

The Table of God

1 Corinthians 12:13

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When Protestants were outlawed in France by Louis XIV in 1685, about 200,000 of them fled the country. They scattered all over Europe and throughout the Atlantic world in one of the largest migrations of the early modern world. In their search for a new home, they quickly learned they were highly dependent on the hospitality of the governments, churches, and ordinary people in the places to which they went. Not everyone welcomed immigrants who spoke a different language, practiced strange customs, and were sometimes willing to work for meager wages. In England there were riots by workers afraid the French refugees would take their jobs. In the English Parliament some politicians spread bizarre conspiracy theories claiming many of the Huguenots were really secret agents of Louis XIV posing as persecuted refugees. (Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon). Finding a new home in a foreign land was not easy for French Protestant refugees.

But hospitality was eagerly extended by the English colonies in North America that desperately needed immigrants, especially those with the education and skills many of the Huguenot refugees possessed. In 1687 South Carolina and Virginia were conducting a pamphlet war to attract Huguenot exiles to their colonies. The pamphlet writer for Virginia conveyed a unique offer from the colony's governor who was also the titular head of Virginia's Anglican church. The governor invited refugees to bring one or two bilingual French ministers with them and promised to pay their salaries to preach in French to the exiles if they would also lead worship in English for an established Anglican parish.

For refugees in search of a place where they would be more fully accepted, this offer must have looked too good to be true. It meant they would have a place at the table of an established Anglican Parish from the day they arrived in English America. Five months after this pamphlet was published in Europe a bilingual French minister arrived in Virginia with dozens of refugees from his hometown in France. He immediately began practicing the creative dual track ministry the governor had proposed barely a year earlier. By offering services in French and English the parish was in fact embracing both cultures. Over the next decade this Huguenot community grew to more than 1,000 people scattered across plantations along the Rappahannock River—perhaps the largest Huguenot community in North America. Having a place at the table from the moment of their arrival in the new world enabled these refugees to assimilate more quickly than any other Huguenot settlement in North America. They assimilated so quickly, they became invisible to future researchers. Because they have been hidden to historians for almost 300 years, my new book will be the first to tell their story.¹ It is the unlikely story of linguistic and cultural barriers quickly melting away.

In the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians Paul challenged the early church to embrace linguistic and cultural differences in precisely the same way. He was addressing a church that was deeply divided because members came from two distinct cultures. Some of them were Jews and some of them were Greeks. They spoke different languages. Their religious backgrounds and cultural customs were

¹ Lonnie H. Lee, *The Huguenot-Anglican Refuge in Virginia: Empire, Land, and Religion in the Rappahannock Region* (Lanham, MD, 2023).

radically different. Neither group understood the other. Both were suspicious of the other. Both feared being swallowed up by the other. Part of Paul's genius as a Christian leader was his ability to understand and identify with both groups. He believed the fledgling Christian community was called to fully embrace both cultures.

Paul recognized how difficult it is to bring people together who come from different worlds. To overcome the powerful barriers of language and culture is no small accomplishment. Paul therefore calls upon the Corinthians to lean into the reconciling power of the gospel. He invites them to recognize how that power is conveyed to them through the sacraments of grace. In baptism we are initiated into a new identity that takes us beyond the limitations of our language, culture, and national identity. In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper we are empowered to rejoice in the presence of people who are fundamentally different from ourselves. Paul said it like this: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews and Greeks, slaves and free—and we are all made to drink of one Spirit."²

Paul had confidence that the Corinthians could do what he was asking of them because he trusted in the power of the Holy Spirit to connect us to the body of Christ. The celebration of World Communion Sunday today reminds us of our calling to share the table with people who are radically different from ourselves. Throughout the world today the followers of Christ gather around his table to celebrate the common baptism that makes us one. This worldwide family is beyond our capacity to define or limit. We don't get to choose who will be part of this family of God.

After the Reformation became well established in Scotland a unique practice began to take shape among the Scots. Presbyterians created Communion festivals to experience the family of God on a very large scale. People would gather at outdoor locations for a four-day event that included preaching and teaching in preparation for receiving the sacrament. When the Communion day arrived, people went to dozens of open air tables to receive the sacrament and rotated through until thousands had been served. People went home knowing they were part of a family that was much larger than they imagined.

Scottish Presbyterians took this practice with them to Ireland and later to America. David Brainerd was a New England congregationalist minister who discovered this practice when he moved to Pennsylvania to work with some Delaware tribes in the early 1740s. He was amazed by the impact of these gatherings on those who took part. He had never seen anything like it in New England. He decided to implement this practice with the Native Americans he was serving. He found the open air festival atmosphere worked well with the Delaware who had a long history of outdoor ritual celebrations. In June of 1746 Brainerd did something very unusual and quite daring. He led a group of Delaware to a Presbyterian Communion festival in Freehold, New Jersey. There Native Americans and Scottish Presbyterians sat together at the same tables. In language that is evocative of later descriptions of the American melting pot, Brainerd said that around those tables people were "melted with the love of Christ."³ That is what the table of God is all about. At this table no one is excluded, and everyone is blessed.

² 1 Corinthians 12:13, NRSV.

³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI), 54-56.