

Biblical Perspectives on Fellowship Meals

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I

In modern times, especially in America, we have all but lost the Biblical perspective of sharing meals together. We've come to look at eating together merely in its social and physical context. That is, the only purposes we see are to fill our bellies, satisfy our taste buds and enjoy a social gathering where we joke and laugh and talk about current events, business or the weather. Many have come to think of meals as merely an earthly activity with no spiritual significance. I used to think this myself, until my eyes were opened to what the Bible teaches about sharing meals together in a spiritual context. I would like to share some thoughts with you along these lines. I ask only that you keep an open mind and examine what the Bible has to say about it. If you will stick with me, I believe you will be blessed by the "feast" of teaching that the Bible offers on this subject.

Old Testament History of Fellowship Meals

First, let's notice the importance that covenant meals played in ancient times. There are many examples. In Gen 26:28-30, Isaac makes a water-rights covenant with the Philistine king Abimelech. The covenant brought union, fellowship and peace between former enemies. Immediately following the making of the covenant, they "made them a feast and they ate and drank." (vs. 30) The feast was a celebration of the covenant, symbolizing the newfound peace between them—it was a fellowship meal. We see the same thing in Gen 31:44-54 between Laban and Jacob. After making a covenant together and offering a sacrifice to seal their covenant, Jacob "called his kinsmen to the meal," clearly to celebrate the covenant. We see similar examples of covenant meals between Jethro and Moses (Ex 18:12—eaten "before God"), between Israel and Gibeon (Josh 9:12-15), and between David and Abner (2 Sam 3:20). This all gives new meaning, perhaps, to David's words in Psalms 23: "You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies." The "table" represents peace, union, fellowship, and reconciliation.

The most significant example of a covenant meal, however, is in Exodus 24, at the climax of the sealing of the covenant between God and Israel. After Moses offered the sacrifice, sealing the covenant with the "blood of the covenant", he and the elders and Aaron and his sons went into the presence of God on the mountain where they "beheld God and they ate and drank." (Exo 24:11). If we aren't careful, we might miss the significance of the words "and they ate and drank." This was a very important part of the covenant process. It was a celebration of the new union between Israel and God, a union established by the blood of the covenant (i.e. by sacrifice). The sacrifice provided the reconciliation; the sharing of the meal celebrated the fellowship or communion between man and God. It was a *spiritual* feast.

We see this same concept in the Levitical sacrifices outlined in the Law of Moses. The various sacrifices were to be eaten by the priests, (Ex 29:31-34; Lev 6:16, 26; 7:6; 8:31; 10:12-14) or, in the case of the peace offerings, by the worshipper (Lev 7:15-18) as a holy meal "before God." In fact, these "meals" were essential, not to be neglected. (Lev 10:16-20) They weren't designed to simply fill their bellies, but to celebrate the union between man and God, a union made possible by sacrifice. They were joyous occasions—not solemn and quiet, but interactive and celebratory. The sacrifice was a time of solemn and perhaps even somber reflection. The

meal that followed however, was a time of fellowship, celebration, praise, and rejoicing, though certainly with dignity.

The Significance of Fellowship Meals

While it is true that we have nearly lost the Biblical understanding of fellowship meals in our modern society, there is one fellowship meal that many of us have regularly participated in throughout most of our lives, i.e. the family dinner. Traditionally in America, the evening dinner hour is a time for the whole family to gather around the table together and share a meal (sadly even this is going by the wayside). But it is more than a meal. It's not simply about the food. It is about sharing our lives together each day. The meal provides an opportunity for fellowship. After everyone is scattered about throughout the day, we come back together around the table to reconnect, and in a sense, you might say, to celebrate our relationship. During Thanksgiving we do the same but in a bigger way. The Chinese have a dinner tradition in which they all eat from the same plates placed at the center of the table, usually on a Lazy-Susan. This wonderful tradition makes the sharing even more intimate. All this touches on the concept of a fellowship meal. It goes beyond food; it goes beyond the mere physical. It is a sharing of our common, and even our spiritual relationship.

Let's now get back to our Biblical study. The fellowship meal is very common throughout the pages of the Bible. As previously mentioned, most of the sacrifices ordained in the Law of Moses were followed by a meal celebrating the union brought about by the sacrifice. The "peace offerings" (Lev 7:15) and "votive offerings" (Lev 7:16-17) especially emphasized the fellowship meal. The peace offering was to be partially burned, partially eaten by the priest and the rest eaten by the worshipper on that day or by the next day. It was a meal, with meat, bread and drink (Lev 7:11-14; Num 6:17; 15:1-12). It is a safe assumption that since the peace offering had to be eaten the same day and the votive offering by the second day that this was taken home and shared with others. One does not eat a young bull by himself. It was a communal act involving God, the priests, the worshipper, and their families and friends. Nearly all other offerings (burnt offerings, sin offerings, etc.) had peace offerings associated with them, and thus the communal fellowship meal. These meals had deep significance. They were not simply for the purpose of satisfying hunger. Nor were they simply social in purpose. They were for celebrating one's common relationship in and union with God. They were eaten "before the Lord your God." (Deut 12:7, 18; 14:23, 26; 15:20; 27:7; cf. Exod 18:12)

There is one very special meal in the OT that combines the concepts of a covenant meal and a family fellowship meal—the Passover Feast. This greatest of all the OT Jewish meals or feasts was a celebration not only of the great deliverance of the Jews out of Egypt, but of their newfound relationship with God. The Passover Lamb was a sacrifice representing their deliverance from death. The family was gathered together and the lamb eaten in a fellowship meal with deep spiritual significance. It was celebratory, joyful, interactive, and done in the presence of God.

Purpose of Fellowship Meals

The purpose, mood and manner in which the Passover was eaten should be instructive for us, since the NT counterpart to the Passover meal is the Lord's Supper—a fellowship meal instituted by Jesus during the Passover meal. The Lord's Supper is not only a fellowship meal (1 Cor

10:16-17; 11:17-34), but is also a covenant meal not unlike the one we read about in Exod 24:11. In fact, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he used the very language of Exodus 24 in regard to the "blood of the covenant." (Matt 26:28 cf. Exod 24:8). Jesus further connected the Lord's Supper to the ancient covenant meal tradition when he stated that he would partake of it with us, for the covenant meals were eaten in the very presence of God (Exod 24:11; 18:12). Like the covenant and fellowship meals going back Abraham's time, the Lord's Supper is the joyful celebration of the fellowship made possible by the sacrifice. One cannot really understand the true meaning and manner of the Lord's Supper apart from the long history of such celebratory meals. When you look at the Passover, for example, (keeping in mind that the Lord's Supper is the counterpart to it) it raises questions about our modern concept of the Lord's Supper and the manner in which we partake of it. For example, should the Lord's Supper be a formal, ritualistic, solemn, somber, and almost sad observance, with each person silently isolated in their own thoughts? Was it that way when Jesus instituted it even as the apostles partook in the shadow of the cross? (cf. Lk 22:23) Is there anything in the entire NT suggesting that it ought to be partaken in this manner? Were there any fellowship meals partaken of in such a manner in the OT? Was the Passover itself eaten in such a way?

I am not suggesting that there are not solemn moments to such an observance. But what is the overall mood meant to be? Again, the Passover feast is very instructive to us. A seven-day feast followed it. Have you ever been to a feast that was solemn and somber? (Except perhaps a wake, and even these are more lively and joyful than our modern concept of the Lord's Supper.) Sorrow and mourning is accompanied by fasting, while eating and feasting is an expression of joy and celebration. (Ezra 8:10-12; Lk 9:33-34) The Feast of Tabernacles and Feast of Weeks were celebrated with great rejoicing. (Dt 16:11, 14) So was the Passover. (2 Chron 30:23-26) Here we see they had so much joy that they continued for a *second* week of feasting. This joyful, *interactive* mood of the Passover is confirmed by the Mishna, which speaks of the Passover as a time to "give thanks, to praise, to glorify, to honor, to exalt, to extol, and to bless him..." It was not a funeral dirge. It was a celebration. Shouldn't this say something about the mood and the way in which we ought to partake of the Lord's Supper? Just think about it. Is it possible we have turned the Lord's Supper into more of a ritual than a celebratory fellowship meal? Is there anything in the Bible to suggest that we're to eat the Lord's Supper in the isolation of our thoughts rather than in interactive fellowship and communion?

A Ritual or A Sharing?

Is there anything in the Bible to suggest that the Lord's Supper is meant to be a ritual in which we partake of a tiny sample of bread and juice as we sit silently in the isolation of our own thoughts? Or is the Lord's Supper meant to be an interactive meal shared in joyful and mutual celebration with the Lord and with one another? And when I say "meal," I mean a true meal, a supper in the fullest sense of the word. As my daughter likes to say, "It's the Lord's supper, not the Lord's sample." What does the Bible teach?

So far we have seen that there is a consistent pattern, beginning in the days of Abraham and continuing through the time of Jesus, of covenant/fellowship meals shared in by God's people in celebration of covenants made or of reconciliation gained through sacrifices. These were full meals. They had theological significance, but were meals nonetheless. They were interactive, not individual. They were joyful, not somber and silent. The Passover is a good example. It was very interactive and joyful. This is seen both in Jewish accounts of the Passover meals and

in the Biblical account of the "Last Supper" during which Jesus "instituted" the Lord's supper (Lk 22:14-38; Jn 13-16). There was much discussion going on between Jesus and his apostles at this supper. Wouldn't the first Lord's Supper be a model for those to follow? In fact, Jesus didn't exactly institute something wholly new here, but rather promised to continue what they were doing, though with new significance and meaning. Notice carefully what Jesus said:

"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." (Lk 22:15-16)

What will he never again eat until it is fulfilled in the kingdom? The Passover. That is what he says. And he is implying that he will again eat it, i.e. the Passover, with them in the kingdom. The Lord's supper is the NT Passover. Don't misunderstand. The parallels between the two meals don't match in every detail, but the Lord's supper is the *continuation* of the Passover feast. Obviously, the lamb is no longer needed, since Jesus is our Passover Lamb. The meaning and significance has changed somewhat. Instead of Jews celebrating protection from the death of their firstborn and deliverance from Egyptian bondage, Christians celebrate deliverance from death and bondage due to sin. But it is still a meal to be shared in interactive celebration. It is not a ritual, but a meal of theological significance. It is a *supper* which we *eat* (1 Cor 11:20). It is done *together*, not *alone*, in celebration not in self-condemnation. When and where was this changed into a ritual that could not in any sense of the term be called a 'supper'? There is nothing in the Bible to suggest such a change.

The Lord's supper cannot be understood apart from the hundreds of biblical examples of covenant meals and fellowship meals, including (and especially) the Passover feast. These form the pattern upon which it is based. Jesus directly connected the Lord's Supper to the OT covenant meal (such as the one in Exodus 24) and to the fellowship meal called the Passover. These were joyous, interactive, celebratory, fellowship meals. Is this how we eat the Lord's supper today?

A Sharing In Christ

For the past few years I have become increasingly convinced that there is something amiss in the way we do the Lord's Supper. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I knew we were too individualistic, too ritualistic and too formalistic in our tradition. A couple of years ago I did a study dealing with covenant/fellowship meals of the Bible and how these relate to certain views about eating together as a form of Biblical fellowship. However, at the time I had not made the connection to the Lord's Supper. A recent book by John Mark Hicks, titled [Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper](#), has filled in the gaps for me.¹ I highly recommend you read this book if you are interested in studying this subject in greater depth. Just be ready to have your thinking challenged.

Hicks confirmed my suspicions about the Lord's Supper and showed its direct connection to the covenant/fellowship meals I had learned about in my own studies. Further, Hicks does a great job of showing what it means to "break bread" with Jesus. In chapters 4 and 5 of his book, using the Gospel of Luke, Hicks masterfully describes how "table fellowship" was a focal point of Jesus' ministry. Luke records no less than ten meals that Jesus shares with people. These were not simply meals for the sake of filling one's belly or for social recreation, but were

¹ Leafwood Publishers, 2002

fellowship meals with theological or spiritual significance. And it is in these meals that Luke defines what it means to "break bread" with the Lord. The "Last Supper" (Luke 22) is sort of the climax. But it is not really "the Last Supper." Here Jesus promises to continue to "break bread" with his disciples in the kingdom. (vss. 16, 18) Furthermore, he says he will not do so with them again until he does so in the kingdom. Lo and behold, after His resurrection, we then see Jesus "breaking bread" with his disciples. (Luke 24:28-35) Jesus even acts as host. (vs. 30) And it is in this very breaking of bread that Jesus is revealed to them (vs. 30-31, 35). Could this be a preview of the Lord's supper that he would share with us in the kingdom that was just about to be established?

Once the kingdom was fully established in Acts 2, what do we find the disciples doing? Immediately, Luke once again emphasizes the breaking of bread. (Acts 2:42-46) In the context of fellowship, Luke includes "breaking bread" as a very central and important aspect of the relationship among Christians within a congregation. We must let the author define what he means by "breaking bread." He doesn't define it in Acts 2 but expects his readers to already know what it means. Where did he define it? In his Gospel. (Lk 9:16; 22:19; 24:30) These are instructive.

"Breaking bread," as defined by Luke's examples in his Gospel, is never a solemn, silent, individualistic ritual administered to you by some cleric (or by the men of the congregation). Nowhere in the Bible do we find it to be so. Rather, like the meals Jesus shared in throughout his ministry, "breaking bread" (the Lord's supper) is a celebratory, interactive fellowship meal with the Lord. The bread of the meal represents his body. The wine (or grape juice) of the meal represents his blood. The supper as a whole is the experience of fellowship we gratefully and joyously share with the Lord and with one another. Pretty radical thinking for many of us. But think about it: Have the past 1,800 years of human-devised religious tradition turned church (and especially the Lord's supper) into something the apostles would hardly recognize?

Summary

So far we have noticed the consistent Biblical pattern of fellowship meals shared in by God's people. These meals were not rituals, yet they carried deep theological or spiritual significance. They were meant to celebrate and reconfirm our covenant relationship with God and with one another. They were joyful and interactive, not solemn, sad and silent. Now, as I began this series, I was not sure where I was going to take all this. There are two directions it leads to.

First, there is the idea that Christians should be sharing meals together as a form of fellowship. This was a central part of the "one another" relationship in the Lord's church. (Acts 2:42-46; 6:1-6)

Secondly however, there is a connection to the Lord's supper as *THE* ultimate fellowship/covenant meal of the Bible. It is in this latter area that I have concentrated these articles. If we isolate the Lord's supper from its biblical roots of fellowship/covenant meals, we fail to recognize not only the mode and manner in which it was eaten, but its very meaning. What we have done with the Lord's supper, historically, is change it from a *supper* to a *ritual*. We are not "eating" (1 Cor 11:20, 33) a "supper" at a "table" (1 Cor 10:21) in fellowship with one another. (1 Cor 1:16-21; 11:17-34) Rather, we "observe" or "partake of" in silent isolation, a ritual administered in tiny samples by a cleric or an authority-figure of the congregation. These "holy elements" are contained in fancy gold or silver containers setting on an "altar." This is not a "supper" in any sense of the word. Unfortunately, as any modern dictionary will explain, our

modern way of "observing" the "Lord's Supper" is indeed a ritual in the fullest sense of the word. Even the language we use, such as "observe" the Lord's supper rather than "eat" it. We *observe* rituals. We *eat* suppers.

As already stated, the Lord's supper was meant to be a supper in the fullest sense of the word. Some may ask however, if it should be taken in conjunction with a common meal. I have purposely not addressed that issue. I chose instead to focus on the mood (celebratory or sad), manner (ritualistic or more of a true meal), mode (interactive or silent and isolated) and meaning of the Lord's supper. Whether or not it is to be eaten in conjunction with a fuller meal has been an issue stretching back to the 1st Century. Can one simply "break bread" as a supper in our modern culture today? Possibly (see Lk 22:29-31, 35). More importantly, to "break bread" (the exact phrase used in Acts 2:42 and 20:7 to describe the supper) meant to share a meal, as defined by Luke in his Gospel. And this fits with the Bible as a whole.

Commentaries and scholars are unanimous that the first century church ate the Lord's supper in conjunction with a fuller meal called the *agape* (love) feast (cf. Jude 12). However, the problems seen in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 11:17-34) arose out of an abuse of this meal. Church history from the late 1st and early 2nd centuries records widespread abuse of the love feast, where it was eventually dropped by the church. The abuse that Paul deals with in 1 Cor 11 was their failure to "wait for one another" and to share. They were violating the very meaning of the Lord's supper in terms of the fellowship. They were isolating themselves and each eating their own fill before others even arrived.

There are two questions I'd like you to think about: (1) What exactly was Paul condemning or forbidding in this passage? Was it the fact that they were eating this in conjunction with a fuller meal or was it that they were ignoring the needs of one another? (2) When we eat the Lord's supper in isolation of our own thoughts today, with no interaction, isn't the end result somewhat the same as in 1 Cor 11? In other words, nullifying the very *fellowship* it was intended to celebrate? And here's a third question to consider: Is it possible that by turning the Lord's supper into a ritual we have removed nearly every Biblical element from it? The table, the supper, the eating, the fellowship and even the rejoicing?

Just something to think about.