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Communal Eating and the Body of Christ: Missionary Lessons from the Kankanaey

Robert Newton

Abstract: Through a series of vignettes, the author recalls lessons learned from the Kankanaey Christians in the Philippines that challenged and enriched the author’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper. He briefly explores the role culture plays in how a people group understands God’s Word and faithfully follows it in the formation of its church’s doctrine and practice. The reader is asked to consider the interaction of culture with doctrine and practice, both in a “receiving” culture’s understanding of God’s Word and in a “missionary’s” awareness of what he may be communicating about God’s Word in his words and actions.

The journey of God’s Word from sacred text to our minds and hearts never follows a direct (immediate) path. It passes through several lenses and filters along the way: language, culture, personal or corporate experiences to name a few. Considering the finiteness of our own existence in the flesh, especially our fallen nature, leads us to confess with St. Paul, “For now we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13). Recognizing the limits of our own culture, language, experiences, and, yes, our own flesh serves as a healthy reminder that no one person, church, or group within a church can rightly claim the “pole position” on God’s Truth.

At the same time, our Lord in His wisdom chooses to communicate His infinite Word in the finite languages and cultures of people, all peoples. Consider that our Lord’s first Words to our world following His ascension into heaven came simultaneously in several different languages, signaling that His saving Gospel was for all peoples and could not (nor would He allow it to) be confined to a single place or people group (Acts 2). Furthermore, the Lord uses our various cultures, languages,



Rev. Dr. Robert Newton is President emeritus of the California-Nevada-Hawaii District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Previously he served as an Evangelistic Missionary in the Philippines, Professor of Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, and Pastor of a multicultural congregation in San Jose, California. President Newton and his wife Priscilla have shared marriage and ministry for forty-eight years and are blessed with four children and fourteen grandchildren.
newton-r@sbcglobal.net

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and experiences (personal and shared) as finely tuned antennae through which He speaks personally and powerfully to us in His Word.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of teaching for a year in one of our seminaries in Papua New Guinea. We were reflecting on the story of Abraham, particularly his faith in following the Lord's command that he leave the safe surroundings of his home in Haran and travel to the land that God would show him (Genesis 12). One of the students burst out, "Em i got no lain!" expressing great dismay over Abraham's actions. "Em i got no lain" roughly translates into English, "He has no line (ancestral line, clan) going with him," with the connotation that Abraham had placed himself in extreme danger by leaving his home turf and traveling "alone" (or unprotected) to a strange land inhabited by hostile tribes.

No New Guinean in his right mind would ever travel to a place far from home without the guarantee that he would have members of his own "lain" awaiting his arrival. Given the several people groups in Papua New Guinea and the long-standing animosity standing between them, traveling or arriving in a place without a protective escort would be suicidal. "Em i got no lain" expressed this student's understanding of the incredible faith required of Abraham to follow the Lord's command and the assurance Abraham possessed from the Lord's Word alone that he and his small family would not only be safe but indeed be blessed.

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It was a question from the mission field, "Must a Gentile be circumcised in order to be saved?" that rocked the established Jewish church to its foundations, exploding the boundaries of their finite Jewish worldview. At the same time, it opened the eyes of Jewish believers to a much greater and deeper understanding of God's plan of salvation for them and the world, which brings me to the missionary's question underlying this essay: What might we learn from Lutheran Christians among the Kankanaey people of the Philippines

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Most if not all missionaries can attest to how their experiences across cultures greatly aid them in better understanding and believing God's Word. These experiences raise questions or posit ideas that open up entirely new perspectives that can have a profound impact on their study of Scripture and its application to our lives here in the world and in the church.

case study of sorts also asks us to consider more seriously the role culture plays in the formation of a church's doctrine and practice with the hope that it raises our awareness as Western Christians of the theological messages we may be communicating by our words and actions to our Christian brothers and sisters around the world.

The Kankanaey number over 250,000 and reside in the highlands of the Philippine island of Luzon fifty to one hundred miles north of Baguio City. My wife, Priscilla, and I served as missionaries among them from 1977–1983. Kankanaey culture differs from our Western culture in many ways, but for the focus of this essay, I highlight one: *collectivism* vis-à-vis *individualism*. The Kankanaey organize themselves as a *collectivistic* or a *group-oriented* people. As such they place higher importance on the well-being, goals, and needs of the community over against their own person. They define themselves in relationship to the community and see themselves primarily as extensions of the community.

Culturally, they more closely reflect Paul's description of the "body of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 12 than we tend to do here in the United States. That is due primarily to the fact that we Americans (at least those from northern European descent) place higher importance on an *individualism* with focus on the well-being, goals, and needs of the individual over those the community. We prefer self-reliance and value the ability to define ourselves independent of the community. Loosely applying Descartes' famous axiom, we in the West say, "I think, therefore I am." The Kankanaey might say, "I belong, therefore I am."

The radical difference in perception and understanding between these worldview values was brought to my attention very soon after our arrival in the Philippines. My language instructor was helping me grasp the meaning of "*mangan*," the Kankanaey word for eat. I was conjugating the verb—*manganak*, *manganka*, *mangontaku* (I eat, you eat, we eat)—when he interrupted me. "Robert," he said, "we do not say *manganak* (I eat). "Is it a word?" I asked. "No," he replied. After an hour of deeper conversation, I learned that "*mangan*" is indeed the Kankanaey word for eating, but its primary meaning is not ingesting food. *Mangan* might be better translated, "We gather around food." Eating had much less to do with nutrition and much more to do with maintaining relationships in community. Thus, "*manganak*," or "I eat" made little sense to them. Even when individuals had to eat by themselves due to travel or work, they considered their eating in the larger context of the community. In that sense, they did not eat alone.

This early encounter with Kankanaey culture was the first of many that focused on eating and its significance regarding community and personal relationships within

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the community, especially reconciliation when relationships became strained or broken. These encounters and subsequent conversations expanded and enriched my understanding and appreciation of the Lord's Supper.

Now We Share the Soup

A few years (and a thousand misunderstandings) later, two elders from one of our station's¹ congregations came to our home with a request. "Missionary, we need you to come soon to our village. One of our brothers was publicly shamed and now he has absented himself from worship. We need you to restore our shamed brother to the community." I was reluctant to come for fear that it would reinforce the notion that only the missionary could exercise the Office of the Keys. Their insistence prevailed, however, and I met with the elders in their village a few days later.

The "shamed brother" was present at the meeting when I arrived. We sat together, and at my request he unfolded the story. "Missionary, about a month ago a number of the elders and other members of the congregation were together studying God's Word. I asked a question about what we were reading, and our leader raised his voice when he answered me. I felt that he scolded me, and I lost face in front of our people. I do not know what to do now."

This problem seemed so simple I did not understand why I was needed to resolve it. Nevertheless, I offered my counsel. "Sabado,² you have been a leader in this congregation for a long time. I believe you know what needs to be done. You need to go to the brother who offended you, tell him your story, and give him an opportunity to confess his sin and ask you for forgiveness. Then you share the soup together."

"Sharing the soup," usually the broth of a boiled chicken, was the final step in the process of reconciliation. It was the public sign to the offending parties and the community that forgiveness had truly been extended and that the relationship, once broken through sin, was healed. Though words of apology and forgiveness would have been exchanged, no real reconciliation would have taken place without sharing the soup.

As soon as I had given my counsel to Sabado, two other elders brought a large bowl of soup to where we were sitting, and we were instructed to eat together. "Thou art the man" (2 Samuel 12) thundered in my mind, as I realized that I was the leader who had caused offense. Immediately I turned to Sabado and confessed my sin and sorrow over hurting him. The brothers then explained in more detail how I had caused Sabado to lose face (an unintended cultural blunder on my part that caused deep offense). Sabado forgave me, and we joyfully shared the soup together with the others gathered for the meeting. Sharing the soup restored our relationship to each other and to the larger community.

Sharing the soup was not simply a visible assurance of forgiveness offered and received. It was the sign of assurance that the relationship was restored through forgiveness. Forgiveness of sin (release from debt) was the penultimate step to something greater and deeper that could be expressed only by eating together or, as the Kankanaey would say, “gathering around food.” That shed new light not only on my understanding and appreciation of the Kankanaey people but also upon my understanding and appreciation of the Lord’s ultimate intention in forgiving sins.

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This episode brought fresh meaning to the stories in the ninth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. The imposition of the paralyzed man in the middle of Jesus’ teaching provided our Lord the perfect opportunity to declare His divine authority and purpose for His incarnation. “So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins. . .” This was especially good news for the man who not only suffered the hardships of paralysis but even more the pain of assumed separation from God. The obvious question in everyone’s mind, save Jesus, was, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” Imagine the torment of body and soul this man endured his entire life, pondering this question while knowing that it was impossible for him to do anything about it. Only God Himself could (and would) address his brokenness.

The next story finds Jesus calling Matthew the tax collector to follow Him. Matthew was the first disciple chosen from those who lived “across the tracks” religiously speaking. He was by trade and reputation reprobate. Shortly after meeting Matthew, Jesus was seated at a table with a whole house-full of reprobates and apparently enjoying their company. His actions caught the attention of the Pharisees who correctly concluded that Jesus intentionally identified with those the religious community despised. He was choosing to be seen as an extension of the community of “sinners.” “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mt 9:11). Their question revealed more about Jesus and the Kingdom of God than they could possibly have imagined. God Himself was eating with tax collectors and sinners! If that wasn’t remarkable enough, none of those sinners were consumed by His presence, a real possibility according to Moses (Ex 24:9–11; Ex 33:20). By placing the story of the paralytic in immediate proximity with Jesus’ eating with sinners, Matthew intends that we connect Jesus’ divine authority to forgive sins with His divine desire that our personal relationship with Him be restored. Dining with the living God is again possible (Genesis 3) because He has forgiven our sins.

We may not simply equate Jesus' dining with sinners in Matthew 9 with the Lord's Supper. In the Eucharist, Jesus not only serves as host at His Table but He also gives Himself as the meal. However, both accounts connect the forgiveness of sins that He procured through His death and resurrection with the intended result that we dine with Him now and in eternity. Too often we may look at our participation in the Lord's Table individualistically. That is, we look to the Lord primarily to offer each one of us forgiveness for our sins (release of our eternal debt) and assurance of eternal life (deliverance from the death penalty). We leave the Table rejoicing.

That joy is made all the greater, however, when we consider the personal (and corporate) relationship the Lord intends with us and we with Him—a relationship both effected and celebrated in our dining together with Him. Our joy is made even more complete by remembering that we don't eat by ourselves (*manganak*). While personal, dining with the Lord is never individualistic. We are not a conglomerate of individuals eating simultaneously at His Table. Jesus gathers us around Himself; and, in sharing His Bread and Cup together, He makes us one with Him and all other communicants (1 Cor 10:16–17).

On another occasion, the Kankanaey again opened my mind to the corporate meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper. The congregation in Namagtey was small, numbering fifteen or so households. Just before our worship service was to begin, a few of the elders shared with me that we would not celebrate the Lord's Supper that morning. One of the families was not present due to an altercation that had taken place in their household the day before. The congregation agreed to postpone the celebration of the Supper in order that we re-gather at the family's home later in the afternoon. We would address the family problem, and, if all were reconciled, we would celebrate the Sacrament at their home with all the congregation present. They understood that the Supper was a gift given by the Lord to the entire village, and we should do all that we can to make sure that all are able to gather with the Lord.

The connection forged by the Kankanaey between dining together and forgiveness has caused me to ask hard questions of myself as a steward of the mysteries of God. We are amply blessed as the Lord offers us His grace and forgiveness through several means, as Luther reminds us in the Smalcald Articles:

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18[20]: "Where two or three are gathered . . ."³

While Luther is more likely referring to God's gracious means operative throughout the world, these several means are very present in our Lutheran worship services. As such, some of our pastors comfort themselves with the possibility that worshipers will hear the Gospel and receive Christ's forgiveness in the service even if they are not allowed (for one reason or another) to participate in the Supper. For the Kankanaey, however, forgiveness publicly offered and received without concomitantly gathering around our Lord's Table is difficult to grasp. "How do we express the result of the forgiveness that together we received from the Lord if we do not dine together with Him?"

This connection further raises questions regarding our expectation that all worshipers participate in corporate confession and absolution, yet restrict admission to the Lord's Supper to only those with whom we are in "altar and pulpit fellowship" (closed communion). The Kankanaey could only interpret that phenomenon as Jesus' word of forgiveness being incomplete and, therefore, insincere. They would naturally ask, "What conditions beyond believing His own Words must we meet in order for Him to truly forgive us and invite us to 'share the soup' together?"⁴

Finally, and most disconcerting of all, Kankanaey Christians would not be able to understand or accept the idea that as brothers or sisters in Christ they are welcome to participate in worship—including corporate confession and absolution; the hearing (receiving) of the Gospel through the readings, liturgy, and sermon; and the offering of thanks, praise and petition through prayers and hymns—but not participate in the Lord's Supper. Such exclusion would only be interpreted as exclusion from the Body of Christ. The congregation is essentially treating them as "tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 18). They would wonder, "What offense have I caused that I cannot join the community in the Meal?" Because of (1) the deep connection gathering around food has with belonging to the community and (2) the *collectivistic* connection made between personal being and belonging to the community, Kankanaey people would conclude that they are not considered by this congregation to be members of Christ's Body, His Holy Christian Church.

We Westerners might try reasoning with them that exclusion from the Lord's Table at a specific Lutheran congregation does not imply exclusion from His Body. They would likely not understand the argument, given that they wouldn't imagine that there are many *individual* "Lord's Tables," each belonging to a specific people group

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or clan within that group. They would better understand that there is one Lord's Table shared by many.

The myriad gatherings of Christians around tables bound by time and space (location) are actual extensions of the one Table of the Lord that transcends time and space. That Table sits at the foot (within the single act) of the cross by which He gathers all people to Himself (Jn 12:32). The many "meals" are the sacred participation⁵ with and proclamation of the One crucified Lord at His Table: "Do this, as often as you [eat my Body and] drink [my Blood], in remembrance of Me." And again, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim (καταγγέλλετε) the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:24b–26).

Sharing Food and Bridging Hearts

Toward the end of our first term on the field, a few lay leaders and I visited a number of villages in a region south of our station with the hope that we would begin proclaiming the Gospel among them upon our return from furlough. On the second day out, we arrived at the small village of Nabsong. As it was near dusk, the elders of the village invited us to stay the night. We were regaled with Kankanaey delicacies (marinated pork), rice and sweet potatoes, roasted chicken, and rice wine. We talked together late into the evening. The next morning the elders of the community invited us to come regularly to their village and to share more stories from the Bible. "You are different from the other people who visited us a few years ago," the head elder confided. "They did not share their hearts with us." Curious, I asked him to elaborate. "We welcomed them as we welcomed you," he explained. "However, they would not share our food or rice wine. They insisted on eating the food that they had brought with them. They were of a different heart."

These visitors thought they were serving the villagers of Nabsong by not imposing upon them. Thus, they carried their own provisions and did not depend on the generosity of the villages they were visiting. As sincere as their motives might have been, their decision not to eat with the villagers communicated that they were superior to the Kankanaey and would never become one in heart with them. They did not understand that there could be no true sharing of hearts without the "gathering around food." I was grateful for their cultural blunder when I later learned that the visitors so described were Jehovah Witnesses.

The deep offense these visitors caused demonstrates the essential role that "gathering around food" plays in the formation and maintenance of personal and community relationships among the Kankanaey (and perhaps among other collectivistic cultures as well). There can be no sharing of hearts without the sharing of food. The connection between sharing food and relationships greatly informs the Kankanaey understanding of Holy Scripture, especially regarding such topics as fellowship, community, Body of Christ, reconciliation, etc. It especially shapes their

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understanding of the theology and practice of the Lord Supper in their life together and their relationship with Christians from other Lutheran church bodies.

What might we learn from our Kankanaey brothers and sisters? The above might cause us to ask what we may have lost in our understanding of Christ's Body as the churches increasingly organize around individualistic rather than collectivistic values. At the very least, it might challenge us to examine our attitudes and actions as individualistic Westerners living and serving among collectivistic people groups, especially in regard to eating, relationships, and community. As oft noted, both in ecclesiastical gatherings and official publications, the LCMS is currently privileged to be invited by other Lutheran church bodies to walk alongside them in the area of theological education. Several LCMS pastors, theological professors, and ecclesiastical officers serve as long- and short-term professors and instructors in the seminaries and Bible schools of these church bodies, including some that do not share formal "altar and pulpit" fellowship with the Synod.

The above might cause us to ask what we may have lost in our understanding of Christ's Body as the churches increasingly organize around individualistic rather than collectivistic values.

Due to official opinions and resolutions of the Synod regarding the Lord's Supper (closed communion), LCMS leaders serving abroad have been exhorted to refrain from communing with those Lutheran brothers and sisters with whom we are not in formal fellowship, despite the fact that they daily live and work with them. They proclaim God's Word together and together confess the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.

The exhortation not to commune together turns on the understanding of communicants as confessors. The 1999 report of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations on admission to the Lord's Supper⁶ discusses in some detail that communicants participate in the Lord Supper both as participants in the grace of God in Christ and as confessors of the doctrines believed and practiced by their church body. With that understanding, it makes the following observation,

The teaching of our Synod, which is consistent with historic Christianity, is to refrain from communing Christians who have joined themselves to churches whose public confession differs in important ways from the scriptural and confessional teaching (and thus is heterodox). This has been the case even when those church bodies (e.g., the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA]) officially espouse the biblical and confessional teaching regarding the Sacrament of the Altar. Our practice of not communing those who belong to such church bodies does *not* mean that we

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fear that such individual Christians would necessarily commune in an unworthy manner. There is another important consideration besides genuine faith and personal worthiness. We ask at times that those who may have *genuine faith* and who, if they were to commune in our churches might do so *in a worthy manner*, still not commune at our altars because of other doctrinal disagreements between their church bodies and our own Synod.⁷

This quotation, while referring specifically to Christians from other church bodies communing at LCMS congregations, applies by analogy to LCMS members communing at churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS. In good conscience, then, members of the LCMS working with Lutheran churches not in fellowship with the LCMS believe it necessary (for the sake of conscience) not to commune with their Lutheran brothers and sisters with whom together they live, serve, and otherwise worship. They sincerely hope that their brothers and sisters of these Lutheran churches will understand their rationale for not joining them in the Eucharist.

What may be overlooked in their decision, however, is what “confession” they are actually making to these other Lutheran brothers and sisters, particularly regarding the Body of Christ. They would maintain that participating with these believers challenges the “unity of confession” necessary to share the Lord’s Supper together. In contrast, the Kankanaey would maintain that by *not* gathering together around the Lord in His Supper we challenge the very Gospel message the Supper proclaims, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim (καταγγέλετε) the Lord’s death until he comes.” Not communing, therefore, undermines the actual unity of the Body of Christ that the Supper effects. The LCMS members might believe that by separating themselves from the local congregation at the Lord’s Supper they are confessing that they are not one in doctrine. The local community would see such separation as a statement that they are not members of the Body, made one in and by the Lord Jesus.

In sorting out these differences, it is critical that we avoid wounding the consciences of brothers or sisters for whom Christ died. Here an individual’s personal persuasion must not be exercised in any way that brings harm to the Body (1 Corinthians 8). Matters regarding participation in the Lord’s Supper are not simply differences in logic or doctrinal understanding; they are matters of conscience and risk alienating from the Lord people for whom He died. Recognizing what is truly at stake in these matters, we, like the disciples of old (Acts 15), must be diligent to come together as brothers and sisters in

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Christ to study God's Word, charitably debate, and humbly listen to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to and through His churches from around the world.

Endnotes

¹ A mission station roughly resembles a geographic "circuit" in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) including several congregations and preaching stations.

² Names of people have been changed for the sake of privacy.

³ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 319.

⁴ Luther asks a similar question in the Small Catechism: [9–10] Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily? Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words "for you" require truly believing hearts." Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 363.

⁵ Traditional animistic Kankanaey people "remember" past family members or ancestors in an active way. Feasts are celebrated in their honor (memory) where gifts of food and clothing are shared with and for the departed. They believe that the departed are actually present, participating with the community in eating, drinking, and ceremonial dancing. It is normal, therefore, for Kankanaey Lutherans to understand that they participate in the Lord's Supper in the very presence of the Lord. The paradigmatic shift for them is not in recognizing the "Real Presence" of the Lord, but that the Lord provides the Meal for them rather than their providing it for Him.

⁶ *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching*. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. (St. Louis: LCMS, November 1999).

⁷ CTCR, *Admission to the Lord's Supper*, 41.