

Notes

Communion Dramatizes the Future Messianic BanquetJerry Truex; October 1, 2017

A. Introduction

Today I will suggest that communion, among other things, symbolizes the future Messianic Banquet and thus communion is an act of "open commensality."¹ "Commensality" refers to practice of eating at the same table, sharing food together (Latin: *com* "with"; *mensa* "table").

Eating together is both a powerful image and a powerful experience of the coming kingdom of God. Eating together creates and cements relationships, redresses power and status imbalances, and cultivates mutual respect.

Depending on one's tradition, communion is also called the Lord's Supper, Breaking Bread, the New Covenant Meal, the Eucharist and, in the Catholic tradition, Mass.

When we practice communion, I believe we dramatize four biblical themes that helps create, sustain, and proclaim Christian existence:

- 1) We remember the death of Jesus as our Passover lamb (past/faith)
- 2) We participate in a fellowship of material sharing (present/love)
- 3) We partake in a fellowship of spiritual sharing (present/love)
- 4) We anticipate the coming messianic banquet (future/hope)

I will briefly highlight the first three themes, then focus on the fourth, namely, that communion gives us a vision of the future the messianic banquet.

B. We remember the Lord's death – past/faith

First, when we celebrate Breaking Bread together, we are remembering Jesus' death. We remember a past event, corresponding to faith.

¹ A term I borrow from John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) 66.

We remember Jesus' death, which he connected to the symbolism the Jewish Passover meal.

1. Passover Meal

The last meal Jesus ate was a Passover meal² or Passover Seder.³

The Passover meal was celebrated every year on 15th of Nisan (during March-April) that primarily celebrates God's liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

2. Jesus is our Passover Lamb

Jesus' last meal or last supper was a Passover meal.⁴ In addition to symbolizing liberation, Jesus connected the Passover meal to his death.

At that meal, Jesus took the bread and wine and said they represented *what is about to happen to him; namely, his body would be broken; his blood would be shed.*⁵

From that point on, for the followers of Jesus, the Passover Meal is a New Covenant Meal⁶ in which we remember the death of Christ, our Passover Lamb (John 1:36; 1 Cor. 5:7; Mark 14:12).

C. We participate in a fellowship of material sharing – present/love

Second, when we break bread, when we eat together, we are sharing food with each other as a present reality. It is an act of love.

² James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 772-3.

³ Seder means "an order, arrangement."

⁴ It was full meal, not a mere taste of food, as indicated by the Didache 10:1-2: "After the Eucharist when you are filled, give thanks this way: ² We thank you, holy Father, for your holy name which you enshrined in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality that you made known to us through Jesus your servant. To you be the glory forever."

⁵ 1 Cor. 11:23-26: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (NRSV).

⁶ He said eating this meal marked the restoration of Israel, the renewal of Israel, and called it a New Covenant meal for his followers (Jer. 31:31-33; Matt. 26:17-20, 26-28; Mark 14:12-24; Luke 22:7-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-29). Jesus' disciples represented the restoration of Israel, people of the New Covenant. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 507-13.

There are two things to note. First, very clearly, the earliest “breakings of bread” were *communal meals* shared in homes—full meals.⁷ Second, these meals involved *sharing material goods*, especially food in this case (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-36; 6:1).

D. We partake in a fellowship of spiritual sharing – present/love

Third, when we celebrate communion, the Scripture tells us that Christ is present as we break bread together. Christ’s presence is an act of love

I draw this inference from the story of the disciples who encountered Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus. In the story, the disciples *only recognize the resurrected Jesus* when Jesus breaks bread with them.

Luke 24:15, 28-31. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.....

²⁹ ... they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So, he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

In this way, Scripture tells us that Communion can be a *spiritual awakening* in which we are able to recognize Christ is *present with us*.

E. We announce the coming Messianic Banquet – future/hope

Fourth, when we celebrate communion, we announce the future Messianic banquet, when people from all tribes and nations will gather to the table of the Messiah Jesus.⁸ It is a future event that corresponds to hope.

When we celebrate communion—which we connect to our pot luck—I believe are announcing the future, all-inclusive banquet of the Messiah.⁹ This becomes clear when we trace how Luke’s Gospel develops the theme of food.

⁷ Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology an Eschatological Approach*, Volume II (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987) 339.

⁸ Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology an Eschatological Approach*, Volume II (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987) 338.

⁹ The Messianic banquet symbolizes God’s future blessing of faithful people. In the eschaton, God will throw a banquet and the faithful will receive bountiful provisions and blessings. E.g., Isa. 25:6-8. ¹⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe

1. The importance of food in Luke's Gospel

One of Luke's major themes is how God provides food for the poor. So, when we read about Jesus' final meal in Luke 22:7-23—when Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper—we need to consider what Luke has said about the importance of food and banquets.

Luke mentions food and eating more than any other Gospel; in fact, he mentions the Messianic banquet eight times, which is more than all the other Gospels.

1. Luke 5:29-35 Banquet at Levi's House
2. Luke 7:36-50 Banquet at a Pharisee's House
3. Luke 9:12-17 Feeding the Five Thousand
4. Luke 10:38-42 Dinner at Martha and Mary's
5. Luke 11:37-54 Another Banquet at a Pharisee's House
6. Luke 14:1-15 A Third Banquet at a Pharisee's House
7. Luke 22:7-23 The Last Supper/Passover
8. Luke 24:30-32 The Road to Emmaus

2. Egalitarian: Jesus ate with deplorables (Lk 7:33-38)

Jesus practiced "open commensality." He ate with anyone. His table was open for everyone.

And he was criticized for that.

Luke 7:33-34. ³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; ³⁴ the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (NRSV)

Luke 7:36-38. ³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. (NRSV)

away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken." (NRSV)

The Pharisee criticized Jesus for letting this woman get near to him, but Jesus “shames him” by saying that the woman was a better host than he was.

Luke 7:44-46. "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." (NRSV)

3. Reciprocity: Healing & peace for food & home (Lk 10:3-9)

In Luke 10, Jesus sends out the Seventy to spread the word about the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Here we are dealing with the heart of the original Jesus movement.¹⁰

Luke 10:3-9. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" (NRSV)

Notice that the missionaries are not to carry provisions with them—no bag, no purse, etc. They do not beg for food or clothing or anything else. Rather, the missionaries focus on sharing peace, healing, and announcing the kingdom of God. “They share a miracle and a Kingdom, and they receive in return a table and a house.”¹¹

Healing and sharing food are transactions. They express mutual obligations and mutual respect. Sharing food symbolizes the mutuality and reciprocity of the

¹⁰ According to John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 341.

¹¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 341.

Kingdom of God. Sharing food symbolizes good will, mediates social status, reduces power imbalances, expresses inclusivity.

4. Inclusivity: Messianic Banquet (Lk 13:22-29)

We have talked about "commensality," which is the act of eating together. But what does "open commensality" mean. Here is what the Gospel of Luke says.

Luke 13:22-29. ²² Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ ... He said to them ... ²⁹ people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God."

Clearly, Jesus' table was open to everyone and anyone. From Luke's point of view, Jesus table fellowship was an invitation to the entire world.

5. Non-hierarchical: Open commensality (Luke 14:12-14)

When we celebrate communion, we are not only announcing the coming Messianic Banquet and the inclusion of people from all parts of the world, but we are also announcing that Kingdom of God will include the poor, the marginalized, the untouchables, the broken and exploited.

Here is a story about Jesus eating again that is unique to Luke's Gospel.¹²

Luke 14:12-24. ¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I

¹² It has dissimilar parallels in Matt. 22:1-15 and *Gospel of Thomas* 64.

must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' ¹⁹ Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' ²⁰ Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'

²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in [compel] the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' ²² And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' ²³ Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.' ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

The original invitation went out to people who chose not to come. If we focus on their replacements, we see that the host compels *anyone* off the streets.

"If one actually brought in anyone off the street, one could, in such a situation, have classes, sexes, and ranks all mixed up together. Anyone could be reclining next to anyone else, female next to male, free next to slave, socially high next to socially low, and ritually pure next to ritually impure... what a social nightmare that would be."¹³

Anthropologists have argued that table fellowship—where, when, and with whom food is eaten—provides a social map for economic differences, social status, and political and racial differences.

"Once the anthropologist finds out where, when, and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members... To know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society."¹⁴

What Jesus' parable advocates, therefore, is open commensality; eating together without using the table as a map (or reflection) of society's vertical hierarchies or horizontal segregations.

¹³ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) 68.

¹⁴ Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) 4, 220 as quoted by John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) 68.

F. Conclusion: Who can come to the table?

For Jesus and the early Jesus movement, table fellowship—and especially the practice of the Lord’s Supper—was a visual and visceral enacted parable that demonstrated the inclusive character of the kingdom of God.

When we have communion, we are enacting, not saying, a parable. If a parable tells us what the kingdom of God is like, then a ritual, like communion, shows us what the Kingdom of God is like.

If the Lord’s Supper is symbolic of the future Messianic Banquet, if it is symbol of open commensality, then there are no limits or conditions placed on who may come to the table, who may partake of communion.

Jesus welcomed children,¹⁵ sinners, women, and foreigners, as well as people who were not part of the faith community.

Communion is a proleptic enactment of the future messianic banquet. Communion express Jesus’ open invitation to all to come and eat. In this view, communion is a radical and inclusive invitation to everyone and anyone; it is like an “alter call,” if you like, where people are invited to express faith in Jesus, perhaps for the first time.

¹⁵ Cf. Mark 10:13-15. Since children were included in Passover Seders on which the Lord’s Supper is based, and since early church *agape* meals included children, children should be included. As Eleanor Kreider notes, “The exclusion of children from communion is derived from strands of church tradition, not directly from Scripture,” *Communion Shaper Character*, 178.