

Eating, Family & Faith

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Eating: there is nothing more taken-for-granted in family life than this. It's what we do every day, morning 'till night. From breakfasts to bedtime snacks, from family dinners to the daily routine of packed lunches or hamburgers from the local drive-thru, we eat so routinely that to think about its significance is rare. Yet significant it is.

The anthropologist Margaret Visser once said the extent to which something is taken for granted in our lives is the degree to which it shapes us. No doubt, eating is a formative business. Families are shaped in profound ways by life at the table. Yet family eating patterns are changing. The accepted traditions of yesterday are challenged by the life's reality today. So what can we say about the practice of eating from a Christian perspective? How do we approach the daily routines of food in ways that express our Christian commitments?

To explore these questions, I'll do three things: firstly, I'll suggest some of the cultural meanings

associated with eating; secondly, I'll consider the significance of eating in the Bible; and thirdly, I'll propose some practical ways Christian faith can impact our family eating habits today.

Eating from a Cultural Perspective

There are numerous social and cultural meanings associated with eating. It's a loaded activity. To illustrate, here are just four.

Eating and Culture

Anthropologists argue that when you know what, where, how, when and with whom a person eats, you can understand the nature of his or her

society. Eating is a transmitter of culture. This is equally true within a family unit. Much of who we are as social beings is determined through the repetitive act of eating together. Such basic matters as who sits where at the family table, who prepares the meal, who serves, who is served first, what is served and what is not, who dominates or directs conversation and who cleans up after the meal—all of this communicates a wealth of information about social obligations and customs, authority structures, gender roles, history, prejudices and priorities. Some of these reflect the broader culture of society or a particular religious or ethnic heritage. Others are the unique expression of an individual family.

Eating and Relationship

In all societies of the world eating is a primary way of entering and sustaining relationships. In fact, the English word *companion* is derived from the French and Latin words meaning ‘one who eats bread with another.’ Eating plays a central role in almost every social and family gathering. Every time a family sits down to a meal together it affirms the solidarity of a group of people inextricably linked to each other. Inviting an outsider into such an event communicates a welcome into the family’s most intimate space. Of course, food is about more than just family connections. Business and collegial relationships, friendships both intimate and casual, romantic ties, political alliances—all these and more are recognized, ritualized and celebrated through the sharing of food. If relationship makes the world go ‘round, then it’s food and drink that lubricate the cogs.

Eating and Covenant

In ancient cultures sharing food with a guest was equivalent to establishing a covenant, and often a very serious one. In the Ancient Near East the host was obliged to offer protection and shelter to the person who had eaten at his table. This is not just a thing of the past. Today the Bantu of southern Africa regard exchanging food as the formation of a covenant they call a ‘clanship of

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porridge.’ In Chinese society the giving and sharing of food gives ‘flesh’ to relationship, and in the West most major business deals are sealed with the mandatory business lunch. Various family celebrations are, in their own way, routine affirmations of family covenants. Those annual events which draw together extended families in one place, no matter how fraught with internal tensions, are one of the key ways families reaffirm their blood ties and mutual obligations.

Eating and Celebration

Celebration is incomprehensible within any society or family without the activity of eating. So central is it that certain food items are associated with particular rites and events. To a North American, Thanksgiving would not be Thanksgiving without the turkey, cranberry sauce, giblet gravy and pumpkin pie. For the English, a Christmas without plum pudding or for the Danes the traditional rice dessert with almonds and whipped cream would be unthinkable. In the West, weddings are celebrated with an elaborately decorated cake, and a birthday with cake and candles. Wedding anniversaries, retirements, special awards, engagements, graduations and promotions are often the cause for a feast. Even funerals are marked by the sharing of food and drink. It’s true to say that every significant rite of passage in every society and family is linked in some way to the business of eating.

Eating from a Biblical Perspective

Typical to the discussion of eating from a biblical perspective are two words: fasting and gluttony, one the spiritual discipline of not eating at all and the other the sin of doing it too much. While it’s



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true the Bible has something to say on both issues, there is so much more to eating in scripture than this.

Eating in the Old Testament

It is difficult to avoid the subject of eating in the Hebrew bible. In the story of creation God's role as creator and sustainer of life culminates in God's provision of food for 'everything that has the breath of life in it' (Gen 1:30).

Continue on from there and the imagery of eating routinely signifies the presence, promises and blessing of God. As the people of Israel wandered in the desert, God rained down manna from heaven every day for forty years (Ex 16), a daily reminder of God's sustaining presence. The promised land was repeatedly described as one 'flowing with milk and honey' (Ex 13:5; Num 13:27; Deut 6:3), a promise the wandering Hebrews could almost taste! Furthermore, imagery of blessing and judgment is routinely tied to food: satisfaction a picture of God's blessing (Deut 6:11; 8:10-12; 11:15) and deprivation one of judgment (Lev 26:26; Is 9:20; Hos 4:10).

Just as these more temporal images of God's blessing are tied to eating, so the ultimate deliverance of the people is described in terms of an invitation to an open table laden with a lavish feast of good food (Ps 23:5; 36:7-9; Is 25:6; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-14).

In the world of Ancient Israel, eating was an important step in forging relationship. As two parties sat down at table together, their common meal indicated reconciliation, paving the way for oaths and agreements (Gen 26:28-31). It was by God's initiative that covenant relationship was established with Israel (Gen 12:1-3; 15:9-21; 35:9-15). The complex rites and rituals of sacrifice (Lev 1-7) and the later establishment of feasts (Lev 23) were essential to the renewing of this connection. This annual cycle of feasts were moments in which God and the people sat at table together and celebrated the ties that bound them.

Eating in the New Testament

Around almost every corner of the gospels Jesus is eating and drinking; so much so he was labeled

a 'glutton and a drunkard' (Mt 11:19). It was not so much the fact that he enjoyed eating that riled his critics, but where and with whom he chose to do so.

In a society that maintained very clear social and religious boundaries through the rituals of eating, Jesus demonstrated a blatant disregard for protocol and tradition. His willingness to eat with anyone, regardless of class, race, profession or moral record, was deeply threatening to those who saw it as their duty to enforce these exclusions. Such was the reaction to Jesus' table habits, one commentator has suggested that Jesus actually got himself crucified by the way he ate!

Over time, influential Jewish groups had constructed a complex set of rules designed to protect their racial and religious purity. Jesus' habit of sharing his meals with 'tax collectors and sinners' (Lk 5:30) was threatening, for it demonstrated that this new kingdom order had little to do with religious customs and regulations. The kingdom of God is now symbolized by an open table to which all are invited, a table without boundary or exclusion (Lk 14:15-24; 15:11-32; Mt 25:1-13).

This open invitation was later reinforced in a vision given to Peter (Acts 10) indicating an end to the Levitical laws regarding clean and unclean foods. This signaled the beginning of the early church's mission to extend the invitation of God to the Gentile community, one that had long been considered 'unclean' and beyond the table of faith.

Jesus also used eating imagery to define his own mission. He identifies himself as the 'bread of life' (Jn 6:35-59) and the 'living water' (Jn 4:10-14). As he met with the disciples for the last supper he determined that his presence from here on would be made tangible through a shared meal. Jesus established this meal as (i) an act of **remembrance**—'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance for me' (Lk 22:19); (ii) a time of **covenant renewal**—'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you' (Lk 22:20); and (iii) an **anticipation** of the



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great banquet yet to come—‘For I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of this vine until the Kingdom of God comes’ (Lk 22:18).

As we move on into the life of the early church, the community of believers found their identity as followers of Christ most tangibly in their eating together. As part of an ordinary meal, it was through the breaking of bread that the church expressed its unity, identity and destiny as the people of God (Acts 20:7, 11; 1 Cor 11:33; 2 Pet 2:13; Jude 12).

Eating and the Christian Family

In the light of these cultural and biblical perspectives, the question remains: how do we allow our Christian faith to affect and inform our family eating habits? I will address this question by way of five images—each one a window into the Christian faith and naturally tied to the daily act of eating: providence, sacrament, community, service and mission.

Eating and Providence

Central to the prayer that Jesus taught his followers is the petition ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ (Mt 6:11). Every time we ‘break bread’ together, whether in an overtly religious ritual or the daily routine of breakfast, we are gathered up in the mystery of God's providence. Indeed, food is the stuff of life and the creation and sustaining of life are God's business.

This dependence on God as provider is increasingly difficult to grasp for families in the developed world. In the West, only 3 percent of the population is needed to produce more than 100 percent of the required agricultural products. If food is lacking on our table, a quick trip to the supermarket solves our problem. Yet for those who still plough the earth, await the rains, milk the cows, cast nets into the ocean and nurture the grapevines, dependence on a power outside of themselves is a daily reality.

Whether we are aware of it or not, every time we eat we express our dependence on a power external to us. As we spoon the potatoes, butter

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the bread and pour the water, we handle the grace of God. For those who bow to pray before eating, this dependence is acknowledged.

For those families who live in an urban context, an important starting point is to find creative ways to get back in touch with their immediate dependence on God's earth. Planting a vegetable garden, no matter how humble, is a great beginning. Baking bread or preserving fruit is another. A family trip to an orchard to pick fruit or to a farm after the rain to collect mushrooms can be helpful ways to reconnect with the providence of God. Finding ways to be less dependent upon convenience foods or preoccupied with the economy of time—the law of the microwave oven—and more involved in the processes of preparation and creation can make us more aware of God's creativity and providence. Yes, it's all time consuming stuff, but isn't anything than enriches our lives?

Eating and Sacrament

As Jesus broke bread and shared it with his fellow travelers on the road to Emmaus, ‘their eyes were opened and they recognized him’ (Lk 24:31). While not every meal we participate in is overtly religious in nature, each time we sit down to a meal God is present. It is an expression of Incarnation; we discover God in the midst of the ordinary. When we sit down to eat, we sit down to a God-ordained part of life in which grace is revealed.

In the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we articulate a spiritual truth: life is dependent on death. In order for us to enter into the fullness of life, life had to be surrendered. Jesus surrendered his life to death so that we can live. In a sense, that

same principle of 'life for life' is at work in every meal we eat. Each time we swallow we enact it. Whether we are eating a bowl of porridge, devouring a sirloin steak or sipping a glass of orange juice, life had to be laid down for us. It is part of the order of things. It is so ordinary, and yet in this ordinariness is mystery.

Nurturing a conscious awareness of God's presence at the meal table—a daily discipline in a fragmented and fast-paced world—is crucial if we are to develop an integrated family spirituality. It will call for a degree of creativity as we seek to establish mealtime rituals that make God's presence a daily experience. It will mean consciously watching for incarnational moments when God's presence and purposes can be named and celebrated.

We can't afford to be too idealistic about such things. The realities of family meal times do not always lend themselves to deeply 'spiritual' encounters. Those who have small children, for example, will know that the family meal time is a more often a struggle for survival than a heady religious experience. Similarly, the often tense and sometimes angry encounters that occur at the family table make the awareness of God's presence a challenge. Regardless, the reality persists. God *is* present—as profoundly present in the midst of chaos or tension as God is in the midst of peace and harmony. The simple act of lighting a candle at the table can be an acknowledgement of the fact even when the sentiments of the spoken word feel empty and strained.

Eating and Community

To be human is to belong. The need to belong has been central to our humanity from the beginning. As we have already discovered, Jesus extended the boundaries of belonging at the table of God. He proclaimed God's kingdom open to and inclusive of all who respond to God's invitation to eat with him.

In the words of Wendy Wright, 'When we break

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bread together, we symbolically enact the basic truth that we are most complete when we are together.' A family is that group of scattered individuals who come together at the end of the day, most commonly around the meal table. They may or may not be related by blood, but every time they meet there they acknowledge their identity as a family and reaffirm their sense of belonging. There is a sense in which our meal table defines the boundaries of our community. Occasionally, or regularly, an outsider is invited to the table. In welcoming them we communicate that, for the period of the meal at least, this person is no longer a stranger. They belong with us.

In a society that increasingly values individualism, where families are sacrificing their common identity in pursuit of individual interests, the common mealtime is disappearing or shared around the television set. Our task is to reinvent the household mealtime as a time to value relationships, listen to each other, extend welcome to the outsider and reaffirm our need for community. Guarding the sanctity of the shared mealtime is crucial. Finding ways to make meal preparation a communal event will only deepen the experience.

Eating and Service

Through his words and actions, Jesus painted a picture of a kingdom in which love and self-giving are central. His proclamations were, and still are, radical. For Jesus, genuine power is only possible through the laying down of personal ambition. It's in service that we discover the greatness for which we are made.

Jesus' example of foot-washing shows that there are few places where this can be demonstrated as



tangibly as at the meal table. Whether a ministry of compassion or of simple hospitality, what is offered there is service plain and simple.

Ernest Boyer Jr. calls this service of the table ‘the sacrament of care.’ Care is offered most often in the routine and ordinary activities of the day—washing dishes, peeling vegetables or making beds. It is unlikely the one who prepares meals for a family week in and week out, year in and year out, is conscious of it as a sacrament. It is too routine, instinctive and second nature for that. Yet if we take Jesus' words seriously, then what is offered to the family day after day is as significant in God's kingdom as any glorified act of service offered by prophet, priest or king.

In our churches we can be looking for ways and opportunities to recognize these ‘sacraments of care’ offered by otherwise unrecognized

members of our church communities. In our homes we can nurture those who serve us by regularly voicing our thanks for what is given, celebrating these as gifts from God. Simple liturgies and rituals can be constructed together that give voice to our gratitude.

Eating and Mission

In a sense, Jesus' eating habits embodied his mission. His sitting at table with the despised, disenfranchised and closed-out was a clear indication that the kingdom of heaven is an inclusive place of welcome and refuge for all. It indicates that the mission of the church is not merely proclamation of the ‘good news’ to those outside, nor is it limited to the clothing and feeding of the outcasts. It is a mission that calls for both of these, yet more. It demands an intimate investment in the lives of those we invite to the

table.

Jesus could have limited his ministry to the proclamation of the kingdom from the mountaintops and synagogues. Instead, such moments were the exception. More commonly, Jesus was brushing up against all manner of people in the most domestic settings and very often eating with them. The mission of the early church clearly reflected this. Mission for Jesus and the early church involved initiating relationships and embodying the nature of God's inclusive kingdom. According to Jesus, there is an honoured place in the kingdom for those who show to others the same open hospitality: 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in' (Mt 25:35).

Being invited into a private home for dinner is increasingly rare in Western societies. As a friend said recently, 'When you invite me into your home you invite me into your life.' However, the invitation to intimacy and commitment is commonly avoided in favour of less demanding encounters.

In an uncertain and fearful world, perhaps the family home is valued more as refuge than a place of community. Of course, refuge is an important part of what the family home is about. Protecting, nurturing, and healing those within—these are important functions of the Christian home. However, if we intend to model the inclusive nature of God's kingdom for our children and for each other, yet fail to invite even those who are like us to the dinner table, then how do we even begin addressing the call to the stranger?

The mission of the church is about more than a distant proclamation or a free handout at the soup kitchen. It is about intimate investment in the lives of those around us. It is about securing our identity as a family and then opening the table to those who need the embrace of Jesus. I have often said that for all the complex programs of mission and evangelism organized by the church, the most time-honoured and proven means of mission we have is simply to set another place at the table.

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Conclusion

While our eating may always be a routine and ordinary part of our lives, essential to physical survival, its significance at a much deeper level should never be forgotten. In the Christian family, eating provides one of the most immediate and daily opportunities to nurture one another in the faith, to live together in the awareness of God's presence and goodness, and to practice the call of God to holiness, service and mission.

Bon appétit!

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