

Personalized Eating and Community in Christ

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In his important and cogent challenge to the twenty-first century church, David Matson has spoken to my heart in two ways. First, while I had many similar German experiences of “parallel eating” in the university cafeteria (*Mensa*) when I was teaching in Tuebingen, my own first experience of such parallel eating occurred in the congregation where I was baptized (more on that below). Second, he has brilliantly drawn on his own expertise in exegeting Luke’s two-volume narrative to focus very appropriately on the high level of attention Luke gives to table fellowship, to the meaning of such eating together, and to the households in which these meals were shared.

Responses to “Personalized vs. Parallel Eating”

Three of Matson’s exegetical and contextual points are particularly telling. First, I find completely convincing Matson’s clear distinction between the *parallel* eating of different foods in the same place and *personalized* eating, that is, actually sharing the same food, hand-to-hand and face-to-face, as a sign and experience of interpersonal unity.

Second, I was not initially convinced by Matson’s emphasis on the report of Jesus’ sending out the 70/72 as signaling the intentional and radical inclusion of Gentiles in Jesus’ table fellowship. However, my further reflection has resulted in my unqualified “yes.” To be sure, I could wish that Luke had gone beyond the use of the table of nations and our knowledge that there were Gentiles or predominantly Gentile villages in such areas as the Decapolis, Perea, Gaulanitis and Samaria to mentioning specifically that the “sent out ones” entered and stayed in *Gentile* homes. Was Luke simply waiting until later to highlight so strongly Peter’s dramatic entering the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius (see below)?

Third, I am pleased that Matson has called our attention to the “strong eucharistic overtones” in Luke’s report about Jesus’ feeding large and small groups of people in contexts that practically demanded *personalized* eating. The high importance of these events for the early Christ-followers is emphasized by the reports in *all four Gospels* of the feeding of the five thousand, for whom Jesus was the reason they were in the same place at the same time.

I offer here a few suggestions for strengthening Matson’s argument. I think that more should be made of the Lukan Jesus’ reputation for eating with anyone who would eat with him—and doing so in God’s name—which certainly constitutes personalized eating! In my experience it seems frequently forgotten or ignored that Jesus presented the three unique parables in Luke 15 about God’s concern for the “lost” precisely in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling and saying: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2). Specific reference could be made to “Jews who lived like Gentiles,” such as Zacchaeus of Jericho (Luke 19), as a bridge to Gentiles who lived like Gentiles. For context, see the condemnation of the sons of Israel in Jubilees 15:33-34 as “making themselves like the Gentiles” if they did not circumcise their sons.

If for his article Matson had been given more space, he could also have elaborated on the fact that the Pharisees sought to bring all of Israel into obedience to their profound concern for “purity,” especially ritual

purity, in a culture obsessed with purity concerns. In this context, it does perplex me that in light of Luke's interests, Luke presents no direct parallel to Mark 7:1-23, especially to Jesus' words in vs. 15: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile," words that even many skeptical scholars are convinced the historical Jesus taught. Mark then concludes: "Thus he [Jesus] declared all foods clean" (7:19), which opened the door to sharing food with everyone. To be sure, later, Luke makes this point explicit in his narrative, which directly connects Peter's vision of God's declaring all foods clean with Peter's then going to the home of the "unclean" Gentile Cornelius and staying there "for several days," implying that some previously-feared personalized eating was enjoyed by all—in God's name. And, as Matson notes, Acts 11:3 specifically states that Peter was criticized for eating with those Gentiles.

Even more could be said about the historical Jesus' profound challenge to the central role played by limited table fellowship (and parallel eating) in reinforcing boundaries and statuses widely believed to be sanctioned by God. Jesus' own radically inclusive table-fellowship practice laid the foundation for his followers to share—with each other, with those yet to come, and even with enemies—all things necessary for life, material and spiritual

Parallel Eating "in Church"

Finally, come with me to Canton, Ohio, where I was baptized at age sixteen. There, in the "First Christian Church," I had my first experience in *parallel* eating—during the celebration of the Lord's Supper, of all places. The elements were distributed to more than 2,000 people by a large group of deacons who had been trained by Masons (who knew "floor work") to serve everyone in a period of less than four minutes. The service was being broadcast on the radio, so unless the choir sang a hymn (which they usually did) these four minutes were regarded as "radio dead time." During that period, following the two prayers at the table, no one spoke to anyone or even looked at anyone longer than it took to pass the trays with the little wafers and cups of grape juice. One elder declared his piety to me by stating that he never looked at the person who served him beyond perhaps noticing that he was wearing brown shoes.

In strong contrast, when I have been invited to preach in Germany and the U.S.A. and given the privilege of presiding at the Lord's Meal, before the distribution I have urged the good folks to turn to their neighbors to be sure that they at least knew the first names on either side of them in preparation for looking each other in the eyes when the trays were being passed, to smile, and to offer some form of personal blessing—or if one were especially shy, at least to quote an appropriate passage of scripture. Every time that a congregation has followed my lead in such a simple ritual, folks have come up to me after the service to report that they just experienced the most meaningful celebration of the Lord's Supper in their lives. My friends, we can and we must do better, emphasizing *personalized* eating (and sharing our lives with each other) in the name of Jesus.

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