

Personalized vs. Parallel Eating: Luke's Challenge for the 21st Century Church

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Some years ago my wife and I were on a tour of Western Europe. On one occasion in the city of Munich we decided to eat lunch at a McDonald's. It was crowded that day, with very few tables open, but we finally located an empty booth and sat down to eat. Suddenly, and much to our surprise, two young teenagers speaking German scooted in beside us, one sitting next to my wife and one sitting next to me. They happily went about their conversation as if we weren't even there, oblivious to the two American tourists sitting beside them. My wife and I looked at each other, communicating our bewilderment in a silent but knowing stare, unfamiliar and uncomfortable with this aspect of German dining customs. We allowed a few minutes to pass before trying to start up a conversation. We did our best to understand their answers to our questions but with limited success. We hurriedly finished our lunch, seeking closure on this rather awkward social arrangement (at least to us), and left.

As I think back on that occurrence now in light of the subject of this article, I ponder exactly what kind of table fellowship we ostensibly enjoyed with our two young German friends that day. There we were—sitting next to each other in the same restaurant and even at the same table—and yet perfect strangers to one another. No meaningful contact took place between us. We ate our food, they ate theirs. We were in the closest of physical proximity but might as well have been miles apart. Was this in fact sharing a meal? Did we in fact “eat with” these two young Germans? Was this an example of what the New Testament calls *koinonia*?

The answer, of course, depends on how one defines a meal. The noted New Testament social historian Philip F. Esler would call what we experienced that day “parallel eating,” when two parties sit at the same table but do not share the same food, drink, or vessels.¹ A good example of this kind of eating occurs in the apocryphal book of Judith when the heroine Judith, a pious Jewish widow surreptitiously bent on the destruction of the wicked Assyrian general Holofernes (in hopes of saving her village of Bethulia from destruction), accepts the general's invitation to dine with him. When the time comes to eat with the general, Judith eats in his presence but refuses to eat his food or drink his wine; she partakes rather of her own food and wine in vessels that her maid had brought (Jdt 12.19; see 10.5). Here is a picture of a Gentile and a Jew eating “in parallel,” much like people sitting next to each other at an outdoor concert might politely say, “Stay off my blanket, please, and eat your own sandwich. Thank you very much.”²

How different is this parallel eating from the kind of personalized eating that characterized the eucharistic fellowship of the Pauline house congregations! Warning the Corinthians to avoid idolatry, Paul draws an analogy to the way that they customarily eat the Lord's Supper: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all

1. Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 102.

2. I owe this insightful analogy to Heather Holland, Chaplain and Dean of Student Life at Emmanuel Christian Seminary in Johnson City, Tennessee.

partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10.16–17).³ Here Paul’s argument assumes, as Esler keenly observes, a social setting in which the participants sit together at table, passing from hand to hand the same food, wine and vessels, symbolic of their oneness in Jesus the Messiah.⁴

How about Luke? Luke is well-known for his interest in homes and hospitality. So often does Jesus enjoy hospitality in the homes of strangers in Luke’s Gospel that it could be humorously observed that Jesus is either “going to a meal, at a meal, or coming back from a meal.”⁵ Given this emphasis in Luke, it comes as no surprise that the earliest followers of Jesus in Acts eat quite often as well. They regularly devote themselves to the breaking of bread as an essential dimension of their apostolic faith (Acts 2.42) and eat in various homes as part of their daily life together (Acts 2.46). But as the Jesus movement begins to reach Gentiles, what kind of eating does Luke envision taking place? When he describes Christians meeting on the first day of the week “to break bread” (Acts 20.7), what kind of eating does he have in mind? In mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles, did Jewish Christians eat apart from the Gentiles, perhaps bring their own food and wine to the fellowship meal, or partake of common provisions? In short, did they engage in personalized or parallel eating?

What’s in a Meal?

The failure to discern the critical difference between the two kinds of eating described above lies at the heart of a debate in recent years that impacts our discussion significantly and poses serious questions for the contemporary church. According to E. P. Sanders, a well-known expert in the literature of Second Temple Judaism, Jews of a more liberal persuasion could and did eat with their Gentile counterparts.⁶ He concedes, however, that a “harder line” brand of Judaism insisted on keeping separate from Gentiles, such as we find in the second-century BCE text of *Jubilees*: “Separate yourself from the Gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs. Because their deeds are defiled, and all their ways contaminated, and despicable, and abominable” (22.16).⁷ A number of copies of this text appear among the scrolls of the Dead Sea sect, whose members vowed upon joining the community to disassociate from “all the men of injustice who walk in the way of wickedness” (1 QS 5.10) and to refuse eating and drinking with any non-member (1 QS 5.15).⁸

A similar stance towards Gentiles appears in a number of other works of the late Second Temple period, going beyond the restrictions of the original biblical food laws (Lev 11.1–47; Deut 14.1–21). In one, Tobit bemoans the apostasy of his fellow exiles and refuses to eat the food (literally, “breads”) of the Gentiles, being mindful of God with all his heart (Tob 1.10–12); when Tobit desires to extend his hospitality during the feast of Pentecost, he expressly tells his son to go and look for some poor person “of our people” to invite to dinner (Tob 2.2–3). In others there is an added aversion to drinking Gentile wine, which does not appear in the biblical legislation at all. In a Greek addition to the book that bears her name, Esther prays: “Your servant has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honored the king’s feast or drunk the wine of libations” (Add Esth 14.17). The biblical book of Daniel, written in the same general time period, reflects the same attitude: Daniel and the three Jewish youths resolve not to defile themselves with the king’s food or wine, and instead convince the palace master to serve them only vegetables and water, presumably in isolation from the other courtiers (Dan 1.8–21).

3. All scriptural citations, including apocryphal, come from the New Revised Standard Version.

4. See Esler, Galatians, 96, 100–102, who hones and clarifies the argument of his earlier work, *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), in response to criticisms by E. P. Sanders. Key differences between Esler and Sanders will readily emerge in the course of this article.

5. Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian. Luke’s Passion Account as Literature* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 47.

6. E. P. Sanders, “Jewish Association with Gentiles and Galatians 2:11–14,” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 170–88.

7. James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. (2 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985). All pseudepigraphal citations come from this volume.

8. Cited in Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

Sanders dismisses such texts as “extremist” views in Judaism, but Esler argues that these and other texts show that there was a general ban on Jews eating and drinking with Gentiles in the ancient world. The key difference between Sanders and Esler is what it means to share a meal. Sanders interprets “eating with” as simply “eating in the presence of,” much like the way that Judith ate her own meal in her own vessels in the company of Holofernes, or the way that my wife and I ate our own meal in the presence of those two young German boys in Munich. Sanders admits as much. After surveying much of the same Jewish literature of the period, he concludes: “The point of all these exemplary stories of how to eat with Gentiles is that Jews should sit and *eat their own food or only vegetables.*”⁹ What Sanders doesn’t realize is that he is really arguing for parallel eating as a definition of table fellowship, a rather different phenomenon than the personalized *koinonia* that characterized the eucharistic meals of the early Christians and one that, as Esler points out, “has no significance for the interpretation of Paul, or Luke, or any other New Testament writer.”¹⁰

“Eating and Drinking Whatever They Provide”

What is significant for the interpretation of the New Testament, particularly for the Gentile writer who composed the two-volume work of Luke-Acts, is the kind of hand-to-hand eating and drinking that characterized Jewish and Gentile Christians in a new and inclusive community. In his inaugural sermon in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4.16–30), Jesus signals that his ministry would reach Gentiles; this signal only gains in strength when Jesus sends out seventy(-two) messengers to bring peace to households (Luke 10.1–16). The passage is chock-full of allusions to Gentiles, including the important symbolic number of “seventy” or “seventy-two,” which, on either reading, recalls the number of nations in the world in the Greek translation of Genesis 10.¹¹ Since Luke uses “twelve” symbolically to refer to the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22.30; Acts 2.36), it is very likely that he intends “seventy” or “seventy-two” symbolically as well.¹²

In sending out the seventy(-two), Jesus gives precise instructions about what they should say and how they should eat:

Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!”

And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move from house to house. (Luke 10.5–7)

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Luke 10.8–9)

Given the general ban noted above, these words of Jesus would strike the reader as nothing short of amazing. Gentiles in Luke’s day were certainly well aware of the social boundaries separating Jews from non-Jews. Writing in the century just before Luke penned his gospel, the Greek writer Diodorus of Sicily mentions how it was the custom of the Jews “not to break bread with any other race” (*Library of History* 34.1.2); writing in the century just after, the Roman historian Tacitus observes how it was characteristic of Jews to “sit apart at meals” (*Histories* 5.5). Thus Luke has Peter acknowledge to the Gentile household of Cornelius that they themselves know how unlawful it is for him even to be present with them (Acts 10.28; cf. Luke 7.6).

9. Sanders, “Jewish Association with Gentiles,” 177, emphasis mine.

10. Esler, *Galatians*, 102. For Esler’s decisive answer to Sanders as well as Esler’s further development and clarification of his argument, see 93–116.

11. Whether “seventy” or “seventy-two” is the correct reading matters little for our interpretation since the former reflects the number of nations in the Hebrew text while the latter reflects the number of nations in the Greek. Other allusions are possible (see most commentaries), but less likely.

12. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 1:232–33.

Yet Jesus instructs his messengers to violate that very social script when they bring the good news of the kingdom. They do not discriminate in their choice of which houses to enter and hence do not determine in advance with whom they will eat or what they will eat. Rather, they eat and drink whatever the household “provides” (*ta par auton*—literally, “the things of/from them”) and “what is set before” them (*ta paratithemena*), anticipating the same actions of the Roman jailor at Philippi when he “set before” Paul and Silas non-kosher food, employing the same verb (Acts 16.34). Here then is no parallel eating. The eating and drinking enjoyed by the seventy(-two) is of the most intimate, personalized sort, with every indication that food and wine were shared and enjoyed with the household in celebration of a common salvation.

Luke, of course, has already prepared the reader to expect this kind of inclusive table fellowship when Jesus multiplied the loaves for the five thousand, and all shared a meal in small group settings with strong eucharistic overtones (Luke 9.12–17, esp. v. 16; cf. 22.19; 24.30). The preaching of the kingdom by the seventy(-two) gives the meal a further eschatological significance, foreshadowing the messianic banquet of the end time when even the poor and crippled and blind and lame will join with others on the margins of society to eat and drink in a house filled to the brim with outsiders (Luke 14.15–24). In both cases guests do not get to choose in advance with whom they will eat or determine the menu; the implication is that guests share their food and provisions across socially stratified lines.¹³ In Jesus’ eschatological purview, unexpected guests from every nook and cranny of the earth will come to sit at table with the patriarchs of Israel in the kingdom of God (Luke 13.28–30).

“Why Did You Go to Uncircumcised Men and Eat with Them?”

The kind of personalized eating envisioned by Jesus in the mission of the seventy(-two) finds extended expression on the pages of Luke’s second volume when Peter enters the house of Cornelius and preaches peace to his household (Acts 10.1–48).¹⁴ That Luke feels compelled to narrate this story three times (Acts 10.1–48; 11.1–18; 15.7–11, 13–21) reveals something of its fundamental importance for Luke and the sociopolitical motivations of his theology.

Many interpreters think that the story is simply about justifying the conversion of the Gentiles, but something more is going on, as indicated by the criticism leveled at Peter by the Jewish church in Jerusalem:

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11.1–3)

Notice, here, the two-fold accusation against Peter: 1) he entered the house of Gentiles; and 2) he ate with them. No mention is made about Peter baptizing Gentiles, who could conceivably maintain their own separate existence and ethos as followers of the Messiah; rather, as Esler observes, “The central issue in this narrative is not that the gospel has been preached to gentiles, but the far more particular fact, of great ethnic and social significance, that Peter has lived and eaten with them.”¹⁵

Peter undergoes a radical transformation in the process of the story, which changes his perspective on eating with Gentiles dramatically. His prior attitude toward the Gentiles considered their food to be unclean and uneatable (Acts 10.14) and the Gentiles themselves to be unclean, summarized in his opening statement to

13. On more specific implications of Jesus’ mealtime practices for a first-century honor/shame society, see S. Scott Bartchy, “The Historical Jesus and Honor Reversal at the Table,” in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. W. Stegemann, B. J. Malina, and G. Theissen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 175–83, especially his discussion of the Lukan Jesus’ open “symposia” practices in the context of ancient Greco-Roman meals (see his entry, “Table Fellowship,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall [Downers Grove: IVP Press, 1992], 798–99). I wish to thank Professor Bartchy for pointing out the implications of these two passages for the meals envisioned in the mission of the seventy(-two).

14. For the development of this theme, see David Lertis Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 86–134.

15. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 93.

Cornelius and his household: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10.28). The word “unlawful” (*athemitos*) has close associations with idolatry in other writers of the period (Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.650; 2 Macc 6.5; 7.1; 10.34; 3 Macc 5.20), as it does in its only other usage in the New Testament (1 Pet 4.3). Peter seems to regard Gentiles as unclean on account of their idolatrous practices and would not even *think* about eating with them lest he too be implicated in idolatry. Yet God has done something dramatic in Peter’s life. God “showed” Peter in a heavenly vision that all foods were now clean and that the old divisions and barriers between Jews and Gentiles no longer pertained (Acts 10.9–16). Thus, by story’s end, Peter has not only baptized Gentiles, but he and his fellow Jewish believers have accepted an invitation to stay in the home of Cornelius, enjoying meals and eucharistic fellowship with his Gentile household over a period of “some days” (*hemeras tinas*) (Acts 10.48). In the course of the story Peter had learned to read from a different “script”—entering Gentile homes, preaching peace to households, and eating and drinking “whatever they provide.”

The Challenge for the Church Today

So, the quintessentially Lukan question must be asked of us: how do we eat? Do our eating practices in the church today resemble the personalized eating habits of the seventy(-two) messengers and Peter who eat and drink in close and intimate companionship across social and ethnic lines? Or do much of our eating practices really take place “in parallel,” like when my wife and I ate at the same table with those two young German strangers but had very little meaningful contact? The breaking down of ethnic and cultural barriers lies at the heart of Luke’s concept of salvation, the “peace” sent by God through Jesus Christ (Acts 10.36) and announced by shepherds (Luke 2.14). For Luke, it is not enough simply to baptize Gentiles; one must learn to live and eat with them as well.

It is not easy to learn how to live together in church in a manner suggested by the intimate act of sharing food and drink. The New Testament itself bears witness to how big a problem table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles really was. The solution offered by Luke in his sending of the seventy(-two) is to recognize that all foods are clean, thereby abrogating the long-standing barriers between Jew and Gentile (see also Mark 7.19b; Luke 11.37–41; Rom 14.14, 20; Eph 2.11–16). Yet not all early Christians could share such a radical conviction that effectively removed the very basis for Israel’s existence as God’s separate and holy people of which the food laws served as a concrete visual reminder (see Lev 20.24–26). A different solution, posed from the opposite side, demanded that Gentiles be circumcised (in effect, made Jews), precluding the problem altogether (see Acts 15.1, 5; Gal. 5.12–14). In between these polar opposites was a more practical, pastoral solution: ask Gentile Christians to respect a Jewish menu in matters of food and drink so as to remove Jewish offense as much as possible. This solution goes back to James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, with his advocacy of the so-called “apostolic decree” (Acts 15.20, 29; 21.25), but the limited geographical scope of the decree (Acts 15.23; 16.4) suggests that it remained at best a limited and temporary solution. Paul seems to have worked a similar compromise between the “weak” and the “strong” at Rome, though he himself remained convinced “in the Lord Jesus” that all foods were clean (Rom 14.14, 20).

Where do we find ourselves on this spectrum at the opening of the twenty-first century? The growing field of food and identity studies has emphasized the important role of food in defining group boundaries. As one Mexican-American young woman remarked when reading the story of Daniel and his three friends and their effort to retain their Jewish identity: “Feels like they don’t want to be stripped away from it. They want to hold on to what they actually can from it. If they aren’t in control of being in their homeland, at least they can control this, being able to eat these types of foods. They know they can say, ‘I can eat this.’” She went on to state: “I think one of the ways we [the Mexican-American community] are continuously reminded, believe it or not, is with *food*. ‘Cause you know you are at home and you are eating your meals.”¹⁶

16. Kelly Dagley, “Immigrant Readings of Daniel 1” (unpublished seminar paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, March 18, 2011, emphasis hers). Dagley nicely summarizes the point: “If they cannot physically be in their homeland, then they can try to eat as if they are.” I wish to thank Professor Dagley, my colleague at Hope International University, for providing a copy of her paper to me.

In our postcolonial age that celebrates all things multicultural, how do we express our essential oneness in Christ while at the same time respect and retain social and ethnic identity in the church? Can there be the kind of free and open access between peoples inherent in personalized eating if that eating violates a group's ethnic or cultural boundaries, or if ethnic identity makes certain areas of social interaction off-limits as suggested by some recent sociological theories? Are we left in reality to eat "in parallel," maintaining a kind of "separate but equal" existence that seems to fall short of the oneness envisioned in Christ? In the context of the Stone-Campbell Movement, which has always insisted on the visibility of the church's unity around a common table, what exactly is the nature of the unity we seek?

For Luke, those who hear the word of God and do it become brothers and sisters in the non-biologically related family of Jesus (Luke 8.19–21). Is Luke portraying the early Christians as a "third race" (to use Tertullian's expression) with a new social and cultural identity all their own marked by unrestricted *koinonia* at table?¹⁷ Does Luke envision the church as made up of two or more constituent communities who eat in parallel with one another (or perhaps not at all) or as one household of faith where all are guests and Jesus is host (Luke 24.28–31)?¹⁸ By separating himself from the table of the Gentiles at Antioch (see Gal 2.11–14), Peter was in effect asking Gentiles to become Jews; by removing food distinctions between Jews and Gentiles at table, is Luke in effect asking Jews to become Gentiles? Or, is he asking both Jews and Gentiles to become something else altogether?

*As Christ breaks bread, and bids us share, each proud division ends.
The love that made us, makes us one, and strangers now are friends,
and strangers now are friends.¹⁹*

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17. I wish to thank my colleague, K. C. Richardson, for the intriguing Tertullian reference.

18. Notice the shift of Jesus' role here from invited guest (v. 29) to hospitable host (v. 30). I wish to thank Julia Fogg for the insightful suggestion that the church could deepen its personalization of table fellowship if one group doesn't see itself as "guest" and the other as "host," but both groups see themselves as guests and Jesus as host. Perhaps then there would be the willingness to receive service from others, whatever the food.

19. Brian Wren, "I Come with Joy," Hope Publishing, 1971.