

7/14 Fellowship meals for the proclamation of Christ's death

(A report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission.)

1. The Purpose and Limits of this Report

1.1 This report has been written in response to the following request from the 2007 Sydney Synod:

Synod requests the Diocesan Doctrine Commission to consider the appropriateness, with respect to the teaching of Scripture and the Anglican formularies, of Anglican churches having a fellowship meal for the proclamation of the Lord's death, and to bring a report to Synod at a convenient time. (Resolution 37/07)

The question under discussion, therefore, is quite specific: In light of what both Scripture and the Anglican formularies teach about the practice of believers eating together and its connection with the proclamation of Jesus' death, is it 'appropriate' (that is, is it required by, implied by, or at least consistent with, such teaching) to have a fellowship meal to proclaim the Lord's death?

1.2 Whereas our historic Anglican practice of celebrating 'The Lord's Supper' or 'The Holy Communion' is a fellowship meal in which a small piece of bread and a sip of wine is shared, the Synod request seems to be asking about a more substantial meal shared by members of a church.

1.3 The question, then, is not whether such a 'fellowship meal' is the only way, or even the best way, of proclaiming Christ's death. Nor is it being proposed that such meals take the place of our historic practice of celebrating 'The Lord's Supper' or 'The Holy Communion'. The question is simply whether such meals can be an 'appropriate' way of proclaiming Christ's death.

1.4 In order to address this question, the report will briefly examine the nature and meaning of meals in the New Testament (sections 2 and 3), and the relevance of the Anglican formularies to this discussion (section 4). After offering some brief conclusions (section 5), it will then outline a series of 'guiding principles' for contemporary fellowship meals, so that they might effectively proclaim Jesus' sacrificial death for sinners (section 6).

2. The Significance of Meals in the Time of Jesus

2.1 In the period of the New Testament, shared meals were profoundly significant for all the cultures of the Mediterranean world. Eating with someone not only expressed welcome and friendship, but frequently symbolized social equality and spiritual unity. Indeed, outside of household settings, where extended families normally came together, most people only ate with those who belonged to the same social class or religious grouping. Even at patron-client dinners, where there was a clear social hierarchy, the importance of a relationship that was in some sense reciprocal was undeniable.

2.2 For the Jews of the New Testament period meals had a special significance. Not only did they express intimacy and acceptance of one another, they were governed by the expectations of the Jewish Law concerning what could and could not be eaten, and with whom it could and could not be eaten. Meals helped establish a clear boundary line between those who were and those who were not the true people of God. Only faithful Israelites (and occasionally sympathetic Gentiles) could eat together. Unrepentant Israelites ('the wicked') and pagan enemies were necessarily excluded.

2.3 The Pharisees, in particular, were strongly convinced that Israel's identity and destiny depended on her moral and ritual purity. Indeed the Pharisees came into existence as a sect in reaction to the compromising tendencies of many of their Jewish contemporaries, including a number of leading priests. Among other things, their concern for purity meant that they would only eat with those who had 'undefiled hands' (Mk 7:2-4). This, as we see in the Gospels, commonly led both to pride and to contempt for the less observant (Lk 7:39; 18:9).

2.4 Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners demonstrated a clear rejection of the social and religious exclusivism of the Pharisees (Mt 9:10). Therefore, it is not surprising that they roundly criticized him, complaining: 'This man receives sinners and eats with them' (Lk 15:2). Nor is it surprising that he became widely known as 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Mt 11:19). Furthermore, Jesus challenged contemporary self-serving approaches to meals, urging banquet hosts not to invite those who would repay them in kind (e.g., friends, family, rich neighbours). Rather they should adopt an attitude of grace and faith, inviting those who cannot repay (e.g., the poor, the crippled, the blind) and awaiting repayment 'at the resurrection of the just' (Lk 14:12-14).

2.5 Contrary to the criticisms of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus' willingness to eat with anyone who would eat with him in no way reflected moral delinquency and spiritual bankruptcy. His explanation as to why he ate with tax collectors and sinners was simple: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mk 2:17; cf. Mt 9:12-13; Lk 5:31-32).

2 7/14 Fellowship meals for the proclamation of Christ's death (2014)

In other words, Jesus understood himself to be the great physician who had come to bring salvation to any who would receive him. His freedom to eat and associate with 'sinners', then, stemmed from his conviction that not only would their corruption fail to infect him, but that his presence with them signaled the arrival of their salvation (Lk 19:9-10).

- 2.6 In keeping with the promises of the Old Testament (e.g., Isa 25:6-9), Jesus regularly spoke of the coming of the kingdom of God in terms of a great feast (Mt 22:1-14; Lk 14:15-24). This aspect of the prophetic hope is inextricably linked to the coming of Israel's Messiah (Isa 55:1-5). This coming would supply ample reason for celebration: God's great eschatological promises would be fulfilled in the resurrection of the dead and in a new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:13). According to Jesus, feasting with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be a significant part of the experience of the coming kingdom of God (Mt 8:11; Lk 13:28-29).
- 2.7 The most significant of all the meals in which Jesus participated during the course of his earthly ministry was the 'last supper' he shared with his disciples (Mt 26:17-35; Mk 14:12-31; Lk 22:7-38; Jn 13-17). The meal was a Passover – i.e., the annual, memorial feast that celebrated the deliverance of the people of Israel from their bondage to the Egyptians in the time of Moses. In the course of Israel's history, the Passover also came to look forward, as well as backward, eagerly expecting the final deliverance of the people when the Messiah comes.
- 2.8 Jesus himself highlighted the unique significance of this particular Passover meal, declaring it to be the last meal he would eat until the kingdom of God comes, and linking it with his own imminent death for his people (Lk 22:16-20). As Israel's Messiah, Jesus then reinterpreted the meal in terms of the fulfilment it would find in his death ('he took bread ... and said, "this is my body" ... and he took a cup ... saying, "this is my blood"', Mt 26:26, 28). In other words, his body about to be given for them and his blood about to be poured out for them on the cross would secure the long awaited redemption of Israel (Lk 24:21), so that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to the nations' (Lk 24:47).

3. The Fellowship Meals of the First Christians

- 3.1 The book of Acts tells us that along with the apostles' teaching, the fellowship and the prayers, the first Christians devoted themselves to 'the breaking of bread' (Acts 2:42, 46). Whilst this language may possibly suggest a link between these occasions and Jesus' actions and instructions at the last supper (Lk 24:30), it certainly indicates that they shared real meals together (Acts 20:7,11; 27:35). Moreover, as they ate together in each other's homes, 'they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God' (vv. 46b-47a). Thus, the 'ordinary meals' of the first Christians were far from ordinary; they were a vital expression of their fellowship and occasions of joyful thanksgiving. It was in this context that 'the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved' (v. 47b).
- 3.2 The significance of meals for the first Christians is also evident in the prominent role they played in a number of the disputes and developments that arise in the New Testament. For example, a major section of 1 Corinthians (chapters 8-11) deals with a range of issues regarding eating: e.g., with whom Christians should eat, what they should or should not eat, and how they should eat together. Similarly, the initiation of ministry to Gentiles is brought about through Peter's wrestling with the question of what he can eat (Acts 10). Through a series of visions of food hitherto unclean, but now cleansed by God (vv. 10-16), he was brought to understand that he was free to go and visit the Gentile, Cornelius (vv. 19-20, 28, 34-35). Because he could now associate and eat with Cornelius and his household, Peter was able to share Christ with them in person (vv. 36-43) and remain with them for some days (v. 48).
- 3.3 A major conflict among the apostles in the New Testament also concerned meals. In Galatians 2, Paul recounts a particularly serious disagreement between himself and Peter over the question of with whom one can eat. Peter had initially eaten with Gentile believers in Antioch, but after some visitors had come from James in Jerusalem, he drew back and separated himself (v. 12). Before long the rest of the Jewish believers, including Barnabas, followed his lead (v. 13). In light of the lesson Peter learned and articulated in Acts 10, the incident is particularly puzzling. Whatever rationale Peter may have provided for withdrawing from eating with Gentile believers, as far as Paul was concerned Peter was not only acting hypocritically, but in a way that was patently inconsistent with the truth of gospel (2:13-14). For Jewish believers to eat separately from Gentile believers was, in effect, to imply that their common salvation by Christ through faith was insufficient for table fellowship. This redrawing of old boundary lines (see Eph 2:11-16) sent the message that justification was, after all, by works of the law and not through faith in Christ (Gal 2:16). Paul insisted that if this were true, 'then Christ died for no purpose' (v. 21). The lesson from this incident is clear: the practice of Christians (Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free) eating together is inextricably bound up with the truth of the gospel, in particular with the significance of Jesus' death.

- 3.4 In the case of the unrepentant immoral brother in the Corinthian congregation, however, the apostle Paul insists on a withdrawal of table fellowship. His instruction is 'not to associate ... not even to eat with such a one' (1 Cor. 5:11). Such a withdrawal would be highly significant, indicating the seriousness of the offender's behaviour and its incompatibility with a confession of faith in Christ. Eating together is an act of genuine fellowship. Declining to eat together signals the withdrawal of such fellowship.
- 3.5 The fellowship meals of the first Christians certainly gave expression to gospel truths, particularly the death of Jesus, which brought Jew and Gentile, slave and free together. In this sense, their meals were an advertisement of the power of reconciliation in Christ, whose blood broke down the dividing wall of hostility that existed between them (Eph 2:14-16). Therefore, we may wish to answer the Synod request in the affirmative. It is certainly appropriate for churches to express their fellowship in Christ through sharing a meal, especially given the fact that every church is made up of a variety of different people who may have never gathered together if it were not for Christ. All such fellowship meals could be said to 'proclaim' the death of Jesus.
- 3.6 The link between eating and drinking and the proclamation of Jesus' death is made explicit in 1 Corinthians 11:26: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim [katagellete] the Lord's death until he comes.' It is commonly understood that Paul is here speaking of a meal that recalls the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper and which invested the bread broken before the meal and wine shared after the meal with particular significance. Some, however, argue that the activity of sharing a meal when gathered as Christ's body itself proclaims the Lord's death.¹
- 3.7 What both views have in common is an understanding that the proclamation of which Paul speaks took place in the context of a real fellowship meal. Moreover, on either view, the proclamation of the Lord's death in such meals should continue, as Paul says it will, 'until he comes' (v. 26). This not only underscores the significance of these occasions, but introduces an eschatological element to the gathering and its meal: Christians not only look back, memorialising and proclaiming Christ's death, but also look forward (in anticipation) to the banquet that he will share with those he has redeemed from every nation, tribe, people and tongue in the consummated kingdom of God.

4. Fellowship Meals and the Anglican Formularies

- 4.1 For reasons that are not altogether clear, by the middle of the second century, the practice of churches sharing a full meal (often referred to as 'the love feast') had developed into the practice of sharing a token meal of a more structured and ceremonial nature (usually referred to as 'the eucharist'). It was this latter practice that was inherited by the English Protestants at the time of the Reformation. However, due to the influence of the Wycliffe Bible (1382-1395), it was more commonly referred to as 'the Lord's Supper' or otherwise 'Holy Communion'.
- 4.2 The expression 'the Anglican formularies' in Sydney Synod resolution 37/07 refers to The Book of Common Prayer, The Ordinal (i.e., the Ordination Services contained in the Book of Common Prayer), and The Articles of Religion (otherwise known as The Thirty-Nine Articles). According to the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia, these documents articulate the 'ruling principles' of our beliefs and practices.
- 4.3 While the Thirty-nine Articles do not address the subject of fellowship meals in general, Article XXVIII makes use of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10-11 in connection with the church's practice of the Lord's Supper. This it refers to as 'a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ: and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.' The formularies understand the historic practice of sharing in a symbolic meal in the context of the regular gathering of Christ's disciples around the Word and in the Spirit in the light of Paul's encouragement to 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'
- 4.4 This connection continues in The Book of Common Prayer's "Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper". It is, in fact, strengthened in the exhortations appointed to be read at the time of Communion, in which the warning about unworthy eating is written in the same terms as those in which Paul describes the effects of unworthy eating in 1 Corinthians 11:30ff. The formularies simply identify the Holy Communion with the meal Paul had in mind as he wrote to the Corinthians.
- 4.5 Despite this identification, "An Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper" does not preclude other 'fellowship meals for the proclamation of Jesus' death.' By implication, however, the same theological realities (i.e., the death of Christ, our participation in him by faith and our unity with one another) should shape all such church meals.

¹ These two views are outlined in a working paper presented to the Doctrine Commission in the course of preparing this report. The paper is available as a resource at www.sds.asn.au on the Diocesan Doctrine Commission Reports page.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The answer to the question asked by the Sydney Synod is in one sense quite straightforward. Every opportunity to remember and proclaim Christ's death both to one another and publicly before the community is to be welcomed. Furthermore, as we have seen, the New Testament expects that the Lord's death will be remembered and proclaimed in ways that are consistent with the meaning and significance of that death. In particular, the death of Jesus draws us into loving fellowship not only with the triune God himself but also with each other in an environment where worldly divisions between those gathered are unwelcome.
- 5.2 The historic practice of Anglicans has been to proclaim the Lord's death in the context of eating and drinking together by our participation in 'The Holy Communion'. The liturgy provided in The Book of Common Prayer sought to embody gospel truths and especially the theological realities presented by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. The same theological principles that properly guide participation in the Holy Communion should shape all other fellowship meals in which the truth of Jesus' death for our sins and his rising for our justification is remembered and proclaimed.
- 5.3 It seems important, then, to conclude with some guiding principles for fellowship meals that will help ensure that they appropriately and effectively proclaim Christ's death. These are by no means exhaustive, but seek to provide a foundation for serious theological reflection upon the form and content of such meals.

6. Guiding Principles for Fellowship Meals

- 6.1 Such meals should be Christian gatherings, even if they take place at a time and in a place different from the regular gatherings of this group of God's people. (There is no reason why such fellowship meals could not take place in the homes of believers, as they did in the early church.) This basic principle of identity means that the theological realities that should govern all of our gatherings will also apply to this gathering.
- 6.2 While believers' eating and drinking together may be a demonstration of the power of Christ's death to break down all dividing walls of hostility, it will always be appropriate for this to be explained in spoken words. In such a context, it is important to relate participation in the meal to the gospel of the death of Christ. In this way the thoughts and hearts of the participants will be focused on the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father's love for unworthy sinners. At the same time, the congregation can rejoice together in their common experience of God's grace in Christ and 'feed on him in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving.' Thus, in both word and deed the fellowship meal becomes a proclamation of Christ's death.
- 6.3 Participation in the meal must reflect the selflessness and service of the one whose death for us we remember and proclaim. In other words, this meal is for people of repentance and faith, who have forgiven others their sins because they have received forgiveness from God. Furthermore, all should conduct themselves at the meal in a way that honours both the Lord and those present. The meal should exhibit the unity of those who partake and our mutual concern one for another.
- 6.4 The fellowship meal provides a clear focus for these renovated human relationships brought into being by the death of Jesus Christ and our common faith in him. Occasionally, however, an individual may claim to be a Christian and yet refuse to live as a disciple or behave properly as a member of the body of Christ. Such a person should not attend the fellowship meal until repentance is forthcoming. (1 Cor 5.11).
- 6.5 These recommendations may well mean that leaders in the community will need to ensure, as far as possible, that those present at the fellowship meal be made aware of what it means to take part in a worthy way. The ancient practice of the churches (adopted by historic Anglicanism) has been to 'catechize' in one way or other those who would participate in the 'Lord's Supper'. It would be helpful if some form of this practice was extended to fellowship meals as well. Such instruction need not be extensive, and could simply consist of an explanation of the purpose and basis of the meal given at the occasion itself. Nevertheless, it should at least make clear the proper context in which both true fellowship and a faithful remembrance of the Lord's death takes place.
- 6.6 In certain circumstances, where the leaders of the community are aware of persistent sin or relationship breakdown, it would be wise to give advance notice of such fellowship meals. This would serve not only the obvious practical purposes, but also allow for proper pastoral care to be exercised. For example, those who for one reason or another would be uncomfortable sharing in such a meal may in good conscience absent themselves. Ideally, however, the provision of due notice will provide sufficient time for participants to be reconciled to God and/or to others, so that all might share the meal together and all might proclaim the Lord's death.

- 6.7 In summary, our response to the Synod's request is that it is appropriate for Anglican churches, and believers in general, to have a fellowship meal for the proclamation of the Lord's death, in addition to and distinct from their sharing in the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, as set forth in our authorised liturgies.

For the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

M D THOMPSON
Chairman

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