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# Lord’s Supper and Hospitality

NAOMI WALTERS

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Since the time of my “adult believer’s baptism” at the mature age of nine, I have participated in the Lord’s Supper in a number of different ways. I have eaten communion as an actual meal including meat and dessert with house churches in both Texas and Australia, I have knelt at altar rails and communed by intinction at mainline churches in New Jersey and London, and I have shared leavened bread and actual wine with smaller groups of ministers in Michigan and Tennessee.

But most often—more times than I can count—I have passed stale, saltless crackers in silver trays and even staler sips of grape juice in plastic cups down a pew in an auditorium whose ceiling is shaped like an upside-down boat. My primary experience of the Lord’s Supper is linked to Jesus’ last supper with his disciples (Matt 26.17–30; Mark 14.12–26; Luke 22.7–39); we do it because Jesus says to do it. The Lord’s Supper table reads, “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” But, whether I was explicitly told to do this or I simply implicitly picked it up, I most often took the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of my sins over the past week. I learned to “[e]xamine myself, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup” lest I “eat and drink judgment on myself” (1 Cor 11.28–29).

These four passages—the three synoptic gospel accounts of the Last Supper and Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 11—are the only texts I remember hearing during “Communion Thoughts” growing up. But I have since come to wonder: How might the experience of the Lord’s Supper in Churches of Christ be different if we considered biblical texts beyond the Last Supper as instructive for our practice? This paper will present a brief overview of a number of texts from both the Old and New Testaments and, from that overview, argue that hospitality is a central theme of Eucharistic practice, a theme that is missed when only the Last Supper is considered.

## **Lord’s Supper: More Than Just the Last Supper**

Some scholars and practitioners argue that it is only Jesus’ last supper with his disciples that is instructive for Christian practice of the Lord’s Supper. However, there are a few good reasons to consider the Lord’s Supper not as a singular event, but as one example among several of hospitable practice at mealtimes.

From a literary perspective, we should remember that, writing forty years after Jesus’ life, the gospel authors already knew the “end” of the story—that Jesus would share a meal with his disciples the night before he died—and they would have had that meal in mind each time they recorded Jesus at any other meal. Moreover, they were writing their gospel accounts for churches, so they also already knew that the Lord’s Supper would become a central part of Christian life together. They would have written with their ongoing experience of the Lord’s Supper in communities of faith in mind.

From a theological perspective, we might also consider what it means to do something “in memory of” someone else. At the Last Supper, Jesus commanded: “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” Even in secular practice, when something is done “in memory of” another person, it is not necessarily in memory of their death, but rather in honor of their entire life. Similarly, Jesus’ words do not mean that the Lord’s Supper should be done only in memory of the moment of institution, but in memory of all the meals and moments he and the disciples had shared.

If we can move beyond an approach to Scripture that simply seeks to find either a pattern or explicit instructions for the Lord's Supper, we will find that "our cups runneth over" with material that can enhance our understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper. Specifically, this paper will trace the ways that the theme of hospitality intertwines with meals throughout the biblical narrative, from Genesis to Revelation.<sup>1</sup> The word *trace* is used intentionally; drawing a fully detailed picture will be impossible, since whole books could be (and have been) written on many of the following texts and themes.

One final preliminary remains: a definition of *hospitality*. The Greek word, *philoxenos*, is a compound of the word for *love* (*phileo*) and the word for *foreigner* or *stranger* (*xenos*). So, etymologically the word for *hospitality* is connected to the word for *love*, but specifically *love of the stranger*.<sup>2</sup> As a form of love, it is giving and sacrificial, and with its attention to the stranger, it is continually extended outward. So, we will use "love of stranger" or "gracious provision for the other" as a working definition of *hospitality*.

### Hospitality and Meals in the Bible: A Whirlwind Tour

We now turn to an overview of biblical texts that display the twin themes of hospitality and table, beginning with God's role as host—first, of Israel (and through Israel, "the nations"); second, as epitomized in Jesus; and ultimately, at the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19.9). Following that, we will consider Jesus' role as host and guest, focusing on the gospel of Luke.

#### The Hospitality of God

The hospitality of God begins with the very fact of creation as an act of God's gracious provision for the other. Hospitality, or hosting, is essential to the biblical depiction of God, making dependence, or "being hosted," just as essential to humanity. This dependence on God's hospitality recurs throughout Genesis and Exodus as God provides for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; sets apart their descendants to become the people of Israel; liberates Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod 12);<sup>3</sup> preserves them with manna and quail in the desert (Exod 16); and provides them a home in the land of Canaan.

This gracious hospitality of God toward Israel serves as the theological foundation for Israel's extension of hospitality toward others. As a constant refrain throughout the Torah, Israel hears: "*You shall also love the stranger; for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt*" (Deut 10.19).<sup>4</sup> This reminder that they were once strangers seeks to motivate Israel toward hospitality on two fronts: first, empathy toward the stranger because Israel knows how the stranger feels and, second, gratitude toward God, without whom they would be strangers in Egypt still.

Of course, the hospitality of God is epitomized by the giving of God's very self in Jesus. Jesus, as the embodied hospitality of God, fulfills his role as host throughout his life, but also powerfully in his death. In this sacrifice, Jesus' body and blood are given for us as food for the journey—a connection Jesus himself makes in the Last

1 "Offers of food or a meal together are central to almost all biblical stories of hospitality, to most historical discussions of hospitality, and to almost every contemporary practice of hospitality. In the context of shared meals, Jesus frequently challenged the prevailing religious and cultural boundaries by the company he kept and exposed the hidden patterns of social exclusion. He was a guest in the home of tax collectors, dined with sinners, and taught hosts to welcome those most likely to be excluded. Many of the early church's struggles over recognition and inclusion surfaced in the context of eating together." Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 73.

2 In contrast to love of family, friend, neighbor, or so on. In Hebrews 13:1–2a *philoxenos* is contrasted explicitly with "love of brother" (*philadelphia*): "Let mutual love (*philadelphia*) continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality (*philoxenos*) to strangers."

3 This particular act of hospitality has been commemorated through the Passover meal throughout Israel's history, continuing still today. Much has been said regarding the connections between the Last Supper meal that Jesus shared with his disciples and Israel's Passover meal. This is well beyond the scope and intent of this paper, though those interested will find a good starting point in Joachim Jeremias' *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1966), esp. 42–61. Jeremias lists a number of parallels between the gospel accounts of the Last Supper and a Jewish Passover. For our purposes, the focus is on God's role as host in the Last Supper and the Passover meals, rather than specific connections between the practices of those two meals.

4 See also Exod 22.21; 23:9; Lev 19:34.

Supper. So, just as Israel's practice of hospitality found its basis in their experience of God's hospitality, Christian hospitality finds its fundamental motivation in our experience of God's hospitality in Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, God will serve as host at the "marriage supper of the Lamb," a meal that is also intended for the nations or "for all peoples." This feast was promised in the prophets,<sup>6</sup> prayed for throughout the Psalms,<sup>7</sup> foreshadowed in the gospels, and envisioned in Revelation.<sup>8</sup> All biblical meals in which strangers are hosted as friends provide a taste of the kingdom banquet that God will host at the end of time.

### Welcoming the Stranger: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

We now examine a few such biblical meals in the life of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. The themes of hospitality, meals, guests, and hosts are central to the theological matrix of the Gospel of Luke.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with there being no room at the inn (Luke 2.6–7), Luke records Jesus on the road, experiencing both rejection and hospitality, often over meals.<sup>10</sup> Compared with the other gospels, much of Luke's original material involves food,<sup>11</sup> and much of the teaching material he has in common with the synoptic gospels he uniquely sets in the context of a meal.<sup>12</sup>

The most alarming characteristic of Jesus' eating and drinking in Luke is that he is constantly eating with the wrong people. In his role as guest, Jesus frequently eats with tax collectors and sinners (5.29–32; 19.1–10). Even when Jesus is the guest at the table of a Pharisee, he welcomes sinners, allowing them to touch him, which scandalizes his hosts (7.36–50). Jesus embodies his role as host in a radically inclusive manner (9.10–17), inviting all the wrong people—even compelling or coercing the crippled, blind, and lame to attend a party somewhat against their will (14.12–24).<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' habit of eating with the wrong people extends even to the Last Supper, when Jesus shares a meal with Judas who will betray him, with disciples who still need to be reminded not to seek positions of power, and with Peter who will deny him. In the Last Supper, the connection between meals and hospitality as gracious provision is made clear: Jesus not only breaks bread with sinners, but he becomes bread for sinners.<sup>14</sup>

But of course, the Last Supper is inaccurately named, because in Luke Jesus shares another meal with his disciples after his resurrection. In a story unique to Luke, Jesus' disciples offer a meal to a man who they think is a stranger, but turns out to be the resurrected Jesus (24.13–35). The disciples extended hospitality and in so doing, Jesus was "made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24.35).<sup>15</sup>

5 "The practice of Christian hospitality is always located within the larger picture of Jesus' sacrificial welcome to all who come to him." Pohl, 17.

6 "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast . . . of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear," Isaiah 25.6; see also Amos 9.12–15; Joel 3.18; 2.24–26; Jeremiah 31.1–6.

7 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," Psalm 23.5; see also 63.5; 107.9.

8 "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more . . . for [the Lamb] will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes," Rev 7.16–17.

9 In fact, these intertwining themes are found throughout the two-volume work of Luke-Acts, though for the sake of space, our conversation here is limited to Luke. But see Acts 2.42, 37–47; 6.1–3; 9.18–27; 10.1–11.3; 16.25–43; 20.7–10; 27.33–36; 28.30–31.

10 "From the worship setting of the home meal radiates much of Jesus' ministry. He is often described as a guest at someone's table, and many of his most memorable parables are told during and around a meal." Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 66.

11 For instance: Jesus visits Mary and Martha (10.38–42); the parable of the prodigal son and his brother (15.11–32); the rich man and Lazarus (16.19–31); the walk to Emmaus (24.13–35).

12 For instance: Luke 11.37–54 and Matt 23.23–36; Luke 22.24–30, Mark 10.41–45, and Matt 20.24–28.

13 "In the meal Jesus underlines the inclusive nature of the realm of God, which he often compared to a monarch's feast. . . . This theme of abundance and hospitality, characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry, is the way to understand the realm of God. Jesus was calling people to a change of mind and heart in keeping with the coming of God's realm." Keifert, 66.

14 "Jesus gave his life so that persons could be welcomed into the Kingdom and in doing so linked hospitality, grace, and sacrifice in the deepest and most personal way imaginable." Pohl, 29.

15 "They welcome him as a guest, and in breaking bread together, Jesus becomes their host. In this moment of table fellowship, they recognize him as their risen Lord." Pohl, 31.

So, in addition to the fact that hospitality characterizes all of God's interactions with us, this review of Jesus' meals in Luke reminds us that Jesus' ministry explicitly connects hospitality—that is, love of stranger—to the inclusion of that stranger at our tables.<sup>16</sup>

### Potential Implications

With this brief overview of biblical texts in mind, we can return again to our original question: If it is legitimate to consider all the tables at which Jesus ate (and also the larger religious narrative of Israel of which Jesus' eating is a part) and if considering these narratives reveals the centrality of hospitality, what might that mean for our practice of the Lord's Supper?<sup>17</sup>

### Ecclesial Implications

Perhaps this goes without saying, but were our practice of the Lord's Supper to imitate that of the early church, it would be an actual meal. The Lord's Supper was most likely not a somber moment of silent reflection, but a joyful time spent over a meal. Hospitality, as seen in the Lord's Supper, is about sharing both food and life. We might consider taking time in the Lord's Supper for conversation at least akin to "passing the peace" in mainline churches, if not a more extended time to converse with those in our community.

Also, our meal ought to imitate the heavenly banquet, which will not have separate denominational tables. So we ought to host and be hosted at joint Lord's Supper celebrations between churches. The Lord's Supper meal represents our willingness to work alongside, worship with, learn from, and love those with whom we disagree. At the very least, our table ought to be hospitable to those with whom we are united in the one body, Christ's church.

### Evangelical/Missional Implications

This brings us to the question of the relationship of the Lord's Supper table to those outside the church.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that "open communion" is a minimum implication of our current discussion.<sup>19</sup> By "open communion" I mean not only irrespective of denominational status, but also regardless of baptismal or confessional status.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This connection between meals and the necessity of including the stranger, even the stranger who is thought to be a sinner or unclean, is made all the more explicit in Acts 10:1–11:3. In Peter's vision, a voice (which Peter perceives to be the voice of the Lord) commands Peter to eat foods that are unclean according to Jewish dietary law. "The designations clean and unclean are here shown to be an excuse to deny fellowship and limit hospitality to others. By saying that the food associated with Gentiles is clean, God also instructs Peter to be hospitable to Cornelius and welcome him in. If all foods are permissible, then hospitality extends to everyone." Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 171.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the importance of hospitality will apply more broadly to our church's life together, but the implications that follow are specifically regarding the Lord's Supper, because this meal remembers and reenacts the center of the gospel: the reconciliation that is available to us because of God's work in Christ. As Pohl says, since the Lord's Supper of the early church was an actual meal, "It condensed attention to spiritual, social, and physical dimensions of life into one potent practice." Pohl, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Or perhaps, even more broadly, to the question of how any aspect of Christian worship relates to non-Christians. This is the subject of Keifert's *Welcoming the Stranger*, which argues for ways that our worship can be both worship and evangelism (in the sense of communicating the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ, not in the sense of selling someone on our particular congregation). "Sunday morning worship has become a moment of evangelism whether Christians like it or not—indeed, whether they are prepared or not." Keifert, 3.

<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to say whether I am suggesting a change of practice for Churches of Christ, or simply a more intentional foundation for our current practice. In my experience, although I have heard congregations mention that the Lord's Supper is for adult baptized believers only, I have never seen any active prevention of participation.

<sup>20</sup> The practice of "closed communion" seems to find its roots in the *Didache* more than in scripture: "Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'" (Chapter 9)

In contrast with a closed table, our review of the inclusive hospitality of God as epitomized in Jesus and as promised in the heavenly banquet demands a practice of the Lord's Supper at which all are welcome.<sup>21</sup> It is from the fundamental relationship of God as host and humanity as guest that any subsequent arrangements of host and guest follow. Jesus' parables regarding seating arrangements and guest lists remind us that at tables where God is the host, seating arrangements based on importance place us all together at the foot of the table. In other words: it is not our table to exclude anyone from—it is God's table.

Jesus' parables also remind us that merely accepting all the outsiders who dare to come to the table is not quite enough. Even the encouragement to "invite all people to the table" displays a power dynamic in location. We also need to think about the ways that our practice of the Lord's Supper might push us outside the church walls, or even ways that the Lord's Supper itself might occur outside those walls. We need to develop an awareness of where the Holy Spirit is at work, "leading us to new frontiers of hospitality,"<sup>22</sup> where we will encounter God working to compel strangers to come in and fill God's banquet table.

None of this is easy or clean. Our attempts to model our practice of the Lord's Supper after the past, present, and future meals in which God is host will be risky, chaotic, messy, costly, and likely humiliating. But our attempts to commune with each other in an ever-inclusive practice of the Lord's Supper, however flawed those attempts may be, will bring us in contact with the presence of God in Jesus and in the stranger—just like the Lord's Supper did in the early church, and just like it does today in house churches in Texas and Australia, in mainline churches in New Jersey and London, in small groups in Michigan and Tennessee, and even in auditoriums whose ceilings are shaped like upside-down boats.

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<sup>21</sup> This practice also aligns with a shift regarding the way a person joins a community. Rather than "believe, behave, belong" (in which a person must believe the right things and behave in the correct way before they are considered to be part of a community), it has been suggested that the progression of "belong, behave, believe" more closely models what actually happens sociologically, as well as the way that Jesus undertook his ministry.

<sup>22</sup> John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 134.