
Choosing Your Seat at the Table

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I attended a conference on church leadership several years ago¹ primarily because I wanted to meet the featured speaker. He had written several books that I had enjoyed reading. After a little subtle politicking, I managed to get an invitation to the speakers' dinner after the first day of the conference. Things couldn't have been going better.

When we arrived at the restaurant, I took a place at the table with several of the other speakers. As the rest of the invitees arrived, however, it became clear that we would not all fit at the same table. Two members of the conference staff apologized for the confusion and sat at the next table over, leaving a seat for the featured speaker to sit at our table. He was the last to arrive at the restaurant.

When the featured speaker walked in, he took one look at the seating arrangements and took a seat at the other table with the two staff members. "We can't let the two of you eat all alone," he said.

I chuckled to myself. The reason I wanted to meet him would be the reason I wouldn't get the chance. He was probably the same guy who made a point of joining the skinny new kid for lunch in the grade school cafeteria when everyone else had shunned her.

Then, I noticed something else interesting. My new hero didn't seem to see himself as a hero. Although I was thinking maybe I should have gone over to the other table so that he didn't feel like he had to be the one to do it, he didn't seem bothered at all by not being able to sit with the other speakers.

Nor did he exhibit even a hint of righteousness at having been the one to notice that somebody needed to do something. He wasn't like the vegetarian who can't talk about the virtues of organic carrots without mentioning the vices of those who don't eat them. He just got on about the business of enjoying his meal and the opportunity to make some new friends.

"Have no fear," Jesus said. "For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." (Matthew 10:26)

I'm used to thinking of Jesus seeking out those who live their lives on the margins of society²—the poor, tax collectors, and folks of less than perfect reputations. I know that Jesus scandalized others by doing these things, and paid for it with his life.

I, however, sometimes forget that Jesus didn't do these things for himself. He didn't do them to demonstrate he was right, or to compare himself to others or to judge anyone else.

Jesus did these things because he trusted God and allowed himself to be led by the Spirit.

I never did get a chance to do more than introduce myself to the speaker featured at the conference, yet I do feel like I

know him a little. And, I'm confident that I learned more by watching him at dinner that night than by reading all of his books.

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