

CONVIVIUM

Excerpts from Chapter 10 – *Making Room for Life*, by Randy Frazee

The Meal

The table is the centerpiece and heart of community. This is an ancient belief – a tradition that has stood the test of time. The “making room for life” vision is an invitation to come to the table, to share a meal and conversation with a circle of family and friends each evening. It is no mistake that Jesus chose the meal as the place where the community remembers his saving work on the cross.

Some call it “the convivium.” Convivium is the Latin word for “feast.” The convivium invites us to feast on whole foods that nourish our body and to feast on the conversation of those who sit around the sacred table of community and thus to nourish our minds and souls. The proponents of the convivium are sometimes known as supporters of the “slow-food movement” for two reasons. First, the food is good for us and worth savoring. Second, and more important, this is the moment we’ve been looking forward to all day. It is the prize, the reward, for a day of hard work. When one’s definition of success is measured in accumulation, then the meal has little value other than to be the fuel to keep us working until we have all the stuff we think we need or until it is paid off. Comedian George Carlin says that under this arrangement “a house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it.” However, when one’s definition of success is conversation, then the meal becomes the end, not merely the means. Discovering the convivium is at the core of trading accumulation and activity for conversation and community as a way of life. With this vision, the house becomes a place of safety, replenishment, and refuge with a cover on it. In simple terms, to miss the meal, or to rush it, can only spell failure.

If we are to make room for life, we must discover the convivium. We must return to a time when food is placed back on the table – and it is worth eating slowly – and where conversation is not rushed.

Food Preparation

One of the keys to a good meal is that it must be wholesome and good for the body. The meal doesn’t have to be elaborate or fancy. If no one in your family knows how to cook a full meal, I would encourage you to see who could pick up this important role. It can certainly be shared. If you have children, it’s important to pass down this art to them so that their families will have access to the convivium in the future. One of the best options, whether you are a gourmet cook or a beginner, may be to share a meal with neighbors. The workload is spread out and the conversation is expanded. You should do this at least once a week, if not twice a week. It’s also great for people who are single, for single parents, and for empty nesters. When only two people are in the house there is a tendency to skip a quality meal or go out to eat regularly.

Setting the Table

Setting the table is not one person’s responsibility but a part of the overall festival of the meal – a family affair, in order words. If you live in a home with a kitchen table and a dining room table, I strongly recommend you have your dinners each night in the dining room. What is set on the table should become a unique mark of each family. You should seek to be creative and build

traditions. After ten years or so, what's on your dinner table will remind your family that you have a history together – even before a single word is spoken.

On Saying Grace

On most nights we simply hold hands, and I offer the grace. On certain nights we will ask a member of the family to do the honors. If we have guests at the table, we always pray for God's blessings on them. If a member of our family is missing from the table, we always pray for their safe return to us. On many nights we observe Communion. We have matzo crackers in the buffet next to the dinner table. At the beginning of the meal I pass around the cracker, and everyone breaks off a piece. A member of the family then says grace but focuses the prayer on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross – the ultimate act of grace on our behalf. At the end of the meal and conversation, I pass around a goblet of wine that sits by my place setting, and every person sitting at the table takes a drink – and so we close the meal focused on the blood of Christ. Saying grace is an absolutely essential part of the Christian convivium.

The Art of Dinner Table Conversation

At its most profound and simplest level, conversation at the dinner table involves each person sharing what happened throughout that day. I believe a significant part of the connection requirement is met when we have a chance each day to share the events of our day, no matter how mundane, with a circle of family and friends who are hanging on each word we say because they genuinely care about our welfare and are interested in our story.

Here's how it works in our family. After we've said grace and the food is on each person's plate, we simply tell about our day. We start with the family member or friend sitting on my left. Each person starts with the time they got up and then chronologically unfold the details. I've been utterly amazed at the value of this simple experience. I remember coming home one day and asking one of my sons to tell me how his day went. He responded back, "Oh, I'm saving it for dinner tonight." After doing this for some time I'm convinced we were created with the need to share our days with a circle of family and friends. Such a simple thing to do, but I believe the long-term results of this kind of conversation lead to relational, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. For this experience to be successful, parents must not use this time to scold or correct a child at the table who is sharing his or her day. To do so will certainly stop the flow of information during future dinners. Adults must not do this to each other either.

The meal is not over until the table is cleared and the kitchen cleaned. This ritual of cleaning does not fall to one person but to everyone who has partaken of the meal. It is a privilege and an extension of the festival. When this is completed, the mealtime is done for the day.

Some of feel like we are a long way from this kind of lifestyle. What can we do to take steps toward this kind of family dinner at the table?

CONVIVIUM – In Small Bites

Our goal may be to experience the Convivium, as described in *Making Room for Life*, in our homes. But right now we may need to take some “small bites” – some baby steps in that direction.

So what can we do? First, pray for a God-honoring schedule and start small. Then try using these guidelines to make the family dinner time run smoothly.

- Sit around a table – facing each other several times a week.
- Begin meals with a prayer. Try ending the mealtime with a prayer as well.
- Perhaps light some candles.
- Turn off the TV for the duration of the meal.
- Do not answer the phone (or text!) during the meal.
- Try to eat mostly the same foods. (Mom and Dad are not short-order cooks.)
- Talk positively about food and be willing to try new things. (“I don’t care for this” rather than “Yuck. I don’t like this.”)
- Stay at the table until everyone is finished and has been excused. (“May I be excused?” is always good manners. To keep little ones at the table after they have finished eating, consider giving them paper to draw on or a picture to color.)
- Inquire about each other’s day, and then listen until that person is finished speaking.
- Everyone is involved in the set-up and clean-up. (Little ones can set the table and carry their plates to the sink. Older ones can be in charge of clean-up.)
- Invite others (friends and family) to the table from time to time and treat them as our honored guests. (This is a great time to teach manners to children.)

Feel free to change or modify as needed except the guideline about TV. It’s not really a meal together if we have our eyes glued to the set and we do not speak to one another.

Do not confuse eating out with family dinners around the table. Eating out as a family is fun, but because it’s public and not private it doesn’t encourage the sharing and communicating that eating at home does. Consider bringing your to-go food home to eat around your table.

Remember, this really can make a difference in the life of your child. Here’s what my six-year-old daughter said the other night at supper during a prayer, “I really love to play outside with Meg and Macie, but my favorite thing is being with my mommy and daddy at supper.” (And no one paid her to say this!!)

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