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***Whose Meal is it Anyway?  
Jesus, the Church and Eucharistic  
Origins***

***The Barry Marshall Memorial  
Lecture, Trinity College***

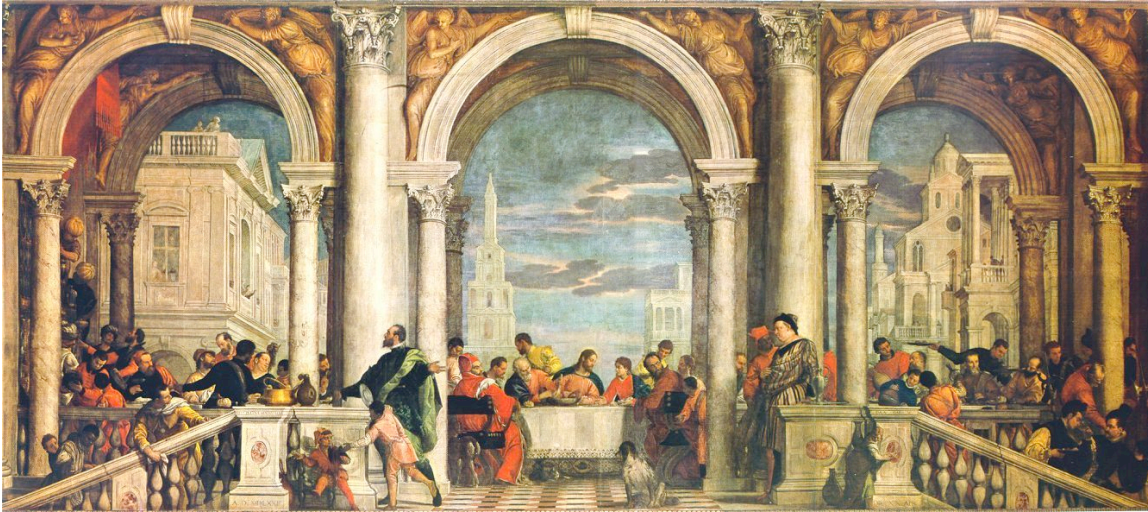
**A public lecture by Revd Dr Andrew McGowan,  
at Trinity College on 21 August 2002**

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## *Whose Meal is it Anyway?*

The Barry Marshall Memorial Lecture, by  
Revd Dr Andrew McGowan, 21 August 2002.<sup>1</sup>



### *Of Popes and Python*

In a well-known Monty Python skit, a renaissance Pope sounding suspiciously like John Cleese summons an artist—allegedly Michelangelo—to complain about the progress of a new ‘Last Supper’ he has commissioned. The pontiff is upset that this rendition of the institution of the Eucharist includes unexpected elements such as a mariachi band, twenty-eight disciples, three Christs, and a kangaroo; he demands changes. The Pythonesque painter, unwilling to adapt the canvas to depict the more traditional banquet of the twelve with a single savior, attempts a solution:

‘I’ve got it, I’ve got it! We’ll call it ‘The Last But One Supper’!’

‘What?’ [says the Pope]

‘Well there must have been one, if there was a last supper there must have been a one before that, so this is the ‘Penultimate Supper’! The Bible doesn’t say how many people were *there* now, does it?’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the Revd Dr David Cole and Professor Donald Markwell for the invitation to be Frank Woods Fellow at Trinity College, University of Melbourne, in August 2002, and to give the Barry Marshall Memorial Lecture. Comments and assistance from Andrew Hamilton, Ross Fishburn, Ron Dowling and Richard McCall are gratefully acknowledged; in particular Joan Branham’s help with both text and images has been invaluable.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.montypython.net/scripts/michpoppe.php>

The impatient patron brings the interview to a close, summoning all the *dignitas* of the Petrine office:

‘Look! I’m the bloody pope, I am! May not know much about art, but I know what I like!’<sup>3</sup>

The story seems to have been drawn, if loosely, from history. On July 18th 1573, the painter Paulo Veronese was summoned by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, accused of heresy because of an insufficiently traditional and overly populated Last Supper. The painting, now in the *Accademia* in Venice, was painted for the refectory of the monastery at San Zanipolo in that city. A quick glance reveals the problem—the Mannerist canvas is vastly different in conception and form to the more familiar Leonardo rendition in another monastic refectory in Milan. While Leonardo’s coherent group of disciples obediently follows Renaissance rules of clarity—groups of three producing gestures and lines that merge dutifully toward one-point perspective at Christ’s head—Veronese’s painting is altogether too expansive in style and scope to fulfill traditional, let alone emerging Counter-Reformation needs, for an enclosed, defined origin for the Mass. The participants are too many and of the wrong kind—‘buffoons, drunken Germans, dwarfs, and other such absurdities.’ Did he not know, the inquisitor had asked, ‘that in Germany and other countries infested by heresy, it is habitual, by means of pictures full of absurdities, to vilify and turn to ridicule the things of the Holy Catholic Church, in order to teach false doctrine to ignorant people who have no common sense?’<sup>4</sup> Whatever literal pictures were involved, reformers were indeed invoking a different version of the actions and intentions of Jesus as fundamental to the different ways they expected to deal with the meaning and practice of liturgy in their present.

Not wishing to change the painting itself, Veronese actually did change it into a sort of penultimate supper merely by amending the title, calling it ‘Feast in the House of Levi’, and adding the inscription Luke 5:29 to one of the painting’s pillars, to indicate a different Gospel meal scene that more readily tolerated the presence of clowns and soldiers. In doing so he solved his immediate problem but accentuated a more persistent one; for both the historical and the comic versions of the story point not only to the importance of the Last Supper as an image for the Eucharist, but also to the tension evident even in the Gospel tradition between that Last Supper and those suppers that preceded it. For scholars and worshippers as much as for artists, the solemn meal in the upper room seems to act as a delicate filter or hinge between those ‘penultimate suppers’, the earlier meals of Jesus populated by tax collectors and sinners, abundant and joyous, and on the other hand the later meal of the Church, the Eucharist, formal, ritualized, and exclusive.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> M.Yriarte’s translation of the proceedings, cited in Francis Marion Crawford, *Salve Venetia: Gleanings from Venetian History* (2 vols; New York; Macmillan, 1905) 2.29-34.

*Admission to Communion: Controversies*

In the twenty-first century, eucharistic controversies have a different form, but pictures of Jesus still inform the debates. In Britain and Ireland, unkind words have been spoken in the recent past concerning intercommunion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.<sup>5</sup> In Australia and elsewhere, the admission to communion of remarried divorcees is a vexing pastoral issue in the Roman Catholic Church<sup>6</sup>, not to mention the more spectacular one of refusal of communion to openly gay and lesbian participants at Mass. Scholars seeking to address these recent concerns have often emphasized the place of meals in the ministry of Jesus, rather than the Last Supper as sole basis for eucharistic reflection. Frank Moloney's book *A Body Broken for a Broken People*, for instance, surveys New Testament Christologies, particularly those of the Gospels, finding in them and in the evidence for the practice of the historical Jesus, the 'dangerous memory of Jesus sharing his table with the broken people of his society and culture.'<sup>7</sup>

That kind of picture of Jesus can however function even more expansively. In the United States where I presently live and work, eucharistic issues, like so much else, depend on exactly where and who you are. While there are concerns not altogether dissimilar to those already mentioned, the most prominent issue under discussion in the Episcopal Church—the Anglican Church in the United States—is that of abandoning all specific requirements or qualifications for admission to communion. A number of parishes in the Episcopal Church, and in other American Protestant circles, might now be found where the invitation to communion is interpreted or even replaced by words such as 'This is God's Table, not ours; all are welcome.' Grace Cathedral in San Francisco now advertises that 'all persons who seek God and are drawn to Christ are welcome to receive the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist.'<sup>8</sup> A similar invitation was made in the order of service for the consecration of a suffragan bishop for the Diocese of Massachusetts last year.

This radical position is nowhere more apparent than at the remarkable Church of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, also in the Diocese of California of the Episcopal Church. At St Gregory's an iconic mural of saints above the altar includes numerous heroes of Christian or other faiths or none, dancing together; and as one might have expected in a setting where both Malcolm X and Anne Frank are included in the depiction of the Church triumphant, baptism is not regarded as a qualification for admission to the Eucharist. St Gregory's has not only participated in but arguably led the movement to make the

<sup>5</sup> See Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England & Wales, Ireland, Scotland, *One Bread, One Body: A Teaching Document on The Eucharist in The Life Of The Church and the Establishment of General Norms on Sacramental Sharing* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1998), and House of Bishops of the Church of England, *The Eucharist, Sacrament of Unity: An Occasional Paper* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See the references given in Francis J. Moloney S.D.B., *A Body Broken for a Broken People* (Rev. ed.; Blackburn, Vic.: HarperCollins, 1997) 7-13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 190. Similarly Andrew Hamilton's critical response to Josef Cardinal Ratzinger's theology of communion makes significant reference to Jesus' 'confrontational hospitality'; Andrew Hamilton S.J., 'Eucharist, Theology and Discipleship,' *Pacifica* 12 (1999) 152.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gracecathedral.org>, August 16, 2002.

eucharistic table just as open as the tables of Jesus are often said to have been. Its Rector and liturgist Richard Fabian writes:

Far from requiring Baptism before communion...the Church might more logically reverse the conventional order, and baptize for Christ's mission those whom Christ has already welcomed to his table, and fed with his body and blood.<sup>9</sup>

This view, whatever we make of it, does at least alert us to the fact that these issues are always just as much about baptism and its meaning as about Eucharist; Fabian's statement still assumes a relatively high doctrine of the Eucharist, for instance. Like the other instances of debate about admission to communion, the issue is at least as much ecclesiological as it is one of sacramental theology.

However idiosyncratic it may appear from the perspective of the Australian scene, this more radical view and the practices associated with it do demand to be taken seriously. Rather than simply using the inclusive character of Jesus' 'penultimate suppers' to argue for a somewhat more inclusive Eucharist, it attempts to model the Eucharist on them quite directly, and to give the meal of the Church just the same expansive and unconditionally-accepting character attributed to the meals of Jesus even by historians and theologians who were probably not imagining this particular pastoral application. Questions about the use of the New Testament in this case must at least be raised in the others as well.

In what follows, then, I will consider issues relating to participation and inclusion in the eucharistic meal, first in terms of traditions concerning Jesus, and second in relation to evidence about the early Church itself, in an attempt to ask 'whose meal' the Eucharist actually is.

### *The Eating Jesus*

The emphasis on the eating Jesus found in a good deal of recent discussion is owed in part to attempts to get behind the Gospel texts to consider the practice of the historical Jesus, whether for its own sake or as a resource for critical reflection on New Testament theology. This tendency was pioneered in particular by American New Testament scholar Norman Perrin, who in the early 1960s argued that a tradition of distinctive meals going back to the ministry of Jesus, and not merely to one supper at the end of his life, was necessary to explain the prominence of the Eucharist in the earliest Church. Perrin argued also that the character of Jesus' eating at such meals was a key reason for his rejection and death.<sup>10</sup>

Perrin, who not coincidentally is another of the figures in the iconic mural at St Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, was also among quite a few New Testament scholars

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<sup>9</sup> *Worship at St Gregory's* (San Francisco: All Saints' Company, 1995) 29 n.55.

<sup>10</sup> N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (HarperCollins, 1976) 102-8.

who suspected that the Last Supper itself did not happen, at least in the terms understood in later tradition.<sup>11</sup> Those who hold this position might well place more historical emphasis on the picture of Jesus' inclusive meal-fellowship well before his death as a basis for the ongoing practice of the Church, than on what they regard as the 'myth of origins' of the Christian meal.<sup>12</sup>

Yet one does not have to be this sceptical to acknowledge how stories of Jesus sharing food with marginal characters such as tax collectors and sinners, proclaiming the reign of God in the parabolic form of an expansive banquet, or producing miraculous meals, are both historically and theologically important, and even presented in the New Testament with reasonably clear connections to the eucharistic practice of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

In what follows I will briefly examine those three elements of the Gospel tradition and the likely historical basis for them, and consider their implications for three aspects of participation in the meals of Jesus and/or of the Church: hospitality, inclusion, and ritual respectively. I will argue that the emphasis on the eating Jesus, while important and revealing, has tended to fall into three interrelated traps, with unintended consequences when pastoral implications have been drawn from these historical reconstructions.

### *Hospitality - Friend of Tax Collectors and Sinners*

The first issue I want to address is hospitality, and the Gospel traditions that have Jesus associating and sympathizing with individuals other than pious or righteous Israelites, and especially eating with them.

This characteristic of Jesus' 'penultimate suppers' is reflected in the polemical saying that Jesus was 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt 11:19, Luke 7:34). Appropriately enough for this lecture, we first encounter it in narrative form in the story of the call of the tax collector Levi (Mark 2:15-17), Veronese's alternative theme. There Jesus feasts with the new disciple and incurs the criticism of the 'scribes of the Pharisees.' Numerous other narratives, parables and discourses depict and elaborate on similar themes, where Jesus' acceptance of the marginal is connected with

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<sup>11</sup> *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* 26-7. See also Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 265-6; Willi Marxsen, *The Lord's Supper as a Christological Problem* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 114-120; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 360-7. On the other hand the scholarship that tends to support or at least allow the possible historicity of the Last Supper comes from a wide range of positions: E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1993), 263-4; John Meier, 'The Eucharist at the Last Supper; Did it happen?' *Theology Digest* 42 (1995) 335-51; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 405-39; Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 215.

<sup>12</sup> This applies perhaps especially to Crossan among recent commentators. In fact Bultmann and his followers have tended to see eucharistic origins more in terms of a 'Hellenistic cult meal' or similar.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion including a serious review of alternative positions and objections to 'eucharistic' interpretations, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (3 vols: Doubleday, 1994) 2.961-5, and 1030-5 nn.301-15.

eating and meals; Jesus accepts the ministry of a sinful woman in the house of Simon the leper, for instance (Luke 7:36-50). While this theme seems to have been of particular interest to the early Church and was elaborated on by Luke in particular, it should be seen as historically 'core' rather than essentially an elaboration.<sup>14</sup>

This tradition certainly supports interpretations of Jesus' ministry and practice as inclusive. Yet there has arguably been a tendency to slide from the picture of Jesus the inclusive eater to an image of Jesus the inclusive host, both among radical questers for the historical Jesus and more moderate interpreters of the Gospels and their theologies. While there may be exceptions, I suggest that Jesus' preeminent place in the tradition as an associate of tax collectors and sinners is certainly not as host, but as guest.<sup>15</sup>

Then as now, hospitality certainly involved a reciprocal element that might mean we could call those who eat together friends regardless of whose table was involved, but the distinction between host and guest is more historically important and theologically suggestive than has generally been noted. This tradition points to Jesus' willingness to be received by and present with those otherwise considered unlikely; it is unhelpful to conflate it with images of him as host at the banquet of the reign of God. At the simple level of what Jesus did or is depicted as doing in the Gospels, the basis on which to speak of him as actually 'welcoming sinners and inviting them to the Lord's Table' is rather thin,<sup>16</sup> at least before the Last Supper. What is actually distinctive is arguably his willingness to be welcomed, to sit at sinners' own tables, and to be in company at table with others whose status is dubious. This means, among other things, that this part of Jesus' meal practice historically does not so much contribute to the formation of a meal tradition, but participation in one.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion - The Messianic Banquet*

The second issue I wish to address is that of inclusion. This may now be seen more clearly as a separate question from hospitality, since the character of Jesus' association with sinners does not really demonstrate inclusion of others by him, but his willingness to accept inclusion, along with others of various sorts. In this connection I wish briefly to examine another Gospel meal motif, the sayings concerning a final expansive banquet that reflects and creates God's universal reign.

One of the most powerful sources of a contemporary desire to present the Eucharist as an expansive and inclusive meal is the tradition of the Messianic banquet and Jesus' use of it. This vision of God's reign as a meal is familiar from the parable of the Great Feast or 'wedding banquet,' or in the saying from the source common to Matthew and Luke that

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 2.149-50, 302-3.

<sup>15</sup> Brendan Byrne makes an important link, for Luke's Gospel at least, between this motif and the wider sense of God as host: 'The marginalized one [i.e., Zacchaeus] who has given hospitality to Jesus finds himself drawn into a much wider hospitality, the hospitality of God'. (*The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's, 2000), 4. This, however, is a matter of Luke's treatment of the tradition rather than something historically self-evident from the ministry of Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Alexandria, N.S.W.; Broughton Books, 1995), 126.

speaks of ‘many [who] will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt 8:11). Although Matthew’s use of the saying implies that those who come from east and west are the Gentiles, the original setting may also only have referred to the Jews of the Diaspora.<sup>17</sup>

There is the danger of losing sight of the exclusive sting in the tail of this inclusive vision; while some are invited in, others are cast out. Both Matthew and Luke preserve the qualification: although ‘many will come from east and west,’ ‘the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness...’ (Matt 8:11-12). Whether these ‘sons’ were envisaged as the Palestinian Jews ceding to the Diaspora or, as apparently for Matthew, non-Christian Jews ceding to Gentile converts, the point is that this banquet is universal in scope but selective in application.

Even the festive ‘wedding banquet’ parable of the Q sayings tradition (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24), also independently attested in the *Gospel of Thomas* (64), is characterized in all versions not only by the inclusion of the marginalized but also by the exclusion of the previously invited. This seems to hold good for the preaching of Jesus generally; the reign of God is judgment as well as grace, and reversal of privilege rather than merely the construction of a level playing field. The feast of the reign of God may have unexpected participants, but specific ones; wanting to come may not be enough.

How distinctive or radical was this view on the part of Jesus and/or the early Christian communities? Norman Perrin assumed that there was a Jewish reaction to Jesus sufficient to cause his death, and that his meal teaching and practice had to be central to this. Additionally, Perrin, in step with most other scholars of his time and earlier, sees Jesus creating a distinctive community, a proto-religion as it were, over and against Judaism. Both these things now seem unlikely in the light of recent scholarship on Jesus in relation to Judaism. Contemporary studies tend to see Jesus’ mission not as the creation of a distinct religious community, but rather an attempt to bring renewal or reform in Judaism, or Judea. The motif of the messianic banquet, while important to the proclamation of God’s reign by Jesus, is in large part the restatement of a hope widespread in Judaism, proclaimed in Isaiah and acted upon in other Jewish settings too. The Qumran community also celebrated a meal that anticipated that final banquet (1 QSa II.11-24), acting as a defined ‘congregation of the community of Israel’ who believed that they had been chosen and others rejected.<sup>18</sup>

Two cautions are to be issued here. Neither exaggeration of Jesus’ originality as a proclaimer of God’s great banquet over and against Jewish customs and institutions, nor de-emphasizing the element of exclusivity of the reign of God, can be justified by the theme of an inclusive messianic banquet. Inclusion is a real motif in the Jesus tradition, but it is always a selective inclusion related to the recreation of a distinctive community chosen by God.

<sup>17</sup> See Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* 161-164; but cf. U Luz, *Matthew 8-20* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 8-12.

<sup>18</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Allen Lane, 1997) 160.



*Ritual - Miraculous Meals*

My third point has to do with ritual, and I wish to explore this in some relation to the tradition of miraculous feedings over which Jesus presides.

There are those scholars who link changes in early Christian meal practice with a presumed decline from primitive Christian egalitarianism and openness into institutional and hierarchical anxiety and boundary maintenance—a culinary version, as it were, of Alfred Loisy's laconic observation that what Jesus had proclaimed was the Kingdom, and what came instead was the Church.<sup>19</sup> In such depictions, earlier meals are presumed to have been characterized by abundance and festivity, later ones by formality and parsimony. John Dominic Crossan, for instance, gives a section of his major book on the historical Jesus the pessimistic title 'From Kingdom to Liturgy.'<sup>20</sup> Crossan sees in Gospel stories of abundant feeding a sign of commensality—sharing food—as basic to 'a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources' that amounts to 'the heart of the original Jesus movement.'<sup>21</sup> By contrast the more liturgical focus of the Last Supper tradition appears to him a late stage in the process of turning the abundant meal of Jesus into the solemn commemoration of his death.<sup>22</sup> Somewhat similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza stresses the practice of the historical Jesus as characterized by feasting rather than fasting, contrasting sumptuary with the ascetic as well as drawing an explicit contrast between inclusive meal and exclusive ritual: 'The central symbolic actualization of the *basileia* vision of Jesus,' she says, 'is not the cultic meal but the festive table of a royal banquet or wedding feast.'<sup>23</sup>

These pictures of Jesus depend to some extent—not wholly—on miraculous feeding stories, most notably the 'Feeding the Five Thousand,' which are one of very few traditions concerning Jesus found in all four Gospels. However the history behind them is to be understood, they are certainly the very opposite of anything rigid, exclusive or parsimonious—thousands of people are well fed, and great quantities remain. Yet Jesus at the miraculous feedings of four or five thousand people (Mark 6:34-44, 8:1-9), and for that matter at meals celebrated after the resurrection (Luke 24:30; cf. Acts 27:35), actually breaks and shares bread according to a recognizable ritual process similar to that of the 'institution narratives' of the Last Supper. While I think we must read these accounts as stories of the Church first and foremost, clearly ritual and abundance are not opposed realities in them. Skeptics about the historical value of these stories can hardly disagree; the scenes that depict Jesus most of all as giver of abundance are actually accounts of ritual meals. Analyses that oppose abundance and ritual reflect a

<sup>19</sup> *L'évangile et l'église* (Paris: A. Picard et fils, 1902), 111. I owe to Ross Fishburn the observation that Loisy's comment has typically been misconstrued as purely negative; see Hans Küng, *The Church* (trans. R. & R. Ockenden; London: Search, 1968), 43 n.1.

<sup>20</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* 293-98.

<sup>21</sup> For him this term seems to include Jesus himself as well as his first followers (*The Historical Jesus* 341).

<sup>22</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* 364-5.

<sup>23</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Herder & Herder, 1994) 119.

misunderstanding of ritual itself, and particularly of the place of meals in the ancient world, which tend to be highly ritualized and to defy allocation to our anachronistic categories of 'sacred' and 'secular.'<sup>24</sup>

Pictures of eucharistic development that tell a story of decline from abundant to ascetic or from inclusion to exclusion are often embedded in that broader depiction of the transition from Jesus to Church as a 'fall,' or of Jesus as a unique figure between twin evils represented by legalistic Judaism and ritualistic early Catholicism. Much of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship was built on a grand narrative of Christian transcendence of cultural particularity, and of material religion with its institutional and hierarchical trappings; this baggage has clearly not been abandoned in all cases, even when the narrative is professedly liberal or secular. A picture of ancient religious traditions and institutions that idealizes Jesus as inclusive and egalitarian free spirit between twin edifices of religious exclusivism is not only implausible, but can easily serve the reinscription of anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic stereotypes. Meal practice thus becomes a new canvas for an old and even pernicious picture where, as for Monty Python's Pope, it is clearer what we like than what we really know.

### *From Meal to Eucharist?*

Where do these observations leave us? I would argue that the best present research into the historical Jesus urges us to caution in attributing to him or his movement any distinctive meal tradition separate from those of Jewish custom and institutions. The result of peeling away layers of supposed ritual accretion is a historical Jesus who does not preside over a distinctive meal tradition, but rather is characterized precisely by the lack of one.

Dennis Smith and Hal Taussig share some of Crossan's view of Jesus, but their work bears more directly on Eucharistic origins; they point out that 'as much as one can reasonably affirm about the historical Jesus on this question' is that he 'probably attended banquets.'<sup>25</sup> If this is minimalist, it points in the right direction. If indeed it is possible to burrow down to a layer of historical evidence concerning the practice of Jesus unimpeded by later ecclesial reflection, and if that layer depicts feasting and open commensality as the sole identifiable characteristics of Jesus' meal practice, then we have simply peeled away the historical onion of eucharistic origins and found that it has no centre. For if we really can move back past a point where a tradition of distinctive, limited participation in the meal can be identified, then we have moved also past the point of a Christian or even a Jesus meal tradition at all. Jesus' meal practice was simply the meal practice of his milieu; he ate and drank. Jesus, in short, does not present us with a model of distinctive community meals, but a model of sharing openly in the meals of others.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance the essays in O. Murray (ed.) *Symptotica: A Symposium on the 'Symposion'* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), and in Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (eds.) *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> D. Smith & H. Taussig, *Many Tables* (Wipf & Stock, 2001) 47; see 45-8 in general also; cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Fortress Press, 1987) 208-9.

While the designation of Jesus as ‘a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’ is likely as historically authentic as it is ethically powerful, the stories in the New Testament of Jesus as abundant feeder and indiscriminate dining partner are already presented with layers of reflection that come from the eucharistic meal practice of the first Christians as a distinctive group. If we accept the fundamental form-critical insight that the Gospels are not merely windows onto the practice of Jesus, but portraits of the earliest Christian communities and their concerns that employ and rework sayings and stories about Jesus to deal with their own concerns, then we must apply the same critical hermeneutics to the stories of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners as to those of the Last Supper, rather than claim for them a special historical value because of an immediate theological appeal. That Jesus did eat with marginalized people is very likely; but we possess these stories not because he did so, but because this was meaningful to the communities we may identify with the Gospels or their likely antecedents, that is, with those who first enacted a distinctive and even exclusive meal tradition focused on Jesus.

For various reasons then, exploring the penultimate suppers of Jesus leads us back, or rather forward, to the Church. I want to make two points regarding the Eucharist in earliest Christianity. The first concerns community; the second, participation.

### *Community and Commensality*

The work of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas has offered the insight that culinary practice and community formation are often linked, and that more specific or defined communities are also likely to eat in more defined ways, both in terms of food and in their companions at table.<sup>26</sup> If Jesus’ mission was not the immediate construction of a specific religious movement like the sectarian group at Qumran, which regulated participation in the food and drink of the community in very strong terms, then we might well expect a loosely-defined meal practice among the first followers of Jesus, with regard to participation and otherwise.

The anthropological correlation of a type of community with a type of meal already hints, however, at a different way to understand a move from something like ‘open commensality’ among Jesus and his followers to a more distinctive meal tradition in the emerging Christian movement of the following decades. If the development of the Christian Church as a recognizable entity distinct from Judaism was a gradual process involving complex questions of self-definition, then the emergence of the Eucharist as a distinct meal tradition is not necessarily a corruption of a pristine tradition *per se*, but the routinization of the proclamation of Jesus into the meal tradition so culturally central in the whole ancient Mediterranean. In other words, the distinct meal tradition emerged with the distinct community itself; we cannot simply narrate the history of second generation Christianity or second generation Eucharist as a fall, unless we also narrate it as a birth.

<sup>26</sup> See especially ‘The Two Bodies’, Chapter 5 of *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Rev. ed.; London: Routledge, 1996), 69-87.

The question of eucharistic origins is then one of the emergence of a particular Christian identity and its ritualization in the setting of meals.

### *Participation*

Second, participation: who did eat at the earliest eucharistic meals? This, and not the extent of Jesus' own table fellowship, is the crucial question for those who would seek models and meaning for contemporary pastoral practice from eucharistic origins, since the meals of Jesus himself were not a formal or otherwise distinctive community tradition, at least until the end. The New Testament documents themselves contain little explicit evidence about limits to participation. We should not expect to find a nexus between baptism as such and Eucharist; the Synoptic tradition uniformly connects baptism with John the Baptist and with the Church, but not with Jesus himself. Yet there are other indications that concerns regarding initiation and boundary maintenance could be at work, whether or not baptism was envisaged.

We have already considered a number of relevant texts, which mostly include—even from Jesus himself—elements of election and exclusion, even while they depict eclectic gatherings. One case in the New Testament that seems to depict a surprisingly inclusive eucharistic meal is the shipwreck scene in the Acts of the Apostles:

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.' After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. We were in all two hundred seventy-six persons in the ship. (Acts 27: 33-37 NRSV).

As Geoffrey Wainwright points out<sup>27</sup>, Paul's ritual actions with bread are as 'eucharistic' as any other New Testament bread-breaking story including, we might add, the Last Supper itself. The NRSV renders Paul's statement about the value of the food prosaically—'it will help you survive'—but he says literally 'this is for your *sôteria*'—salvation or health, survival indeed. And despite the fact that there are ambiguities—Paul seems to bless and eat his own food 'in the presence of them all,' but others in the assembled company take their own food—this must still be read as a common meal involving the whole ship's company, crew and guards included, very few of them followers of Christ.

Arguments about whether the historical event underlying the story was or was not 'the Eucharist' are beside the point. The only real issue we can address is whether the author of Luke-Acts presents the story as eucharistic, and the answer to this must be 'yes,' or at

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<sup>27</sup> G. Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 130-131.

least that this is as much a Eucharist as we find anywhere else in the Lucan corpus or the New Testament as a whole.

But does this meal present a general ideal for unrestricted participation in the Eucharist? Not a few sacramental theologians have found themselves tied in knots by attempting to use the evidence of Luke-Acts to discern models for the related issue of baptismal ritual and conversion;<sup>28</sup> and here as in those cases, Luke clearly tells exceptional stories involving ritual to make points relevant to his narrative of the expanding Church, rather than to prescribe normative ritual itself. If, as we should grant nonetheless, Luke's vision of the eucharistic community is expansive, the issue of participation in the story may well have to do with the legitimation of the Gentile Church that is being constituted in the narrative through Paul's spirit-filled mission. The growing Church did of course have controversies about participation—but they seem unlikely to have been about the nexus between baptism and Eucharist, but rather about the nexus between ethnicity and baptism.

Where explicit indications about participation in the Eucharist do exist in ancient Christian documents, they are strongly weighted to the exclusiveness of the eucharistic meal to the Christian community and hence the baptized. The *Didache* or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, which is not much later than Luke and the other synoptic Gospels, urges that 'no-one eat from your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord, for the Lord has said concerning this, 'do not give what is holy to dogs'' (9.5). Later Church Orders assume the same qualification; the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome prescribes receiving the Eucharist for the first time as part of the baptismal ritual after an extended catechumenate (21). It also makes passing reference to the necessity of avoiding the accidental consumption of the Eucharist not only by the unbaptized, but by mice (37) (continuing the theme of contrast with animal consumption?).

Interestingly however, the *Apostolic Tradition* does not limit its concerns about sharing meals to the celebration of the Eucharist. Describing another communal meal ritual called 'Lord's Supper,' but which seems actually to be what most scholars refer to as the 'Agape' or love feast, this Church Order specifically excludes catechumens from sitting with the faithful at the meal, even at this non-eucharistic setting. While such a late source cannot of course interpret the New Testament evidence for us, it is a reminder that groups at any point in this history could have concerns about commensality that were not based solely on high eucharistic theology. To push all concerns about exclusion and boundary maintenance into categories related to ritual and sacramentality is at best anachronistic.

Yet no one would be surprised to find the Church of the second and third centuries erecting fences. The questions are rather, how does this form of boundary-maintenance relate to earlier experiences of meal and participation? Does this concern to exclude the non-baptized really represent a loss of chaotic inclusive innocence? It seems rather that

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<sup>28</sup> See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search For the Origins of Christian Worship* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: SPCK, 2002), 53-56.

the tendency for the earliest Christian communities to celebrate exclusive meals reflects the emergence of their distinctive existence; people who knew that they themselves were the marginal, the excluded, those who had been brought from east and west into the Great Feast, have conveyed the traditions concerning Jesus to us.

### *Emmaus*

There is one further set of Gospel traditions concerning meals of Jesus that I have left aside up to this point because it has a somewhat different character, namely that two of the Gospels depict the risen Jesus eating with his disciples. Like the miraculous feeding stories these are easier to place in the life of the Church than to subject to careful historical scrutiny.

The most famous of these resurrection meal traditions is the story of the road to Emmaus, where Jesus is 'made known' in the breaking of the bread. In that case as in the miraculous feedings, Jesus 'took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them' (Luke 24:30). Although the Gospels in general recount the appearances of Jesus as private, Caravaggio's depiction of the Emmaus story makes what were for him reasonable inferences about the presence of others at what was for him an inn, just as Paulo Veronese had originally done about the upper room.

Caravaggio's rendition of the scene makes a powerful if subtle point about what inclusion and exclusion might be; the two disciples are amazed and express their shock physically; but another person in the room, the attendant who did not know what it was he was recognizing, is unmoved, stolid. This could perhaps be a picture of the inclusive eucharistic doctrine of St Gregory's or Grace Cathedral—those who 'seek God and are drawn to Christ' are distinguished by their feeling or experience from others who are merely there. But in fact it is not feeling that fundamentally distinguishes the two in the story from the other; feeling follows discipleship, and the two travelers recognize one whom they had already known and followed to the Cross. While the Christian Eucharist emerges from the riches of Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman social practice, its distinctiveness comes into the light not before but after the stories of the eating Jesus become stories of the risen Christ.

### *Conclusion*

Not a few commentators, wiser heads than mine, have avoided dealing with the historical Jesus as a source for reflection on how the Eucharist should be celebrated, or on anything else. We do not have clear or certain access to him, as though through a window; rather we have pictures, portraits of beauty and power whose theology is accessible and by which we may continue to be renewed. Certainly, attempts to use what is in fact rather dated scholarship about Jesus to establish an interesting but problematic pastoral and liturgical practice may well seem to provide a cautionary tale regarding pursuing these issues at all. It seems at times that we may not know much about Jesus, but we seem to know what we like.

Some will offer sound reasons of principle for the doctrine of the Eucharist being grounded in tradition rather than historical research, and hence placing it squarely in the Church. I have attempted to suggest, however, that in this particular case examination of the historical Jesus and of the use of traditions about him in early Christianity lead us to a similar result for different reasons. Whose meal is it? I would reverse, at least for the sake of correction, the attractive slogan: it is our table, not God's. It is the meal of the Christian community, historically and theologically. God cannot be made the excuse for excluding the baptized or including the unbaptized. Yet the Eucharist is eating and drinking with Jesus, too. What may be hardest for those involved in both conservative and liberal departures from understanding the Eucharist as the meal of all the baptized is accepting that we ourselves are not just the 'tax collectors and sinners,' or the 'buffoons, drunken Germans, dwarfs, and other such absurdities' in the picture, but that we are the hosts, too.

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