

MEAL AS A CATALYST FOR RECONCILIATION: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE POSSIBILITIES OF UTILIZING A MEAL EVENT FOR PEACEMAKING

Ecumenical Studies Interest Group

Peter J. Morgan
Liberty University

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a part of human existence. While not every person has experienced what might be called the worst kinds of conflict (war, physical abuse, etc.) every person has experienced conflict in one form or another. Left unresolved, conflict can escalate or result in the involved parties avoiding contact. In either case the fundamental result is that any potential for positive action stemming from cooperation between those involved becomes unrealized. Without reconciliation, which results in peace, conflict remains unresolved and the potential for continual and/or worsening conflict remains. "Much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact, *peace is communion between former enemies*."¹ For reconciliation to take place a true understanding of the other is necessary.

Achieving reconciliation between conflicting parties is a task made difficult by the reality that their relationship is defined by disagreement. In order for productive communication to take place it is helpful for there to be a positive commonality to exist between the two parties. With such a commonality in place, the two, or more, sides of a conflict have something to identify the other with that does not inherently exacerbate the conflict. It is the assertion of this paper that a meal event offers a point of commonality between any and all conflicting parties as the

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¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 126. **[FOOTNOTE: Times New Roman, 10 pt.]**

Peter Morgan, "Meal as a Catalyst" [HEADER: Times New Roman, 11 pt., Different 1st Page]

consumption of food is common and necessary across all of humanity. To support the thesis that a meal event is a viable means of acting as a catalyst for reconciliation between individuals, this paper will look towards the Greco-Roman Jewish situation of the first century. First, the historical meal cultures of the Gentiles and Jews of the first century will be explored, including issues of purity in Jewish culture. Second, examples of how meal events impacted Peter in regards to Jewish/Gentile relations will be discussed in light of Greco-Roman hospitality. Finally, the concept of meal as reconciliation will be discussed in light of Miroslav Volf's four steps of embrace.

A MEAL EVENT DEFINED

This paper defines a meal event as an occasion where at least two individuals meet and partake in food and the pleasantries of hospitality. A meal event is more than just two people eating together; it is the entire activity of those people prior to, during, and after the meal itself. Therefore, it is possible to talk specifically of either hospitality or meal and still be under the auspices of the meal event. The obligations of hospitality, and the consumption of food itself, can vary from culture to culture, but regardless of the culture being discussed, a meal event encompasses hospitality and the meal itself.

ANCIENT MEAL CULTURE

Much like cosmopolitan cities of modern times, the cities of the Roman Empire in the first century contained a wide variety of cultures. The predominance of Greco-Roman culture permeated society, even to the extent that specific cultures, like that of the Jews, who wished to retain social identity, had much in common with Greco-Roman hospitality.² The largest difference between the Jews and Gentiles in terms of hospitality tradition was in the area of

² Dennis Edwin Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 133.

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