

The Introverts' Dinner Party

1 Corinthians 11:20-29

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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Are you an introvert or an extrovert? One way of defining the two types is to say that an extrovert is energized by being in a group of people, while an introvert is drained by spending time with a group and needs to spend time alone to recharge. The extrovert is gregarious, action-oriented, decisive, and not prone to self-doubt. The introvert is more sensitive, contemplative, questioning—and sometimes shy. Becca thinks that I am pure extrovert in contrast to her introversion, but I think the truth is that I am in the middle. There is no such thing as an extrovert poet. There *are* extrovert preachers—plenty of them, but not many good ones. To be a preacher of any depth, you have to enjoy spending time alone with books and God, and living with questions.

I recently read the bestselling book by Susan Cain with the title *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* [Crown, 2012]. Her thesis is that America is an extrovert culture in which people who are introverts are devalued. This is a 20th century development and she dates it from the time Dale Carnegie's course became popular. The whole idea of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was that anybody can learn to fake the skills of an extrovert. To get ahead in business and sales—and even in life—you need to be gregarious, assertive, sure of yourself and your product. Eventually this became the model for our school systems. The goal of teachers was to get every student to speak up, to participate in class. They wanted to bring introverts out of their shells rather than recognizing their natural gifts. This form of education produced the kind of salespeople that businesses wanted, but it did not produce people who are self-critical or deep thinkers. And it forced true introverts to fake their way to success.

In one section of this marvelous book, Susan Cain moves from discussing the case study method of large-class discussions used at Harvard Business School, which produces people with assertive leadership skills who seldom ask hard questions of themselves, to a discussion of Saddleback Church in California. She visits their campus with its several simultaneous worship services with different musical styles, but she notices that there is only one style of personality among the leaders, the extrovert ideal. Cain speaks to an evangelical pastor who lives nearby who says:

The evangelical culture ties together faithfulness with extroversion. The emphasis is on community, on participating in more and more programs and event, on meeting more and more people. It's a constant tension for many introverts that they're not living that out...It doesn't feel like 'I'm not doing as well as I'd like.' It feels like 'God isn't pleased with me.' [p. 66]

He has a point. Among many evangelicals (and as I've said, I still count myself one) there is an emphasis on getting out there and forming more relationships so you can witness, being part of a small group so you can grow spiritually, showing up for meetings of all kinds—and precious little emphasis on solitude or contemplation. No wonder so many evangelical pastors are full of hot air but not so full of self-awareness.

Do you think our church is designed for extroverts or introverts? I don't know the answer to that; I'm just asking. A mainline church like ours is more reserved in a New England sort of

way, but is it really as admiring of the introvert personality as it is of the gregarious, self-assured decider?

Many churches can be characterized as “social” churches, where the emphasis is on the horizontal—friendships among church members, potlucks, group meetings, coffeehouses. In a church like that the most social people might be taken as the most spiritual—but it might be the introverts who don’t like group times that might be most tuned to the vertical.

I used to want to be in a rock and roll church where everybody expressed passion all the time. When I was in high school I went to see Janis Joplin in concert and all the way home I was thinking “That’s what Christians ought to be like.” I’ve been in plenty of worship settings where people were jumping around and raising their hands to a rock beat. Last week when I was at John Henry Tripler’s 60th birthday party at Club Soda with the Booze Beggars playing old-time rock and roll, I looked up and noticed that a majority of people on the small dance floor in front of the band were Harbor Church members. I thought to myself, “What would it be like if we had a rock band at Harbor Church and all these aging boomers could dance around and get that excited at church?” But then I thought, *Nah*. My younger brother who fancies himself something of a hip music critic told me not long ago that he went to a “contemporary Christian” event where all the kids were jumping around and praising God. His comment was, “They weren’t worshipping; they were just rocking out. That’s all it was.” He goes to rock concerts but for worship he goes to the Episcopal Church.

For years I argued that my churches needed to go with a generational shift in worship tastes. With the advent of the Baby Boomers, the church needed to shift from meditative worship to celebrative worship. I had a great time promoting celebration. But now I am not so sure. I don’t want church to be dry and boring, but does church really need to be oriented to extroverts? Up in my study—especially when I am working on sermons—I play Christian rock music loud, and I would love to hear that kind of music on Sunday morning or Friday night. But it would have to be paired with time for reflection. Noise and passion would have to alternate with silence and contemplation.

Communion offers us a different model of worship. In almost any tradition, the act of sharing the Lord’s Supper calls for reverence and quietness and examining oneself. The apostle Paul says “Examine yourselves and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor. 11:28). He says it a little differently in 2 Corinthians: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves” (13:5). There is a long tradition of practicing self-examination before receiving communion, sometimes including going to confession (even in Presbyterian and Baptist churches in the past) before partaking. Do we stop and quiet ourselves long enough to examine ourselves before we eat this bread and drink this cup? Or do we keep busy and noisy precisely *because* we don’t want to look at ourselves?

In Augustine’s *Confessions* [8.7, Warner translation] the man of the fourth century sounds modern when he writes about how God is trying to get us to look at ourselves:

But you, Lord...were turning me around so that I could see myself; you took me from behind my own back, which was where I had put myself during the time when I did not want to be observed by myself, and you set me in front of my own face so that I could see how foul a sight I was....If I tried to look away from myself...you were setting me in front of myself, forcing me to look into my own face.

God is always asking us to look at ourselves; that is the way we come to see our need for him, and the way we see him. If that is introversion, we all need a dose of introversion.

In 1 Corinthians 11, it seems that the extroverts were having their way in the church. The common meal they shared—probably a potluck—was just one more party. It wasn't really for the purpose of eating the Lord's Supper, Paul says; it was about eating *my* supper. The rich who did not work and those who could get off early arrived first, and—without waiting for the slaves and laborers to come—went ahead and ate their supper, some even getting drunk. Some went hungry while others pigged out. Paul is upset. In our translation he says "What!" which is Greek for "What the ----!?" They show contempt for the church and humiliate the poor.

Then Paul repeats the words of the tradition he had received, "that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed..." The purpose, he says, is to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. If your life and the way you share the meal does not reflect Jesus' life and sacrifice, then you are eating and drinking in an unworthy manner.

Verse 29 says "All who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves." What is "discerning the body"? It has two meanings: the body of Jesus which is represented in the body and blood, and the body of Christ which is the family of believers, the church. If you eat without recognizing that those on your right and left *are* the body of Christ, you eat and drink unworthily.

So the Lord's Supper is a time for turning inward, a time for our introvert sides. It is like a dinner party Jesus has thrown for extreme introverts—that banquet he talked about made up of people drawn from the blind and the lame, from the highways and hedges. But when the guests come to dinner with the great King they become shy, not because they are fearful of the other guests but because in the presence of holiness their mouths are shut. In the presence of the altogether righteous and pure, they are *forced* to examine themselves, and their hearts turn inward. At the introverts' dinner party, the guests sit in silence and focus on the bread and the wine.

Sometimes we take Communion in a hurry. We take it as something routine. We do not stop as guests at the Lord's Table and compare ourselves to him. We do not stop to smell the bread and the wine. We are using real homemade bread today and real wine (with the alcohol removed) because I want you to stop and smell them—to taste and see that the Lord is good.

When I took Becca on a trip to Japan, we sat in a teahouse one morning and had a lady in a kimono kneel before us and perform the traditional tea ceremony. Some people theorize that the ritualized handling of the cup had its origins in the Japanese observing the Portuguese priests celebrate mass in the 1500's; one missionary told us he thought that the tea ceremony might have been the way that persecuted Christians celebrated communion in secret. In the slow-motion time of the tea ceremony, the hostess gives you the empty cup before the tea is made, so that you can appreciate the material and the craftsmanship. You watch as the tea is whisked together in a bowl with great care. When the cup of green froth is handed to you, you turn the cup around before drinking, taking in the aroma and enjoying the feel of the warm clay on your hands, and only then drink the tea in a state of mindfulness.

Today we will observe the Lord's Supper without words, with no prayer except your own. I urge you to examine yourselves. Then I ask you to hold the bread and appreciate it both as bread and as the symbol of the body of Jesus that was given for you. When you are ready, on your own schedule rather than on a signal from me, eat the bread. When you receive the small cup of wine, take in its aroma and think of what it means, of how the blood of Jesus has cleansed you from all sin. When you are ready, drink the cup. When we are all finished, we will join hands and sing a song, reaffirming our sense of community. But first, before we join hands, we will turn inward and commune with Christ.