



Eat, Drink, and Be Merry: A Theology of Hospitality in Luke-Acts

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We all love a great meal! But why? I suspect that most of us seldom reflect primarily upon a great meal as mere nutrition: “This dinner had low levels of sodium, fat, and cholesterol, yet was high in calcium and iron. It was fabulous. Let’s eat this again.” While I have no intention of undermining the value of a healthy diet, I doubt many of us grade a dining experience by such standards. Instead, when questioned about great cuisine, we might say, “What a meal! The flavor! The spices! And that dessert was to die for!” Now we’re talking.

But there’s more. I wonder if you, like me, often reflect on a great meal and recall not only the food, but the place and company with whom you shared the experience. When I travel, a primary means of experiencing the culture includes the local food. I enjoy a meal with new friends and learn about their lives, histories, and customs. To eat is to live, to enjoy life to the full. We meet each other and encounter God. We learn, love, laugh, cry, and experience transformation. In this essay, I propose that Luke provides such a model for hospitality embodied by Jesus

Hospitality was no small matter for early Christians. Jesus both gave and received hospitality generously. For Luke, failure in hospitality leads to a fractured community and, if left unattended, hinders kingdom exploits. From the gospels, Christians are called to the practice of hospitality for the sake of themselves, their neighbors, and the kingdom.

and the new people of God.¹ I offer the following menu: (1) a brief summary of the rise of hospitality in the ancient world and specifically in the New Testament; (2) the function of the hospitality motif in Luke-Acts; and (3) pastoral reflections.

HOSPITALITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Moralists of the ancient world consider the art or practice of hospitality a fundamental moral virtue.² Whereas current ethicists devote their primary attention to hot-button moral questions like sexuality (e.g., abortion, marriage, LGBT, and bio-ethics), ancient moralists recognize hospitality as the basic practice central to all aspects of human activity from family and friends to strangers and enemies. By definition, hospitality facilitates the social process in which someone who is an outsider shifts from stranger to guest. S. C. Barton suggests three stages of hospitality employed in the ancient world. A host must first *evaluate* the stranger to determine if incorporation of this guest is possible without undue threat to the security and purity lines of the group for whom the host is responsible. If so, the host will *incorporate* the stranger as a guest, and in accordance with culture-specific codes of hospitality, the host will extend obligations understood by both parties. Finally, the *departure* of the stranger now turned guest not only signals a healthy parting of ways between an honorable host and the refreshed traveler, but also serves to solidify future relations between the two parties and their respective communities.³

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By the first century, moralists describe at least five broad categories of hospitality all attested in Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources. First, the materialization of the Roman Empire gives rise to the need for *public* hospitality. A growing infrastructure must provide accommodations for those who journey as representatives of the empire. The geographic expansion of the empire might best be paralleled to the recent burst of globalization felt in the late twentieth century. Second, developing propaganda concerning *Pax Romana* literally paves the way for increased travel. Promises of safety and better routes on land and sea lead to the emergence of *commercial* hospitality, the beginnings of a food and lodging industry targeted at traveling business folk. Third, the growth of the empire also proves critical for those involved in *temple* hospitality, designed to facilitate worshippers on pilgrim-

¹Though hospitality often includes food, I do not intend to restrict hospitality to the table. The table serves only as a metaphor for hospitable practices.

²For an excellent bibliography, see Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

³S. C. Barton, "Hospitality," *Dictionary of Later New Testament & Its Developments*, eds. Ralph Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 501–507.

ages to holy places. Luke gives no better example than Paul's evangelistic efforts in Ephesus, where opponents appear not to be upset by his message, but rather the potential threat to businesses that profit from the Temple to Artemis (Acts 19). Fourth, *theoxenic* hospitality refers to human generosity to gods, heroes, and semidivine guests. Indeed, the author of Hebrews calls upon his readers "not [to] neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2). Finally, *private* hospitality becomes increasingly esteemed and encouraged throughout the ancient world. Although more and more people travel for business, political, and personal reasons, "Holiday Inns" free of filth, insects, drunkenness, and orgies remain in the distant future. To address such conditions, moralists describe a system to secure private accommodations. Travelers begin to solicit and carry letters of recommendation in order to commend or request hospitality for friends and acquaintances (3 John). It is therefore no surprise that early Christians similarly reflect upon and practice hospitality.⁴

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND HOSPITALITY

Although theologians and pastors of spiritual formation typically (and rightly) seek biblical support for spiritual disciplines and practices such as prayer, study, simplicity, and worship, many ignore the discipline of hospitality.⁵ Preachers of Paul's Letter to the Romans often emphasize his exhortations for readers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, endure persecution, submit to governing authorities, and a host of other Old Testament commandments (Romans 12–15), only to bypass Paul's refrain to "extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom 12:13). As an itinerant apostle, Paul not only implores the people of God to live hospitable lives, but also depends upon their hospitality (cf. 1 Cor 9:4–14; Acts 21:4, 7, 16–17; 28:7). For example, Paul appeals to Philemon in anticipation of release from prison: "prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you" (Phlm 22). Paul also instructs the Colossians to receive Mark, a traveling itinerant and Paul's delegate for the gospel (Col 4:10). When Paul rehearses the many hardships of his apostolic ministry, he includes the frequent absence of hospitality and even severe experiences of inhospitality from his enemies (1 Cor 4:11–13; 2 Cor 6:4–10; 11:21–33).

In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul shifts from general instructions and his personal travel to obligations for church leaders. Paul lists the essential qualifications of overseers in the local church. Once again, it has been my observation that hospitality rarely plays a vital role in the selection of contemporary leaders. Instead, modern concerns for qualification typically (and legitimately) include marital status,

⁴J. T. Fitzgerald, "Hospitality," *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig Evans and Stanley Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 522–525.

⁵Joerg Rieger's *Traveling* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) serves as a rare exception. Globalization and (im)migration should surely produce a resurgence of interest in the practice of hospitality.

character, teaching ability, sobriety, and general people skills (1 Tim 3:2–5; Titus 1:8). But what about Paul’s exhortation that a leader “must be hospitable” (Titus 1:8)? For Paul, institutional hospitality falls under the category of patron/client relationships as part of a larger ancient concept of households. If God’s household provides a metaphor for the church and if an overseer serves as God’s household steward, the overseer must exhibit the best qualities of familial and institutional hospitality. The overseer must welcome traveling Christians, itinerant preachers, and other strangers into the church. The plethora of warnings throughout the New Testament about false teachers only heightens implications for the home of the overseer as a place of screening to avert threats to church life and order. Leaders must oversee charitable activity in the church, ensure fair administration with regard for the poor, secure internal unity, and uphold the reputation of the church. Make no mistake, even a cursory review demonstrates that hospitality is no small matter for early Christians.

HOSPITALITY IN LUKE-ACTS

Switching to Luke-Acts requires a methodological pause. While Paul writes letters with propositional instructions, Luke tells stories. Regrettably and all too often, readers limit Luke (and the other Gospel writers) to the role of historian, or in the case of Acts, a narrative that helps readers understand Paul better. While the Third Gospel and Acts supply the facts and Acts certainly provides excellent context for Paul’s epistles, does Luke intend more? Length limitations do not give me the space to unpack this idea; suffice to say, the growing majority of scholars emphasize the didactic value of stories.⁶ In other words, if “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim 3:16), and if letter writers exhort, poets and psalmists compose prose and song, prophets deliver oracles and visions, then writers of the Gospels and Acts tell stories valuable for faith and practice (see also 1 Cor 10:1–11).

Pentecost: Enlarging the Vision

No contributor to the New Testament pays more attention to the Holy Spirit than Luke, and since I write as one firmly planted within the Pentecostal tradition, readers should not be surprised that a Pentecostal begins with Pentecost. However, I intend to celebrate and interrogate the classical Pentecost(al) reading of Acts 2. The Pentecost narrative is the story of the transfer of the charismatic Spirit from Jesus to the disciples (Acts 2:33). The same Spirit who rests upon Jesus now rests upon the disciples so that they will continue “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). The events of Pentecost provide the first example of an expanding mission that fulfills Jesus’ promise that the disciples would “receive power” and “be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The new people of God extend

⁶See I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1970), and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

the ministry of Jesus under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Sadly, for many within my tradition, the meaning of Pentecost ends with power for evangelism.

Here lies the importance of tongues; no event speaks to the hospitality of God and the call upon God's people to embrace an open-ended vision like Pentecost. For Luke, Pentecost launches not only the geographic expansion of the gospel "to the ends of the earth," but a barrier-breaking inclusivity.

A rehearsal of the Pentecost narrative proves telling. Most participants presumably come from a Jewish background and would enjoy Pentecost as an extended Jewish party, a community feast in celebration of God's goodness and faithfulness (Exod 23:16; 34:22). Many Jews would attempt in their lifetime a journey to Jerusalem in order to attend at least one Jewish feast (Pentecost, Booths, or Passover). The context for Luke's account consists of the new people of God, having recently encountered the resurrected Jesus, gathered before Pentecost to wait, pray, study, and eat. On the day of the feast, the experience of about one hundred and twenty disciples draws the attention of travelers "from every nation under heaven" (2:5), who hear tongues in diverse languages (2:8; many of them listed in 2:9–11). As these onlookers stand amazed, Peter (and the Eleven) provide clarity for the confused crowd and turn more than three thousand to the resurrected Jesus. Luke employs Peter's emphasis on the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28–32 > Acts 2:17–21) as a declaration of the potential universality of God's Spirit upon all people regardless of, or, better stated, inclusive of male and female, young and old, clergy and laity, and not only Jews, but Samaritans, Gentiles, and beyond. Here lies the importance of tongues; no event speaks to the hospitality of God and the call upon God's people to embrace an open-ended vision like Pentecost. For Luke, Pentecost launches not only the geographic expansion of the gospel "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; cf. 2:39), but a barrier-breaking inclusivity (Acts 2:39). The Holy Spirit given by Jesus serves as God's eschatological envoy extending the divine invitation of hospitality to Israel and the nations.

Jesus on the Margins: Guest and Host

At this point, I must tender another methodological pause concerning the relationship between Acts and the Third Gospel. In short, recent scholarship has seen a significant return to emphasis upon Luke-Acts as a two-volume work. Although separated in the canon by John's Gospel, Luke intended for the Third Gospel and Acts to be read together. So why begin with Acts only to backtrack to the Third Gospel? If Luke's story of the new people of God supplies a sequel to the life of Jesus (Acts 1:1) and if the Spirit of Pentecost at the center of Luke-Acts serves as the driving force for the new mission, Luke must lay a foundation for his theology of hospitality. He does so through the pneumatic ministry of Jesus.

Whenever I read from the Third Gospel, I cannot help but picture Jesus as a “party animal” (give me a break, I teach undergrads!). Luke’s Jesus seems just as comfortable in ministry while “wining and dining” as “behind the pulpit.” In fact, unlike some other movements of his day, which sought to restrict table fellowship (Pharisees and the Qumran community), Jesus gets labeled “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). Though meant to be a pejorative comment, Jesus not only embraces the label, but displays his openness and vulnerability at table fellowship as a platform for transformational ministry.

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Luke’s Jesus accomplishes this by way of a great reversal. Typically and according to customs outlined above, Jesus enters a home as a guest and receives the hospitality of his host(s). But Jesus “spins the table”; he turns his hosts into guests so that they might receive his hospitality. Two beloved portraits unique to Luke demonstrate this reversal. According to hospitality custom, Mary and Martha open their home to the traveling Jesus and, as honorable hosts, take care of Jesus their guest (Luke 10:38–42). As Martha works hard (and justifiably so), she implores Jesus to insist that her sister Mary participate in the service of hospitality. In an affectionate manner, Jesus not only praises Mary for choosing to be nurtured by him, but invites Martha to settle down and receive his hospitality. Later on in the Third Gospel, Luke tells of Zacchaeus, the tax collector (19:1–10). When Jesus invites himself to the house of a corrupt government worker, the crowd begins to mutter: “He has gone to be the *guest* of a ‘sinner’” (19:7 NIV; emphasis mine). Luke tells little of the dining between Jesus and Zacchaeus except for the remarkable economic reparation that Zacchaeus offers to those he had exploited. Ironically, the statement of the crowd fails to anticipate Luke’s reversal. Zacchaeus may have entertained and nourished Jesus, but Zacchaeus becomes the guest of Jesus hospitality: “Today salvation has come to this *house*...for the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost” (Luke 19:9–10; emphasis mine). In both stories, Jesus the guest becomes Jesus the host and the agent of transformation. Furthermore, the transformation of both Martha, a woman, and Zacchaeus, the tax collector, foreshadows the barrier-breaking Pentecost symbolic of Jesus’ extension to the margins of society and God’s hospitality toward every outcast, whether sick, poor, disenfranchised, women, children, Gentiles, and beyond.

The Church at the Margins: Jesus to the World

Turning to Acts, Jesus’ hospitality to the socially marginalized continues through the ministries of the early church. The exuberant table fellowship of Jesus

finds traction through various practices of the Jerusalem church; believers “had all things in common...broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:44–47; cf. 4:32–37). Explicit expressions of hospitality overturn centuries of marginalization and separation toward the likes of an outcast Ethiopian eunuch and the hated Samaritans (Acts 8; see also Luke 10:25–42) and break the barrier for unfit Gentiles to enter into full communion with the new people of God (Acts 10–11). The Acts of the Apostles reveals the stories of a growing community that embodies the hospitality of Jesus and extends a welcome to all people without partiality (Acts 10:34). Not surprisingly, the Jerusalem Council addresses hospitality concerns and adopts less restrictive regulations for table fellowship in order to integrate Gentile converts into the new people of God (Acts 15:1–29). Such liberties provide the opportunity for future household conversions in Acts. Thus, when the Philippian jailer and Lydia open their homes, Paul not only accepts their hospitality, but like Jesus turns the table and offers them the barrier-breaking hospitality of God.

Sacred Meals and Beyond

Luke’s passion for hospitality finds importance not only as a practice to facilitate inclusion but also to propel early Christians to begin embracing a sacramental banquet. Luke alone produces the memorable account of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:12–31). Jesus appears out of nowhere to his downcast disciples who were lamenting the death of their would-be messiah. The disciples, unable to recognize Jesus, mock their fellow traveler for his lack of information about the events of the previous days. As the unidentified traveler narrates the story of Israel’s messiah through the Law and the Prophets, the disciples remain unable to identify him. As darkness draws near, the disciples display customary hospitality, for they open their home and feed the traveler. In dramatic fashion, Jesus not only reverses the role of host and guest but also provides what would become an early model for eucharistic fellowship; “when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:30–31).

A similar sacramental encounter occurs in Acts 8 when Luke tells of the doubly marginalized Ethiopian eunuch reading from Isaiah but not able to understand the implications. Philip appears out of nowhere, shares the good news, baptizes the eunuch, and disappears. Luke certainly intends to parallel these two stories; Philip continues the life and ministry of Jesus (Acts 1:1). Through their hospitality, Jesus and Philip provide revelation to wanderers and bring transformation through the respective sacraments of the “Eucharist” and baptism.⁷

The Banquet as the Taste of Heaven

Not only does Luke emphasize the hospitality of God and his people in the

⁷I am indebted to Richard Pervo (*The Mystery of Acts: Unraveling Its Story* [Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2008] 87) for this parallel.

here and now but he also builds upon Old Testament eschatological hopes: “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines... [for] all peoples” (Isa 25:6–8 NIV). On one hand, the hospitality of the Lukan Jesus inaugurates the partially realized kingdom. On the other hand, Jesus anticipates an eschatological banquet that God insists must be well attended; “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15). Luke expresses Jesus’ desire that people from every corner of the earth “take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). And those who share in the trials of Jesus will be invited to “eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22:18–30). Luke undoubtedly intends for his readers not only to imagine a future eschatological feast but also to use current table opportunities to extend a foretaste of heavenly celebrations.

Although God’s hospitality knows no limits, his people often struggle to embrace such inclusivity. Failure in hospitality, whether due to dishonesty, ethnocentrism, or exclusion, results in fractured community and botched mission.

No Room for an F in Hospitality

By now it is clear that Luke pays close attention to the need for and benefits of hospitality. However, all is not glamorous; he also takes great pains to emphasize the dire implications of failed hospitality. For Luke, failure in hospitality leads to a fractured community and, if left unattended, hinders kingdom exploits. I turn to two stories straddled between the growing persecution of the first followers. First, in a disturbing story, Ananias and Sapphira pay the ultimate penalty for their lack of integrity. Though they demonstrate concern for the needy among the new people of God, they lie about the percentage of money given from the sale of a property. Peter, under the direction of the Spirit, makes it clear that acts of generous hospitality without integrity carry grave consequences. Similarly, Luke tells of an averted schism due to a conflict over food distribution between Hebraic and Hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1–7). If left unattended, the table needs of the Hellenistic widows might have caused the first split of God’s people. These stories stand between the respective arrests of Peter and John, the Twelve, and the subsequent martyrdom of Stephen. While it seems obvious that persecution might hinder the mission, Luke makes clear that God’s people must serve with internal integrity and full regard for the marginalized. Luke uses this sobering interchange to remind readers that the church must remain fervent in the midst of pressures and be careful not to self-destruct.

A final example concerns the dramatic conversion of Peter (Acts 10–11). Ironically, while typically proclaimed as the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the story requires a closer look. While Luke describes Cornelius as ready for the message Peter brings, Peter must receive a triple vision from God in

order to overcome his restrictive views on table fellowship in a Gentile home. Upon entry into Cornelius's home, Peter confesses, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation" (Acts 10:34 NIV). Though Peter's earlier Pentecost declaration that this "promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away" (Acts 2:39) expresses God's hospitality, Peter did not yet realize what he was saying. Based upon the quantity of detail and the content of Acts 10–11, Luke may be less interested in the addition of Cornelius than Peter's exclusivity. Although God's hospitality knows no limits, his people often struggle to embrace such inclusivity. Failure in hospitality, whether due to dishonesty, ethnocentrism, or exclusion, results in fractured community and botched mission.

Whereas Paul simply states "practice hospitality," Luke uses stories to encourage this practice. So what might Pastor Luke say to us? I offer a few possibilities. First, Christians would do well to consider the everyday opportunities afforded through loving table fellowship. Luke demonstrates that the table creates space for openness and vulnerability and postures us to be recipients and agents of God's renovation. Second, we should reflect that if familial or private hospitality proves transformational, how much more will that of the gathered people of God. What if our churches would provide space not only to hear Jesus' voice in a sermon but also enlarge our theology of the table? Given the value placed upon relationships in our culture, creative hospitality might be the key to church unity and evangelism. Third, what if our church-related ministers, whether teachers, preachers, counselors, or administrators, would reflect anew upon their vocations? Beyond their regular sermons, lectures, and various talks, how might ministers seek creative ways to model and enable the people of God to live hospitable lives in a fractured world? What if we would be encouraged to live our ordinary and routine lives as an extension of God's hospitality? May we pray that God would enliven our individual and collective imaginations to extend the hand of Jesus to our next-door neighbor and those around the world. I am convinced that as we listen to God's heart, the possibilities are endless. Cheers! ☩

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