

Table Fellowship of God's People

BY TODD D. STILL

“Let us break bread together on our knees,” says the spiritual, inviting us to the table fellowship of God’s people. As we explore what common meals have meant to the Jewish people and the church of God, we discover how table fellowship can mold us in faithfulness.

The primary reason we gather for a meal is to take nourishment, and given the grisly reality of starvation and malnutrition that continues to plague the human race, this should not be quickly dismissed as a trite truism. Famine, war, poverty, and the inequitable distribution of food prevent many people from having the nourishment they need to survive, much less to flourish. Yet, even though the main reason we gather round a table is to satiate our appetites and, if possible, delight in the fare on offer, other factors prompt us to share a meal.

“Let us break bread together on our knees,” says the spiritual, inviting us to the table fellowship of God’s people. Beyond caloric intake and creaturely comfort, why have the faithful gathered at tables, and what have these common meals meant to the Jewish people and the “church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31-32)? As we explore what prompted our predecessors in the faith to sup together, we’ll discover how table fellowship can mold our communities of faith.

THE PASSOVER

Festivals were part and parcel of Israel’s life together as God’s covenanted people.¹ No sacred celebration on biblical Israel’s calendar, however, was more cherished and pivotal than the Passover. In time the people linked the Passover with the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread and

transformed it, along with the Festival of Weeks (or, Pentecost) and Festival of Tabernacles, into a pilgrimage holiday. Passover afforded Israel a protracted opportunity each spring to commemorate and celebrate Yahweh's delivery of his people from Egyptian captivity. In Jesus' day, throngs of Diaspora Jews—estimates run as high as 100,000 Passover pilgrims—would join with Judeans at the Temple to worship and offer sacrifices to God, who was their “help in ages past” and “hope for years to come” (to borrow the words of Isaac Watts' hymn).

At the center of the Passover celebration is a shared meal. Scripture records its rationale and a brief description of the menu of roasted lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs (Exodus 12-13; cf. Numbers 9:1-14 and Deuteronomy 16:1-8). While the specifics of and explanations for the meal developed over the years, especially during the century after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 (see in particular *Mishnah Pesahim*), the Passover meal continues to play an integral role in the life of the Jewish people.

JESUS AT AND AS THE PASSOVER

According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus' parents attended the Passover festival every year. Luke highlights Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old, presumably the age when he was expected to become religiously responsible (2:41-51). Perhaps Jesus journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem for this festival often during his adolescence and early adult years (note John 2:13; 6:4). His final trip to the holy city occurred near the time of the Passover (see Luke 22:1; cf. Mark 14:1; Matthew 26:2; John 11:55).

Before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples (Mark 14:12-31; Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 22:1-23; John 13:1-30).² The Synoptic Gospels explicitly refer to this supper as a Passover meal (Mark 14:12, 16; Matthew 26:17-19; Luke 22:8, 15), though they do not mention the preparation of a lamb. Furthermore, they report that during the meal Jesus compared the shared loaf with his body and the shared cup with his blood. These significant variations signal that the supper Jesus shared with his disciples on the night of his betrayal was different in kind from the Passover meals that were shared at other Jewish tables. The fact that this meal, which we call “the Last Supper,” is the model for the Lord's Supper in the earliest churches suggests that Jesus' first followers considered his instructions to the twelve during their final meal to be especially valuable and readily applicable to all would-be disciples (note especially 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

When the early Christians reflected on the significance of the Last Supper and its host, they reached penetrating insights about Christ and the church. For example, when writing to the Corinthian congregation regarding its need for moral purity, Paul christianizes aspects of the Passover meal. The apostle proclaims the Christians in Corinth to be “unleavened”

people who should be leading “unleavened [lives of] sincerity and truth,” and he bases this breathtaking metaphor on the sacrificial death of Christ, “our paschal [Passover] lamb” (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Other passages—John 1:27, 36; 1 Peter 1:19; and the Book of Revelation (twenty-eight times)—liken Jesus to a slaughtered paschal lamb. John’s Gospel explicitly links Jesus’ crucifixion to the Jewish day of Preparation, the day on which, beginning at noon, the Passover lambs were slain at the Temple (19:14-16).³ This suggests that John construed Jesus’ death as a type of paschal sacrifice (19:36).

We may note that Paul, with a display of interpretive chutzpah not uncommon among the rabbis of his time, links the Lord’s Supper to the Exodus event remembered in the Passover. The manna and water that the Israelites miraculously received from God in the wilderness, Paul says, was spiritual food and drink from Christ, “the spiritual rock that followed” the wandering people of God (1 Corinthians 10:1-4). With this typological reading, Paul is intimating that the ancient Israelites participated in a kind of Lord’s Supper. Be that as it may (and this is Paul’s point to the Corinthians), their ingestion of spiritual food and drink did not shield them from the consequences of their sinful behavior (10:6-13).⁴

This ostensible connection between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper continued to be fertile theological ground for Christians beyond the New Testament period. In his Pashal Homily (*Peri Pascha*), which is the oldest known Christian Easter

sermon, Bishop Melito of Sardis explores the link with these remarkable metaphors: “For this one [Jesus Christ], who was led away as a lamb, and who was sacrificed as a sheep, by himself delivered us from servitude to the world as from the land of Egypt, and released us from bondage to the devil as from the hand

of Pharaoh, and sealed our souls by his own spirit, and the members of our bodies by his own blood” (*Peri Pascha*, 68).⁵

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WHAT, WHERE, AND WITH WHOM TO EAT

Table fellowship became a flashpoint within the early Christian communities. Certain Jewish religious authorities looked askance at the meal-time company of Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 9:10-11; Luke 15:2), and their failure to follow ritual washing practices (Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-41).

Jesus' detractors called him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19; cf. Luke 5:30; 19:7). At a later time, Peter was forced to examine whether it was permissible for Jewish Christians to eat Gentile food with Gentile people in Gentile space (Acts 10:1-11:18). Whereas men of "the circumcision faction" in Jerusalem viewed Peter's decision to eat with Cornelius and his household as dangerously progressive, Paul regarded Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentiles in Antioch at the arrival of "certain men from James" to be harmfully conservative. Indeed, Paul believed Peter's conservatism was fueled by cowardice and insincerity, and that the pillar apostle's tactical adjustments at the dining table compromised the very "truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:11-14).

Paul's acceptance of table fellowship with Gentiles, which would have been scandalous to the vast majority of Jews, surely was very rare among Jewish Christians outside of the Pauline mission. Furthermore, other Christians' guarded position with respect to "idol foods" (Acts 15:29; Revelation 2:14, 20) was not fully embraced by Paul. He does not appear to share the dietary scruples of his fellow Jews. Basing his view, in part, on Psalm 24:1 ("the earth and its fullness are the Lord's"), Paul instructs the Corinthians, a congregation comprised of Jews as well as Gentiles (see 1 Corinthians 7:18), that they may "eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience" (1 Corinthians 10:25-26). Similarly, he states his conviction to the believers in Rome that nothing (i.e., no foodstuff) is unclean in and of itself (14:14a). For Paul, "the kingdom of God is not [about] food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

Why did Paul embrace this comparatively radical stance vis-à-vis food and table fellowship? He was convinced that a new day had dawned in Christ (see, e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 1:4; 3:23; 4:4-5) and, as a result, the traditional Jewish boundary lines needed to be redrawn and well-established Jewish beliefs needed to be reconfigured. He promoted the ideal that there was neither Jew nor Greek in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Gentiles, therefore, could be full-fledged members of the people of God without adhering to Jewish customs such as circumcision and, more central to our present concerns, dietary laws.

Although Paul was adamant that Jewish Christians not add the "works of the law" to his Gentile converts' faith (Galatians 3-4), he also warned those with no dietary scruples against spiritually running roughshod over the "weaker" members in a congregation. When writing to the Roman believers, Paul insists that a "weaker" brother or sister who is a vegetarian be welcomed and not despised by a Christian who is a carnivore (14:1-3). More pointedly, Paul calls the "strong" not to allow their dietary liberty to "cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died" (14:15). On the contrary,

members of the Christian community, like their Lord, should bear with, please, and edify one another (15:1-3).

SULLYING THE SUPPER IN CORINTH

Paul probably wrote the letter to the Roman church from Corinth around A.D. 57. In a letter written to Corinth from Ephesus a few years earlier, he said more about how believers should relate to one another with respect to food, specifically "food offered to idols" (1 Corinthians 8-10). Paul implores some Corinthian believers who continued to dine in temples for idol sacrifice—much to the detriment or even destruction of fellow Christians—to seek the good of others and not themselves (10:24). A commitment to serve and to please his neighbor characterized Paul's ministry. He did not pursue his own advantage, but sought to benefit others so that they might be won to faith (9:19-23; 10:33).

Paul recalls the experiences of the Israelites whom God brought out of Egyptian captivity: the vast majority of them succumbed to idolatry and, as a result, never entered the land flowing with milk and honey (10:5). He warns the "strong" Corinthian Christians, who think themselves knowledgeable, to be careful lest they stumble (10:12). The spiritually confident Christians, who eat and drink freely in the sacred space of other deities without a worry, must shun idolatry (10:14). As Paul makes his case that it is both spiritually prudent and morally responsible to forego altogether dining in the temple of an idol, he highlights the inherent incompatibility between partaking of food and drink at the "table of demons" (i.e., those sinister, malevolent spirits that stimulate and sustain idolatrous worship) and eating and drinking at the table of the Lord (10:21). To ignore commitments conveyed by and inculcated through table fellowship, Paul maintains, compromises the Christian community and incites divine jealousy (10:22).

Paul repeatedly chides these arrogant Corinthians not only for their brazen overconfidence in their own spiritual strength and stamina, but also for their

reckless disregard for the well-being of fellow believers. Their egocentric attitude of entitlement threatened to rend the church asunder. In addition to their careless stance toward temple dining, the spiritually cocky Corinthians were exercising their 'freedom' in law courts (6:1-8), brothels (6:16), and, rather predictably, within the congregation of believers. They were "hijacking" the church's worship gatherings with protracted ecstatic utter-

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ances (1 Corinthians 14) and turning the Lord's Supper into a humiliating, divisive laughingstock.

Their divisions at the Lord's Supper were a microcosm of their fractured, dysfunctional fellowship. If properly celebrated, the Supper would foster the assembly's unity as a body of believers: "Because there is one bread," Paul reminds them, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (10:17). But their sharing of the single loaf and one cup had become farcical. The Corinthian church partook of the Lord's Supper in conjunction with a full meal—a potluck dinner, if you will. While in theory this was a positive practice, in Corinth it merely compounded the community's discord. Ironically, their coming together was tearing the assembly down, not building it up; their worship gatherings were not for the better but for the worse (11:17).

Instead of sharing their food, some church members were eating and drinking in excess, while other believers were left wanting and without. This humiliating treatment of fellow believers, Paul exclaims, denigrates the church of God (11:18-22). Their feast had run so afoul, he contends, that they are no longer eating the Lord's Supper (11:20). The apostle is clearly alarmed by the Corinthians' distortion of the tradition regarding the Supper that he had received from the Lord and subsequently entrusted to them (11:23 ff.). He refuses to commend the congregation at this juncture in the letter, for they were profaning the Supper by not honoring and receiving one another (11:17; contrast 11:2). The proclamation of the Lord's death through the Supper was being upstaged by their slurred speech and growling stomachs (11:21)! In addition to instructing the Corinthians to come together for fellowship rather than food orgies, Paul cautions that their behavior at the Lord's Supper is literally a matter of life and death—physically and spiritually, individually and collectively (11:27-34). It is hard to imagine how the apostle could have taken Christian communion more seriously than he does in this epistle.⁶

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we've all too often mimicked the Corinthians' divisions and neglected the apostle's admonitions regarding the Supper. Rather than being a sacred, unifying event, our observance of the Lord's Supper sparks theological controversy and spawns denominational acrimony.⁷ We become so preoccupied with describing the precise relationship between the body and blood of Christ to the bread and cup, or determining who is worthy to administer and receive the Supper, that we rend the bond of unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:11, 21). Nonetheless, we would do well to continue hoping that our Lord, working in and through those who seek to follow him, may gather the pieces of our fractured table fellowship—even as the fragments of the loaves and fishes were gathered after his feeding miracles—so that nothing and no one will be lost.

"Until he comes" we are "to proclaim the Lord's death" in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:26), and when Christ comes, we will share in "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9). Then and there, Passover pilgrims will embrace the Passover lamb at the Passover feast, which is presently foreshadowed, albeit imperfectly, by "the *communion* of saints."

Recently, at a luncheon where Baptists and Jews shared in table fellowship and theological dialog, I recalled Paul's prayer: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6). With this benediction the apostle concludes his instructions on eating and drinking. Here he captures the hope to which we are called, and the love that our table fellowship should embody.

NOTES

1 For an overview, see Carl E. Armerding, "Festivals and Feasts," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 300-13.

2 On the relation of this meal to Passover, see I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980); Barry D. Smith, *Jesus' Last Passover Meal* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993); and Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "'Not by Bread Alone...': The Ritualization of Food and Table Talk in the Passover *Seder* and in the Last Supper," *Semeia* 86 (2001): 165-91.

3 On the chronological conundrum this creates vis-à-vis the Synoptic Gospels, see Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, 66-75.

4 I've been helped on this puzzling passage by E. Earle Ellis, "A Note on 1 Cor 10:4," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1957): 53-56.

5 Quoted in Gerald F. Hawthorne, "Melito of Sardis," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 731-733. For an English translation of the sermon, see S. G. Hall, *Melito of Sardis, On Pascha and Fragments: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

6 For thoughtful and useful suggestions on how congregations today might do the same, see John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), especially 215-259.

7 Justo L. González reviews the controversies in *A History of Christian Thought: From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century*, vol. 3, revised (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), especially 167-172. My tradition's wrangling over the Lord's Supper is told in Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003).



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