

A Biblical Theology of Feasting

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Just as the food we eat expresses and establishes the relationships we have, so too meals in the Bible establish and express kinship relationships. Even more, a meal is often a central part of entering into a covenant. And once that covenant is established, a shared meal is one of the greatest ways our identity is formed and reinforced. Let's follow these two strands through Scripture to see how they shine light on the Lord's Supper.

Covenant-Making Meals

In Genesis 26:26–33, Isaac and Abimelech “cut a covenant” (v. 28); this covenant is followed by a meal: “So he made a feast, and they ate and drank” (v. 30). Likewise, when Jacob and Laban “cut a covenant” to repair the breach of trust between them (Genesis 31:43–54), a sacrifice and a meal ratified the agreement: “Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread” (v. 54). This pattern of sacrifice and feasting accompanied most covenants in the Old Testament. And we certainly see the Lord feeding his people and feasting with them throughout the Old Testament.

For instance, when God came to Abraham in Genesis 18, the patriarch prepared a meal and the Lord dined with him as he reasserted his covenant promise to give Abraham a son. Because the Abrahamic covenant is spread across eleven chapters (Genesis 12 – 22), this meal fits into the pattern of ratifying a covenant with a meal.

In Exodus the correlation of sacrifice, feasting, and salvation is found again. First, God commands Israel to sacrifice a lamb while the angel of the Lord passes over to kill the firstborn sons (ch. 12). The substitutionary sacrifice protected the firstborn sons of Israel, as they took refuge behind the blood and ate the beloved animal that died for them. Later in the same book, God visited his people at Mount Sinai (ch. 19–24). On that mountain God made a covenant with Israel, and “Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders from Israel went up . . . they beheld God, and ate and drank” (24:9, 11).

On this same mountain, Moses would receive instructions for how the whole nation of Israel would eat and drink in the presence of God. Leviticus 1–7 records five types of sacrifice, which together form a matrix of atonement that covers all angles of sin.

Still, in this system of sacrifice, fellowship and feasting is always the final goal. The priests regularly ate the sacrifices they offered and the calendar of Israel was scheduled around the feasts they kept (Leviticus 23). In other words, within God's covenant with Israel, the Lord was restoring to Israel what Adam and Eve had lost—fellowship to eat in the presence of God.

Identity-Making Meals

At the same time, the food choices prescribed in the Law of Moses made the Israelites a distinct people. They reinforced the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. As God formed

his people by carving them out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 4:34), God gave them a menu that would make their fellowship “invite only” (by circumcision actually).

We know from the Law’s repeal in Acts 10, that eating pork or shellfish was not intrinsically defiling. Rather, Yahweh’s food laws were given to shape the identity of Israel. They separated them from the world, while uniting them to one another. Peter repulsed at the idea of eating “unclean” meat, because from birth he had “never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (Acts 10:14).

From this side of Christ’s cross, we may struggle to appreciate Peter’s struggle. We joke about the joys of eating pork barbeque and playfully lament over what Israel missed. But this obscures the fact that Christ’s new covenant people are still defined by what we eat. Yes, we have the freedom to eat Thai food on Tuesday and Cajun shrimp on Saturday. But the new covenant has not only expanded our menu; it has created a new meal which defines everything else about us.

A Covenant-Making, Identity-Defining Meal

As we learn from our Lord, everything in the Old Testament leads to Jesus Christ (John 5:39). This is especially true for feasting and food. As a son of Israel, Jesus is led into the wilderness for forty days. Like his ancestors, he is tempted to turn stones into bread, and he proves his sonship by trusting that life depends on the word of God, not the consumption of bread (Matthew 4:4). Later, when he is again in the wilderness (“on the other side of the Sea of Galilee,” John 6:1), Jesus feeds the multitudes as he teaches them: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

Whereas food laws and feasting, under the old covenant, were made of bread and meat, Christ comes as a greater meal. Only those who eat his body and drink his blood will find eternal life (John 6:52–59). Jesus offended and confused many as he spoke about faith in this way, and it only proved his point: “No one can come to me unless the father draws him” (v. 44). Jesus is the tree of life and he gives life to all who come to him starved for true food.

Ultimately, the bread of life is broken for the sins of his covenant people. Before his death on the cross, however, he shares a meal with his disciples. Building on the foundation of the Passover, Jesus inaugurates the new covenant meal. He says that the bread represents his body “which is given for you” (Luke 22:19); the cup “is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Altogether, this meal is to be shared by all his followers until he comes again (see 1 Corinthians 11:26).

The ‘Last’ Supper: Communion as Antitype and Prototype

From Pentecost until now the church has received communion to remember Christ’s sacrifice. After baptism (the initiating covenant rite), the Lord’s Supper is the ongoing rite of the new covenant. It is the repeated meal which proclaims the gospel to us and defines who we are. Whereas God separated Israel from the nations by means of the exodus; so God has separated (i.e., positionally sanctified) his people by the gospel.

In truth, we live and move and have our being in a world filled with tables set for demons, but when we sit down at the Lord’s Table we are reminded who and whose we are. Day-by-day we may eat our native cuisines, but it is Christ’s new covenant meal that defines us and should retrain every other appetite.

This was Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 10:21: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." The Lord's Supper—as the gospel made edible—calls us to forsake all other idols and tables devoted to demons. This was Paul's point to the church in Corinth and reminds us that the Lord's Supper is both a fulfillment of what the Old Testament foreshadowed and displays a beautiful picture of the final wedding feast.

May we prepare ourselves for that day as we come to table this Lord's Day.