ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

SHARING FOOD, SHARING LIFE:

AN EXAMINATION OF COMMUNITY EATING PRACTICES AND IDENTITY

SUBMITTED TO DR. KEN CUKROWSKI

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

BIBL 640: NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS

BY

LAURA BEALL

MAY 12, 2011

EATING TOGETHER AS IDENTITY

Food is a pervasive and powerful element in the Judeo-Christian tradition,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the implications of food and eating are as varied as the biblical stories in which they are included. One might claim that the biblical focus on food and eating merely reflects the concerns of people who spent 90 percent of their time producing or preparing food.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, while it might be easy to thus relegate food and eating to the realm of an outmoded consideration, no longer necessary in our world of (supposed) plentiful and quickly available nourishment, to do so is to nearly miss the spiritual significance of eating altogether![[3]](#footnote-3) In this paper I will focus on the power that eating together in community has to form and reveal a group’s identity. Then, in light of these connections between eating and identity, I will briefly examine Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian church about their unhealthy practices during the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34).

It would be helpful to begin by defining what I mean by “eating together.” First, I am following Jung’s basic delineation between “sharing” (with those we know) and “hospitality” (toward strangers or even enemies), with my primary focus on sharing within a close-knit community.[[4]](#footnote-4) Second, my discussion revolves around typical, daily food habits.[[5]](#footnote-5) And finally, I use the phrase “eating together” to encompass the whole eating process: from obtaining food, to preparing and serving it, to eating together, and lastly to cleaning up after the meal.

**You Are Because You Eat Together**[[6]](#footnote-6)

When examining the relationship of food to the makeup of a community, eating and identity can be connected in two basic ways. First, a group builds and expresses its character based upon *who* is eating together. Second, the fact that group members share in the basic practice *of* eating together also greatly shapes their character as a community.

So first, who is eating together? A simple answer to this question is not necessarily a straightforward indication of the relationship of food to community, which can be viewed in two different (though not incompatible) ways. On the one hand, a group’s food values can inform their identity. Food issues related to economics, social status, politics, religion, passions, desires, and so on can serve to unify or divide a group.[[7]](#footnote-7) Such issues can become easily visible over a shared meal, when conversation flows, when matters of personal preference and conviction come to the forefront, and when relationships are thereby strengthened or damaged. Food values may cause a group’s initial formation, or they may precipitate its demise.[[8]](#footnote-8)

On the other hand, a group’s identity can direct its eating practices. Communal eating values and practices can emerge because of individuals’ shared commitments, as with orthodox Jews, whose dedication to following God-given dietary laws leads to certain eating habits. Not only *shared* values and identity influence practices, though. Contrasting identities of community members can also go a long way toward forming group practices either destructively (when allowed to disrupt relationships) or constructively (when worked out in healthy relationships).[[9]](#footnote-9)

In either case, whether food habits inform or are informed by identity, community practices of eating—since they are a fundamental and recurring aspect of daily life—serve to indicate who is truly included in the fellowship of that life. The presence or absence of certain people in a group’s mealtime interactions constructs a reality of identity that inevitably forms the community uniquely. Who is present at mealtimes and how they are treated is immensely suggestive of community relationships, and understanding who is eating together and why they are doing so is essential to fully comprehending a community’s makeup. Repeated time spent sharing food strengthens bonds between community members, anchoring them in relationships and drawing them ever closer to one another. Therefore, practices of eating together determine and indicate who is “in” and who is “out,” who is committed, and who is truly connected.

**You Are What You Eat Together**

In the context of community life, *what* a group eats is also highly indicative of that group’s values and boundaries. Simply put, specific food choices form and reflect identity.[[10]](#footnote-10) This truth is easily illustrated in accounts of Jewish and monastic food laws, largely set in place for reasons of purity, camaraderie, and devotion. These kinds of food laws are “community discourse written in the flesh,” clearly delineating who is part of a community and who is not, thereby both indicating and constructing a group’s identity.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, food choices do not have to be codified to indicate values and identity. Less formal ethical considerations also evidence a community’s values.[[12]](#footnote-12) Attention to organic foods, fair trade certified foods, and locally grown foods, for example, shapes a group’s identity, in this case bespeaking a group commitment to health, human flourishing, and environmental care, and inviting individuals who hold such values in high esteem into interaction with the community.

 Even leaving such ethical and religious considerations aside, what a group eats can still illustrate the culture and relationships of that community. Heritage is passed down through eating traditions, and food customs hint powerfully at significant aspects of identity.[[13]](#footnote-13) When a group eats what is culturally and personally relevant for one member of their community, they validate and express solidarity with that member, and when they establish communal food preferences and traditions, they form an identity based upon common habits and culture of eating.

**You Are How You Eat Together**

Finally, *how* communities eat is significant, for those choices demonstrate both how they are formed (or malformed) and who they are in relation to one another and the world.[[14]](#footnote-14) Do community members eat alone or together, with intention or haphazardly, lavishly or moderately? Do all group members contribute to food preparation and cleanup, or are certain preferences or power structures in place so that those jobs fall to a particular person or class of people? Does eating happen in a restaurant or at home? In front of a television or around a table? What kind of ratio of eating to feasting to fasting is in place, and when are these things considered appropriate? These and similar questions elicit the many layers of a group’s eating practices and what those complex practices demonstrate about communal values and identity.

Furthermore, numerous specialists attest that purposeful time spent together eating is vital to a community’s health.[[15]](#footnote-15) Meals are meant to be times of fellowship, a chance for group members to proclaim their connection to one another. Ideally, then, when Christians eat they use this frequent opportunity—and God-given daily necessity!—of sharing food to engender relationship-building conversation, to serve one another, and to share in common life.[[16]](#footnote-16) By giving attention to how they eat and what it says about them as a people, they can modify their eating practices to fit their desired community identity and values.

EATING TOGETHER: A CASE STUDY IN THINGS GONE WRONG

The *who*, *what*, and *how* aspects of eating together are all visible in the Corinthian church’s abuse of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34). They are, in fact, integral reasons for Paul’s admonishment. A brief examination of these aspects will show the dysfunction (and indirectly the intended function) of the Lord’s Supper in that community of faith.

 Paul indicates that the Corinthians’ identity as Christians is what informs (or should inform!) their values and actions in the Lord’s Supper. They are meant to gather around this meal to celebrate the loving Christian community that has formed because of Christ’s sacrifice.

However, the Corinthians are going astray in *how* they are eating the Supper, and their dysfunction indicates that their communal bonds are not as tightly-knit as Paul might hope. Their group is full of divisions (v.18). Instead of eating together because of a concern for the health and wholeness of the community, they are eating separately out of appetite and self-centered desire, “communing” at different times and to different levels of satiety, thus indicating their contempt for God and fellow believers (vss.21-22, 33-34). They are not examining themselves and eating in a worthy manner, so they are visiting calamity and judgment upon themselves (vss.27-32).

Their dysfunctional attempts at the Lord’s Supper even somehow change *what* they are eating, though not in a literal sense to be sure. Because their actions proclaim their own personal agendas rather than remembrance of the Lord’s death (v.26), Paul goes so far as to say that what they are eating is in fact *not* the Lord’s Supper—it is mere bread and wine, *not* the body and blood of Christ those emblems are meant to represent (vss.20, 29). In short, *who* is eating together, *how* they are eating, and the effect that has on *what* they are eating speaks volumes about the Corinthians’ identity as Christians, and Paul is not pleased with the results he observes.

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1. Biblically, one can trace the uses and importance of food from the first chapter of Genesis, where God initially supplies food, all the way to the last chapter of Revelation, where the tree of life and the water of life give sustenance to those in God’s presence. Within these bounds, prominent passages involving food include: God’s provision of manna and quail for the Israelites (Exod 16), dietary laws in Leviticus, Daniel’s refusal to eat the king’s provisions (Dan 1:8-16), Jesus’ feeding of the crowds and the Last Supper (in all four gospels), the sharing of the early church (Acts 2:46), and the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9). Though I will mention some briefly later, tracing extra-biblical Judeo-Christian attitudes toward food and eating goes too far past the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. L. Shannon Jung, *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 9. Jung provides this statistic, not this supposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though the overwhelming Western experience is one of readily available nutritious food, food insecurity is a major predicament for a large portion of the world’s population. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated that 925 million people worldwide were undernourished in 2010. See “The State of Food Insecurity in the World,” <<http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/en/>> (10 May 2011). However, even in cases of food insecurity, the meaning of food and eating far surpasses physical nourishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Jung, *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 39-40. While I will concentrate here only on sharingfood, I do believe that that practice is a necessary (or at least particularly helpful) step to prepare a community for the full expression of hospitality towards outsiders. Inward relationships indicate what outward relationships will look like and must be healthy before hospitality can be effectively extended. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While the practices of feasting and fasting should be central to a healthy Christian community’s food rhythms and would, I believe, produce similar findings as those presented here, I will leave these practices aside for now, as they are essentially exceptions to the rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My discussion of the formative and denotative aspects of eating together will be framed through adaptations of the well-known adage—“you are what you eat.” In its original form, this saying only scratches the surface of the much larger picture of eating and its significance. However, I will revise it in a couple of ways to demonstrate the broader role of food and eating in the context of community. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For example, communities dedicated to vegetarian or vegan eating, a CSA (community supported agriculture) movement or farmer’s market, or a group of people formed when a religious feasting tradition brings otherwise independent individuals together. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Consider, for example, how groups of “orthodox” and “heretic” Christians were created and destroyed when forced meat-feeding was used as a test of belief among some medieval Christians. See Dianne M. Bazell, “Strife among the Table-Fellows: Conflicting Attitudes of Early and Medieval Christians toward the Eating of Meat,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1997): 91-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lars Kjaer and A.J. Watson discuss the tensions caused by these contrasting values and social locations in their article “Feasts and Gifts: Sharing Food in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011). Such potentially destructive tensions have often been avoided through the codification of food laws, like the numerous references to food and eating in the short span of *The Rule of Benedict* and similar rules of life. However, it has been my own community’s experience that the opportunity for positive growth through the self-emptying give and take of needs and preferences is perhaps (at least for a smaller group) healthier than the compilation of a list of food rules. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Eating is, as described by Augustine and expanded upon by Bazell, a “visible sign” or sacrament, that indicates “metaphysical positions” that might not be openly manifested otherwise. See Bazell, “Strife among the Table-Fellows,” 86. As implied previously, what people eat or refuse to eat together can be directly connected to *who* they eat with, with one an extension of the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter J. Tomson, “Jewish Food Laws in Early Christian Community Discourse,” *Semeia* 86 (1999): 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. David Grumett, who also speaks briefly to ethical considerations in relation to Christian eating, puts it this way: “Diet impresses on people’s bodies their Christian beliefs in ways that deserve to be rediscovered.” See Grumett, “A Christian Diet,” *Christian Century* 127, no. 7 (6 April 2010): 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See for example, the analysis of an African Caribbean culture in Shirlyn Toppin, “‘Soul Food’ Theology: Pastoral Care and Practice through the Sharing of Meals: A Womanist Reflection,” *Black Theology* 4, no. 1 (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Many experts have something to say about the eating mentality of modern Americans—our eating practices and what those reflect about us. I particularly appreciate Jung’s description of our food habits as “eating and food system disorders.” Jung, *Food for Life*, 57-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to anthropology professor Sidney Mintz, “Interaction over food is the single most important feature of socializing. The food becomes the carriage that conveys feelings back and forth.” Quoted in Jeffrey Kluger, Christine Gorman, and Alice Park, “America's Obesity Crisis: Eating Behavior: Why We Eat,” *Time*, 7 June 2004, < [http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,994388,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0%2C9171%2C994388%2C00.html)> (9 May 2011). See also: The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, “The Importance of Family Dinners VI,” September 2010, <http://www.casacolumbia.org/upload/2010/20100922familydinners6.pdf > (11 May 2011). And finally, pastor James P. Wind, “A High-Stakes Church Supper,” *Congregations* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 5, calls eating together “a life-and-death matter” that is “one of the most basic human ways community is formed and faith is created.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In modern Christian society, often the only meal where connection or kinship is recognized is the Eucharist, and then it is frequently celebrated badly (as we will shortly see with the Corinthians). If only we could recover in its fullness the art of breaking bread together! [↑](#footnote-ref-16)