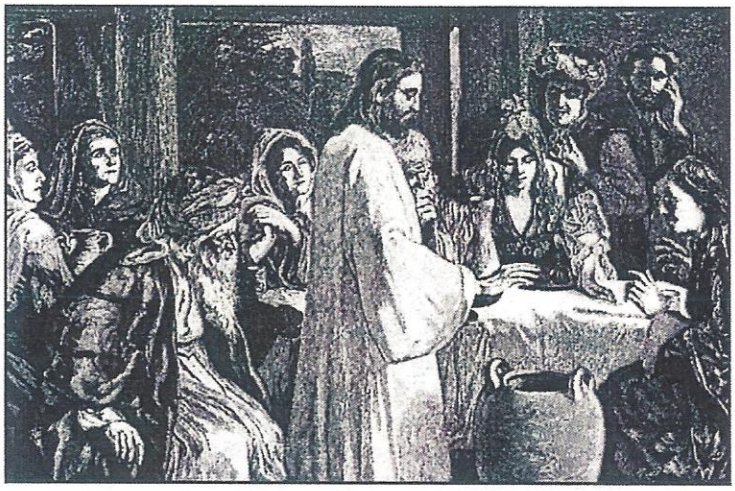
THE THEOLOGY OF FEASTING

Developing a community of celebration around an overflowing table

By Craig R. Dumont, Sr.

I have spoken and written often in the past that our church is a celebration community, and I don't mean simply that we assemble for a time of triumphant hymns, exciting and victorious songs of praise and worship and rousing sermons and powerful testimonies, all of which are highly desirable and I hope are present. But on a more basic, and I believe, more important level, I am speaking of something elegantly simple. If you have attended our church events in the past you know that food, and lots of it, is ubiquitous. I speak about food and drink often; indeed, it may be one of the most talked about subjects, along with work and finance related issues, in our church. On occasion I am asked why I place so much emphasis upon food and fellowship and with the holidays approaching and more personal and church feasts planned I thought I would take the opportunity to discuss this topic.



Jesus turns the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee

The Bible is the foundation for establishing priorities for Christians and there are two topics or activities that the Word of God spends more time on than any others: food/eating and work. In fact, from the very creation of man food and work were foundational and organizational activities.

In Genesis 1:27-29 God gives man the work of dominion and care for creation and then sets before him a gourmet banquet table. In Genesis 2:15—17 God sets man in the garden of Eden to work and to eat. "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." The importance of working and eating (and refraining from eating what God withholds) is introduced immediately and the implication is that they are inseparable! This interconnectedness remains throughout Scripture with the apostle Paul reminding believers that "if a man doesn't work, neither shall he eat." Further, work and food continue to be subjects consuming (no pun intended) the most Scripture in the Bible. The reason, I believe, is that if we get work and food right we get almost all of life right, including evangelism and worship that is acceptable to God. But the focus here is food and feasting.

Leon R. Kass, in his book **The Hungry Soul:** *Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature,* summarizes the powerful organizational aspects of food and eating in every area of life when he writes:

> Compared to wisdom eating may be a humble subject, but it is no trivial matter. It is the first and most urgent activity of all animal and human life: We are only because we eat. Much of human life is, in practice, organized around this necessity. Enormous time and energies are poured into growing, harvesting, rearing, butchering, preserving, packaging, storing, transporting, stocking, selling, buying, preparing, cooking, and consuming food. The manufacture of tables, chairs, stoves, refrigerators, dishes, glassware, utensils, and kitchen gadgets; provision of homes with fuel for cooking, with water for drinking and cleaning, and with electricity for refrigeration; the operation of groceries, bakeries, supermarkets, restaurants, and services for garbage collection and sanitation; the scientific development of new fertilizers and animal feed, of pest-resistant crops and of genetically engineered high-yielding livestock—all these and more follow from the increasingly complex ways in which we arrange to meet our most basic need. Indeed, at least indirectly, the need to eat makes the world go around: Most of society's work gets done largely because we workers need to make a living—that is, to earn enough to feed ourselves and our families.

Kass assures us that "these massively important socioeconomic aspects of eating" are not his concern, as his book deals with a topic far more interesting: *the meaning of eating*, in which he succeeds magnificently. But the point remains; the pursuit of food and the manner in which we consume that food is the single most important factor in organizing our lives.

God uses food to convey *meaning* and to *organize* His covenant peoples lives in the Old Testament with comprehensive dietary laws. Much discussion has went into the meaning of the division between the clean and unclean animals listed in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus and

their use as food or prohibition (Time and space doesn't allow for discussion here). There is an extensive list of what is clean and edible and that which is unclean, "an abomination, it shall not be eaten." Restrictions in the dietary laws (You shall not eat) are immediately followed by a declaration and command of God: "For I am the Lord your God: Ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy" [vs. 44]. Holiness, in the Old Testament, is in some way connected to what the Israelites ate or did not eat![1] This connection is reemphasized in verses 45-47:

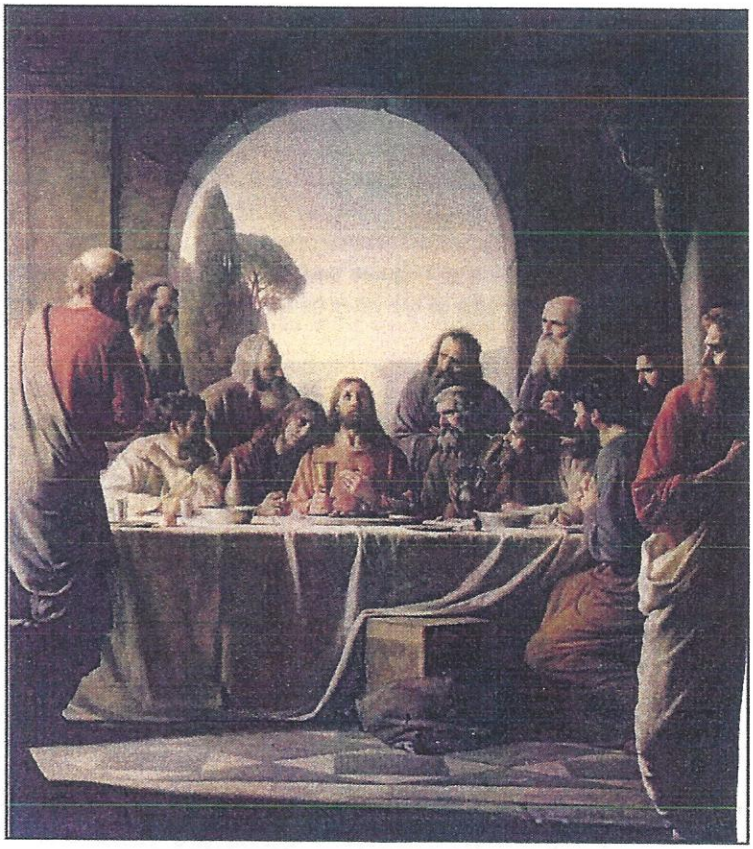
> "For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. **You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.** 'This is the law of the animals and the birds and every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that creeps on the earth, **to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten.**'"

Abundant food and drink is promised as one of the magnificent blessings of the land Israel is about to enter, a land symbolized as overflowing with "milk and honey." God states that not only is food and drink abundant, but He uses a metaphor that invokes images of beauty and delight. In many ways God is setting forth a "gourmet nation" that knows how to prepare great meals, both in taste and in visual presentation. This new nation's eating is also meaningful and will be a method of organization. They shall be separated (organized) from other nations and set forth as unique (meaning) through what they eat or don't! They will be holy, i.e. separated and uncommon/unique.[2] They will learn to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."[3]

It is interesting to consider that this command includes "beauty" in worship that is deemed holy, for even in the sacrifices before the Lord there is a requirement in many cases to bring sophisticated and deliciously prepared food and present it in an aromatic and visually pleasing way. Food is important and only the best ingredients and presentation is acceptable to God.

> When anyone offers a grain offering to the LORD, his offering shall be **of fine flour. And he shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it.** He shall bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests, one of whom shall take from it his handful of fine flour and oil with all the frankincense. And the priest shall burn it as a memorial on the altar, an offering made by fire, **a sweet aroma** to the LORD. . . If your offering is a grain offering baked in a covered pan, **it shall be made of fine flour with oil** . . . And every offering of your grain offering **you shall season with salt**; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt. If you offer a grain offering of your firstfruits to the LORD, you shall offer for the grain offering of your firstfruits **green heads of grain roasted on the fire, grain beaten from full heads. And you shall put oil on it, and lay frankincense on it.** It is a grain offering. Then the priest shall burn the memorial portion: part of its beaten grain and part of its oil, with all the frankincense, as an offering made by fire to the LORD. [Leviticus 2:1-2, 7, 13-16]

Further, God commands that His people be a feasting people! "Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my feasts" [Leviticus 23:2]. There was the Passover, Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of the First Fruits, and more. "And thou shalt eat before the Lord thy God . . . and thou shalt [buy] whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth; and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household" [Deuteronomy 14:23-26].



If God has mandated that food and wine and everything about it is a vital and central aspect to life it would follow that Christians would seek to discover and celebrate "the meaning of eating" in terms of fellowship and worship.

In fact, for over 2,000 years Christians *have* pursued the theological and philosophical implications of food and feasting and the result, until recently, was a calendar reflecting that very thing. The Christian year linked important events such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost and others with feast days. For most of Christian history and for most Christians time literally revolved around the great feasts of the Church.

In addition to the Christian feast days theologians have been intrigued with Christ's commands at the Last Supper and Paul invoking that memory to the Corinthians. So much of Christ's ministry revolved around food and drink—His first miracle was turning water into the most excellent wine—that many scholars, both Christian and non-Christian, have written volumes in the attempt to explain the connection of ministry, meaning and meal.

One powerful example is Oscar Cullmann's Essays on the Lord's Supper in which he documents the strong emphasis on food in our Savior's life and ministry. Writing concerning Acts 2:42— "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" and Acts 2:46— "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart"—Cullman restates the ancient teaching, going back before Augustine, that the Eucharistic meal is separate from the Last Supper and that we need to understand the place of food and rejoicing in "the origins of [Christian] worship."

> That joy which, according to Acts 2:46, filled the hearts of the first believers united for the "breaking of bread" could not have been elicited either by the recollection of the Last Supper or by the recollection of the daily meals taken with the Lord during His lifetime . . . There is only one group of meals, the recollection of which could fully justify this overflowing joy: those which the first Christians took together immediately after the death of Jesus, meals during which Christ suddenly appeared to them and, under their very eyes, ate some fish with them. According to Luke 24:36, the eleven and their companions ate with the Risen One on the night of Easter Day. According to this same account, a few moments previously the two disciples from Emmaus had told them how the Risen One had shared in their meal and how He had taken the bread and pronounced the usual blessing.
>
> If the first appearance of the Risen Christ to all His disciples took place during a meal, it seems to me essential to consider whether or not the later meals of the primitive community were derived from the recollection of this event which was so vital for the first Christians.

If God has mandated that food and wine and everything about it is a vital and central aspect to life it would follow that Christians would seek to discover and celebrate "the meaning of eating" in terms of fellowship and worship.

In fact, for over 2,000 years Christians *have* pursued the theological and philosophical implications of food and feasting and the result, until recently, was a calendar reflecting that very thing. The Christian year linked important events such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost and others with feast days. For most of Christian history and for most Christians time literally revolved around the great feasts of the Church.

Cullmann notes that the Greek wording in Acts 2:42 & 46 "denotes a strong manifestation of joy, an overflowing joy, which seems incompatible with a recalling of the Last Supper and with the words that Jesus uttered on the occasion." He goes on to point out the importance early Christians placed upon water, wine, salt and fish. For instance, "the role of the fish [is] interpreted as a eucharistic symbol" due to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand in with loaves and fishes and then "the meal which the Risen Lord had with His disciples did in fact involve fish (Luke 24:42)." And further, in John 21:12-13 we read that following the resurrection, "Jesus said to them, 'Come and eat breakfast.' Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, 'Who are You?'—knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish." Cullmann notes that for the early church,

> It thus confirms the relation that we have recognized between the primative Eucharist and the first appearances of Christ.
>
> There are further passages which confirm that these collective visions of the Risen One took place during meals. First of all let us take note of Acts 10:41. In St. Peter's speech we read these words, which are very important . . . "This Christ God raised up the third day, and gave Him to be made manifest, not to all people, but unto witnesses who were chosen before of God, *even to us who did eat and drink with Him after He rose from the dead."*
>
> . . . We can now understand why the Christian community in the Apostolic Age celebrated its meals "with joy." The certainty of the Resurrection was the essential religious motive of the primitive Lord's Supper. The experience of the presence of the Risen One in the midst of the assembly of the faithful was repeated each time the community was united for the common meal. This experience was identical with that of Easter, and the first disciples must have considered these cultic meals as the direct continuation of those in which the disciples had participated immediately after the death of the Lord. When assembled "to break bread," they knew that the Risen One would reveal His presence in a manner less visible but no less real than previously.

The celebration of "Christ has risen! Christ has risen indeed!" played out in the life of the church necessarily included—required!—feasting. Indeed, "can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?" Fasting is for those times when the bridegroom is taken from them,[4] but all Christians understand that "where two or three are gathered in [Christ's] name, there [Christ] is with them" (Matthew 18:20). Therefore, as the Church came together on a regular basis it was natural to assume it was a time of celebration with food and feasting a regular part of the festivities. It is this Christian paradigm that made the church a center of "joy unspeakable and full of glory," attracting multitudes to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

This emphasis upon joy, festivals and feasts made its mark upon the community of believers from the earliest times and totally shaped the way Christians and much of the world viewed and marked time. Alexander Schmemann has noted that "our liturgical year is built on the *remembrance* of Christ. The church calendar fills time with the memory of Christ and makes time itself an image of salvation and new life." Further, "it is indeed the proper function of liturgy that in and through it *everything* that Christ accomplished *once* always returns to life, is made present again, actualized in its relation to us and our salvation. A feast thus is an entrance into, and communion with the eternal

meaning of an event of the past, through which we taste of the Kingdom of God." This"wonderful church calendar" provides us with the framework to structure a "harmonious crescendo of festivals, with their gradual unfolding and their inner unity . . . with the true joy of church life."[5]

What Schmemann recognized is that God uses feasts within the Christian community to provide meaningful, powerful and effective symbols for the Church (remember everything that Christ accomplished), and to organize (the liturgy and wonderful church calendar), the life of every believer. "Who are the Christians? Those who know that Christ has come and who expect His return." The first theme of the liturgical year is the coming of Christ and this fact sets the stage for an eternal "Year of Jubilee" for those who are redeemed!

> What happened in Bethlehem was God Himself coming to man. It was the participation of man in this coming, the meeting of Christ by Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men, all truly representing the world. It was the participation of the entire nature in time. It was, it forever remains, a tremendous and glorious mystery: into this world God Himself has entered. The God in whom we believe is not a god somewhere'out there' nobody knows where, but the God who has taken upon Himself to enter into our time, to be one of us, to be the Emmanuel, the God with us. Hence the second feast of the cycle Epiphany, which means Manifestation, in that Christ manifested Himself to man, to the world, to the entire Creation . . .'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29) . . . The feasts of Christmas and Epiphany reveal to us the cosmic dimension of the Christian faith.
>
> What then is celebration? It is the appropriation by us, by the Church, of the joy given by God. On one hand, the whole life of the Church is one endless feast; and on the other hand, it is a preparation for the only ultimate feast: the fulfillment of all things, of the world itself, in God . . . It is easy to†'go to church,' it is difficult to celebrate. For mere 'going to church,' mere attendance, is not enough. True celebration is always a living participation. But no one can reach that participation, and the meaning, the depth, the joy of the celebration, unless he prepares himself.[6]

The Church of the Resurrection is first and foremost a Community of Celebration primarily exemplified not by preaching, although powerful preaching and teaching is surely a necessary aspect of any church,but by love feasts. These frequent love feasts give tangible expression in which we manifest the truth of John's statement: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14).

To be continued . . .

(Endnotes)

[1]I owe Leon Kass a debt of gratitude in opening my eyes to this clear fact.Although I had read this section many times and have often meditated on God's command to"be holy, for I am holy," I never connected eating & food with the context of separation and organization until I read Kass's commentary on this scripture in his excellent book, **The Hungary Soul:** *Eating and the Perfecting of our Nature.* While this book has its flaws (Kass seems ignorant of God's requirement that blood sacrifices are made in anticipation of Christ's own ultimate shedding of blood and he too easily accepts at least a form of evolutionary argument) this is an outstanding work that deserves a far greater audience.

[2] God continues to use food and eating to provide meaning and organization for His people even now. The Lord's Table with the bread and wine is the epitome of meaning and separation: In terms of meaning we are told that "This is My body, this is My blood." Organizationally, the Church builds her life around The Table. There is continuous separation between believers and unbelievers—Romans 14:22-23 & 1 Corinthians 10:21; and even between believers who are in right relationship with Christ's body, His church and all its members, and those believers who have unrighteous relationships. See 1 Corinthians 11:18-34. There is even a hint (or more!) that our diet reveals our faith and separates between those who have weak and strong faith. See Romans 14:1-2. The final separation is seen in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7-9.

[3] It is amazing how we so easily forget that God loves beauty. There are some things He commands to be made simply "for beauty and for glory." See Exodus 28:2 & 40. God speaks of the Israelites as taking possession of "beautiful trees" (Leviticus 23:40) and "beautiful cities" (Deuteronomy 6:10). The temple was beautiful. Praise from the upright is beautiful (Psalm 33:1 & 147:1); innumerable times the Bible refers to beautiful women, mostly in appearance, but also in character. I could go on, but let it suffice to note that we confess with the author of Ecclesiastes that God "has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

[4] There is only one day of fasting per year required in the Old Testament and that was the Day of Atonement when Israel was to "afflict their soul" and humble themselves before the Lord. See Leviticus 16:29-34, 23:26-31 … Psalm 69:10-11. There were other times of fasting, but they were times of repentance and acknowledging the judgements of God or sadness or distress due to events that had transpired. Judgement and repentance is often the basis of fasting and is Biblical because it is the stated way to afflict or "humble the soul." See 2 Samuel 12; Nehemiah 1; Psalm 35:13. There is also merit in fasting in developing self-discipline. However while fasting is without a doubt an activity undertaken by serious Christians, the fact remains there is nowhere in Scripture outside of the Day of Atonement where it is mandated. Compare the lack of requirements on fasting to the numerous commands to feast.

[5] Alexander Schmemann; Liturgy And Life: Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience.

[6] Ibid