

Life in the Kingdom: Meal as Symbol of Jesus' Mission

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“Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”¹ ask the Pharisees. Jesus replies, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”² In this statement, Jesus proclaims his table fellowship as vital to his own mission. By acceptance of his invitation, his guests partake in his mission, as well as the meal.³ A response to this call, then and now, requires would-be disciples to examine why Jesus shared meals and with whom, what was the impact of his table fellowship, why did it become (and remain) a significant remembrance of who he was? What do the answers to these questions mean for modern discipleship? This paper shows how Jesus used table fellowship, in word and deed, to symbolize the central concept of his mission, the Kingdom of God, an everlasting reconciliation of God's creation among creatures and God's self, made possible through God's gift of mercy and grace. In doing so, this paper takes into account particular features of Jesus' table fellowship. It examines how his contemporaries (Jewish and otherwise) could have influenced Jesus' meal practice and why certain differences and commonalities may exist. It especially examines the symbolism of Jesus' table fellowship and postulates how distinctions express and fulfill Jesus' mission as expressed by him (in word and deed) in the Gospels.

The Meal in First Century Palestine

Though many distinctions exist in Jesus' table practice, it is not unique in every aspect. For starters, the group meal was often more than an opportunity for sustenance. As James D.G. Dunn puts it, “in Jewish thought Abraham and Job were extolled as the models of hospitality, where again it was precisely the sharing

¹ Mk 2.16 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).

² Mk 2.17 NRSV.

³ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2003), 602.

of food which was the expression of that hospitality.”⁴ Joachim Jeremias described it this way, “in Judaism in particular, table-fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in the meal brings out the fact that they all share in the blessing which the master of the house has spoken over the unbroken bread.”⁵ Table fellowship was one usual way of forming or celebrating a bond and a mutual welcoming or acceptance of guest and host.⁶

While table fellowship created a sense of union between guest and host, it had the potential to create (or exacerbate) boundaries between those welcomed to the meal, and those excluded. According to Dunn, “Table-fellowship functioned as a social boundary, indicating both who was inside the boundary and who was outside.”⁷ Often these boundaries represented the divisions between various Jewish sects. Each sect emphasized, or in some cases expanded upon, particular aspects of traditional Jewish practice. A brief examination of these sects and their activities during the time of Jesus is vital to understanding his reactions to them and thus provides insight into the motivation behind his own mission. A brief overview of sects believed to be particularly influential and prevalent follows.

Sects of Judaism

Common Judaism

All sects of Judaism shared certain beliefs. The belief that the Jewish people were members of a covenant with the one God, to whom they pledged allegiance and from whom they received blessing and protection (and punishment when due) is one example.⁸ As such, they were required to follow the laws given to them by God, through Moses, including purity laws as well as prescriptions for dealing with “pagans.”⁹ Thus, the first boundary is established between Jews and Gentiles. Additional distinctions existed between practicing Jews and their non-Jewish

⁴ Ibid., 601.

⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971), 115; quoted in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 601; quoted in James D.G. Dunn, “Jesus, Table-Fellowship, and Qumran” In *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 254-5.

⁶ Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord’s Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity*, Symbol and Culture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 10 quoted in John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 341; Lee Edward Klosinski, *The Meals in Mark* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1988), 56-8 quoted in Crossan 341.

⁷ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 602.

⁸ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: The Penguin Press, 1993), 34.

⁹ Ibid., 34.

counterparts.¹⁰ For one, the Jerusalem Temple was the center of worship, and Jewish males (who must be circumcised) were required to worship at the Temple three times per year (although those living in the Diaspora usually could make only one visit per year to the Temple).¹¹ Purity laws were adhered to when entering the Temple (and many extended these rules to daily life) with the intent of separating “bodily processes connected most intimately with life and death” (e.g., semen, menstrual blood, etc.) and the “presence of God.”¹² Furthermore, Jews paid the Temple tax to contribute to the sacrifices made on behalf of the whole community, regardless of proximity to the Temple.¹³ In addition, there was morning and evening prayer at home and weekly synagogue for group prayer and study.¹⁴ The Sabbath was demarcated a day of rest for all those residing or visiting a Jewish community.¹⁵ Amongst the purity laws adhered to during daily life included dietary laws that restricted certain foods as ‘impure’ such as pork and shellfish, to name a couple.¹⁶

Sanders points out that it was not laws that made Jews distinctive, as all religions and cultures had laws and customs (some that even overlapped with those outlined above), but the Jews religious devotion to their laws, insisting on their divine authority, resulting in their elevation above their relations with others.¹⁷ Non-Jewish groups living among the Jews of the Diaspora scoffed at the Jews’ inability to assimilate by, for instance, eating pork, a food abundant throughout the Mediterranean region.¹⁸ What was merely a social convention to other groups was a divine decree to the Jews’.¹⁹

The Sadducees

While most priests adhered to and carried out the rituals required by the practices just described (perhaps with additions prescribed just for them by Mosaic Law), many aristocratic priests also identified themselves as Sadducees.²⁰ What little is known about the Sadducees includes that they did not follow the

¹⁰ Sanders 35-6.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² James H. Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus” In *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 36.

¹³ Sanders 35-6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sanders 36-7.

¹⁸ Sanders 37.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Josephus *Life* 65f quoted in Sanders 41.

prescriptions of the Pharisees nor did they share their belief in resurrection.²¹ The Sadducees are best remembered as a group who traced their heritage to the Zadok (from which their name stems), a high priest from the time of Solomon.²² This group composed the majority of temple leadership in the time of Jesus.²³

The Pharisees

Some priests also identified themselves as Pharisees²⁴, though Pharisees were primarily comprised of non-priests.²⁵ For the most part, they did not try to force their beliefs on others.²⁶ Though the Pharisees have a reputation of having been strict (thanks to the New Testament), in reality, some of the changes they made to traditions eased restrictions.²⁷ Sanders gives the example of the Pharisees' suggestion that a cluster of houses (such as in a row or surrounding a court) could be defined as one house, allowing for Jeremiah's restriction on carrying pots, dishes, etc. outside the house on Sabbath to be bypassed, allowing families to celebrate the Sabbath together more easily.²⁸ A well-known restriction is the extension of the hand-washing purity law to before all meals, which eventually became a part of common Jewish practice.²⁹ Sanders summarizes the Pharisees as a group who gave serious thought to the laws, and their expertise gave them considerable popularity in the Jewish community (though Herod held down any political influence during Jesus' lifetime).³⁰ It was the Pharisees who are depicted in the New Testament as having much to say about Jesus' table practice, which will be examined in more detail in this paper.

²¹ Sanders 44, 47.

²² Lawrence Schiffman, "Sadducees," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Ed. Lindsay Jones, Vol. 12, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8018.

²³ Charlesworth, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus", 36.

²⁴ Josephus, *Life* 65f quoted in Sanders 41.

²⁵ Josephus, *War* 2.162-6 quoted Sanders 44; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.12-15 quoted in Sanders 44.

²⁶ Sanders 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁸ Jeremiah 17.19-27 cited in Sanders 45; Sanders 209-10.

²⁹ Sanders 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

Qumranite Essenes

Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has led to a greater understanding of the Qumranites, who many scholars believe to be of the Essene sect.³¹ The scrolls contain the documents of a group of people living in an exclusive desert community outside Jericho, in Qumran, from approximately the middle of the second century B.C.E. until about 68 C.E. when destroyed by the Romans.³² Mostly written in Hebrew and Aramaic, these texts were probably authored by Jews alone, without any editorial involvement from non-Jews.³³ In fact, former priests of the Jerusalem Temple, likely Sadducees, who either left by choice or were expelled, may have started this community.³⁴ This group denigrated the Jerusalem Temple cult and the Hasmoneans, referring to the high priest (probably a Macabee) as “the Wicked Priest” and their own leader as “the Righteous Teacher.”³⁵

The connection between Jesus and this group is unclear. They were certainly in existence prior to and during Jesus’ life and mission.³⁶ Although a main sect lived in the desert, groups sprang forth and lived throughout Palestine, capable of holding much influence.³⁷ Though Jesus has nothing to say in the Gospels about the Essenes directly, they share much in common—aside from a shared Judaism, they also favor the same scriptural texts (Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Psalms).³⁸ Various terms were also used in common to Jesus, his followers, and the Essenes—one in particular (“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’”)³⁹ could link the Essenes to John the Baptist (who some say may have been an Essene at some point), and in turn to Jesus, John the Baptist’s former disciple.⁴⁰ Whatever link, direct or indirect, there does seem to be some influence on Jesus by the Essenes, particularly in terms of a shared eschatological bent and Messianic expectation.⁴¹ However, as will be seen later, there are some major differences between Jesus and

³¹ Charlesworth, *Foreword*, xxxii, xxxiv; Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus*, 2-3; Sanders 46.

³² Charlesworth, *Foreword*, xxxii-xxxiii.

³³ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiii-xxxiv; Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus*, 2.

³⁵ Charlesworth, *Foreword*, xxxiii-xxxiv; Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus*, 2.

³⁶ Charlesworth, *Foreword*, xxxv.

³⁷ Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus*, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁹ Is 40.3 NRSV.

⁴⁰ Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus*, 11-12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

the Essenes, which may reflect his reaction to them and other similar sects.⁴²

Judaism of Jesus

The Starting Point

Just as the parties above (Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes) were still participants in the common form of Judaism, but believed they were groups with special knowledge of God's will, Jesus, too, believed himself to be in special relationship with God.⁴³ For Jesus, however, his distinction served not to close himself off from other groups, but to open himself to others.

It is important to acknowledge one of Jesus' earlier influences, John the Baptist. Evidence strongly suggests that Jesus began as a follower of John the Baptist. This evidence includes biblical references to his baptism by John:

...it is most unlikely that the gospels or earlier Christians invented the fact that Jesus started out under John. Since they wanted Jesus to stand out as superior to the Baptist, they would not have made up the story that Jesus had been his follower. Therefore, we conclude, John really did baptize Jesus. This, in turn, implies that Jesus agreed with John's message: it was time to repent *in view of the coming wrath and redemption*.⁴⁴

There seems to be, throughout the Gospels, a labored attempt at obscuring the connection between John and Jesus, or at forcibly subverting John's role (e.g., explaining Jesus' baptism 'of repentance,'⁴⁵ purporting that Jesus never baptized and furthermore that Jesus' disciples baptized more than John's did⁴⁶). Despite these attempts by the authors to cloud the influence John's mission had on Jesus', some reverence on Jesus' part emerges in passages like Mt 11.11: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."⁴⁷ Dunn makes the point that the Gospels frequently "'locate Jesus by reference to John,"⁴⁸ further giving the impression that John the Baptist played an influential role in Jesus' mission.⁴⁹

⁴² Ibid., 37-40; See Sanders 46 for counter argument-he does not believe that the Essenes had a major impact on Jesus.

⁴³ Sanders 48.

⁴⁴ Sanders 94.

⁴⁵ Mk 1.4, Mt 3.14-5 quoted in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 351.

⁴⁶ Jn 1.35-42, 3.26; 4.1 quoted in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 351.

⁴⁷ Sobrino 73.

⁴⁸ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 353.

⁴⁹ Sobrino 73.

Jesus and John shared a passion for the impending arrival of the kingdom of God. Divergence occurs between them largely in emphasis. A sort of inclusion despite repentance marked Jesus' mission: "Did he hope that they [the 'wicked'] would change their ways? Probably, he did. However 'change now or be destroyed' was not his message, it was John's. Jesus' was, 'God loves you.'"⁵⁰ One example of this divergence manifests in their signature rituals. John's baptism (perhaps developed after the Qumranite ritual baths) displayed his emphasis on repentance and reform.⁵¹ Sobrino captures the divergence between John the Baptist and Jesus best: "Like John the Baptist, Jesus recognized the sinfulness of human beings and required all to be converted, but unlike the Baptist, he stressed that the coming of the Kingdom is grace rather than judgment."⁵²

Before the Meal: Jesus' Early Asceticism

Before discussing Jesus' meal practices, it is important to note that the first act of Jesus after his baptism is his retreat to the desert to pray and fast, marking his commissioning, or call by God to his mission.⁵³ This action seems in stark contrast to the portrait of Jesus found in the latter part of the Gospels, considered by some to be a "glutton."⁵⁴ The probability of Jesus praying and fasting from time to time is likely as Sanders points out,⁵⁵ however it is striking that it is not recounted in other Gospel memories of him and in some cases, he is accused of *not* fasting. One can speculate that Jesus may have initially foreseen for himself a mission modeled exactly as that of John the Baptist where he would wear "clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist," emulating John's ascetic lifestyle.⁵⁶ Could a reaction to John's mission motivate Jesus to reform his own to one more reconciled with his experience of God as *Abba*? Perhaps Jesus hoped to build upon John's mission, as John may have built upon a previous mission. If John the Baptist was in fact a former Essene, it seems probable that his own mission was an evolution of something prior—something that valued a rightly ordered life, yet was still too closed. Jesus could very well have sought to integrate openness by way of the meal practice that he found in his own experience which he found to be lacking within the mission he inherited from John the Baptist. The origin of Jesus' motivation can only be speculative, but his resulting mission

⁵⁰ Sanders 233.

⁵¹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 357.

⁵² Sobrino 96.

⁵³ See Mk 1.12f, Mt 4.1-11, and Lk 4.1-13 quoted in Sanders 112.

⁵⁴ Mt 11.19 NRSV and Lk 7.34 NRSV quoted in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 599.

⁵⁵ Sanders 112.

⁵⁶ Mt 3.4.

makes significant changes to the meal practice of his contemporaries.

Tax Collectors and Sinners

The first example of Jesus' table fellowship in the synoptic gospels is Jesus' meal with Levi, the tax collector.⁵⁷ The Pharisees inquired why Jesus ate with "tax-collectors and sinners."⁵⁸ Who, precisely, are the tax collectors and sinners? As Sanders explains it, 'sinners' is how Greek-speaking Jews translated 'wicked' meaning people who transgressed the law, as well as people who were outside the law: "The word 'sinners' in Jewish Greek could refer to Gentiles (who by definition did not observe the Jewish law) or to truly wicked Jews."⁵⁹ To Sanders, the 'sinners' Jesus associated with were 'wicked' and this is in reference to tax collectors⁶⁰, and that the problem was that Jesus did not require their repentance to continue association with him.⁶¹ Dunn, however, offers a compelling argument against Sanders, acknowledging the factional use of the term 'sinner' at work in Jesus' time.⁶² Because of the sectarianism and diversity of interpretation of Jewish law (examples of some sects were given previously), the identification of the 'wicked' as Sanders uses the term, is not an exact science.⁶³ For example, to an Essene, anyone not associated with them was considered to be 'wicked,' even other so-called law-abiding Jews.⁶⁴ In effect, 'sinner' could only be defined from the standpoint of the 'righteous,'⁶⁵ or in other words, 'outsider' was defined from the standpoint of the 'insider.'

The interpretation of 'sinner' as a factional term clarifies the meaning of Jesus' table fellowship in terms of his association with other undesirable groups, such as the disabled, women or even more socially acceptable people (such as the Pharisees).⁶⁶ This sheds light on Jesus' purposeful association with the marginalized,⁶⁷ the margin depending on the 'insider' perspective from which a person stands. As Sobrino puts it, "Jesus attaches great importance to the presence at the table of those whom the anti-Kingdom habitually keeps from it. So he sits at

⁵⁷ Mk 2.13-17; Mt 9.9-13; Lk 5.27-32.

⁵⁸ Mt 9.11; Mk 2.16; Lk 5.30; Charlesworth, *Dead Sea Scrolls and Historical Jesus*, 23; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 600; Sobrino 103-4.

⁵⁹ Sanders 227.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 227-229.

⁶¹ Ibid., 230-1.

⁶² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 529; Dunn, "Jesus, Table-Fellowship, and Qumran," 259-60.

⁶³ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 529.

⁶⁴ Sanders 227-9.

⁶⁵ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 531.

⁶⁶ Sanders 126.

⁶⁷ Sobrino 103.

the table with publicans, with sinners and prostitutes. His parables stress that in the kingdom those who are never invited will partake of the banquet: ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’ (Luke 14:21), people from the streets, ‘both good and bad’ (Matt. 22:1-10).”⁶⁸ Sobrino’s interpretation provides the insight that not only did Jesus’ table fellowship breakdown the boundaries between insiders and outsiders of his time, but all times: “Jesus’ meals are not only celebrative signs, but also liberative ones: those who for centuries have been prevented from eating together can now eat together. This is why Jesus eats with the poor and despised.”⁶⁹

The Consequences

Eating with sinners was something that “seems to have been a genuine offence: something he actually did that really offended people.”⁷⁰ The reason for the offense probably relates to Jesus’ hallmark emphasis on “mercy and not sacrifice.”⁷¹ The point was not necessarily that Jesus came into contact with sinners, but that he did not demand their repentance or atonement in order to continue their association with him, and this could be perceived as a sanctioning of their behaviors.⁷² Crossan refers to this as “open commensuality” and its radicality lies in his contemporaries’ conception of him as “having no honor” by making “no appropriate distinctions and discriminations.”⁷³ Sanders believes that Jesus placed a higher regard for allegiance to his mission over that of allegiance to orthodox Jewish practice in a sense, that Jesus believed he and his followers were above the law as “God’s elect.”⁷⁴ Jesus’ conception of purity was one that held mercy as the criterion that should guide interpretation of tradition.⁷⁵

Why the Meal?

The existing importance of the meal in first century Palestinian culture as communal, bond-strengthening events for guests and hosts provided the perfect vehicle for Jesus to express his central message of the kingdom of God in a way

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Sanders 226.

⁷¹ Hos. 6.6 NRSV; Mt 12.7 NRSV.

⁷² Sanders 204.

⁷³ Crossan 262.

⁷⁴ Sanders 235, 237.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 204 (Sanders discusses Jesus’ concept of ‘perfection’ as mercifulness, in emulation of God).

understandable to all levels of socio-cultural society.⁷⁶ His preaching complements his use of the meal in praxis, and a prime example of this is Luke 14:7-24, the “Parable of the Great Dinner.” Here Jesus says, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”⁷⁷ These words are actualized in Jesus’ daily meal practice, realizing what he preached about the kingdom, in regards to who was included.⁷⁸

Any divergence from customary table fellowship on Jesus’ part had the potential to transform minds and hearts or to offend them.⁷⁹ Jesus’ table fellowship was marked by an openness that was distinctive among the table practice of his contemporaries, and it is highly probable that these divergences were intended by Jesus as catalyst for transformation. “Unlike both Pharisees and Qumranites, table-fellowship was not fenced around to mark off the insiders from the outsiders. There was no purity barrier to be surmounted before one could enjoy Jesus’ company and listen to him”⁸⁰ Qumran Essenes were very exclusive, to the point of excluding not only the ritually impure, but anyone with particular disabilities or imperfections in their eyes.⁸¹ Dunn notes that for the most part, the Pharisees’ complaints against Jesus were concerned with his meal practice, such as “eating with the religiously unacceptable (n. 255), feasting rather than fasting (Mark 2.18 pars.), plucking grain (Mark 2.23-24 pars.), and eating with defiled (= unwashed) hands (Mark 7.5/Matt. 15.2).”⁸² The boundaries that these groups constructed were meant to protect what they conceived as “Israel’s special status before Yahweh,” probably as an act of loyalty to the covenant.⁸³ Jesus’ own practice was in stark contrast to this, obliterating such boundaries: “Holiness for Jesus, we might say, was not a negative, excluding force, but a positive, including force.”⁸⁴ Jesus’ use of the meal to redefine the boundaries in favor of widening them was a reversal of expectations, a reaction against the expected.

⁷⁶ Sanders 185-6 (Sanders points out how Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a banquet).

⁷⁷ Lk 14:12-14 NRSV.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 602.

⁸⁰ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 605-6.

⁸¹ Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus,” 23; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 602-3.

⁸² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 600.

⁸³ Ibid., 602, 605.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 602.

“Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”⁸⁵

For many Christians, Jesus continues to dine with them, his modern-day disciples, through the Eucharistic meal. Table fellowship was so key to his mission and personality that “Jesus’ action as host, in blessing the bread and breaking it, had become a familiar act by which he could be recognized.”⁸⁶ The early Christians continued this tradition, “That shared meals were a feature of the earliest Jerusalem community from the first (according to Luke) presumably implies that this practice was a carry-over from their time with Jesus.”⁸⁷ How can Christians continue to experience the impact of Jesus’ message as it affected the disciples of his lifetime? One way is to share in Jesus’ concern for those outside conventional boundaries: “The ideal of the kingdom which he promoted was one more motivated by concern for others in their various disabilities, a community marked more by such mutual concern than by the law strictly interpreted and rigorously enforced.”⁸⁸ This challenge is no easier for modern day believers than it was for Jesus’ contemporaries, as the genocides and wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries bear witness to how human beings struggle to overcome the ever-emerging systems of individuals divided into insiders or outsiders.

The implications of Jesus’ open attitude eventually caused offense to the point of his crucifixion by his fellow human beings. Jesus expresses the implications of a closed attitude best in terms of ‘insiders’ who cannot be joyful at the inclusion of the ‘outsiders’: “If God’s joy and the joy of little ones cannot move their hearts of stone, they will never have hearts of flesh and will have understood nothing of the Kingdom of God.”⁸⁹ An encounter with Jesus was an encounter with compassion, and not merely a passive sympathy, but one that motivated him to draw the other into himself.⁹⁰ Mercy led to action, which in the context of table fellowship meant an invitation.

Sobrino describes Jesus’ approach as a “forgiveness-welcome.”⁹¹ Conspicuously absent from Jesus’ encounters with sinners is an emphasis on an explicit act of forgiving: “In many account, Jesus appears with sinners...In virtually all these passages there is no mention of Jesus forgiving sins; they are a

⁸⁵ Mk 14.14 NRSV.

⁸⁶ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 600, 605.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 600.

⁸⁸ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 604-5.

⁸⁹ Sobrino 104.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

direct demonstration of his tender and affectionate ‘welcome’ to sinners.”⁹² This is in part due to Jesus’ recognition that the identification of ‘sinners’ was subject to the self-defined ‘righteous’—in reality all human beings fall into different categories of sin: “On the one hand, there is the type of sinner whom, in present-day language, we would call ‘oppressor.’ Their basic sin consists in oppressing, placing intolerable burdens on others, acting unjustly and so on. On the other hand, there are those who sin ‘from weakness’ or those ‘legally considered sinners’ according to the dominant religious view.”⁹³ In any case, all types of sinners (and thus all human beings) are in need of conversion, and Jesus, through his words and actions shows that this is not possible through coercion (through guilt, shame, or rejection), but through grace: “When a sinner is converted, it is God’s goodness and mercy that moves the sinner to change.”⁹⁴

To Sobrino, the meal is Jesus’ symbol of “the coming of the Kingdom and of the realization of his ideals: liberation, peace, universal communion.”⁹⁵ God’s joy lies in the “communion of the whole human race”⁹⁶ This unification is a sort of transformation of creation, an overcoming of evil by mercy, compassion, or love. Sobrino characterizes this conquering of evil as liberation: “Jesus’ gesture of friendship, the fundamentally human sign of ‘coming close,’ is what liberates, because in himself, Jesus overcomes separation and opposition.”⁹⁷ This transformation of creation, or realization of God’s kingdom, can only take place through praxis of openness and mercy, not abandonment and rejection.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Jesus’ table fellowship was a symbol of the Kingdom of God that he preached. His open fellowship was symbolic of the joyous union that God intends for his creation, and demonstrated the praxis by which the realization of the Kingdom can be fulfilled—through the mercy and grace of God shared with creation. Through the meal, Jesus broke through the boundaries constructed by his socio-cultural society, and even in the hearts of the ‘sinners,’ proclaiming a Kingdom whose arrival should not be dreaded through fear of chastisement, but through welcome

⁹² Ibid., 96 (Sobrino points out that the passages where Jesus ‘grants’ forgiveness such as in Mk 2.10 and Lk 7.48 are redactional, and that “from a historical point of view” it is more accurate to say that Jesus himself welcomes than forgives).

⁹³ Sobrino 96.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 76-7, 97.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 71.

and in hope of transformation. Modern day disciples are called to continue this open fellowship—to do otherwise would be an act against hope, and thus contrary to Jesus’ own actions and teachings.⁹⁹ His dinner guests may continue to respond throughout the ages to Jesus’ invitation, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Sobrino 71.

¹⁰⁰ Lk 14.15 NRSV quoted in Sobrino 103.

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