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Breaking the Bread Breaking the Veil

Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus

by David Lertis Matson

Along with salt, bread was a vital commodity in the Ancient Near East. For the average person of biblical times, “keep giving us each day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11; cf. Luke 11:3) was an apt prayer indeed. Though different types of bread were eaten by rich and poor,¹ bread itself remained the staple diet of the ancient world, with the price of grain serving as an infallible indicator of economic conditions at any given time.

As the ancient world depended upon bread for life and sustenance, so the church depends upon the bread of the Lord’s table. The first Christians in Jerusalem were continually “devoting themselves” to the breaking of bread as part of their daily life together (Acts 2:42, 46). Originally part of a common meal, the Lord’s Supper was both a human and divine means of nourishment: “As often as you eat this bread” (1 Cor 11:26) reminds one of the importance that frequent celebration of the eucharist had in the lives of the early Christians.²

The act of “breaking bread” thus assumes a deeply religious significance on the pages of the New Testament. The noted scholar I. H. Marshall observes that in the New Testament breaking bread is “a fixed and constant part of the Lord’s Supper.”³ In his Corinthian correspondence, Paul describes “the bread that we break” as a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). In the oldest account of the Lord’s Supper, he goes on to recount how Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, broke bread (1 Cor 11:24), an action also depicted in the Gospel narratives (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). Jesus, acting as the head of the household, celebrates the Passover

meal by reinterpreting the elements of bread and wine in terms of his approaching death.

Yet it is Luke among the writers of the New Testament for whom “breaking bread” becomes a “classic” way of referring to the Lord’s Supper (Luke 9:16; 22:19; 24:30, 35; Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11; 27:35). Of the many references listed here, the meal scene embedded in the story of Emmaus (24:13-35) is the most theologically charged: only after Jesus instructs the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and breaks bread in their house are they able to recognize the risen Lord in their midst (24:30). At story’s end, Luke summarizes the entire sequence of events thusly: “Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the *breaking of the bread*” (24:35).⁴ The prominence of the table motif as a setting for Jesus’ revelatory activity makes the Emmaus account “extremely valuable in setting forth Luke’s sacramental theology.”⁵

The purpose of this essay, then, is to explore the meaning of “breaking bread” in the writings of Luke and Acts, using the meal at Emmaus as the key interpretive framework. As the climax to the first of Luke’s two volumes (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1), the Emmaus narrative occupies a strategic “pivot” position, allowing the reader to look “backward” to the table fellowship practice of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and “forward” to the depiction in Acts of believers breaking bread in their homes.

Revelation at Emmaus

The story of the disciples on the road to

Emmaus unfolds in four distinct but interrelated scenes: 1) the two disciples describe the ministry of Jesus to a stranger (Jesus) whom they are kept from recognizing (24:13-24); 2) the stranger interprets the Messiah's suffering and entry into glory in accordance with the scriptures (24:25-27); 3) the stranger reveals his identity to the disciples while reclining at table with them (24:28-32); 4) the disciples return to Jerusalem and announce to the Eleven how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread (24:33-35). The whole story unfolds between the two poles of blindness and recognition, between Jesus as wayfaring stranger and Jesus as risen Lord.⁶ In the first scene, the two disciples walked with Jesus on the road, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:17). In the third scene "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight" (24:31). That Jesus disappears at the very moment of recognition suggests that the climax of the story is reached when Jesus is made known in the breaking of the bread.

While some scholars have questioned the extent to which Luke makes the meal at Emmaus a story about the Lord's Supper, the eucharistic associations in the passage are obvious. The language used to describe the actions of Jesus at table in 24:30 ("took, blessed, broke, gave") is clearly reminiscent of Luke 22:19 when Jesus, acting as host, institutes the Lord's Supper on the evening of the Passover. That the meal occurs on the evening of the "first day of the week" (24:1, 13) following instruction in the Old Testament scriptures (24:25-27) suggests a context of worship featuring both word and sacrament.

The sacramental significance of the Emmaus narrative is theologically important to Luke: from now on Jesus will be present with his disciples primarily by means of the Christian interpretation of scripture and the sharing of the Lord's Supper.⁷ Jesus sets the hearts of his disciples aflame by opening up the Old Testament scriptures (24:25-27, 32); he opens their eyes in the sharing of a meal (24:29-30). This two-fold means of knowing Christ—in word and supper—is significant for believers today for, as Fred B. Craddock insightfully observes, it makes every Christian a first-generation Christian and every fellowship meal an Emmaus meal. Jesus "appears" to every Christian when the word is preached and the Lord's Supper is observed.⁸

The presence of Christ mediated in the act of breaking the bread must not be lost on churches of the "restoration" heritage, which have always emphasized the uniqueness of the apostolic age and the value of the first-generation witness. This emphasis, while important, has led to a diminished appreciation of what happens in our celebration of the Lord's

Supper. If in baptism we encounter the presence of the living Christ, why not in the Lord's Supper? Why is baptism considered "sacramental" (mediating forgiveness) but the Lord's Supper a "remembrance" only? Such an inconsistent view of the sacraments, it seems, is not in keeping with the Christ of Emmaus who reveals himself in the breaking of the bread.

Remembrance of Jesus

But revelation is clearly tied to remembrance for Luke. The disciples recognize Jesus "in" the breaking of the bread (24:35), that is, in the distinctive way Jesus broke the loaf that made the disciples recall their prior occasions of table fellowship with Jesus in the course of his earthly ministry. Perhaps it was the hands of Jesus that they recognized, hands that formerly stretched out in death on a cross but now stretch out to impart the bread of life. Whatever the catalyst of their remembrance, it was divinely given: "their eyes were opened," Luke says (24:31). To say "their eyes were opened" is the same as saying "God opened their eyes."⁹ The memory of Jesus at table prompts an even more immediate remembrance of Jesus on the part of the disciples: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (24:32). The whole experience of the disciples in the house at Emmaus is rich in theological reflection, involving both the immediate and more distant past.

In the meal scene at Emmaus, the wayfaring Jesus appears in the dual roles of guest and host at table, both of which are significant to the theme of remembrance. Jesus first appears in the role of guest, accepting the disciples' invitation to stay with them in their home (v 29). Such an appeal recalls a prior series of distinctive table fellowship scenes in which Jesus accepts and welcomes hospitality. So frequent are these scenes in Luke that Robert J. Karris can remark that "Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."¹⁰ The later fellowship meals of the early Christians stem not only from the institution of the Lord's Supper, but also from Jesus' widely attested practice of table fellowship.

The way in which Jesus accepts hospitality in Luke's Gospel is often radically inclusive, inviting criticism or providing the occasion for controversy. According to Luke's presentation, it may well be the case that "Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate."¹¹ Each of the various episodes that picture Jesus receiving hospitality (5:27-32; 7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10) involves controversy over Jesus' acceptance of outcasts and sinners. In the world of Jesus' day, to eat together was to belong together.¹² In light of this pervasive theme in Luke, the charge

levelled against Jesus is well-documented: “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and

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sinner!” (7:34).¹³

If the example of Jesus as guest provides impetus for the table fellowship practice of the later church, such an example challenges the church to the same kind of radical openness that characterized Jesus’ earthly ministry. And where best to demonstrate this openness than at the Lord’s table, which perpetuates the memory of Jesus’ own table fellowship practice? The New Testament bears ample witness to the fact that the earliest struggles of the church involved matters of table fellowship (Acts 11:3; 15:20, 29; Gal 2:11-14). By having Jesus eat a meal with his disciples after his resurrection, Luke seems to suggest that the post-resurrection community of the Messiah will be a table fellowship community modeled after the pre-resurrection ministry of Jesus.

As important as the Jesus-as-guest theme is in the Gospel of Luke, and one that can help inform a reading of the Emmaus narrative, it does not constitute the chief point of remembrance for the two characters in the story—Cleopas and the unnamed disciple (24:18). Recognition rather comes when Jesus assumes the role of host: “When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (24:30-31a). This change of roles, from invited guest to gracious host, is the second such shift in the story involving Jesus. Earlier he had been instructed by the disciples on the road (24:15-24); then he turns to instruct them (24:25-27). That Jesus functions in the dual capacity of guest and host is not surprising to the reader of Luke, for Jesus “lives to extend and receive hospitality.”¹⁴

The close sequence between the four-fold action of Jesus at table (“took, blessed, broke, gave”) and the moment of recognition on the part of the disciples (“then their eyes were opened”) suggests

that Luke intends to link the two by way of remembrance: “While they are at table he gives thanks for the bread spread before them and breaks it, in a way with which they must have been familiar from previous occasions.”¹⁵ The four distinctive gestures of Jesus expressly recall two prior scenes in which Jesus presides at a meal in the course of his earthly ministry—at the feeding of the five thousand (9:16) and at the last supper (22:19). On both these occasions Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and distributes it (with some variation in the verb forms). As Robert C. Tannehill observes: “The careful repetition of this sequence of actions would not be necessary if it were not significant. It suggests an intention to recall previous occasions on which this occurred.”¹⁶ Thus, in the events of Emmaus, Jesus implements his own last supper directive: “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24; omitted in Matthew and Mark).

The presence of eucharistic (thanksgiving) language at Luke 9:16 suggests that Luke intends the story of the miraculous feeding to pre-figure the Lord’s Supper (22:19; 24:30). As in the story of Emmaus, the narrative of the loaves and the fish (Luke 9:10-17) centers on the recognition of Jesus. Luke’s placement of this miracle story comes on the heels of a series of questions concerned with “who” Jesus is. Jesus declares a woman’s sins forgiven in the house of Simon the Pharisee and the invited guests ask: “*Who is this* who even forgives sins?” (7:49); Jesus stills the windstorm and the disciples ponder: “*Who then is this*, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” (8:25); Herod hears about all that Jesus has been doing and wonders: “John I beheaded; but *who is this* about whom I hear such things?” (9:9). Jesus himself poses this question to his disciples in this particular section of Luke: “*Who do the crowds say that I am?*” (9:18). The answer finally comes in the form of Peter’s confession. Jesus is “the Messiah of God” (9:20). Significantly, Peter’s confession occurs immediately after Jesus feeds the multitude with the loaves and the fish. Noticing this connection, John Nolland writes: “Luke seems to be suggesting that the disciples come to a conviction of Jesus’ identity here in a manner analogous to the way that in the eucharist the Lord Jesus is made known to the believer in the breaking of the bread (see 24:30-31,35).”¹⁷

By having Jesus challenge the disciples to feed the hungry crowd (9:13: “You give them something to eat”), Luke stresses the social dimensions of the supper. The disciples themselves become the agents of feeding, the distributors of the bread that Jesus takes, blesses, and breaks (9:16). The theme of inclusiveness appears in the note that “all” are satis-

fied with the bread Jesus provides (9:17; cf. v. 15). Thus, the story reminds us that the Lord's Supper is not a solitary act, to be taken in isolation from a hungry humanity. In the eucharistic meals of the early church (where the story of the miraculous feeding probably first circulated), the Lord's Supper was part of a larger fellowship meal in which the richer members of the congregation were to share their provisions with the poorer members (see 1 Cor 11:17-34). The combination of spiritual recognition and social responsibility in the supper leads Nolland to offer the following interpretation of the story of the loaves:

We recognize who Jesus is through what he makes possible in our midst. He is the ultimate host at our eucharistic meals. At the breaking of bread we recognize him for who he is. There in a wonderful way we find the nourishment that we need. There also we are challenged to meet the needs of others and to recognize the resources that through Jesus we actually have to meet needs.¹⁸

Repetition in Acts

So far, we have been concerned primarily to look "back" upon the Gospel of Luke, to see how the table fellowship practice of Jesus provides a deeper understanding of the breaking of bread motif at Emmaus. For the disciples, the recognition of Jesus comes via the remembrance of Jesus, particularly through his familiar role as host. Now our concern is to look "forward" to Acts, to see how the experience of Emmaus anticipates the practice of the early church. The decision is not an arbitrary one, since Acts can be regarded, at the very least, as a kind of "sequel" to the Third Gospel (Acts 1:1).¹⁹

When the disciples on the road to Emmaus return to Jerusalem, they tell the other disciples how Jesus was made known to them in "the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). This phrase, which summarizes the entire action of Jesus at table (24:30), reappears in Luke's story of the early church. Five times in Acts believers "break bread" after the manner of Jesus at Emmaus (2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35). These words become Luke's standard way of referring to the Lord's Supper.

The first repetition of the phrase appears on the day of Pentecost as part of a four-fold description

of early congregational life in Jerusalem. Speaking of these believers, Luke writes: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). Unfortunately, the translators of the *NRSV* do not render the definite article in front of "bread" (lit. "the bread") as they do in the case of "the prayers" (probably a reference to appointed times of prayer at the temple). Since meals in Jewish households typically began with the breaking of bread (cf. Jer 16:7), this verse may have in mind nothing more than a common meal, yet the presence of the article suggests that a particular meal is in view—"the" bread of the Lord's Supper. That Luke lumps the breaking of the bread with the other "spiritual" activities mentioned (teaching, fellowship, and prayer), also lends support to a eucharistic understanding. Upon repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38), the newly established Jerusalem believers break the bread together in a context of social concern (Acts 2:43-45; cf. 4:32-35).

The second reference to breaking bread also describes the activities of the early Jerusalem church: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (2:46). Once again,

an ordinary meal may be in view, especially since this time no definite article appears in connection with "bread." Yet Luke's deliberate juxtaposition of attendance at the temple services with the breaking of bread in believers'

Upon repentance and baptism, the newly established Jerusalem believers break the bread together in a context of social concern

homes leads one to think of eucharistic meals. As Charles Lemuel Dibble writes: "The clear meaning here is that the Christians observed not only the Jewish ritual, but a corresponding Christian rite."²⁰

Paul's rather long-winded sermon at Troas, which puts the young Eutychus to sleep much to his regret, is the occasion for the third and fourth references to breaking bread in Acts (20:7-12). Three things are of particular note in this passage. First, the purpose of the Christians gathering at Troas was in order "to break bread" (v. 7). That Paul both "breaks" and "tastes" this bread (see v. 11 where the definite article appears) suggests that the Lord's Supper was eaten in the context of a common meal—

perhaps the agape or "Love Feast" mentioned or alluded to elsewhere in the New Testament (see Jude 12; 1 Cor 11:20-21; perhaps 2 Pet 2:13). Second, Luke places this occasion on the "first day of the week," one of the earliest references to Christian worship on Sunday, "the Lord's day" (see 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10). Whether Luke has Roman or Jewish time in mind is uncertain (probably Roman); more striking is the explicit linkage of the Lord's Supper to the day of resurrection, "the first day of the week" (Luke 24:1) when Jesus makes himself known in the breaking of the bread. Third, the meal eaten on this occasion accompanied a lengthy sermon by Paul (20:7, 9, 11), thus coupling word and sacrament in the context of worship.

The fifth reference is the most intriguing of all, coming in the midst of Paul's shipwreck journey to Rome. Having gone fourteen days without food, Paul encourages his fellow shipmates to take food (27:33-34). Then 27:35 reads: "And after he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat." The language is so strikingly similar to the eucharistic language at Luke 9:16; 22:19; and 24:30 that "it is sometimes supposed that this had become a 'communion service' for the two or three Christians on board."²¹ However, the presence of so many pagan Gentiles on board the ship has discouraged many scholars from seeing a possible eucharistic reference here. Yet in a recent work Philip Francis Esler persuasively argues that such a view fails to take into consideration the pervasive theme of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles evident elsewhere in Acts (10:1-11:18; 16:14-15; 16:25-34; 18:7-11). According to Esler, Paul's exhortation to *everyone* on board (including Jews) to take food "reinforces Luke's persistent emphasis on the fact that the old barriers between Jew and Gentile have been decisively shattered in the eucharistic fellowship of the Christian community and that an era of salvation for all humanity has now been inaugurated, even if there are some who do not yet realize it."²²

What, then, can we learn from the various references to breaking bread in the Book of Acts? First, the early Christian communities depicted in Acts are table fellowship communities. "When we meet, we eat" is a humorous slogan used by many churches today, but it well describes the practice of early Christian believers. Breaking bread functions as a form of recognition in Acts much as it does in the story of Emmaus: Christians, like the Lord they serve, are known by the way they eat. We hear of various kinds of churches today—"growing" churches, "seeker-sensitive" churches, "mega" churches. Yet how often do we characterize a church by the way it eats? According to Luke, the way a church breaks bread together is perhaps the most distinctive mark of all, perpetuating the memory of Jesus' own table fellowship practice.

Second, that the fellowship meals of believers in Acts are not simply ordinary meals is clear from their link to Emmaus. As Tannehill observes:

The Emmaus meal, described as "the breaking of the bread," provides the link between the meals of Jesus with his followers in Luke and the meals of the believers in Acts. The presence of the risen Christ at Emmaus may also suggest that the meals in Acts go beyond fellowship among the believers to include communion with the risen Lord.²³

When we gather together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we must do so with the firm conviction that the risen Lord is present with us, revealing himself to us. Like the disciples at Emmaus, our prayer must always be: "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." For when we do, we continue to encounter the ever-present one in the breaking of the bread.

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