



Who's Invited?

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THE QUESTION PHRASED SO SIMPLY IN THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY IS ONE OF THE MOST vexing pastoral questions facing the churches today, both internally and ecumenically. J. R. Donahue has written:

Within Christian communities, some of the most violent disputes continue to rage over inclusiveness, often centered on the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Yet when Luke's Jesus told a parable about eating bread in the kingdom of God, he shattered his hearers' expectations of who would be the proper table companions. Can his parabolic word continue to challenge our expectations?¹

Jesus' parable about the great supper, consistent with the entirety of his meal practice and use of meal imagery, does indeed challenge our expectations when we ask who's invited to meals in God's reign. This brief essay will first refine that question, then recall some pertinent facets of the last supper and meals in Jesus' ministry, and conclude with some reflections on the challenges this memory presents. These pages are offered as an invitation to further reflection and discussion on the question; they do not pretend to offer a final answer.

¹J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 146, commenting on the parable of the great supper in Luke 14:16-24.

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In welcoming sinners and outcasts at table, Jesus sets an unsettling example. It leaves us with no alternative but continually to question whether our eucharistic practice meets the challenge of Jesus' expectations.

I. THE QUESTION

What are our expectations when we ask who's invited to a dinner party? Minimally, we seek information about who's on the guest list. But is that all? A deeper question is implied. Will the invited guests be compatible table companions for us? Will there be a kinship of interests, values, and life-experience which can truly find expression in table fellowship? The question of who *is* invited is thus seen to contain within it the question of who *ought to be* invited. And that in turn implies a set of criteria by which the appropriateness (and worthiness) of the guest list can be judged.

The reason for this is not hard to find. Anthropologists tell us that food-sharing—"who eats what with whom"—is one of the most constant and basic ways in which a group establishes and reaffirms its identity, enacts its patterns of status incumbencies and mutual roles, and reinforces its shared values and goals. The sharing of food and drink is never without these deeper connotations. Because this encoding of identity, roles, and meaning is done non-verbally and with little conscious awareness, it is all the more powerful. Repeated throughout life, the simple act of table-sharing tells us that we are indeed companions, a name that from its Latin roots literally means "those who share bread." The question of who's invited is, then, a question of group belonging and proper table companionship.

The question needs to be refined in yet another way. When we ask who is or ought to be invited, the question has a negative counterpart as well. Who is not invited? Who ought to be excluded? This reverse side of the question also implies a set of criteria by which one can judge the inappropriateness (and unworthiness) of potential table companions.

Again, anthropologists help us name why this is so. Meal-sharing is simultaneously an act of inclusion and exclusion. There are those who sit at the table and those who do not. Boundaries that identify the group and differentiate it from other groups are wordlessly established and reinforced every time the group gathers over food and drink. Hospitality to a stranger or an outsider is a momentary breaking of those boundaries, with the attendant risks of diluting the group and weakening its identity as well as the potential gain of expanding and invigorating its membership.

There is yet one further refinement to be made. As stated, the question is in the passive voice. That hides another kind of question. Who issues or ought to issue the invitation? Who is entitled to set the criteria about who makes the guest list? One would normally expect that to be the prerogative of the host, speaking for all of the projected table fellows. In the case of the parable of the great supper there is a surprising reversal. It is Jesus, one of the invited guests at a meal hosted by one of the leading Pharisees, who issues an alternate definition of what the guest list ought to be for a meal that truly encodes the values of kingdom-fellowship.

As we wrestle with the question about eucharistic hospitality, we need to attend to Jesus' expectations about who's invited.

II. THE LAST SUPPER

Christian tradition has long connected the celebration of the eucharist with the farewell meal Jesus ate with his disciples. Christians have observed his command to “do this” in memory of him through the ages.² It is there that our reflections must start.

We readily imagine that supper scene to be like farewell meals we've known. Jesus gathered his band to share food and drink with them one last time before his impending passion and death. As recorded in John's gospel, Jesus' conversation at the table was filled with intimate talk of abiding in love, of friendship, of opposition from the world, and of the works of the Father which had become their common cause. It is easy to imagine that farewell meal as a loving yet bittersweet moment in which those first disciples reaffirmed their bonds to Jesus and their commitment to his cause.

A closer reading of the supper accounts, however, quickly dispels any tendency to romanticize the last supper. First, there is the exchange about the betrayer. Confronted with Jesus' prediction, the disciples are thrown into consternation and a bout of self-questioning: “Surely not I, Lord?” (Matt 26:22). Their words betray an insecurity about both their own loyalty to Jesus and that of their table companions. Second, there is the prediction of denial. It should be noted that the texts use plural pronouns and do not limit the possibility of denial and abandonment to Simon Peter: “You will all become deserters because of me this night” (Matt 26:31); “Satan has demanded to sift you all like wheat” (Luke 22:31). Again, we see that same insecurity at work in the disciples. Third, the Lukan account includes the memory that there was a fight over status among the table companions that night (Luke 22:24-27). All of this suggests that Jesus' companions at that last meal were weak and frail disciples indeed.³ Each of them seemed to be on the verge of turning away from Jesus, yet he excluded none of them from the table; even Judas was present at the moment of “institution” in the Lukan account.

Why would the early communities for which the gospels were written have chosen to include this less than flattering portrait of the first disciples in their accounts of the supper? Exegetes commonly hold that the four gospels were written not simply as transcriptions of historical events, but as faith accounts told in such a way as to help the different communities reflect on the meaning of these events for their lives.⁴ Francis Moloney has argued that admission of broken and weak disciples to the table of the Lord is a thread that runs through each of the biblical accounts of the last supper, though altered to fit the circumstances of each

²Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (2nd ed.; London: Dacre, 1945) 743-744, gives a compelling description of the sweep of this history.

³For a fuller account, see Francis J. Moloney, *A Body Broken for a Broken People: Eucharist in the New Testament* (Burwood, Victoria, Australia: Collins Dove, 1990).

⁴For examples of such separate treatment of the New Testament materials, see: Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1982) part III; Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988); Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996).

community. These memories are enshrined precisely because the later disciples experienced themselves as did the first, prone to fail and in need of the strength and forgiveness this holy meal provides. From his study of New Testament materials Moloney concludes: "the Eucharist celebrates and proclaims the presence of Jesus to the broken."⁵ In light of this, neediness and openness to conversion seem to be more basic criteria for those whom Jesus invites to table than does worthiness.

Jesus' invitation to the sinful and broken is not limited to his band of disciples; the same invitation is issued to sinners and outcasts of every kind throughout his ministry. We turn, then, to meals in Jesus' ministry.

III. MEALS IN JESUS' MINISTRY

But what do these meals have to do with the eucharist? Traditionally, the last supper has been seen as the time when Jesus instituted the eucharist; no other point of origin was needed. Scholars of the New Testament now commonly place the last supper within Jesus' larger meal practice and use of meal imagery, both during his public ministry and after his resurrection.⁶ For example, the stories of the feeding of the multitudes, which far outnumber the institution accounts, clearly have eucharistic overtones. For such scholars, then, the Christian eucharist is seen to have roots in the larger meal practice of Jesus as well. That meal tradition provides supplementary, alternate models for thinking about the meaning of the eucharist for today.⁷

The theme of food and meal is more prominent in Luke than in any other gospel.⁸ Luke depicts Jesus at table with a variety of people in a variety of circumstances: at the house of Levi (5:29-32), at the home of a Pharisee (7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-15), at the home of Mary and Martha (10:38-42), and at the house of Zacchaeus (19:1-10). Two facets might be noted. First, these episodes regularly bring Jesus into contact with some unacceptable outsider—a tax collector, a sinner in the town, someone defiled by physical malady—people beyond the boundaries of proper table fellowship. His table sharing was so frequent and so indifferent to proper table companionship that he could be characterized as "a glutton and a drunkard" (Luke 7:34), one "who welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Second, these meal scenes usually lead to a table conversation in which such contacts, the laws of ritual purity, or table manners become the occasion for a discourse about God's reign, about who can enter it and how they are to act. Perhaps the most

⁵Moloney, *A Body Broken*, 99.

⁶For a sampling of such approaches, see: John Michael Perry, *Exploring the Evolution of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994) 6-17; John Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord: The New Testament, Ecumenical Dialogues, and Faith and Order on Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 4-5; Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (London: SCM, 1990) 44-50.

⁷I borrow this idea from the article of Eamonn Bredin, "Liturgy: Transition and Tradition," *The Furrow* 31 (1980) 24-32.

⁸On the food theme in Luke, see Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian. Luke's Passion Account as Literature* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 47-78.

striking discourse is the parable of the great supper prompted by the table conversation at the supper with a Pharisee (Luke 14:16-24; see also Matt 22:1-14). On reflection each of these meal narratives with their attendant discourse might yield new insights into the meaning of eucharistic table sharing today.

The early community certainly found a eucharistic connection in the stories recounting how Jesus fed the multitudes. The lesson they remembered from the twin episodes recorded in both Mark and Matthew was the boundary-breaking ministry of Jesus and the precedent he set for them. They told the story to remember how Jesus got them to take the initiative in meeting the needs of the people and how he left them with enough fragments to feed people on both sides of the lake. Celebration of the eucharist thus became a reminder for the disciples of a later generation. Even if they are of little faith and slow to understand, like the disciples portrayed by Mark, Jesus has left them all the resources they need for ministry.⁹

Jesus' meal practice and his use of food imagery was of a piece with his teaching about the gracious inclusivity of God's invitation to enter the kingdom, about how those invited are to live in God's reign. It was, in effect, a food-language in perfect harmony with his teaching. Anthropologist Gillian Feeley-Harnik¹⁰ has argued that Jesus' meal practice was in fact a "subversion" of the food-language of his people. It contravened the dietary laws, symbolic of the entire Torah, and broke the accepted boundaries of proper table companionship. In so doing it announced a new understanding of membership in God's reign. Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them as a portent that God's reign is open to all.

IV. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This, then, is the dangerous memory Jesus has left us. What are we to make of it? How does it challenge our expectations when we ask who's invited? To be sure, already from New Testament times the community has found it necessary to exclude some from its number and hence from the community table.¹¹ The answer is not to be found in indiscriminate admission; self-examination and discernment are in order (1 Cor 11: 28). Even so, the question remains: have our criteria become too restrictive?

If our question about who's invited concerns the worthiness of the invited guests, the dangerous memory of Jesus' meals, especially his last, raises a serious counter-question. Is an established, secure worthiness to be the criterion, or can frail and sinful disciples be admitted to the table? The latter would seem to have been the case at the last supper. The subsequent stories of Judas and Peter suggest that wavering disciples have two alternatives should later they prove unfaithful. The invitation to the eucharistic table is already an invitation to forgiveness and reconciliation. And once they have fully accepted that further invitation and

⁹For fuller commentary see Donald Senior, "The Eucharist in Mark: Mission, Reconciliation, Hope," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982) 67-72.

¹⁰Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1981).

¹¹E.g., 1 Cor 5:1-13 and Heb 6:1-8. See Moloney, *A Body Broken*, 130-140.

turned back, like Peter, they are to strengthen the others (Luke 22:32). The appropriate criterion might well be what Moloney calls "the quality of a person's 'communion' with the church at many other levels. It is the 'communion' created by genuinely eucharistic lives that is sacramentalised in the Church's eucharistic celebrations."¹² The question would then have to be transposed into one of whether to invite those whose journey of conversion is incomplete.

There is yet another way in which the question of worthiness may need to be rephrased. Worthiness is perhaps too readily understood in terms of inward morality. What if the focus falls rather on the social responsibility of those who would sit at table? If sharing the eucharist means to identify oneself with Jesus who gave himself as bread for the life of the world (John 6:51), then the admission price is that those invited must also be willing to become bread for the life of the world.¹³ The eucharist, in Gordon Lathrop's phrase, ought always be a "hungry feast."¹⁴ Who are the ones hungry enough to be invited, and how can their hunger for service, justice, and reconciliation be deepened at the table?

If the question concerns eucharistic hospitality across church boundaries, one might find a challenge, analogously, in Jesus' example of including people who were not reckoned to be part of the covenantal people. Or Paul's insistence that when the Corinthian community gathers, "it is not really to eat the Lord's supper," for they fail to "discern the body" (1 Cor 11:20, 29).¹⁵ Here again the question may need to be transposed. To what are they being invited? Is the table of the Lord to be the primary focus? Or is it rather a prior question of inviting them into community, to share its life and mission? And how narrow or large are the boundaries of the church to be drawn? The criterion for the invitation, then, would be a communion of life and gospel mission. If Christians could learn to live and work together, we might soon discover that it makes no sense not to eat together.

The question of who's invited is not an easy one to answer and we might well prefer to avoid it. But the biblical story of the example of Jesus is unsettling and will not go away. It leaves us with no alternative but continually to question whether our eucharistic practice meets the challenge of his expectations. ⊕

¹²Moloney, *A Body Broken*, 134.

¹³This point is made by Mary Collins, "Catechesis and Sunday Eucharist," *Liturgy* 80 13/3 (1982) 2-7.

¹⁴Cited in Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 97.

¹⁵Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Tablesharing and the Celebration of the Eucharist," in *Can We Always Celebrate the Eucharist?* ed. Mary Collins and David Power (New York: Seabury, 1982) 3-12, interprets this failure to discern the body as an exclusion of those of different ethnic background or social status. Also see Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord*, 41-46, on this issue. His book is a good status report on ecumenical eucharistic sharing.