

The title of my talk is “Table Fellowship and the Eucharist: Or What Early Christians Can Teach Us about Breaking Bread in the Twenty-First Century.” Clearly, I took the topic for today’s symposium rather literally. In fact, when I first heard about this event, my mind immediately went to holiday dinners with my extended family in the South. Religion may or may not come up; we’re all Christian, but I’m the lone Anglican among Southern Baptists, so there are a few theological differences. And when it comes to politics, let’s just say we’ve learned to avoid stepping in that minefield for the sake of getting along. But then I started thinking about other table settings, such as first dates, where you wonder how soon you can quiz the person across from you on religion, politics, sex, and that fourth horseman of taboo dinner topics: money. I also have a variety of friends, and our conversations are usually determined by what we have in common, rather than not. In short, all dinners require some amount of social navigation. But what if there’s a middle ground, where love and respect are able to flourish alongside hard conversations and debate? As a theologian, I am compelled to ask if, aside from the oft-cited, sometimes-practiced “Love your neighbor as yourself” commandment, there is anything in scripture and early Christian practice that can help show us a better way, especially in these divisive times.

To begin exploring that question, it’s important to understand the role that meals played in the ancient world. From the first Passover depicted in the Book of Exodus to Shabbat dinners, meals are obviously important to Judaism; but they were also significant in Greco-Roman society. Many people belonged to what we would call in English “associations,” which were a vital form of social belonging. Meals were so central to these associations that they were essentially banquet clubs, with members expected to pay dues and follow certain etiquette. People would spend hours eating and drinking while discussing and debating topics such as philosophy and religion: think of the philosophers’ speeches in Plato’s *Symposium*, or imagine a Rabbi and his disciples examining

Torah. Rather than sitting around a table, they reclined, even as they ate and drank. The Mishnah, a third century Jewish text that may reflect tradition from centuries earlier, specifically mentions reclining as a requirement in the Passover liturgy. Perhaps this is why the Gospel of John describes the disciple that Jesus loved reclining against his Lord's breast.

So, let's turn to Jesus. In contrast to his ascetic forerunner John the Baptist, the Gospels portray Jesus of Nazareth as a man who enjoyed a good meal, and often with scandalous company—in Matthew 11:19, Jesus himself acknowledged that his opponents called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” What's unique here is not that Jesus attended banquets and used them as a teaching opportunity, but that in dining with outcasts and the marginalized, he broke the social boundary markers that meals symbolized in the ancient world. Following what anthropologists call “commensality”—so, tabling as a model, or map, of hierarchy in a society—John Dominic Crossan calls Jesus's table practice “open commensality,” a “nondiscriminating table depicting in miniature a nondiscriminating society.”

Naturally, as a Christian, I can't talk about Jesus and tables without mentioning the Last Supper and institution of the Eucharist—the Body and Blood of our Lord in the matter of bread and wine. At his final Passover celebration, Jesus played the role of the servant by washing his disciples' feet. Then, as the Gospel of Luke emphasizes, he took the bread, blessed, broke, and gave. Crossan points out that the verbs “took” and “blessed” are actions of the master; but “broke” and “gave” are actions of the servant, *or* of the female host who would typically prepare and serve meals. Thus, Jesus, their Rabbi, played the role of the servant and the woman. *This* is what Jesus's open commensality, his table fellowship, looked like. This is also how the two disciples on the road to Emmaus finally realized they were in the presence of the resurrected Christ—the moment Jesus took the bread, blessed, broke, and gave.

According to Bernard Cooke, early Christians understood the link between ancient Jewish temple liturgies, in which peace offerings were celebrated as a sacred meal between God and God's people, and the Eucharist. Furthermore, just as Jesus followed in the footsteps of great Jewish prophets condemning empty ritual performed by those who exploit the poor and the powerless, early Christians viewed the Eucharist as not only a sacrifice or gift between Christ and his people, but also as a meal of reconciliation, of peace. It's not for nothing that Paul criticizes those Corinthians who begin to partake of the meal that proceeds the Eucharist *before* everyone has arrived—in other words, not waiting for the poor and the enslaved, who would show up hours later and find nothing left for them. There's also Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he insists that no discrimination is allowed within the Body of Christ. As N. T. Wright puts it, "all full members of God's people, thus released from the power of sin and death, belong at the same table." These meals—shared by Christ-confessing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, enslaved and free persons—is when real community formation for Christians began.

Ultimately, not only is the central act of Christian worship a meal, but one could argue that, in many ways, Christianity began around a table—is perhaps even best *practiced* around tables. But sadly, evening communal meals would all but disappear as a major Christian practice after just a few centuries. Only in the last hundred years or so have theologians and ethicists sought to retrieve this history and concept of table fellowship, to focus on the Eucharist as an ethical model instead of just debating the metaphysics of it. But is full retrieval even possible in the twenty-first century—and in the U.S., for that matter? Hal Taussig points out that similar to Hellenistic associations, houses of worship in the U.S. are still the most prominent spaces to provide regular, non-commercialized meetings of a plurality of people. I'll pose some discussion questions about that in a moment, but I hope that all of you here today, whether you're Christian or not, have found

inspiration in Jesus's open commensality and the radical table fellowship of the early Christians. As we continue to break bread with those similar and dissimilar to us, those we agree and disagree with, may we seek to always include and empower others, to serve and give, like Jesus.

Discussion questions:

1. To any Christians in the audience: what are some ways we could bring radical table fellowship to our church communities—or how are you seeing this already done?
2. For those belonging to another religion or culture: what are your perspectives on table fellowship—and what can your traditions teach us?

References / Recommended Reading:

Cooke, Bernard J., with Bruce T. Morrill. *The Essential Writings of Bernard Cooke: A Narrative Theology of Church, Sacrament, and Ministry*. New York: Paulist Press, 2016.

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Vearncombe, Erin, Brandon Scott, and Hal Taussig. *After Jesus, Before Christianity*. The Western Christianity Seminar. New York: HarperOne, 2021.

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