

## **“Transforming Encounters”**

### **A Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper**

**John Mark Hicks**

#### **Lesson 1. What Are Transforming Encounters?**

Baptism, assembly, and the Lord’s supper are personal and communal moments through which God encounters and transforms us as we participate in the story of God.

##### *Discussion Questions:*

1. When you hear the phrase “transforming encounter,” what do you think of? What does that phrase mean in this video series?
2. How do the questions “what are we doing?” and “what is God doing?” in these “ordinances” deepen or enrich your experience of baptism, assembly, and the Lord’s supper? Name what we do and what God is doing.
3. What is the difference between moments of encounter in our daily lives and the moments of divine encounter in baptism, assembly, and Lord’s supper?
4. How are baptism, assembly, and the Lord’s supper rooted in the ministry and teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew?

#### **Lesson 2. Israel Baptized into Moses in the Cloud and Sea**

Israel has its own baptismal journey by which God redeems and cleanses a people for God’s own possession and mission.

##### *Discussion Questions:*

1. Why are the “waters” so important in the creation, flood, and the Exodus? How does this deepen the meaning of baptism for us?
2. What does it mean to be baptized “into Moses” in the Exodus? How do we experience the Exodus in our own baptism?
3. How do Israel’s water immersions enhance your own understanding of Christianity’s baptism?

4. Why is water such a dynamic and pervasive image in Israel's history and practice? How might contemporary Christians express that dynamic character in our practices?

### **Lesson 3. Israel Assembled in God's Presence**

God calls Israel into frequent assemblies sanctified by divine presence.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

1. Read Psalm 66. What feature do you recognize as part of the assemblies of Israel?
2. Identify some features of God's meeting with Israel on the "day of assembly" in Exodus 19. What happened? Why is this significant?
3. How does Israel's "holy mountain" experience shape your understanding of the "mountain" experience of Christians in assembly? What parallels do you see? How should this inform and inspire our own assemblies?
4. What is the significance of Israel's "sacred assemblies" for its life and relationship with God? How does Israel's life teach us about how we approach our assemblies?
5. What is the value of a "calendar" in Israel's faith? How does this shape Israel? How does it remind Israel? Would a "calendar" also benefit Christians just as it did Israel?

### **Lesson 4. Israel Ate with God at Tables**

God eats with Israel in peace and communion.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

1. What is the significance of Israel eating the sacrificed animals in the presence of God?
2. How might Exodus 24:1-11 inform our understanding of the Lord's supper in our own context? What principles apply to our circumstances in the new covenant?
3. In your reading of the biblical texts for this lesson, how do you understand the distinction between the altar (where the animal is sacrificed) and the table (where the animal is eaten)? Is the Lord's supper a table or an altar? What is the difference?

4. Read Psalm 116. What do you learn about the significance of a thanksgiving meal from this worshipper's words in the assembly?
5. What is the atmosphere and meaning of the fellowship meal in Israel? How might this shape our understanding and experience of the Lord's supper?

### **Lesson 5. Jesus was Baptized with Sinners in the Jordan**

The baptism of Jesus is our baptism.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. What are the emphases in the preaching and practices of John the Baptizer that prepare people to enter the kingdom of God?
2. Why was Jesus baptized? How is his baptism an example for us now?
3. What does it mean to say that the baptism of Jesus is the "first Christian baptism"? How does the baptism of Jesus relate to our baptism?
4. Is this a sufficient reason for baptism: "I was baptized because Jesus was baptized, and I am a disciple of Jesus"?
5. How does the baptism of Jesus shape our understanding of discipleship?

### **Lesson 6. Jesus Assembled with Israel**

Jesus is the true temple of God by whom we worship the Father in the Spirit.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Why did Jesus attend communal assemblies? How might his reasons encourage and disciple us about participating in assemblies?
2. Why do you "go to church"? Is following Jesus a sufficient reason?
3. How might the promise in Matthew 18:20 give meaning to your experience of assemblies?
4. How does Matthew 18:20 reflect the story of God in Israel as well as the presence of God in our assemblies?

## **Lesson 7. Jesus Ate with People at Tables**

Jesus hosts a table in his kingdom and eats with his disciples.

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. How does the table ministry of Jesus define or describe a kingdom table etiquette?
2. What does your table look like in your daily ministry of the kingdom? With whom do you eat? Is your table a missional one like the table of Jesus?
3. What is a Passover meal? What is the mood and meaning of a Passover meal? How might our practice of the Lord's supper continue the meaning of the Passover in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus?
4. How do you understand the meaning of "This is my body" and "This is my blood"?
5. Which dimension of the Lord's supper most resonates with your experience of the table—victim (body and blood), host (eating with us), or servant (serving us)? Why?

## **Lesson 8. Disciples Are Baptized in Water and Spirit**

God initiates people into the assembly of the Lord through water and Spirit.

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. What is the significance of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Acts? Why is this an important point for the early church and for the rest of the book of Acts?
2. How does Acts 2:38-39 serve a paradigmatic or normative function as we read the book of Acts? Why might we think this is the normative lens through which we read the rest of Acts?
3. What is the relationship between the giving of the Spirit and baptism in water in the conversion narratives? Is there an "ordinary pattern" there? Why is there diversity?
4. What is the function of the Spirit in our water baptism? What does the Spirit do?
5. How might we balance the presentation of baptism in water and the pouring out of the Spirit in our contemporary teaching and baptismal practices?

## **Lesson 9. Disciples Assemble around Word and Table**

Renewed Israel, like ancient Israel, practiced word and table in their assemblies.

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. What is the continuity and discontinuity between Israel's experience of Israel at Mount Sinai and Israel's experience at Mount Zion?
2. When you hear the phrase "apostles' teaching," what sort of teaching do you think the phrase has in mind? What does it mean to teach about the kingdom of God?
3. When you hear the word "fellowship," what does that recall? What was the content of the "fellowship" in Acts 2? How do you define and practice "fellowship" in your congregational life?
4. How is the communal life of Word and Table experienced in your own congregational life? What emphases are present and what are missing?
5. How does the Table embody the Word and how does the Word interpret the Table? How do they give meaning to each other?
6. Reflecting on teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers, which needs more emphasis in your congregational life? Why?

## **Lesson 10. Disciples Eat with Jesus at the Table**

The living Jesus hosts the table in the assembly of renewed Israel.

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. How do you understand "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42? What points in the video were helpful or perhaps unhelpful in understanding this phrase?
2. What is the experience of the disciples at Emmaus and Troas in relation to the Lord's supper? What is the atmosphere or mood of their breaking of bread?
3. How should the resurrection function in our understanding of the meaning of the Lord's supper? Why do we tend to concentrate more on the victim (death) character of the supper than we do the host (resurrection) dimension of the supper?

4. Does your experience of the Lord's supper tend to transform your "Fridays" into "Sundays"? Does it tend to move you from despair to hope? Why or why not?
5. How might we adjust our practice of communion in the assembly to reflect more of the joy of the resurrection than a funeral at the tomb?

### **Lesson 11. God Liberates and Incorporates through Baptism**

Through baptism we participate in the gospel and find our identity in Jesus, God's Messiah.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

1. How does Paul's appeal to baptism answer the question raised in response to Paul's gospel preaching? How is baptism a gospel moment?
2. How does baptism orient us to the nature of salvation as past, present, and future? How does baptism testify that we are saved (dead to sin), being saved (alive to God), and will be saved (resurrection; see Romans 5:10)?
3. How do Romans 6 and Colossians 2 emphasize baptism as God's work rather than our own work? How do they orient us to the priority of the gospel in God's saving work?
4. How does our baptismal identity transcend all other identities we have in the world? Why is this important for the church to embrace today?

### **Lesson 12. Disciples Enjoy God and Each Other through Assembling**

Our assemblies—where God loves us, we love God, and we love each other—participate in the heavenly assembly gathered around God's throne.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

1. How would understanding the "throne room" context of our assemblies change our attitudes toward the assembly? What attitudes should we have given our entrance into the Holy of Holies?
2. What is the purpose of assembling regularly in the presence of God as a community?
3. In what ways does the assembly transcend the limits of space and time? How does the assembly unite us with the past, present, and future?

4. What comfort do you derive from the realization that when we gather as an assembly that we also gather with those who have already died? As we gather today, what does that mean for our communion, fellowship, and worship? How does that re-vision or re-imagine the assembly for you?
5. In what ways do we love God in the assembly, and in what ways does God love us? And how do we love each other?

### **Lesson 13. Disciples Commune with God and Each Other at the Table**

At the Lord's supper, we commune with God and each other as we embody the gospel in our communal practices.

#### *Discussion Questions:*

1. What do you think "covenant meal" means in terms of our lives and commitment? How does this perspective enrich our understanding of the Lord's supper?
2. How is the table of the Lord missional in nature? To what are we committing at the table?
3. Why do we so often experience the Lord's supper as primarily or almost solely with God? And why is this communion with God often characterized as memory or cognitive? Is communion more than what happens in the mind?
4. How does the Lord's supper express unity and community within the church? How does the form in which we observe the supper either enhance or diminish that unity and community?
5. What is the problem in Corinth? Why is there such dysfunction in the assembly surrounding the Lord's supper in Corinth?
6. How can we enhance the horizontal or communal dimension of the supper in our assemblies?
7. What does it mean to eat the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner? What does it mean to "discern" the body of Christ in eating the Lord's supper? How does this shape our practice today?

## Transforming Encounters

### For Further Reading

John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002).

John Mark Hicks, *Enter the Water, Come to the Table: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Bible's Story of New Creation* (Abilene: Leafwood Publishers, 2014).

John Mark Hicks, *Transforming Encounters: Baptism, Assembly, and the Lord's Supper* (Austin: Regnum Media, 2023).

John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God's Transforming Work* (Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood Publishers, 2004).

John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton, and Bobby Valentine, *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter* (Abilene: Leafwood Publishers, 2007).

Allan J. McNicol, *Preparing for Baptism: Becoming Part of the Story of the People of God* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2007).

Allan J. McNicol, *Preparing for the Lord's Supper: Nourishing Spiritual Life through the Lord's Meal* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2007).

Wendell Willis, *When You Come Together: The Theology and Practice of Christian Worship* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2010).