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The Nature and Purpose of Leaven

Paul and Kay Watson

Let's take a look at leaven. No, not *Leaven*. Leaven. Yeast. A lump of sourdough. Baking powder. Any one of a number of biological or chemical agents that induce fermentation in the dough and thus cause the dough to rise. Often a bit of leftover dough from a previous bread-making experience that is saved and subsequently inserted into new dough. Used by cooks and bakers for millennia to improve the taste and texture of the bread or pastry being made. Without leaven, bread remains edible but flat, as with modern-day tortillas (Latin America) and *roti* (South Asia). Leaven.

Leaven in the Old Testament

The primary use, or rather non-use, of leaven in the Old Testament is in conjunction with feasts and sacrifices, first and foremost the twin feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. God's instructions to Israel for the first Passover, as conveyed by Moses and Aaron, included the following: "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel" (Exod 12.14–15).

Closely following those instructions are similar instructions for the Festival of Unleavened Bread: "In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread. For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread" (Exod 12.18–20).

The reason for eating this unleavened bread (*matzah*, Hebrew) soon becomes clear later in the chapter when it is recorded that "the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders. . . . They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves" (Exod 12.34, 39).

They "could not wait." The emphasis was upon haste and so, in remembrance, they were instructed that "you must not eat it [the Passover lamb] with anything leavened. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it—the bread of affliction—because you came out of the land of Egypt in great haste, so that all the days of your life you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt" (Deut 16.3; see Exod 12.11).

Leaven took time to work; but Israel had no time to wait. Thus, no leaven and no leavened bread.¹ This injunction was extended in Israel's general sacrificial system to include grain offerings (Lev 2.4, 11; 6.17) and peace offerings (Lev 7.13) that were to be offered unleavened. On the other hand, for the Festival of Weeks,

1. Similar but non-ritual examples of a host serving unleavened bread as part of a hastily-prepared meal for unexpected guests include Lot's meal for the two visiting angels (Gen 19.3); Gideon's meal for his angelic visitor (Judg 6.19); and the meal prepared by the medium of Endor for Saul (1 Sam 28.24–25). In each instance, unleavened bread was served because time was of the essence.

worshippers were to “bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering, each made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, *baked with leaven*, as first fruits to the Lord” (Lev 23.17, emphasis ours). Bruckner adds these interesting observations:

Matzah bread is made only with flour and water. It could be made from five species of grain: wheat, rye, barley, oats, and spelt (emmer). Ashkenazi Judaism forbade products during this feast that have traces of natural leaven: rice, corn, millet, and legumes. . . . In current Jewish practice, a family searches the home on the night before Passover with a feather and a spoon to collect pieces of leavened bread hidden to initiate the search.²

Leaven in the New Testament

Over time, leaven acquired a bad reputation and became a symbol for the infectious power of evil.”³ Thus Plutarch wrote: “Yeast [leaven] is itself also the product of corruption, and produces corruption in the dough with which it is mixed; . . . and altogether the process of leavening seems to be one of putrefaction.”⁴ This corrupting, putrefying aspect of leaven helps explain three of the four metaphorical occurrences of leaven in the New Testament, the first of which is Jesus’s warning concerning the ‘leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees’:

When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” They said to one another, “It is because we have brought no bread.” And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matt 16.5–12. See Mark 8.14–21 for a similar account and Luke 12.1, where Jesus uses leaven to describe the hypocrisy of the Pharisees).

As was so often the case, Jesus was speaking on one level while his disciples were thinking and speaking on another level. Instead of responding to the admittedly cryptic statement made by Jesus, the disciples digress to their more immediate, physical problem: hunger. But “by worrying about their next meal, they are exhibiting their lack of trust in the God who provides their daily bread (6.11).”⁵ Nor do they recall two previous occasions on which Jesus had provided bread for multitudes. Having done that for crowds of strangers, would Jesus not do the same for his closest friends and followers? Oh, “you of little faith” indeed. And then Jesus returns to his original concern for them: the “leaven/yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, i.e. their ‘teaching’—insidious teaching that can spread like yeast in dough.”⁶

The second negative example of leaven appears in 1 Corinthians 5.6–8, in the context of the Apostle Paul’s scathing rebuke of the Corinthian church for tolerating the blatantly immoral relationship of stepmother and stepson within the congregation. Paul writes, “Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really

2. James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 115f. See Nahum Sarna, “Exodus,” in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, ed. D. Lieber (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 385.

3. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.), 150.

4. Ibid., Plutarch, *Roman Questions 289F*, as cited by Garland.

5. Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*. Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 184.

6. Ibid.

are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Old yeast could literally be dangerous: “This homemade rising agent, however, was fraught with health hazards. If it became tainted, it would spread poison to the rest of the dough in baking, and that batch of dough could infect the next batch and so on.”⁷ That is precisely the analogy that Paul is making here in an attempt to impress upon the Corinthian sisters and brothers the dangers of indifference and inattention to this ‘infectious’ sinful situation.

Note, however, that Paul is not just speaking of leaven in general, but of the leaven that is strictly avoided during the Passover celebration. Christ is their paschal lamb. Christ has been sacrificed for them. Thus “[Paul] associates casting out this man out of the church with the Jewish practice of cleansing the house of yeast at Passover.”⁸ Furthermore, “note that in Paul’s scriptures ‘the one who eats leavened bread’ . . . is threatened with being ‘cut off’ from Israel (Exod 12.15), from ‘the congregation of Israel’ (Exod 12.19).”⁹

It should also be noted that the Corinthians apparently thought that *his* sin—the sin being perpetrated by the incestuous stepson—had nothing to do with them and was not *their* sin. On the contrary, the Corinthians were arrogant and boasting about something (1 Cor 5.2, 6). Their open mindedness? Their unqualified acceptance of persons and actions? Whatever lay behind their arrogant boasting, they were mistaken. As Talbert observes,

The Corinthians were proud of the individual who lived in incest because he expressed his alleged Christian freedom in his style of life (v. 2a); they were also boasting about themselves as a community (v. 6a). Because of their spiritual status, they believed they were immune to danger from exposure to practices that might not be within God’s will. . . . Hence, even if the community disagreed with the incestuous man’s behavior, they did not have to worry. His sin could not touch them.¹⁰

Whereas Paul’s first concern was for the sinner himself (v. 5), here in verses 6–8 Paul’s expressed concern is “about the spiritual safety of the community as a whole because of its exposure to unchecked evil.”¹¹ For indeed, “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” (v. 6).

Richard Hays places added emphasis on the *corporate responsibility* of the church in Corinth to rectify this situation. Such corporate responsibility for taking action is very much in line with the example of Achan in Joshua 7 and with specific Torah injunctions for Israel to “cut off from their people” those who commit such sexual offenses (Lev 18.24–30 and 20.22–24). “When Paul says to clean out the old leaven, he is not telling the individuals at Corinth to clean up their individual lives; rather, he is repeating in symbolic language the instructions of verses 2–5 to purify the community by expelling the offender. . . . The Corinthians are to gather as a community and take solemn action to exclude the incestuous man from the church.”¹²

Finally, with regards to 1 Corinthians 5.6–8, it is important to note that throwing out the old leaven means not only expunging the sinner but also the Corinthians’ own boastful arrogance and replacing such “with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (v. 6). “Simply ridding the community of the *porneia* is not sufficient; something positive must be put in its place (see Luke 11.24–26).”¹³ And Paul specifies what it is that should replace their boastful arrogance: sincerity and truthfulness (v. 8). This is what “unleavened bread” looks like.

The third and final pejorative use of the leaven metaphor in the New Testament occurs in Galatians 5.9. In verses 7–8, Paul chided the Christians in Galatia for having allowed someone—i.e., the “Judaizers”—to cut in

7. Garland, 150.

8. J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), X:848.

9. Ibid.

10. Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 17.

11. Ibid.

12. Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 83.

13. Sampley, X:848.

on them as they were running the Christian race, thus shoving them off-track, as it were. Now in verse 9, Paul quotes the proverbial saying about leaven, viz. “a little yeast levels the whole batch of dough.” Much as Jesus had warned the disciples to “beware the leaven (i.e., teaching) of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt 16.5–12; Mark 8.14–21; also Luke 12.1), Paul is here warning the Galatians specifically of the Judaizing interlopers who have begun to lead them astray. Hays notes the comparable use of the same proverb in 1 Corinthians 5.6, saying, “This is a word of warning about the subtle corrupting power of false teaching behavior. In 1 Corinthians 5:6, Paul quotes precisely the same proverb to support his order that the Corinthians expel a flagrant sexual offender from the church. Here in verses 9–10 the issue is different, but the point is the same: The church should take action to preserve its integrity by excising the cancer before it can spread.”¹⁴

In Matthew 13.33 and Luke 13.20–21 we find leaven used in a positive way and surprisingly so, given its reputation as an agent of corruption. In these texts, Jesus tells a parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until it was leavened.” In some translations the leaven is said to be *hidden* (instead of *kneaded* or *placed*). Like leaven, the presence of the kingdom may be invisible to unbelieving eyes, but its effect soon becomes obvious.¹⁵ Leaven here in this parable is a sign of God at work in the world.¹⁶

Equally striking is the difference that a small quantity of leaven can make. Fifty pounds of flour (“three measures”) are sitting on the baker’s table, inert and waiting for transformation into bread—enough bread to feed some 100 to 150 people. A banquet, a party is surely planned. But it is not until the small amount of yeast is inserted into the flour that the flour becomes bread. Such will be “the final victory of the kingdom despite all appearances.”¹⁷

Leaven in the Kingdom Today

What might leaven mean for kingdom members today? Surely we should take to heart the power of small things that leaven represents. Jesus’s warning to the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees should ring in our ears: Beware of what you listen to, and whom you listen to. Be discriminating in what you believe, and whom you follow. Good leaven—i.e., good teaching and preaching—makes us mindful of the things of God; bad leaven has the opposite effect.

We should likewise be aware of how much havoc can be wreaked by even a modest amount of sin. In the times we now live in—times of individualism and maximum personal freedom—this may be especially hard to do. Were circumstances similar to those of 1 Corinthians 5 to manifest themselves today, it might seem natural to argue that they are two consenting adults, they are not harming anyone else, and it’s their own business. But such reasoning would be wrong: what they are doing *does* affect, and infect, the entire community. As Sampley put it, “believers have responsibility for the comportment of members within the community.”¹⁸ Moreover, by taking such action, the community will show itself to be “a prophetic counterculture in the midst of an unbelieving world.”¹⁹ As the apostle said to the body of believers at Corinth, the yeast of malice and evil needed to be purged from among them, and the festival (i.e., the worship of Jesus Christ) celebrated with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor 5.8).

Finally, there is the common understanding in Jesus’s day of leaven as a corrupting agent. Does the kingdom work like corruption? Does it undermine and pervert? From the perspective of Jesus’s opponents, the kingdom he proclaimed, which accepted sinners and toll collectors and ignored issues of purity, was indeed a corrupting force. But the kingdom does not pervert; rather, it inverts. Jesus in his preaching and teaching and ministry to the outcast set in motion a disturbing process that would change Israel and the world. In this sense,

14. Richard Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), XI:315.

15. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 151.

16. Hare, *Matthew*, 157.

17. M Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 312.

18. Sampley, 850.

19. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 87.

the kingdom is like leaven in that it has an inward vitality of its own that gives it the power to affect with its own quality whatever it touches. It has the power to transform the dough into something new, while at the same time maintaining continuity with the old.²⁰

Precisely. The kingdom of God is not a corrupting agent, but it is a change agent. As Garland put it, the kingdom does not *pervert*, but it does *invert*. The kingdom has the power to transform—transforming that which is weak into that which is strong and that which is corrupt into that which is good. It is this transformational power that we should affirm and proclaim by “hiding” a bit of leaven wherever we can and then, like the woman in Jesus’s parable, wait for the kingdom to do its work.

Leaven and Leaven

We cannot close without noting the quietly powerful influence of *Leaven* over so many years, thanks to the good efforts of Stuart and D’Esta Love. They have included writers from all three wings of the Restoration Movement and have thus nudged us at least a bit toward reunion. And they have regularly included female writers and editors, again nudging us at least a bit toward gender inclusiveness. A little bit of leaven here, a little bit of leaven there—who knows just how much dough has been made to rise as a result? Our thanks to Stuart and D’Esta for being such faithful leavening agents.

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20. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 151.