ourselves as messengers of Jesus' healing message, how well are we standing in for him at this Table every time we gather here?

This Table is Jesus' messenger, and we are standing in for him when we invite the community to meet him here with us.

With the newly approved Welcome Statement our Session is naming and claiming our welcome anew in our contentious times and inviting us to embrace our welcoming roots. The Session is not fencing this Table to protect its sanctity; the Session is extending the Table to be good stewards of the sacred welcome Jesus invites us to taste and see here.

Table manners at their best create space for us to trust each other, space for sharing, for you and me to come as we are and to get what we need.

A year ago today I stood at this Table for the first time and used the words "welcome home." We've covered a lot of ground together in a year, Grace Covenant. And our life together keeps bringing us back here—to the place where we learn Jesus' Table Manners again and again. They are not about forks or fences or figuring out who is in and who is out.

Jesus calls us to be prophets of welcome—the radical kind, the kind that defines us, not confines us, the kind that empowers us to say we need God and we need each other, the kind that teaches us how to say without fear to a world divided against itself, "Welcome Home."

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fpchurch.org.uk/about-us/what-we-contend-for/the-lords-supper/fencing-the-table/the-origins-of-fencing-the-table/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis* (Harper Collins, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/British-Etiquette/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/British-Etiquette/>

<sup>5</sup> I wrote the lectionary reflections on Matthew 10: 40-42 for ONScripture, an online lectionary resource. A portion of my reflections also appeared in the online Sojourners magazine. Portions of this section on Matthew come from those reflections.