

ED YOUNG

THE TABLE



THE TABLE

CASTING THE VISION
FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

SMALL GROUP STUDIES

CONTENTS

Week 1	Introduction	7
	Devotionals	14
Week 2	What's Cooking? Part 1	25
	Devotionals	30
Week 3	What's Cooking? Part 2	41
	Devotionals	46
Week 4	The Two-Fold Purpose	57
	Devotionals	64
Week 5	The Chairs	75
	Devotionals	82
Week 6	Putting the Pieces Together	93
	Devotionals	98
LEADER'S GUIDE		
Week 1	Introduction	109
Week 2	What's Cooking? Part 1	115
Week 3	What's Cooking? Part 2	121
Week 4	The Two-Fold Purpose	127
Week 5	The Chairs	133
Week 6	Putting the Pieces Together	139

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Small Groups are a vital part of how we do ministry at Fellowship Church just as they are in many churches around the world. There are a number of different theories on how small groups should work and they are all great in different ways. The book you are holding is written with our model in mind. So take a minute to read the following explanation, then feel free to adapt as necessary.

Each of our small groups practices a three part agenda in every meeting. That agenda includes a social time, a discussion time, and a prayer time. Each of these elements share equal importance, but not necessarily equal time. To help you get the most out of this book we have included an explanation of each of the parts.

The first element of every small group meeting should be a time of socializing. This phase of the meeting should about 30% of your time together. Welcome everyone as they arrive at the host home, make visitors feel welcome by introducing yourself and showing genuine interest in them. Enjoy some snacks, or if your group prefers, a meal together. Then move on with second part of the meeting, the lesson.

The lesson itself may take as much as 50% of your group's meeting time, but remember it is not the most important element. You may want to start this phase of your meeting with a short "icebreaker" to get everyone talking. The questions in the "Start it Up" section of each chapter are what we refer to as "level the playing field" questions that everyone should be able to participate in, regardless of their level of spiritual maturity or Bible knowledge. As your group moves through the "Talk it Up" section in each chapter, remember that it is more important to finish on time than to finish each and every question. It is okay to skip some to be sure you allow enough time to take care of the third phase of the small group time: "Lift it Up."

The "Lift it Up" section is a vital part of every small group meeting and should be about 20% of the meeting. During this time you will be able to share with the group what God is doing in your life as well as asking the group to support you in specific prayers. To help focus this time there are one or two questions at the end of each study that will prompt prayers based on the material you have just talked about. There is also a space for you to write down your prayer request(s) so you don't forget them and so you can communicate them clearly when it is your turn. Below that is a place to write down the prayer requests of the people in your group so you can remember and pray for each request throughout the week.

As an additional tool to assist you in your journey of spiritual development there is a "Step it Up" section at the end of each session. This section consists of five devotional thoughts that reinforce the lesson you've just completed and are designed to help you develop a regular quiet time with God. To get the absolute most from this study I challenge you to take five or ten minutes a day to read and apply these devotionals to your life. If your group meets twice a month or bi-weekly, choose five of the intervening days to incorporate these thoughts into your devotional life.

THE TABLE

One summer my wife and I took a day trip to the world's largest flea market in a little town called Canton, Texas. It was a trip that is hard to describe. I watched in amazement as thousands of shopping fanatics frantically pushed their shopping carts from shop to shop trying to find the deal of a lifetime. It was like sitting on the front row at some obscure Olympic competition.



After two or three long hours on the quest for the ultimate flea market find, Lisa was gracious enough to say, "Honey, let's break for some lunch." Grateful for the reprieve, I accepted her offer and we headed off for the food court.

We bought a couple of chicken sandwiches and sat down to eat at one of the tables. After a few minutes, Lisa looked over my shoulder and said, "Ed, look!" I expected her to point out a rare piece of art or a bargain that we had somehow missed. But as I turned around, I noticed an employee of the restaurant carrying a tray of samples. Normally, a restaurant would hand out samples to potential customers. But this girl was weaving in and out of the picnic tables handing out samples to those of us who were already stuffing our faces with these same chicken sandwiches!

Lisa said, "That's hilarious. I mean, all she has to do is walk out about fifteen feet and offer the samples to people who haven't eaten yet." But she was obviously content to feed the already fed.

And that's when it hit me. I said, "Lisa, that's it! That is the local church in a nutshell."

The church has the greatest meal out there. Jesus said in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty again."

But for far too long we've been content weaving in and out of the church aisles handing out samples to the already fed, and we have missed the countless opportunities to offer the bread of life to a lost and dying world.

Christ is the ultimate carbohydrate, the only One capable of satisfying the deep spiritual hunger and thirst we all experience. And over the next twelve weeks, we're going to learn just how to present that meal, the bread of life, in ways that will attract others to "The Table."

This is hard-hitting stuff. I'm not going to pull any punches. But by creatively and intentionally reaching out to feed others the ultimate carbohydrate, you will also discover that your own spiritual hunger is satisfied by Christ.



WEEK ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE TABLE

START IT UP

When was the last time you bit into a perfectly flavored, cooked to perfection, choice cut of meat? When was the last time you sampled a dessert that was the perfect balance of each ingredient, culminating in an intense taste experience? Is your mouth starting to water as you remember the texture and flavor?

The food is important, but it takes more than just a prime recipe to make a memorable dining experience. Along with the right food, you must have the right environment. The environment might be an open field with a setting sun in the background, or a dimly lit table in the cozy corner of a café. The environment is essential in the ultimate dining experience. And what about the guest list? The perfect food and environment can be quickly ruined by the wrong guests.

As a group, dream up the ultimate dining experience. What food, environment and guest list would create an over-the-top dining dream?

This exercise might pique your interest about the ultimate dining dream. But is it just that: a dream? Does such an experience really exist? This series explores that question by examining the ultimate dining experience as designed by God. God desires to feed everyone with his dining design, and the best part is that you play a crucial role.

TALK IT UP

Did you know God designed the ultimate dining experience? God considered your needs, as well as the obstacles of the real life, and came up with the perfect solution. The food of this meal brings satisfaction like no other. The environment is carefully crafted to provide just the right elements to entice and engage every audience. The guest list is diverse and interesting, bringing a mix of people from all social situations. Best yet, you are personally invited to this dining experience, and you can bring as many guests with you as you wish.

By now you must be at least a little curious about this dining experience. After all, this experience was designed by the God who knows you more deeply and intimately than anyone else. He knows the secret needs of your heart—the ones you don't even realize you have.

Describe how has God satisfied a specific need in your life?

God wants to continue satisfying specific needs in your life and in the lives of those around you. And it all starts with the ultimate meal that provides satisfaction for all.

THE MEAL

The heart of Dallas' music scene is an area called Deep Ellum. It is an artsy, cool, hip place. And Deep Ellum is home to an incredible restaurant called The Green Room. It is unique, with eclectic art work and a strange ambiance—strange in a good way. The menu is not thick, but the food is four-star quality. The Green Room owners know that to be successful, you don't need to offer a huge variety; you just need to serve the food with excellence and creativity.

God's ultimate dining experience is the same way. He doesn't serve us a variety of different items half-heartedly; He just serves the right thing in the perfect way... the bread of life.

Read John 6:35

Why do you think Jesus described himself as the bread of life?

If you have made a decision to follow Christ, how has his food satisfied hungers in your life that were not satisfied before?

What do you think are some obstacles standing in the way of more people tasting the bread of life?

God knew there would be some major obstacles in the way of getting this meal to all his creation. Because of this, he designed the ultimate place to serve the bread of life—an environment that would welcome anyone hungering for a satisfaction that will not fade.

THE TABLE

God knew when the word got out about the ultimate food, there would be millions wanting to taste this cosmic carbohydrate. God's perfect environment, his "Table," is not limited by a particular place. The Table translates into every culture and class of people. The idea behind it is simple, but the possibilities are endless.

The Table represents the local church. It has a divine design that allows the bread of life to be displayed in a way that others will be drawn. The Table is open, so space is not limited. The brilliance of the Table can be seen in its two-fold purpose: to serve seekers and nourish believers.

How have you seen Fellowship accomplishing the two-fold purpose of serving seekers and building believers at the Table?

At the Table, the pastor is the dude with the food. He serves up the bread of life. But all those at the Table are not just waiting for the food. In God's design, it is the job of everyone to help serve the meal at His Table.

Read 1 John 3:1

Based on these verses and others in the New Testament, the message is that anyone who believes in Jesus is part of the family. We see that the Christ-followers are responsible for not only eating at the table, but serving as well.

What are some ways that Christ-followers serve at the Table each week?

Now that the meal and the environment have been mentioned, there is only one component left.

THE GUEST LIST

The right guest list is crucial to the ultimate meal. The interesting thing is that the guest list really depends on the purpose of the occasion. For example, a formal dinner followed by a night at the opera may be an enjoyable evening for some people. And ordering pizza and watching a movie on a big screen TV might be more to the liking of others.

Remember the two-fold purpose of the Table: to serve seekers and to build believers. Based on the purpose of the Table, describe what the guest list of the Table should look like.

God's invitation to the Table is for everyone. God wants a diverse guest list at the Table. In fact, a healthy Table will consist of thirds. One third will be mature believers who have believed in Christ and been growing for a while. One third will be baby believers who have recently accepted Christ and are beginning to grow. Finally, one third will be seekers who have not yet stepped across the line of faith in Christ.

How do the thirds at the Table help fulfill God's two-fold mission for his church of serving seekers and building believers?

LIFT IT UP

The ultimate dining experience is an incredible opportunity for all of us to enjoy. God has invited you to the Table to feast on the bread of life.

How does it make you feel to realize God has invited you to the ultimate dining experience?

If you are new to the Table, it might be a little overwhelming to think the one and only God wants to dine with you. If you will keep coming to the Table, you will find the God who can overwhelm you can also make you feel right at home. If you are a Christ-follower, you have a responsibility beyond just eating at the Table. While the privilege to be at the Table is great, so is the responsibility for each family member around the Table. God wants you to fully understand what is going on at the Table so that you can participate in the excitement of everything He has to offer in the ultimate dining experience.

Prayer Requests:

Notes:

STEP IT UP

Take a step further over the next few days and spend some time reflecting on the following devotional thoughts that reinforce the previous session. Use these as reminders to take what you've learned and apply it to your everyday life.

DAY 1

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. -- 1 John 3:1

Do you remember the story of Annie? She is the little red headed orphan that desperately desires a family. She lives in an orphanage of abuse and neglect when Daddy Warbucks rescues her. Daddy Warbucks is a rich bachelor with a home and possessions beyond Annie's imagination. By the end of the story, Annie has the family she has always imagined and riches beyond her wildest dream.

There is a little bit of Annie in all of us. Every person has the desire to belong to something similar to a family. The desire to be loved and to have a unique bond with a group of individuals is in every one. God knows that desire and has answered it in the form of a relationship with him. God is the ultimate Daddy Warbucks with riches beyond compare and a love that is unrivaled. When you accept a relationship with him through Jesus, you instantly become a part of the family.

Being in God's family is an experience without equal. There are not the dysfunctions of so many other families. Holiday celebrations are not accompanied by the usual moments of misery present in so many other families. Have you stopped to consider how good it is to be a part of the family of God?

Spend time considering the greatness of being in God's family. Thank him for opportunity he has given you. Ask for wisdom in how to represent the family well.

Notes:

Prayer Requests:

DAY 2

They all ate and were satisfied, -- Mark 6:42

Think back to the last time you were truly hungry. It is a unique feeling of emptiness and desire. It can be frustrating at times, and debilitating in extreme circumstances. The gnawing of a hungry stomach can easily distract you from the moment and shift your focus. On the other hand, the feeling of a full stomach is a great feeling after you have experienced hunger. Not the feeling of an overstuffed stomach, but that feeling of eating just the right amount of the right thing.

When Jesus fed the people, their hunger changed to a feeling of satisfaction. What Jesus did with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish thousands of years ago is still happening today. He is not dividing the crowds into groups and having them once again sit in the grassy field. He is not stuck simply satisfying stomachs. Jesus is satisfying some of the most intense hungers known to man.

The hunger for love is being fed by Jesus' ultimate act of love. The hunger for a healthy self-esteem is being satisfied as people find their purpose and value in Christ. The hunger for direction in life is quenched. Hunger after hunger is brought to Jesus and he meets them. He will continue to do this for all who come to him.

How has God satisfied your hungers of the past? Have you brought your hungers to God lately? What hunger do you need to allow God to satisfy?

Notes:

Prayer Requests:

DAY 3

Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. -- Genesis 22:7-8

God promised and Abraham waited... and waited. God promised Abraham a family that would become a great nation. This nation would be God's people and represent God to the world. The nations would be blessed through the offspring of Abraham. All of this was incredible except for one thing, Abraham had no children.

Abraham waited on God to provide the child that would lead to the fulfillment of God's promise. Finally, God provided Abraham with a son named Isaac. All the waiting had been worth it. All the doubt was removed. The answer to so many questions was now walking with Abraham to answer one of the greatest questions of Abraham's life. Would Abraham trust God?

God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, the son that was waited for, the fulfillment of God's promise. God was not asking for another \$10 in the offering plate. God was asking for Abraham's son. Abraham was on his way to give God his son. Isaac's question about the lamb for the burnt offering has new meaning in light of what was going on.

Abraham's trust also has new meaning. Abraham trusted God to provide... and God did. Do you trust God to provide for your needs? Do you allow God to have control of providing for you even when it is hard... really hard... Abraham and Isaac hard?

Consider your needs. Do you trust God to provide for you?

Notes:

Prayer Requests:

DAY 4

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, " 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. -- Matthew 19:16-22

"So close yet so far away" is an accurate phrase for this story. The man had tracked down Jesus and was now standing close enough to see him. He got the opportunity to have a conversation with the Son of God. This man was standing within feet of Jesus. As close as the man got to Jesus, it was not close enough. There was an obstacle between the man and Jesus that proximity could not cross.

The man was wealthy. His piles of plush possessions became an obstacle in a relationship with Jesus. The man could not get over his possessions. Jesus stood on one side and the man stood on the other side refusing to cross over to Jesus. This still happens today. Some people stand behind the obstacle of their own pride. Others stand behind the obstacle of bad church experiences. Obstacles come in many shapes and sizes. All of them can be dangerous if not dealt with.

What do you think are common obstacles that keep more of your friends from having a relationship with God? What could you do to help you friends overcome those obstacles?

Notes:

Prayer Requests:

DAY 5

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. “Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. -- Matthew 22:1-8

There is a popular show on television where extravagant parties are thrown in honor of particular teenagers. These teenagers are allowed to invite whomever they desire to their parties. Invitations to these parties quickly become coveted prizes due to the exclusivity of the event. There are hurt feelings, angry attitudes and dishonest counterfeiting happening at the door as individuals vie for a place in the party.

Some churches share characteristics with those teenage parties. The church is a big event where only the popular are invited. Many desire to come to church, but there is a feeling of exclusivity. The problem is the church was never intended to be exclusive. The parable told by Jesus emphasizes God’s desire to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The members of the church play a significant role in this. While we communicate that Christ is the only way to heaven, we also welcome people from all backgrounds into the doors of the church to hear his message of hope and forgiveness.

Are you including others in your church? How does your lifestyle answer this question? What do your words communicate about your efforts to include others in the church?

Notes:

Prayer Requests:



CREATIVE NOTES

ICEBREAKERS

Idea – Six Course Meal

SNACK – For the duration of the study, serve six different “courses” for the snack time.

- Week 1 – Appetizers
- Week 2 – Soups
- Week 3 – Salads
- Week 4 – Entrees
- Week 5 – Desserts
- Week 6 – Fruit and Cheese Trays

Idea – Q&A

DISCUSSION – Ask a question that will engage the group and provide a natural lead-in to the rest of your discussion. Those questions might be something like:

- What is your favorite restaurant for ambiance?
- If you could dine with anyone, who would it be and why?
- Name a restaurant you go to because they make a dish better than any other place.
- Name something that has ruined a dining experience for you.
- What are some things that would be on your list for a good dining experience?

BRIDGE – This series explores the topic of the Table by examining the ultimate dining experience as designed by God. God desires to feed everyone with his dining design and you play a crucial role.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES*Activity – “Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”*

GUIDELINES/INSTRUCTIONS – Have several group members role play a nice dining experience and bad dining experience.

BRIDGE – God considered your needs as well as the obstacles of real life and came up with a solution. His food brings satisfaction like no other. His environment is carefully crafted to provide just the right elements to entice and engage every audience. The guest list is diverse and interesting, bringing a mix of people from all social situations. Best yet, you are invited to this dining experience and you can bring a guest, or two, or as many as you can bring with you.

Activity – “I can’t, I have to wash my hair that night...”

GUIDELINES/INSTRUCTIONS – Break into small groups. Give each group a set of magazines and have them make a poster of obstacles that get in the way of people going to church.

BRIDGE – God knew there would be obstacles in getting the ultimate meal to everyone. Because of this, he designed the ultimate environment to serve the bread of life to those hungering for a satisfaction that will not fade.

Activity – “Let them eat cake...”

GUIDELINES/INSTRUCTIONS – Have a cake on a table in the middle of the group. Ask, “Can the table give you cake? How can we get a piece of the cake?” (Note: Do this during the environment lesson)

BRIDGE – At the Table, the pastor is the dude with the food. He serves up the bread of life, but all those at the Table are not supposed to just eat and remain still. It is the job of the family to not only eat, but also to help serve the guests at the Table.

Activity – Bake Bread

GUIDELINES/INSTRUCTIONS – Have bread dough ready when members arrive. Let each person make their own design or shape. The bread can be baked during the lesson then enjoyed as a snack afterwards, or given as a “take home.”

BRIDGE – God knew when the word got out about the ultimate food, there would be millions wanting to taste the cosmic carbohydrate. He has tailor made the word to reach each and every life, just as we have specifically designed our personal bread.

VISUAL REINFORCEMENTS

- Have copies of menus and nutritional information from restaurant websites.
- Have building blocks and serving utensils to represent building believers and serving seekers.
- Try a food theme for a formal dinner and let everyone sit around a big table for the lesson.
- Set a table with crystal, china and candles – leaders set the table.
- Bring a bottle of “Superfood™” (made by Odwalla®) to represent the cosmic carbohydrate.
- Print off copies of different volunteer positions at your church. Encourage members to volunteer.
- Have Volunteer Applications available at your small group meeting as well as information on any classes your church has to help people discover their spiritual gifts and where they can best serve.

POSSIBLE MEDIA REINFORCEMENTS

- Play a scene of Bob eating dinner in the movie “What About Bob?” (Chapter 9 in the movie at 49:30)

TAKE HOME OBJECT (Reminders of the lesson)

- Volunteer Applications
- Serving utensils (can get inexpensive ones from a dollar store)
- Bake miniature loaves of bread for everyone with a “Bread of Life” ribbon or wrapper

MISCELLANEOUS

- Send out invitations to the “Dinner Party”
- Send a small group meeting reminder designed as a menu

LEADER’S NOTES**How has God satisfied a specific need in your life?**

God meets the needs of both believers and non-believers. On a very general basis, God provides the sun and rain that feed the plants. Homes, cars and other possessions are ultimately provided by God. So, the question about God providing is not about “if” it is much more about being aware of “how” God provides.

If individuals are struggling with thinking of how God has met a need, help them by encouraging them to think about their basic needs. Once they have identified basic

needs, help them consider how each need is satisfied. Show them how God has acted in their lives to provide for them, maybe without their even realizing it.

Why do you think Jesus described himself as the bread of life?

The “bread of life” term comes from an ongoing conversation Jesus is having with this particular group of followers. Shortly before his description, Jesus fed a crowd of 5000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. This crowd followed Jesus, so he took the opportunity to teach them.

In John 6:25-29, Jesus told the crowd they were only looking for more food. Jesus then encouraged them to work for eternal food. In doing this, Jesus began to reveal his role as the Messiah which greatly interested the crowd. Jesus let them know he was sent from God.

In verses 30-33, the conversation changes so Jesus could prove he was from God. The crowd brings up how God provided manna in the desert for those following Moses. The crowd even quotes Nehemiah 9:15, describing the manna as “bread from heaven.” Jesus explained to them it was not Moses who provided the bread, but God. And, Jesus explained, God wanted to provide them with true bread.

When the crowd asked for the true bread, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” This comment carries several implications. First, it is part of several “I AM” statements Jesus made showing his divinity by using the name God used to introduce himself to Moses. Second, Jesus uses bread to describe how he had been provided by God to meet their needs. Finally, Jesus is showing them that if they come to him, he will satisfy their desires on an ongoing basis.

How has the bread of life satisfied hungers in your life that were not satisfied before?

Jesus has a way of satisfying hungers that seemed impossible to satisfy. The apostle Paul knew this and described it in Philippians 4:11, “... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” With Jesus, the insatiable greed for money can be fulfilled righteously by Jesus for the first time. Physical lusts can be transformed and satisfied like never before. The list goes on and on, but the important part is that all is possible through a relationship with God.

What do you think are some obstacles standing in the way of more people tasting the bread of life?

There are many answers, but there are a few that will be the most common in your discussion. Priorities are a huge obstacle. It is not that some lack the desire to taste the bread of life, but when it comes to actually eating the bread, there are too many things higher on the ladder of priorities.

Previous experiences with “church” people can also be a common obstacle. Unfortunately, some of the loudest individuals identified with the church are commonly the worst representatives. Oftentimes their beliefs are unusual, and their lifestyles make it difficult to be around them.

Finally, there is the duo of doubt and/or fear. When you stop to think about the belief in a man who claimed to be God, who died on the cross, but lives today, it is difficult to swallow. It is scary to think about giving the steering wheel of your life to somebody who can be so difficult to believe in.

There will be many different answers. Do not feel like you have to solve the obstacles mentioned. Some of the obstacles have been present for years, and they will only be overcome by the work of the Holy Spirit.

What are ways the family serves at the Table on a weekly basis?

Serving at the Table is not reserved for public positions only. The pastors and the worship leaders definitely serve at the Table, but it takes many more each week. Servants at the Table provide help that ranges from those serving groups of babies, children, students and adults, to those behind the scenes twisting knobs and turning dials. All of the volunteer positions contribute to serving at the Table because they all help the bread of life get to those who need it.

Remember the two-fold purpose of the Table: to build believers and to serve seekers. Based on the purpose of the Table, describe what the guest list of the table should look like.

If the purpose is two-fold, the guest list should be two-fold as well. There should be a group who believe in Christ and what the Bible teaches. These individuals range from brand new believers to those who have believed for a long time. There should also be a group who do not believe. The church is a great place to explore the truth. If a non-believer cannot come to the church to get truth, where are they going to get truth? If the church is following Jesus’ model, it should have both believers and non-believers.

How do the thirds being present at the Table prove that the church is fulfilling the two-fold purpose of building believers and serving seekers?

If the groups are doing what they should be doing, all three groups will naturally develop. If all the believers are inviting seekers, there will be a healthy amount of seekers coming to explore the truth in your church. If the seekers are being taught the truth, they will eventually cross the line of Christianity and become new believers. As they grow in their faith, they will ultimately transition from the baby stage of belief into a stage of maturity. When all these are happening in a healthy balance, the thirds will develop.