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Communitas at the Tables: Jesus, the Marginalized, and the Modern Church

Abstract

The field of the anthropology of religion would be incomplete without the theory of *communitas*, developed by Victor Turner (1920-1983). This paper outlines the liberating *communitas* experience of table fellowship utilized by Jesus to include sinners, outcasts, and the marginalized in the Kingdom of God. In particular, Jesus' invitation of *communitas* at Jewish cultic meals is explained in order to recapture the original understanding of the Abrahamic covenant to be a blessing to the margins of society. The paper concludes by calling Christians to invite the marginalized to the gathered table at church and the dispersed table at home.

Keywords: *communitas*, table fellowship, kingdom of God, liberation, Victor Turner

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Introduction

The Church gathers every Sunday, the day of resurrection and of Pentecost, to renew its participation in Christ's priesthood. But the exercise of this priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world.

—Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*¹

While researching Ndembu rituals, Victor Turner utilized the theory of *Rites de Passage* developed by Arnold van Gennep. *Rites de Passage* describes the three phases of all rites of passage, including separation, *limen*, and reaggregation.² A social puberty rite of some African males illustrates the three phases of *Rites de Passage*. A group of boys around the age of 13 is kidnapped and circumcised, beginning their separation from their status as children. These boys are placed in the bush to care for themselves for up to six months during the *limen* phase in which they are given minimal guidance and expected to prove they deserve to be reaggregated back into the tribe as men.³ Turner was particularly interested in the liminal stage, which represents people who are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”⁴ In an effort to capture the essence of intense communal solidarity celebrated as a group of “threshold people” within the liminal phase, Turner coined the term *communitas*.⁵ Within *communitas* individual status and goals give way to a shared common interest. This anti-structure of *communitas* has been utilized to understand the religious experience of the marginalized and poor across space and time. *Communitas* generates a leveling of status where participants lose who they were and wonder who they will become.⁶ This paper connects V. Turner's understanding of *communitas* with Jesus' definition and examples of who should be included in the kingdom of God. Specifically, the liberating experience of table fellowship utilized by Jesus is used to remind the church that the marginalized and poor are to be included at the tables—both gathered and dispersed—of Christian *communitas*.

Communitas: A Community of Sojourners

V. Turner astutely observed that Christian identity is linked with liminality. He writes, “The Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveler, with no place to rest his head.”⁷ *Communitas* results as Christians share their pilgrimage with others. For example, Benedictine monks experience *communitas* as they share with each other the experience of devoting themselves to God and each other through sacrifice, prayer, and work.⁸ Liminality and the resulting *communitas* is the normative

situation of Christians across time and space, and reaggregation ultimately will happen when God's kingdom is fully realized with the second coming of Christ.⁹

Gordon D. Fee, a renowned New Testament scholar, was once asked by one of his students, "If you were to return to the pastoral ministry, what would you do [meaning, How would you go about it? What would you emphasize]?"¹⁰ Fee explained that he would emphasize the true liminal status of the church as living between the now of Christ's resurrection and the not yet of his return.¹¹ This liminal eschatological framework depicts a church on the move not a church that has arrived, a church of the redeemable not just the redeemed, a church measured by its impact on the community not just the number of people in the pews, and a church that celebrates the priesthood of all believers not just the priesthood of the ordained. Ultimately, a church that understands its liminal status consists of Christian sojourners who gather to celebrate *communitas* and disperse to invite others to join their Christian liminality.

A Reconsideration of Being Blessed

Jesus assumed his Jewish hearers understood the expectation to share God's blessing outside of the Jewish community, so it is necessary to turn to the Torah to uncover Jesus' central assumption about who was entitled to the blessings of God.¹² Genesis 12:2 says, "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; *And so you shall be a blessing* [italics mine]."¹³ This passage reveals an expectation that Jews, and by implication early Christians who were Jewish, should engage and bless others.¹⁴ While many Jews understood God's covenant as a funnel leading only to their blessing, Jesus recaptured the original meaning of the Abrahamic covenant—the Israelites were blessed so they can bless others. Two of the foundational characteristics of *communitas* are an intentional redistribution of power and a reconsideration of who are the powerful.¹⁵ Jesus revealed his understanding of power and status within the kingdom of God by proclaiming, "Thus the last shall be first, and the first last."¹⁶ We can think of Jesus' kingdom-of-God message as a *communitas* message because he reached out to and empowered marginalized people within the Jewish community.¹⁷

Jesus consistently challenged the "attitudes, practices and structures that tended arbitrarily to restrict or exclude" the marginalized in the community.¹⁸ The law was the Pharisees' marker of righteousness and holiness, and a person's failure to adhere to the law was reason to exclude him or her from community. For this reason, it is helpful to use the history of the law and Jesus' interaction with the law as a lens through which to examine the way Jesus worked to define Christianity as a place for the marginalized of his day—sinners and outcasts—and thus as *communitas*.

In the Old Testament, the law was never meant to produce legalism; it was merely intended to be the means by which people came into right relationship with God. Its essence was a covenant between the people and God. Therefore, the law was not meant as a wall between God and his people. The law was meant to provide a more holistic relationship between God and the society in general.

The law originated when God chose to make Israel a special people. The law created a way for Israel to be bound to God. George Eldon Ladd quotes Kleinknecht to point out, "The object of the law is to settle the relationship of the covenant-nation and of the individual to the God of the covenant and to the members of the nation who belong to the same covenant."¹⁹ Obedience to the law meant that the covenant was kept between Yahweh and Israel. Individuals were to maintain a true love for God and for neighbor, which leaves no place for legalism and separatism.²⁰

A fundamental change regarding the attitude toward the law occurred in the inter-testamental period. For the Pharisees, external obedience to the law became the condition of membership in the kingdom of God. If one was obedient to the law, they would be resurrected. Covenant became less important, and the law became the way in which Jews perceived that God judged an individual. Obeying the letter of the law became the way to find justification, salvation, righteousness, and life.²¹ In addition, during this time, the belief arose that obedience to the law would transform the world and bring about God's kingdom. Ladd states, "The Torah becomes the one and only mediator between God and humanity; all other relationships between God and humanity, Israel, or the world are subordinated to the Torah."²² Observance of the external law overcame the idea that a person's heart and relationships with others must be included in the equation.

Jesus began his ministry at a time when the latter attitude of the law prevailed. The synoptic Gospels draw a picture of Jesus' attitude toward Pharisaic Judaism. Generally, Jesus conformed to the religious practice of Judaism. For example, Jesus was seen in the temple, and he contributed to a temple tax, a deed that would have been important to the majority of the Jews. Furthermore, Jesus participated in religious festivals such as Passover. Another Jewish custom Jesus followed was wearing a garment hem fitted with tassels in conformity to the Mosaic precept.²³ These examples illustrate that Jesus not only was Jewish but also participated in many Jewish religious rituals and customs.

However, Jesus concerned himself more with ministering to sinners and outcasts than with keeping Jewish rituals and customs.²⁴ Even though Jesus regularly visited synagogues, each of his recorded visits included healing and teaching, which indicates that Jesus went because of the opportunities for ministry, not just to be

a faithful attender. Both Jesus and the Pharisees were concerned about the Jewish people; however, they had very different ideas about how the Jews were to be renewed and redeemed.²⁵ Ben Witherington writes, “The Pharisees seem to have wanted all of Israel to become like Levitical priests, keeping all the purity laws, both ritual and moral.”²⁶ Jesus, on the other hand, taught that the Jews would be redeemed through him.

Jesus preached about forgiveness that did not require legalistic reformation. For this reason, he was considered a friend of sinners. As E. P. Sanders summarizes, “Jesus said, God forgives you, and now you should repent and mend your ways; everyone else said, God forgives you if you will repent and mend your ways.”²⁷ This understanding of forgiveness collided with Pharisaic Judaism, which, like many modern churches, offered forgiveness only to those who earned it. Jesus invited people into the kingdom of God in the midst of their sins without requiring them to repent. He objected only when they remained in their sins. The offensiveness of Jesus’ message to the Pharisees was that the wicked were included in the kingdom even if they did not repent, seek restitution, sacrifice, and turn to obedience to the law. Their repentance was not necessary for Jesus to associate with them and offer them companionship. Jesus’ statements that included tax collectors and prostitutes in the kingdom ahead of the righteous only made matters worse. Jesus’ sinfulness in the eyes of the Pharisees came when he made statements that implied he knew who God would and would not include in the kingdom, which would have made the normal path of righteousness look foolish.²⁸

Although modern Christian religious rules may not resemble pharisaical rules, the church struggles with reducing salvation to a list of rules—much as the Pharisees did.²⁹ The harm of the rules is similar in that they focus attention away from God and create significant barriers to the marginalized in society. V. Turner emphasizes that within *communitas* rules are suspended.³⁰ Christianity is *communitas* in that Jesus included sinners and outcasts by suspending the rules of Pharisaic Judaism. Jesus taught that those who are blessed are compelled to be active in including the marginalized in the blessing, that the law is no longer used to determine who is allowed in the kingdom, and that the common experience of submission to Christ binds all Christians together.

Table Fellowship with Jesus

Edith Turner, a renowned anthropologist and widow of V. Turner, suggests that *communitas* contains within it a hope for the “way things should be.”³¹ Jesus’ example of table fellowship points the church toward a corrective pattern of including the marginalized and poor in God’s blessing. In order to gain more

understanding about how Jesus experienced *communitas*, Jesus' interaction with the marginalized in society should be examined, especially his openness to table fellowship with them.

Jesus purposefully engaged with the marginalized in Jewish society within the context of a meal and brought the saving good news to them. Jesus' message of salvation to sinners was distinctive to his kingdom teachings.³² Mark 2:15-17 reads,

And it came about that He was reclining *at the table* in his house, and many tax-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they *began* [original emphasis] saying to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners?" And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "*it is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

In contrast, the Pharisees were averse to engaging with sinners and outcasts, appealing to passages such as 2 Esdras 8:38-39, which says,

For indeed I will not concern myself about the fashioning of those who have sinned, or about their death, their judgment, or their destruction; but I will rejoice over the creation of the righteous, over their pilgrimage also, and their salvation, and their receiving their reward.³³

The Pharisees clearly defined and ritually enforced barriers between themselves and others. Jesus disbanded these barriers and invited everyone to partake in the *communitas* of God's mercy and love.³⁴

Among the synoptic gospels, the gospel of Luke provides the most extensive discussion of table fellowship. Whether Jesus was being anointed by a sinful woman at a meal, allowing a woman to sit in a place of honor during a meal while she ignored her traditional role, attending a banquet held in his honor by a despised tax collector, receiving sinners, or appearing to his disciples at a meal after his ascension, he used the *communitas* experience around a meal to redefine who was included within the kingdom of God.³⁵

While at a meal, Jesus told a parable that emphasized the leveling of status. He concluded the parable by saying, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."³⁶ Furthermore at the same meal, he went on to explain the way things should be by explicitly stating: "But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you

will be blessed...³⁷ Jesus used the context of a meal purposefully to encourage the invited guests to consider the uninvited guests and redistribute God's blessing to the fringes of society within *communitas*.

The preceding examples from Mark and Luke reveal Jesus' willingness to experience table fellowship with sinners and outcasts, and the significance of table fellowship to Jews should not be underestimated. Robert Banks explains that table fellowship in the Old Testament bound men to each other socially and also bound them to God.³⁸ For example, cultic meals such as the *chaburah* were a means of partaking of the actual power of God and sharing communion with him. Men participating in a cultic meal became brothers with each other and with Yahweh. The table-fellowship meals of Jesus were distinctive in that they were open to the women and the morally and ritually impure.³⁹ This deed was particularly offensive to the Pharisees who would have seen table fellowship with sinners as a danger to the survival of Judaism.⁴⁰

The Pharisees viewed table fellowship as an intimate experience.⁴¹ They took these meals so seriously that they would not eat either with Gentiles or even many other Jews. Furthermore, the Pharisees believed that Jesus' eating with impure Jews indicated that sinners are included in the kingdom.⁴² Jesus, by sharing table fellowship with sinners, demonstrated the Father's acceptance and graciousness toward the marginalized.⁴³ Several parables compare the kingdom with a banquet to which even sinners are called.⁴⁴ For Jews, the feasting Jesus experienced with sinners served as a metaphor of eschatological salvation.⁴⁵

Through table fellowship, Jesus fulfilled his mission of gathering the marginalized to himself.⁴⁶ Through Jesus' actions, "God is seeking out sinners; he is inviting them to enter into the messianic blessing; he is demanding of them a favorable response to his gracious offer."⁴⁷ Although Jesus' company was unbelievable to the Jews, his outreach to the sinners of the world was an example of participating in and dispensing God's blessing. Jesus was primarily concerned not with maintaining pharisaical boundaries but with offering healing to all who needed it. In choosing to reach out to marginal people in Jewish society, Jesus informed his disciples to be people who bless by inclusion. Moreover, Jesus' legacy of *communitas* with sinners and outcasts means that Christianity is to liberate the marginalized across the world.

The Gathered and Dispersed Tables of Fellowship

In modern times, Jesus' example of providing *communitas* around a meal serves as an important reminder to churches and their members: They are to offer table fellowship to the marginalized. The gathered and the dispersed tables

hold significance for Christians, and our fellowship at these tables provides an opportunity to invite others to *communitas*. The gathered table is the one experienced at the Lord's Table during a service of worship. Christians have long debated who belongs at the Lord's Table. In the Invitation of The United Methodist Church's Service of Word and Table, the ritual proclaims, "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another."⁴⁸ Within the Wesleyan theological tradition, John Wesley's phrase "converting ordinance" provides fuel for arguments over how open the Lord's Table should be.⁴⁹ On the most basic level, Christians use baptism as the invitation to the Lord's Table.

While arguments over the necessity of baptism to receive communion abound, the racial-ethnic and socioeconomic divisions around the Lord's Table need more serious consideration. Sociological research confirms that churches in America lack diversity. Social network analysis reveals that racial-ethnic lines and social class largely determine who gathers together at the Lord's Table.⁵⁰ Of course, Jesus' example of table fellowship suggests these ethnic and economic divides are problematic. Mathias Zahniser suggests that the first Christian communities used Christ as an example and focal point in the communion ritual to create a leveling of society where all participants found equality with each other.⁵¹ At the heart of Christian *communitas* is a leveling of status in which the participants are so caught up in the common cause participating in the kingdom of God that ethnic and economic divides are overlooked. Lesslie Newbigin reminds Christians that worship necessarily involves inclusion of the marginalized and poor: "In Christian worship we acknowledge that if we had received justice instead of charity we would be on our way to perdition. A Christian congregation is thus a body of people with gratitude to spare, a gratitude that can spill over into care for the neighbor."⁵²

Zahniser argues that a communion ritual which includes the marginalized helps "believers bring life into harmony with faith."⁵³ A grateful heart celebrates the leveling of status in *communitas* at the table because at the table of Jesus only he is in a place of honor. Furthermore, if Christ is honored at the Lord's Table, all who come after Jesus are welcome, regardless of status.

The dispersed table is no less important than the gathered table and is the genesis of *communitas* at both tables. The dispersed table simply refers to Christians inviting the marginalized of society to enjoy a meal. Kevin Dougherty's research about diversity in American churches discovered that,

The proximity of varied racial-ethnic groups stands as one of the most important conditions for advancing diversity in religious communities. Inter-group contact and communication

cannot occur where multiple groups are socially segregated or simply not present. In order for appraisals of out-group members to change, opportunities for interpersonal contact are vital.⁵⁴

An important opportunity for change in diversity within American churches is outside of the church at the dispersed table. If Christians invite the marginalized to share *communitas* at a meal in their homes, false divides over power and status are removed in order to reflect better Jesus' example of challenging "social and religious exclusivism."⁵⁵ In the end, all who gather at the dispersed table are given an opportunity to enjoy fellowship with Christ and each other.

While *communitas* is achieved at the gathered and the dispersed tables, the two tables are connected. The gathered table informs Christians of the way things should be through the example and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. The dispersed table is where the deep relationships with the marginalized are developed. Many have decried the ethnic and socioeconomic divide at the gathered table but the divide begins at the table of the dispersed. Inviting the marginalized and poor to a meal at home will lead to a beautifully diverse table in church. Once believers experience a meal around the gathered and dispersed tables with the marginalized and poor, the kingdom of God is in part realized in the present age, and believers are given a taste of the life to come.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Jesus is a voice calling for change. In the past, he called his fellow Jews to experience *communitas*. Today, he is calling the church to embrace its purpose of providing hope to a world that despairs. In fact, the proper understanding of the church is not of an institution that has arrived at its final destination but a movement caught between the now and the not yet. By approaching the two tables with a *communitas* mind-set, Christians will engage with the marginalized and poor as learners, develop empathy, and seek to engage in culturally sensitive ways. When the dispersed table draws people to the gathered table, God's kingdom is literally experienced on earth.

End Notes

¹ Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 230.

² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 94, 166.

³ Alan Hirsch and Darryn Altclass, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook: A Practical Guide of Developing Missional Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 170.

⁴ V. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁶ Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York, NY: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012).

⁷ V. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 107.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hirsch and Altclass, *Forgotten Ways Handbook*, 171.

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1996), 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹² R. S. Barbour et al., *The Kingdom of God and Human Society* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1993), 87.

¹³ New American Standard Bible.

¹⁴ Joseph Dongell, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, February 21, 2006.

¹⁵ V. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 102.

¹⁶ Matt. 20:16.

¹⁷ George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 367.

¹⁸ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 27.

¹⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 540.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 541.

- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 15-17.
- ²⁴ Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 91.
- ²⁵ Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 24.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 25.
- ²⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 204.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 201-08.
- ²⁹ David Bauer, interview by the author, Wilmore, KY, February 23, 2006.
- ³⁰ V. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.
- ³¹ E. Turner, *Communitas*, vx.
- ³² Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 174.
- ³³ New Revised Standard Bible with Apocrypha.
- ³⁴ John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1982), 168-69.
- ³⁵ See Luke 7:36-50 (Sinful Woman); Luke 10:38-42 (Mary and Martha); Luke 15:1-2 (Lost Sheep); Luke 19:1-10 (Zacchaeus); Luke 24:36-49 (Disciples).
- ³⁶ Luke 14:11 (NASB).
- ³⁷ Luke 14:13-14.
- ³⁸ Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 108.
- ³⁹ Jesus invited women to the table too. See Luke 7:36-50 and 10:38-42; Mark 14:3-9.
- ⁴⁰ Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation*, 105.
- ⁴¹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 82.
- ⁴² Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 108; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 208.
- ⁴³ Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation*, 109.
- ⁴⁴ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 208.

⁴⁵ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 73.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁸ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Pub. House, 1992), 35.

⁴⁹ Tucker, Karen B., "Table Etiquette: Means and Manners," The General Board of Discipleship for the United Methodist Church, 2002, <http://www.gbod.org/live-the-um-way/means-of-grace/resource/table-etiquette-means-and-manners> (accessed June 15, 2014).

⁵⁰ Kevin D. Dougherty, "How Monochromatic is Church Membership? Racial-Ethnic Diversity in Religious Community," *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 1 (2003): 71.

⁵¹ Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1997) 67.

⁵² Newbigin, *Gospel*, 227.

⁵³ Zahniser, *Symbol*, 98.

⁵⁴ Dougherty, "How Monochromatic is Church Membership?" 80.

⁵⁵ John Koening, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 20.

⁵⁶ Fee, Paul, 52.

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