

TABLE FELLOWSHIP IN LUKE-ACTS

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Introduction

"Who is my neighbor?" This is what the lawyer asks Jesus in Luke 10, and it is a question that still confronts the church today. Whom should we welcome? Whom should we, rightly or wrongly, exclude from our associations? How should we act toward those whom society does not look kindly upon: the immigrant (legal or otherwise), the poor, the homeless, and the social outcast?

I write this essay as a white North American. As such, I belong to a societal demographic that (a) is the richest in the world in capital and the means to multiply that capital and (b) is increasingly suspicious toward those who are not "like us." These two characteristics pose a challenge to churches that also fall into that demographic. As Christians in North America, we are called to see the importance of hospitality and meal fellowship as issues, not just with political or social ramifications, but as biblical and theological issues that go to the heart of the gospel. I hope to demonstrate in this paper that our faithfulness to the way of Jesus is directly linked to our posture of hospitality.

To address the posture of the church with regards to hospitality and welcome, I will examine three key passages from Luke-Acts.¹ All three passages deal with meals

¹ Many scholars place an emphasis on this theme of hospitality and welcome in Luke, such as Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John H. Elliott, "Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity: Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (Fall 1991), 102-108; Elliott, "Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 211-240; Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (SNTSMS 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); J. Massynbaerde Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest: Jesus and Violence in*

and table fellowship as being exemplary of the offer of hospitality. Examining the ministry and attitude of the Lucan Jesus puts us on the path to understanding how we can embody the same spirit of hospitality and inclusion in today's world. In the first section, I will outline the significance of meals and table fellowship in 1st century Judaism, especially for purity groups such as the Pharisees. Charting their table practice enables us to outline their cosmic vision of who they were, who God was, and how God was working in the world. Having surveyed that, I will examine three passages from Luke-Acts regarding meals that enable us to see how Jesus and his followers subverted the story of exclusivity and replaced it with one of hospitality and inclusivity toward those usually left out. As Elliott notes, "In Luke's account, it is occasions of hospitality and meals which present related dilemmas concerning appropriate modes of behavior and social interaction."² By emphasizing how Jesus treated foods eaten, purity rituals undertaken, and the company he kept in table fellowship, I hope to show how Jesus re-formed and expanded the meaning of the people of God. In this way, Luke gives us the great reversal of Jesus' ministry, whereby those formerly excluded are now the primary bearers of the kingdom of God. I will conclude with some suggestions for the church in North America. As the continued embodiment of the way of Jesus, we can and must exemplify the sort of social, economic and religious hospitality that was

Luke (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); John Paul Heil, *The Meals Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach* (SBLMS 52; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999); Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 241-268; Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 361-87; Neyrey, "The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts: 'They Turn the World Upside Down'," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 271-304; B. P. Robinson, "The Place of the Emmaus Story in Luke-Acts," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 30:4, 481-497; John Howard Yoder, "The Implications of the Jubilee," ch.3 *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1994.

demonstrated by Jesus and the early church.

The Significance of the Meal and Table Fellowship

In a highly compartmentalized and secularized society, hospitality is usually seen simply as a matter of etiquette and appropriate manners. This, however, is far from a Lucan view of hospitality. B. P. Robinson explicitly states, "...the hospitality motif is considerably more than a secular interest of Luke's: it is nothing less than a way of describing the Christ-event."³ Luke's gospel is replete with scenes, many of them unique to his gospel, that take place in homes and at meals, as well as many stories and sayings of Jesus that revolve around the issue of hospitality, welcome, and meals.⁴ Luke seems to be telling us that, to understand Jesus, we must see the importance of his attitude of hospitality, which he practiced against the grain of the cultural and religious expectations of his own society. Therefore, we must recognize that the scenes of dining are central facets of who Jesus is and the kingdom he is bringing.⁵

Luke portrays Jesus as a traveling prophet who, as such, consistently receives hospitality in the form of meals at homes. As a teacher, Jesus also acts as host for many meals as well.⁶ Jesus' table practice in these passages must not be neglected, as Bailey asserts that, "Table fellowship anywhere in the world is a relatively serious matter. This is especially true in the Middle East."⁷ Consequently, meals and table fellowship serve as complex social events, functioning "(a) [as] ceremony, (b) [as] mirrors of social

² Elliott, "Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," 102.

³ Robinson, "The Place of the Emmaus Story in Luke-Acts," 485.

⁴ Heil, *Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, 1-2.

⁵ Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, 71.

⁶ 5:29-39; 7:31-50; 9:11-17, 58; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 13:28-30; 14:1-24; 15:1-2; 19:1-10; 22:14-30; 24:28-35; Koenig sees Jesus as a "wandering prophet messiah" in need of, and dispensing, hospitality, *New Testament Hospitality*, 94.

⁷ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 142.

systems, (c) in terms of body symbolism, (d) in terms of reciprocity, and (e) in terms of social relations."⁸ Therefore, in order to grasp what Jesus was doing, we must first discern the religious and societal significance of meals and table fellowship for the Jewish people of Jesus' day.

Meals are a central way of telling a story.⁹ The manner in which the meal is eaten, and whom it is eaten with "symbolizes the social system of a group."¹⁰ As Elliott states, "Food and meals encode social relationships, cultural values and norms, and metaphysical worldviews."¹¹ Therefore, for many first-century Jews, and especially purity groups such as the Essenes and Pharisees, the meal was a microcosm of the universe under their God. Thus, I will look at three key characteristics surrounding the practice of table fellowship, in order to understand the cosmic vision that groups like the Pharisees were enacting and promoting.

The first key characteristic of the meal, as practiced by Pharisees, is the strict regulations surrounding what foods were allowed, and what was prohibited. They ate only those foods which were allowed by the Mosaic law, and took great pains to ensure that even that food did not become corrupt through contact with any unclean vessel or person. This reflects their view that they were a chosen people, and consequently that peculiarity was reflected in the foods which they did and did not eat. Thus, "the Pharisees' table behavior embodies and confirms their view of a distinctive Israel and its temple, even as it affirms their particular role and status in Israel."¹² So, the first aspect of the story told through the meals and table fellowship is that those who partook of the

⁸ Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," 362.

⁹ Ibid., 363.

¹⁰ Ibid., 368.

¹¹ Elliott, "Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," 103.

meals had an exclusive relationship to God.

In addition to the food itself, many Jewish groups had strict regulations surrounding who should and should not be included in the dinner meals for religious reasons.¹³ For example, the Qumran documents prohibit any Gentiles, women, or those with physical defects from eating with the company.¹⁴ This type of practice is also seen in the Pharisees as portrayed by Luke, as there are many disputes over the people with whom Jesus eats.¹⁵ The Pharisees, in their concern for purity, attempted to replicate the purity and practices of the Temple on a household level.¹⁶ Even for those included by the Pharisees and other groups, however, there was jockeying for social position (14:7-11). One's place at the table was reflective of one's position in the society, and so the table fellowship was a source of contention as each one tried to establish a higher place in the order and structure of the society. Therefore, the second aspect of the story told through meal fellowships was this: the people who find favor with God are limited to those in a select group who uphold the purity regulations.¹⁷ Some are, for reasons of ethnicity or economic and social standing, automatically excluded from participating in this meal, which symbolically reflects their exclusion both from the Temple, and the possibility of attaining full membership in the people of God.¹⁸ The table fellowship

¹² Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," 384.

¹³ Heil, *Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, 24.

¹⁴ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 90.

¹⁵ Some key examples are the dinner in Levi's home (5:29-32), Simon and the woman who washed Jesus' feet (7:31-50), the criticisms of the Pharisees and scribes (15:1-2), and dining with Zaccheus (19:1-10).

¹⁶ Neyrey, "The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts," 277. Thus, how the Temple ran was to be symbolic of how the world is ordered.

¹⁷ Johnson notes that many groups showed commonality, generalized reciprocity, and sharing *amongst themselves*, but refused to carry that pattern outside their particular group. Thus, Jesus differentiates his movement by urging his followers to enact that life to everyone, even those outside their particular group; Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 126-7.

¹⁸ Elliott, "Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," 103.

thus circumscribes the boundaries of God's people.¹⁹

The third aspect of the meal was its relation to reciprocity within a society. The participants in a meal would be expected to reciprocate, and consequently invite the host to a similar meal or feast.²⁰ Moxnes outlines a common way to understand this reciprocity, as taking on three forms: negative, balanced, and generalized reciprocity.²¹ The first, negative reciprocity, is the attempt to get something for nothing; it is the attempt to take advantage of someone for one's own gain. The second, balanced reciprocity, is the practice of mutual exchange in attempts to maintain a good social relationship. The third, generalized reciprocity, is giving without expectation of reciprocity or return for what one has given.²² The typical relationship in 1st century Palestine was one of balanced reciprocity, as practiced by the upper economic classes of the people.²³ Among the wealthy, one would engage in meals of hospitality only if one could be sure that the gesture of friendship and hospitality would be repaid. Thus, the third key aspect of the story told, by the rich in their meals, was that only people of certain economic status were worthy of eating with one another. The poor stayed with the poor, and the rich with the rich.²⁴ In this way, the economic classes were stratified

¹⁹ Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Strange Neighbors and Risky Care," *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 272.

²⁰ This was not *always* the case, as many synagogues were places of welcome and hospitality. The general practice of society, and especially the rich, however, was to invite only those who could reciprocate.

²¹ Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 34. The following description of the three types follows the outline given in M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing), 1972.

²² Neyrey also outlines these three forms of reciprocity; Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," 372.

²³ *Ibid.*, 375.

²⁴ Moxnes notes that if the rich were generous, it was typically for the purpose of being given a good name, or honor, in that society. This is the position that Jesus seems to be critiquing in Luke 22:25, where one is generous only for the reciprocation of being called a "benefactor." This is not generosity or love, but rather accepting social/cultural exchange in place of economic reciprocation. Johnson states, "Without the poverty of faith, the very sharing of our possessions may turn out to be a form of bribery," either of God or other persons; Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 83.

and kept separate.

Through meal fellowships, then, the story told by the religious and social elite (usually the same people), was one that focused on the exclusivity of their relationship to God, their balanced relationship to each other, and their superiority over the *am-ha-aretz*. Through the practice of food purity, they reflected a cosmic vision of their chosenness. This is further reflected through the refusal to eat with Gentiles, Samaritans, physically handicapped or deformed.²⁵ These are excluded due to their religious, ethnic, and physical characteristics. In addition, meals served as economic separators, leaving the rich with the rich, and the poor with the poor. These are excluded due to their economic status and inability to reciprocate with those are wealthy.

Jesus and his followers proceeded to overturn all three of these basic boundary markers regarding meals and table fellowships: violating certain laws surrounding food and purity rituals, eating with those who were considered religious outcasts, and giving great importance to including the poor in the proclamation of the kingdom. "In all the meals, the table is the scene of controversy, and the table talk throws light on the means of salvation taught by Jesus; his teachings collide with prevailing norms."²⁶ Thus, we must understand how and why Jesus eats, and with whom he eats in order to see the nature of the people of God that Jesus was re-forming around himself and his practices of the kingdom.²⁷ Through his practice of table fellowship, he was re-drawing the boundaries around the people of God, and including all the wrong people.²⁸ I would

²⁵ Moxnes states that exclusion applies both to those truly outside a group, as well as those technically inside, but deemed unfit or impure. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 56-7.

²⁶ Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, 115.

²⁷ Neyrey refers to this as "mapping" the form and boundary of a society with religious belief at its center; Neyrey, "The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts," 281, 286-9.

²⁸ Keesmaat, "Strange Neighbors," 275.

now like to evaluate three key passages in Luke-Acts that demonstrate how Jesus (and subsequently his followers) subverts the story told in Pharisaical table fellowship, and re-tells it around himself and his followers, with clear implications for a change of attitudes and actions in light of the kingdom.

The Great Banquet: The Outcasts Welcomed (Luke 14:12-24)

The theme of Jesus' emphasis on the poor in Luke is well known.²⁹ Throughout the gospel, Jesus refers positively to the poor, while the rich are cast in a negative light.³⁰ Philip Esler goes so far as to say that, for Luke, the "good news to the destitute is some very grim news for the rich."³¹ A key passage that well encapsulates this theme is Luke 14:12-24, in which a saying and story of Jesus emphasize that the ways of God's kingdom are exemplified through care for the poor, as they are the central recipients of the kingdom.

The first saying that Luke records (12-14) hearkens back to the three levels of reciprocity mentioned earlier. Jesus' counsel here is given to the one who is holding the dinner, which is full of guests who are clamoring for position and attention. We can assume that the person giving the dinner was of some status, probably both socially and economically.³² The advice Jesus gives, however, is to seek the route of generalized reciprocity--giving that seeks neither reciprocal hospitality, nor a social status of honor as a result.³³ Giving a dinner as Jesus prescribes would have a twofold result; first, the host would be incurring financial loss with no hope of recapitulation. Second, by associating

²⁹ Ford gives key factors in the class stratification of 1st-century Palestine; *My Enemy is My Guest*, 4-5. Another helpful overview of the economic system is Douglas E. Oakman, "The Countryside in Luke-Acts," *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 151-179.

³⁰ Key texts include 1:46-55; 4:18-30; 6:20-26; 12:13-21; 16:19-31; 18:18-30; 22:24-30.

³¹ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 188.

³² Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 130.

with the poor, and other unclean social outcasts, the host would be religiously impure and culturally despised. Therefore, this saying of Jesus calls the host to break the religious boundaries of the Pharisees, and to break the social/economic boundaries between the rich and the poor.³⁴ Rather, the host should adopt the dinner system that Jesus advocates: one that trusts God as the only guarantor of reciprocity and abundance, without reliance on a social-economic status quo to preserve the stability.³⁵

In reaction to Jesus' words, someone bursts in with a blessing on all who "break bread" in the kingdom of God. Responding, Jesus tells a story about a banquet. Within the Jewish mindset, a banquet/"breaking bread" is not merely a time to eat together, but has eschatological overtones of the great messianic banquet,³⁶ echoing key scriptures that look forward to the fullness of God's abundance, such as Isaiah 25:6-9, Joel 3:18, and Amos 9:13-15.³⁷ The story of this banquet has several characters that help us to see what sort of kingdom Jesus is proclaiming and how it effects the rich and the poor.

The first characters to note in this story are the guests who were invited, and gave excuses. Heil notes that Jesus' listeners would see them as members of the wealthy urban elite because of the excuses that are given.³⁸ The ability to buy land and the purchase of ten oxen in a single transaction suggests persons of great wealth.³⁹ As well, marriage, as practiced among the wealthier classes, was also greatly influenced by the

³³ Ibid., 131.

³⁴ Ibid., 132.

³⁵ Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community," 249.

³⁶ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 89; Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, 103; Keesmaat, "Strange Neighbors," 274; Robinson, "The Place of the Emmaus Story in Luke-Acts," 485-6.

³⁷ Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 16. N.T. Wright also lists *1 Enoch* 62 and *2 Baruch* 28 as evidence of the same theme; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 1996.

³⁸ Heil, *Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, 107.

³⁹ Braun, *Feasting*, 75.

"economic considerations [that] governed the exchange of women."⁴⁰ These excuses, in addition to revealing their economic status, also show a rejection of their relationship with the host. In that society, the announcement for the banquets would go out well ahead of time, and then another invitation extended when the day of the banquet was at hand.⁴¹ Thus, the invitation extended indicates that it is the day of this great banquet, and the excuses given by the three men were nothing short of a rejection of the friendship and relationship with the host.⁴² The non-attendance by these persons would have meant dishonor and cultural rejection for the host.⁴³ It is therefore plausible to recognize that those who make excuses for missing this banquet do so with preoccupation over acquiring and maintaining wealth, thus prizing economic factors over the friendship and relationship with the host.⁴⁴

The second group of characters in this story are the common and poor people now invited by the host. After rejection by his rich peers, the master sends his servant out again, but it is now to the streets (*πλαταιας*), where the common people live and work, and the lanes (*ρυμιας*), which were the "narrow streets and alleys where the poorest of the non-elite people lived."⁴⁵ In addition to these, the host also brings those from the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76. Johnson sees the marriage excuse as redactionally echoing the call to give up familial priorities (14:26, 33) to follow Jesus (*Sharing Possessions*, 68), while Ford views it as a literary device that uses holy war principles in the call to the kingdom (*My Enemy is My Guest*, 104).

⁴¹ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 94.

⁴² Interestingly, Braun conjectures that "...we may justifiably infer that the motive for the refusal was to apply a punitive measure of disentitlement against someone for espousing views and acting in ways that threatened the values and interests of the elite." (112) In addition, it is probably safe to assume that some in Luke's audience had experienced the social stigma due to inclusive behavior across lines of economic and social status; *Feasting*, 113.

⁴³ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 95.

⁴⁴ Braun also notes the positioning of the story of the man with dropsy in 14:1-6, and explores the evidence that the disease of dropsy, which created an insatiable desire for liquids, was often used metaphorically by Cynics to refer to greed; Braun, *Feasting*, 30ff.

⁴⁵ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 109.

"highways and hedges" to his banquet table. Those who were in these places were people who did not belong, socially, within the walls of the city.⁴⁶ Their participation in this banquet is thus a breach of the social, economic, and religious standards of the city of the day.⁴⁷

The main character of this story is the host of this banquet, and his change of disposition and action,⁴⁸ which is nothing short of a "social conversion."⁴⁹ Faced with the excuses of his peers, he stands to be humiliated by his banquet that would now not happen. By inviting the poor and outcasts, the host is enacting the sort of generalized reciprocity that Jesus called for earlier in vv. 12-14. The central message, then, of this parable, is one that calls Jesus' listeners to become like the converted host of this story, one who exercises generalized reciprocity, without concern for his economic/social status. By giving freely to those who cannot give back, the host of the banquet is not merely doing a good deed, but also participating in the table fellowship of Jesus, which "is participation in the messianic banquet in anticipation of the completion of all things in the end time,"⁵⁰ with the exaltation of the true God of Israel over the false idols of wealth and status.⁵¹ This story of Jesus thus shows that generosity and inclusion of the poor is a central aspect of the kingdom of God, proclaimed and enacted by Jesus through his

⁴⁶ Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts: Urban Social Relations," *Social World of Luke-Acts: Models of Interpretation*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 144-145.

⁴⁷ Another common interpretation, given by Bailey, see these figures primarily as representing the "lost sheep of Israel," and the Gentile community (*Through Peasant Eyes*, 100-101). While that is surely another subtext to what is going on, from the basic narrative this story's central meaning probably revolves more around inclusion of the economically excluded, rather than the religiously excluded, although the two are not far apart at all.

⁴⁸ Tannehill, *Luke: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 231.

⁴⁹ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 109.

⁵⁰ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 111 (italics original).

⁵¹ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 43-55 summarily reiterates the consistent message of Scripture that one must firmly choose between the God of life and the idols of wealth.

inclusive practice of table fellowship.⁵²

Simon the Pharisee and the Sinful Woman (7:36-50)

In addition to the story of the great banquet, the events at the house of Simon the Pharisee are also very important as regards meals, hospitality, and the welcome of sinners to the table fellowship. Examining Luke's account reveals Jesus' attitudes toward those who were, for specifically religious reasons, not extended hospitality by the Pharisees. Because of their lifestyle, they were considered "sinners" and could not be included in the table fellowship by those considered religiously pure.⁵³ By surveying Luke's account, we see an interesting shift taking place in the roles of guest and host in this setting, along with key indicators as to who is included in the meal of God's kingdom.

The setting for this event is the house of Simon the Pharisee, who has decided to host Jesus in his home. As a Pharisee who lived among the people (not isolated in community, e.g. Qumran), "isolation from impure food and people was especially crucial...when he sat down to eat."⁵⁴ Jesus is therefore entering an environment where the stratification between the pure and the impure will be quite noticeable.⁵⁵ As Bailey notes, however, Simon's failure to provide Jesus with water or greet him with a kiss are decidedly inhospitable: "...from a Middle Eastern cultural perspective, the failings of the host are glaring omissions...it is clear that the accepted rituals of welcoming the guest are not merely overlooked in the telling of the story but have been callously omitted by a

⁵² Keesmaat, "Strange Neighbors," 275.

⁵³ "Sinners" would be ostracized from the pure community. Some of the impure occupations are donkey-driver, camel-driver, sailor, shepherd, tax collector, physician, butcher, tanner, weaver, and launderer; Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, 72-73.

⁵⁴ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 3.

⁵⁵ Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 104.

judgmental host."⁵⁶ Into this situation created by Simon's "false hospitality"⁵⁷ comes a woman from the social periphery.

Luke introduces us to a woman from the city, known as a "sinner." The phrase "εν τη πολει αμαρτωλος" most likely refers to the fact that the woman was a prostitute, plying her trade in the city.⁵⁸ The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding the issue of eating with sinners was known to Luke's audience (5:30; 7:34), and in Jesus' ministry, this woman probably came to him on the basis of the report that he was considered to be a friend of sinners.⁵⁹ Simply by appearing at meal time would have disrupted this meal enough, but she also undertakes to show Jesus the hospitality that was lacking by Simon.⁶⁰ The woman then proceeds to wet Jesus' feet with her tears and let down her hair to wipe them. This gesture of letting the hair down was an intimate gesture, usually considered reserved for a woman's husband only.⁶¹ She also proceeded to kiss the feet of Jesus, a gesture of "great humility and abject devotion,"⁶² and anointed him with her perfume. These actions are greatly offensive to Simon, who still sees the woman as a "sinner" and unacceptable for his company.⁶³ But, as Jesus points out (44-46), she has shown hospitality on three counts where Simon specifically refused to show Jesus the sort of genuine hospitality that, as a guest, he deserved. The reason for her hospitality is shown in the brief story Jesus tells.

⁵⁶ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 5.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 20.

⁵⁸ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 8; Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 45; Wright, *Jesus*, 267.

⁵⁹ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 45.

⁶⁰ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 8-9; Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, 135.

⁶¹ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 9; Tannehill, *Luke*, 135.

⁶² Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 10.

⁶³ Bailey notes that even after acceptance by Jesus, Simon still has animosity toward the woman; Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 18.

Jesus, in his story of forgiveness and love, demonstrates to Simon, the woman, and the rest of the audience that when one has been forgiven, one will love to a greater degree.⁶⁴ It seems that, if a person has truly been forgiven by God, that person will reflect that same forgiveness in relation to other people (11:4; cf. Matt. 5:12-15). How does this apply to the issue of hospitality and table fellowship? I would argue that this story reflects the reality that, if one has truly experienced and understood the hospitality of God as manifested in the participation in table fellowship with Jesus, then one will demonstrate that same hospitality to others, regardless of their status within the religious system. Simon fails to show hospitality because he has not understood the forgiveness and inclusiveness of God's kingdom. The woman, however, shows that she has been forgiven and received the graciousness and hospitality of Jesus' ministry.⁶⁵ As such, her role moves from one of receiving God's hospitality, to being a host who dispenses hospitality.⁶⁶

So, in this text, we have another key aspect of Jesus' announcement of God's kingdom: those who are considered sinners and morally impure are included in their ability to receive the hospitality and forgiveness of God. In eating with "sinners," Jesus was celebrating the messianic meal in a way that included the wrong people.⁶⁷ As a result, those like Simon, who considered themselves pure, refrained from joining in the

⁶⁴ Forgiveness, like table fellowship, is related to the coming of, and participation in, the kingdom of Israel's God; Wright, *Jesus*, 149.

⁶⁵ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 21.

⁶⁶ This emphasizes Koenig's key observation that the role of guest and host are interchangeable and many times simultaneous. I think his point rightly emphasizes the mutuality of hospitality, as one both gives and receives in the embodying of God's kingdom life; Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 44. In a similar vein, Walter Brueggemann emphasizes that Israel's call is to show hospitality and welcome to strangers, because they received hospitality and welcome from God; Brueggemann, "The Practice of Homefulness," *Church and Society* 91:5 (May/June 2001), 13.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Jesus*, 431.

celebration.⁶⁸ In contrast, Jesus' words and actions show that persons who have been excluded and who most easily realize their own need for forgiveness, are the ones most able to appreciate the welcome of Jesus, and in turn to become the unlikely hosts of the inclusive table of God.

Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10)

Acts, the companion volume to Luke, continues the emphasis upon table fellowship and focuses on its increasing inclusivity beyond the borders of the first Jewish Christian communities.⁶⁹ Luke, having outlined how Jesus, in his practice and sayings included both the religious and economic outcasts, now focuses on how the early church practiced table fellowship.⁷⁰ In this context, I will evaluate the Jew-Gentile barriers, and focus on how that was overcome through hospitality, the slackening of the Jewish dietary regulations, and inclusive table fellowship.

The story of Peter and Cornelius reiterates one of the chief characteristics that made Jewish table fellowship an exclusive happening: the food that was eaten. For the Jews, food was a distinctive reminder that they were God's chosen people, unique even in what they would and would not eat (Lev. 11:1-47; Deut. 14:13-21). Just as they were set apart as God's people, so they must set apart the clean from the unclean.⁷¹ Peter clearly

⁶⁸ The story, however, is also left open to Simon, and the audience with him, to change their minds and actions so as to receive forgiveness from Jesus, and also become dispensers of God's hospitality. Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 53. Tannehill notes that Simon is not caricatured as a completely negative figure, but as one with the real potential for change; Tannehill, "The Story of Israel within the Lukan Narrative," *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim Upon Israel's Legacy*, ed. David P. Moessner (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 331. However, in another essay, he points out the tragic role of the leaders of Israel and people like Simon, as ones who should have recognized God's salvation and kingdom did not; Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104:1 (March 1985), 77, 85.

⁶⁹ Key texts include 2:42-47; 10:1-11:18, ch. 15; 16:11-15, 30-40; 20:7-12; 27:33-38

⁷⁰ Elliott emphasizes that this hospitality now centers around the household, rather than the centralized Temple cultic practices; Elliott, "Temple versus Household," 217.

⁷¹ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 249.

acknowledges this reality in his refusal to partake of the food that he saw in his vision (vv.10-14). To eat the food that was considered unclean would not only violate a dietary law, but would also mean re-drawing the boundary lines around who was included in this people of God that revolved around the person and work of Christ.⁷² Peter's vision, then, was not simply about what foods were restricted, but about the people with whom a Jewish follower of Jesus could eat: "Two themes, *food* and *people*, are carefully woven together; in fact the theme of clean and unclean food symbolizes the issue of clean and unclean people."⁷³

The symbolic identification of the food and the people are confirmed by Peter's action in this text. Upon receiving an invitation to Cornelius' house, Peter welcomes the messengers (at least one of whom was a Gentile),⁷⁴ into the house of Simon the tanner, where he himself was a guest. This immediate extension of hospitality and welcome to Gentile persons is a sign that Peter has understood the importance of welcoming Gentiles into the community of believers.⁷⁵ In addition, Peter demonstrates the receiving/giving mutuality that I discussed earlier. Having been blessed with hospitality, he extends hospitality to men who are outside the community boundaries. This hospitality leads to reciprocity and mutuality at the home of Cornelius.

When Peter and "some of the brethren" go to the house of Cornelius, they are warmly received and welcomed into his home. This is not merely a person-to-person

⁷² Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," 378.

⁷³ Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," 381 (italics original). Elliott also reiterates the close connection of food eaten and personal associations allowed by social codes; Elliott, "Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," 104.

⁷⁴ Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 117.

⁷⁵ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 250. Peter's presence at the house of a tanner is also a sign of the broadening inclusivity of the Christian community, as a tanner would presumably be on the fringes of the Jewish community due to his job, which required interaction with impure animal skins.

encounter, but a communal encounter, as Peter and his fellow Jews enter the house of Cornelius, who is joined by his family and certain acquaintances.⁷⁶ As such, Heil regards this as a symbolic encounter and joining of the Jewish and Gentile community.⁷⁷ And rightly so, for, after Peter's preaching, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile persons present. Thus, the Gentile persons experienced the same validation from God's Spirit as did the Jewish believers. This was a clear sign that the Jewish Christians should regard the Gentiles as capable of being full members in the people of God.⁷⁸ The boundary lines between the Jew and Gentile had been broken down by the continuing work of Christ, through the Spirit.⁷⁹ As Yoder notes, "The hostility brought to an end in Christ is...the hostility between Jew and Greek."⁸⁰ Thus, this key text from Acts indicates that the replacement of hostility with hospitality and mutual welcome is a clear sign of the continuing presence of Jesus in the life of the early church.

Conclusion: Hospitality, Meals, and the Church Today

A central theme in Luke-Acts revolves around the hospitality embodied in table fellowship, and the two volumes trace how the boundaries surrounding meals, and consequently persons, are re-drawn in the ministry of Jesus and the practice of the early church. Three key elements of the meals were the religious standing of persons, the economic status of persons, and what food was eaten. Concerns for purity, preoccupation with wealth, and maintenance of a restrictive cosmology regarding the

⁷⁶ Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 251.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷⁸ Luke's record of Peter's speech in 11:17 makes it clear that this barrier-breaking was initiated by God, and not by Peter's own doing.

⁷⁹ According to Cyprian Robert Hutcheon, Luke's passion narrative, by placing the rending of the Temple curtain *prior* to the death of Christ, emphasizes the unification of Jew and Gentile in the living work of Christ, as well as the walls broken down in his death and resurrection; Hutcheon, "'God is with Us': The Temple in Luke-Acts," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 44:1 (2000), 18-19.

people of God served to exclude many people from table fellowship. I have shown, through the use of three different texts, how the author of Luke-Acts wants us to understand the working of God through Jesus and the early church. The communal lines of hospitality and fellowship are re-drawn. The "sinners" were welcomed to eat with Jesus, and many times show greater hospitality than the "righteous." Jesus' listeners were encouraged to practice a generalized reciprocity, that broke down socioeconomic barriers to table fellowship. And the exclusive dietary laws were relaxed in order to break down the barriers between the Jewish and Gentile believing communities. All three actions move the people of God toward greater inclusiveness.

I would now like to return to the question of application in our contemporary context. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the church needs to remember that issues of hospitality, welcome, and meals eaten together are not just "social" or "political" issues. In fact, the texts of Luke-Acts I have examined show that how we eat and with whom we eat are key indicators as to whether or not we ourselves have truly received the hospitality and forgiveness of God in Christ. Realizing that, the question is how we can embody the good news of the inclusive gospel to the world around us. To this end, I offer two brief suggestions.

First, the church must realize that the work of Christ has broken down the economic barriers that would keep communities apart. Realizing the abundance of God, those who are rich in the church, specifically in North America, must realize that it is our calling to show the free generosity for which Jesus called. This requires taking a hard look at the sort of capitalism that is quickly overtaking much of the world--capitalism that is based on the negative reciprocity principle of gaining as much as possible with the

⁸⁰ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 219.

least possible output of generosity. This stands in direct contradiction to the sort of kingdom proclaimed and enacted by Jesus. In addition, we must realize that the idols of consumerism cause us to relate agonistically to others, in a dog-eat-dog race to accumulate the most unneeded possessions. On the local church level, rather than spending enormous funds on building budgets and trying to keep up with the latest cultural trends, the church would do well to look to basic issues, such as feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger, that are so prominent in Jesus' words and actions. The church has largely relegated that duty to para-church or charity groups. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it may tend toward separating the "spiritual" doings of the church from the "material" works of other ministries.

Second, the church must welcome those who are considered sinners. The re-drawing of community boundaries does not mean the abandonment to chaos.⁸¹ The church's posture toward sinners (which obviously includes us all), however, should be one of extending forgiveness and welcome. It should also be a position of humility that recognizes its own fallibility in past judgments about who is excluded and who is welcomed. Acting in this way enables the church to show the healing hospitality that we have received through the work of Christ. Rather than speaking condemnation to people that are already suffering in bondage to sin, the church should extend God's love in humility, so that people are given the opportunity to become part of the mutually giving and receiving community that is the church. When this is done, both people inside and outside the church community will have their lives and minds changed about what it means to be part of the people of God.

In the end, it is God's hospitality toward us, embodied in the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus, that enables us to extend that hospitality toward others. As we break bread together, it reminds us of our common bond to God, to one another, and to the life of this earth. We must continually learn to celebrate the abundance of God's plentiful reign, and overcome hostility with the hospitality of God's welcoming call to all to join in the feast of love.

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⁸¹ Neyrey, "The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts," 299.

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