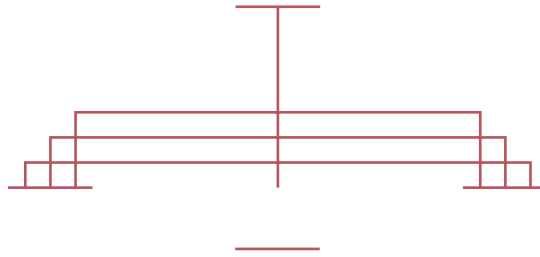




PART 4

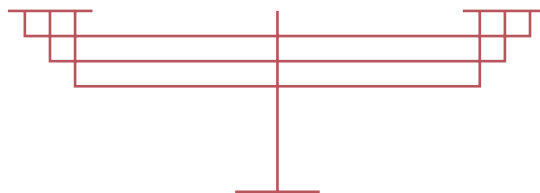
FAMILY MEALS



What are the Christian community's meals for? They achieve many things. They express so much of God's grace. They provide a glimpse of what it's like to live under God's reign. They express and reinforce the community that Christ has created through the cross. They're a foretaste of the new creation. They're a great context in which to invite unbelievers so they encounter the reality of God among us. But they're not "for" any of these things. It's a trick question.

Everything else—creation, redemption, mission—is "for" this: that we might eat together in the presence of God. God created the world so we might eat with him. The food we consume, the table around which we sit, and the companions gathered with us have as their end our communion with one another and with God. The Israelites were redeemed to eat with God on the mountain, and we're redeemed for the great messianic banquet that we anticipate when we eat together as a Christian community. We proclaim Christ in mission so that others might hear the invitation to join the feast.

TIM CHESTER
A Meal with Jesus





PART 4

FAMILY MEALS

Casual gatherings around a common table for the sake of community and gospel hospitality

WHAT IS A FAMILY MEAL?

Real-life conversations happen in real-life situations. Some of the best conversations happen around the dinner table or while we're washing the dishes. For our family meals, we set aside an entire evening to prepare, eat, and clean up a meal together. As we linger over the meal, we listen, talk, and pray. Slowly, over time, we can become friends, and—on a deeper level—family. As we eat a meal together, we have the opportunity to experience true community. Participating in a meal together is a symbol of our fellowship and relationship with one another. If we are willing, we can learn one another's stories, vocations, and passions. Quite simply, we become a spiritual family as we practice the "one anothers" of Scripture.

At Frontline, our community groups typically meet for family meal twice a month, on the first and third week of the month. This gathering centers around the meal—preparing, eating, and cleaning up together as a community. A family meal will look different from one community group to the next. We may spend the evening praying for one another. Sometimes, we may talk about what Jesus is teaching us or what we learned from the most recent sermon. And other times, we may just spend time getting to know one another better. However it looks, we pursue the same purpose: to live out our identity as a spiritual family.

One of the great advantages in gathering this way is that it frees people up to be themselves. You don't have to act a certain way or have a certain knowledge set. You don't need to have listened to a sermon or have a curriculum. Anyone can join in—even an outsider who doesn't know Jesus.

At a family meal, we can invite friends, family, co-workers, and non-believers to meet our group and experience God's grace in a less intimidating setting. In pursuit of the Great Commission, we need other avenues for inviting people to experience Christian community besides simply inviting them to a Sunday worship gathering. While some people might be hesitant to set foot inside a church building, they are more likely to show up at a family meal and experience the love of Jesus. Mission is best carried out in the context of community.

Simply put, we don't grow or go alone.

Family meals afford us a unique opportunity to proclaim the gospel and move out on mission where we live. Whenever someone who doesn't follow Jesus pulls up a chair, our family meals shift to offer hospitality and embrace the outsider. In this way, through the warmth of table fellowship, an appetite for spiritual family may be awakened in those far from God. Our hope is that non-Christians might experience the love Christians have for one another—as followers of Jesus serve and care for each other, people can see gospel community in action. When we share the good news of Jesus with them, they will already have a framework for how the gospel impacts lives and relationships.

We push back darkness better when we push it back together. But that means that our community groups can't just consist of Bible studies and prayer meetings. They must also function as kingdom outposts. As we gather around a common table, we provide a glimpse of the coming kingdom of God. And we invite those far from God to join the feast.

HOW DO WE HAVE A FAMILY MEAL?

A family meal will look different from one community group to the next. What one group does, another may do completely differently—yet hopefully they are pursuing the same purpose. For the family meal, we seek to live out our identity as a spiritual family. While there is not a uniform way to accomplish this goal, here are some practical suggestions:

When should we meet for a family meal?

At Frontline, our community groups typically meet for family meal twice a month, on the first and third week of the month. This helps cut down some of the stress of having a weekly large gathering. Find a day of the week that works best for most people in the group, if at all possible. Pick a time that won't put everyone under a time crunch. For groups that have small kids, be aware of how late your group will meet and have an agreed-upon end-time. But, at the end of the day, no day and time will be ideal for everyone. Use your best judgment, and ask your group to commit to regularly engage this rhythm of community.

How do you plan the meal? For the meal itself, it might work best for one family or person in your community to do the meal planning, but to involve others in the preparation. This cuts down on a lot of the planning and communication that is often necessary to do a potluck-style meal (and also limits the number of leftovers that get left behind). Some community groups may decide to rotate through who is taking point to share the burden over time. As you plan the meal, be aware of any dietary restrictions in your group, or for guests who may be coming. Some easy-to-prepare meals that have worked well for others are homemade individual pizzas, oven-roasted chicken tacos, lasagna and other pasta dishes, or grilling with a variety of salad options. But there are innumerable options that could work equally well.

What does the family meal look like? Again, each community group will look slightly different. But they will all center around preparing a meal together, eating together, and having gospel-centered conversations. When the meal is ready, you might consider gathering in the kitchen and inviting the host family to pray for the meal. At this

point, you may provide some topic of discussion for the dinner. Depending on the dynamics of the group, you may be able to have a more focused conversation, or you may have several smaller informal conversations going on at once. At the end of the evening, consider inviting people to help with clean-up before everyone heads home. Again, the goal of family meal is to gather around a common table for the sake of community, and to live out our identity as a spiritual family. How we accomplish this is flexible and will look different from group to group.

What should we talk about at family meal?

There are a few different options for how to encourage meaningful conversation at a family meal. It is important to ask the question “Who will be there?” We want to be a community where those who aren't yet following Jesus have the opportunity to belong before they believe, and part of that is considering what you talk about.

Discussion could be more informal and focused on what Jesus is teaching us, or on simply getting to know one another better. Often, rather than having a standard Bible study, you can simply ask the question “What was a high and low for you over the past week or two?” This is a great opportunity for those who are believers to speak about God, the gospel, and the Word, and it's also an accessible question for anyone, regardless of their faith, to answer. Other times, we may have a discussion about the most recent sermon. If you do, consider doing it in such a way that anyone can meaningfully participate in the conversation. Summarize what the sermon was about and ask an open-ended question.

Finally, you may dedicate your whole gathering to checking in and praying for one another. Praying together can be a catalyst for deeper community and love for one another. Regardless of the topic, you shouldn't feel pressure to lead the discussion every time. If someone in your group is great at leading discussion, let them do so occasionally. You could still help direct the content and focus of the conversation.



PART 4

FAMILY MEAL PRAYER NIGHT

Family meals can occasionally be dedicated to praying together as a community group. While a prayer gathering can go a number of different directions, one option is to hold a kingdom-focused prayer night geared towards the city. When having a prayer night as a community group, there are a few guidelines for etiquette that are important to communicate to everyone beforehand:

- ***Make room for different prayer postures.*** Whether a person sits, stands, kneels, or raises hands, everyone should seek to engage their hearts as well as their bodies.
- ***Prayer doesn't have to go around in a circle.*** Instead, pray spontaneously as you feel willing. Sometimes, a person may pray multiple times before someone else prays.
- ***As you pray, listen for what the Holy Spirit may be speaking.*** The Holy Spirit often gives words, pictures, and Scriptures to help guide the prayer time. If you sense something, share it and let it guide your prayers.
- ***Don't rush to fill the silence.*** There will be times when everyone engages silently, and that's okay. In these moments, God is often profoundly working.
- ***Pray in everyday language.*** You don't have to polish your prayers or change the tone of your voice when praying.
- ***Ground your prayers in Scripture.*** Don't just let those words inspire you, but fill your prayers with the words of Scripture.
- ***Have an assigned facilitator.*** Typically this will be a community group leader or apprentice who leads through the movements and closes out the time.
- ***Avoid "rock pile" prayers.*** These are prayers where everyone merely tosses disconnected prayers on the pile. Instead work to maintain a unified focus in your prayer together. Introducing a new theme

of prayer every ten to fifteen minutes will help in this regard. As thematic focus begins to drift, it is usually a sign that a particular prayer theme has been sufficiently explored, and it is time for the facilitator to introduce the next theme.

The following outlines an example of a kingdom-focused prayer night, taking roughly ten to fifteen minutes for each movement. For each movement, read the Scripture out loud, then use the prayer points for guidance. When it is time to move on, the facilitator will lead into the next movement.

1. Praying for the Community Group

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. - Acts 2:46-47

Prayer Points:

- Pray for the people in your life who don't follow Jesus, such as your "three."
- Pray for the neighborhood around where you live.
- Pray that the group would love and serve the community well.

2. Praying for the Church

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. - Ephesians 3:8-10

Prayer Points:

- Pray for the church to have a gospel impact in the city.

- Pray for the church to be a light of the gospel in the midst of darkness.

3. *Praying for the City*

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

- Jeremiah 29:7

Prayer Points:

- Pray for workplaces, schools, non-profits, and other places in our city, that they would experience the blessing of God.
- Pray for our local, state, and national government officials.
- Pray for revival and renewal to impact our city.

FAMILY MEALS FAQ

HOW DO WE CARE FOR CHILDREN DURING A FAMILY MEAL?

It is important that the community group makes a joint decision on how to care for children during a family meal. Community groups can connect children to healthy relationships with adults outside their family and provide opportunities to model discipleship for parents who feel ill-equipped to disciple their own children.

Because a family meal allows us to live out our identity as a spiritual family, we should integrate our children into this time, wherever it makes sense. Families are rarely neat and tidy, and children are a part of normal family dynamics. Also, some of our children may be followers of Jesus and called to experience spiritual family as well. But the degree of child involvement will vary depending on age and maturity. One option is to keep them involved in everything you do—from prayer, to eating, to sharing stories—all the way to cleaning up. Another option is to feed the kids separately and allow them to play together, while the adults share a meal of their own and spend time with one another.

There may be times when paying for childcare is optimal for your group. If and when that is the case, please consider the following:

- When planning for child care, use wisdom and discretion. Child care workers, whether paid or volunteer, should be well-vetted. This includes, but is not limited to, obtaining references, performing background checks, setting up clear accountability, and ensuring that the workers are competent.
- Have the group collectively provide finances for vetted childcare. Be sure to pay attention to caregiver/child ratios. Don't overwhelm your caregiver with too many children. If necessary, employ more than one worker.
- For accountability and safety reasons, it is wise to have two adults from two different households

to care for the children while the group meets. Members of your group may rotate on a schedule. Do not allow a child care worker to be alone with a child who is not their own. This is for the worker's safety as much as the child's.

- As an option, you could host child care at one location and gather at another. If the two are geographically close, allow trusted caregivers to provide care at one location while the group meets at the other.

WHAT IF SOMEONE DOMINATES THE CONVERSATION?

Community groups often have one or two people who tend to dominate the conversation with their assertive personalities. And while what they say can often be good or helpful, they don't always create an environment where others feel the freedom, or have the space, to join the conversation. When that is the case, here are some steps you can take to have a more fruitful discussion:

Use your best judgment to assess the situation.

There are moments where it is appropriate and good for someone to share at length about what they are experiencing. Maybe something is weighing heavy on them, or they are going through a tough season. Always ask yourself: "Is it appropriate to set aside extended time to care for this person, or do we need to hear from others?"

Redirect the conversation to encourage others to share. This may look like calling on a specific person to chime in with their thoughts. Or taking a moment to reopen the conversation to everyone. For example, you may say, "John, those are some really great thoughts. I'd love to hear what some others would have to say. Stacy, we haven't heard from you. What are you thinking?"

Take a moment at the beginning of the discussion to encourage those who are hesitant to share.

Some people have a deep fear of sharing their thoughts with a group of people. Others are internal processors and simply need a moment to think about the question. For both groups of people, it is important to communicate that you value what they bring to the conversation. Sometimes, it can be helpful to ask hesitant people if they have anything they would like to share, while also giving them space to say “no.” Recognize that when these people share in a group, it is often an act of courage that should be welcomed and celebrated. It is also important to let people know that silence is okay. Sometimes it takes a minute for people to think, and we don’t have to fill the silence.

If someone continues to dominate the conversation, have a private conversation with that person.

Some people are just not aware that they are dominating the conversation, or how the family meal conversation should flow. First, seek to encourage and bless this person. Thank them for their contributions to the group, recognizing their insights with specificity. Confirm their desire to speak as valuable. Second, point out to them that we want to create an environment where everyone has the opportunity to share in the family meal conversation. Encourage them to continue sharing, but ask them to give space to allow others to speak and contribute. Be sure to give this person an opportunity to respond to what you’ve said and pray with them. Be prepared to have this conversation more than once. Don’t take offense or assume high-handed sin if you have to revisit and remind more than once.

**WHAT IF SOMEONE SAYS
SOMETHING UNBIBLICAL?**

From time to time, you will likely have a group member give a response to a discussion question that is either biblically inaccurate, or even heretical. How should you respond in such instances? Here are some practical steps to consider:

Discern the nature of what is being said. There is a world of difference between being incorrect and being heretical or unbiblical. For instance, someone may simply misunderstand or misapply a passage

in a way it wasn’t intended. If what they say is confirmed in other parts of Scripture, there is no need to heavy-handedly correct them. On the other hand, someone may espouse something that is directly contrary to the Bible’s primary teachings on the person and work of Jesus or our salvation. Such cases require gentle correction.

If they made a minor mistake, avoid immediate correction. Your group should be a safe place to share, and a quick reaction could discourage full participation and willingness among members. In many cases, if what they said was biblical but slightly misapplied, you can let it go. If it feels important for you to address the error, pull them aside privately after the discussion. You can say something along the lines of, “Thank you for engaging the discussion! What you said was good and insightful. But I also think there is another way to look at this passage. I think the context of that particular verse means...”

If they say something that directly contradicts Scripture, gently correct them in the midst of the discussion. It is important to remember that most people are not saying things maliciously. Many times, they have been taught incorrectly, or they have never thought through the implications of that false belief. Depending on the situation, you may just ask the rest of the group their thoughts on the topic. Usually, someone will provide correction in a natural way. The person who originally made the statement will see that they were out of line with biblical truth without feeling singled out. In other situations, you could correct the statement, while also affirming their willingness to participate. You can say something as simple as, “Thank you for your thoughts! I see where you are coming from, but I don’t think that is quite right because of _____. I think a better way to understand this text would be _____.”

If you need to correct someone, follow up with them after the discussion. Pull them aside to once again affirm their willingness to participate and share what they are thinking. Extend an invitation for you both to discuss the topic more thoroughly together. Reaffirm your love and care for them.

WHAT IF SOMEONE IS FREQUENTLY ABSENT OR DISENGAGED?

Taking the time to reach out to someone shows them that they are valued and not just a face in the crowd. Since community is an essential part of a healthy Christian life, we should encourage one another to maintain relationship whenever any of us begin to drift away. Missing one family meal is not usually a big deal. But if someone has missed three family meals with no word, that would definitely constitute a need to reach out. An off-color comment might pique your interest and require a follow-up question. A revelation of need might require action. The occasions for follow-up vary, but they require attentive eyes and ears to notice and act on them.

You can follow up with them through a text, a phone call, or an in-person conversation. The method of communication will depend significantly on the situation. Did someone just miss a single gathering? You could shoot them a text to let them know the group missed them. Has it been a few weeks since you've seen them? It might be good to give them a phone call. Does it feel like someone is in the process of leaving the church? That probably requires a face-to-face interaction. Use your best judgment, and feel free to rely on your hub leader for direction.

Sometimes, a person's lack of attendance settles into a long-term pattern of inconsistency. While this can become frustrating, it is important to have a caring conversation, rather than assume they are apathetic or disgruntled. Our hearts are quicker to assign motives than to seek truth. When you notice this pattern of inconsistency, set aside time to have a conversation and ask them about their absence. Allow them space to share what they are experiencing, and offer to help where appropriate. Let them know that you value them both as a person and as a part of the group.

When having this kind of follow-up conversation with someone who is habitually absent or disengaged, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Be prompt.** Don't wait too long to reach out once you notice the pattern. If you forget to reach out and time passes, push through the awkwardness.

It will mean that much more that you cared enough to make it happen.

- **Make space to listen.** "Seek first to understand before seeking to be understood." Don't make accusations based on assumptions. Rather, listen to them and give room for them to be heard if there is an issue. Ask questions like "I've noticed you've been missing family meal a lot. What is going on in your life?" and "How can I be praying for you and encouraging you during this time?"
- **Maintain a loving tone.** How you say something can often outlast the actual words you say. This is not a conversation to pass judgment, but to actively seek how best to care for them in this season of their life. It should elicit compassion and patient love. Don't forget, they are souls to be cared for.
- **Stress the importance of community.** After listening for an extended period of time, where appropriate, encourage the individual with truths from God's Word about the importance of community and commitment (Matt. 22:37-40; Heb. 3:12-13; 10:23-25).
- **Know when to stop.** Do your part to communicate what they need to hear. There is no need to coerce them or badger them into engaging more. If they seem unreceptive after you have communicated your concerns, let the conversation breathe and give them time to process and consider what has been shared.
- **Be patient.** Give them time to adjust after the conversation. Trust the Lord to move and work. Encourage them where it seems they are taking more initiative and showing up more.
- **Fill in your hub leader.** It is important to let your hub leader know about care issues going on in your group. If you have concerns about someone's attendance, or if you need to have one of these follow-up conversations, contact your hub leader and allow them to speak into the situation.

