

Jon High. 26th Oct 08

Meeting & Eating - the early church

Introduction

Show & tell! - silver cigarette box:

- Value \$100 (around £50)
- not used for years
- of no practical use nowadays anyway (wrong size)
- never used by me
- inscription
- it belonged to my grandfather

There's more to it than just a silver box.

The Fellowship of the Believers

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2 v 42 - 47 (ESV)

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart

Acts 2 v 46 (NASB)

First part looks like key to building a successful church:

- devoted to apostle's teaching (that is hearing and doing what the bible says)
- devotion to fellowship (meeting together)
- breaking bread
- prayer

As none of the bible is there just as filler passages, it's all important. Why do books on church growth seem to stop there? Later in the passage it talks of eating together, is this important?

Can't find it in any theology books...

All about food

Recommended daily calorie intake for energy use is 2,000 for women, 2,500 for men (dependant upon activity undertaken and body weight).

The food standards agency recommends:

- Base your food consumption around starchy foods (and beware of fats used in their cooking)
- Eat lots of fruit and veg
- Eat more fish
- Reduce fat and sugar intake
- Eat less salt
- Be active and try to be a healthy weight
- Drink plenty of water
- Don't skip breakfast

In 1998 Delia Smith's TV series 'How to cook' reportedly led to eggs selling out throughout the country, when she taught people how to boil one.

Bible dictionary lists references to all the foods being eaten in biblical times - useful if you want to learn about Noah's carrot consumption I suppose...

Food is fuel. Without eating we would lose energy, mental capacity and eventually slip into a coma and die. But is refilling fuel all that eating food is all about?

At school we learnt about cooking through being taught recipes - is food just about chemistry?!

Something more

In 1998 Nigella Lawson published a book that contained a thinly veiled poke in Delia's direction:

There is a reason why this book is called 'How to eat' rather than 'How to cook'. It's a simple one: although it's possible to love eating without being able to cook, I don't believe you can ever really cook unless you love eating.

Nigella Lawson, 'How to eat'

Nigel Slater writes on a similar theme:

What we end up eating for supper often has as much to do with our mood as with our taste-buds. How many times have I come home in the sort of grumpy, fractious mood that can only be soothed by a plate of creamy, cheesy pasta? Whose mood hasn't pushed them into making an out-of-character meal, like grilling a red blooded steak or throwing together some high-energy snack such as a peanut butter sandwich? who hasn't sought solace in a bowl of soup? Often these choices are a question of texture and temperature as much as task. Our body may crave hot, creamy, starchy food because it knows it has a soothing effect, or something green, crisp and fresh because it needs something light and cleansing.

Nigel Slater, 'Appetite'

With food, it's so much more than simply fuel. There's pleasure in it, relief, excitement, joy - we have an emotional, social and cultural connection to the things that we eat that is difficult to explain - what we can know, though, is that it's more than it appears to be.

Think about Turkey at Christmas, burgers at a football match, barbecues in the summer, picnics in the park, ice cream on the beach.

There's something else going on, something bigger, something we can't quite comprehend.

Eating together

When initially reading this passage I thought that maybe the same is true of eating together as with food, that there's more going on beneath the surface that may appear at first.

So I looked elsewhere in the bible for examples of people eating together to see if there was more to it, and found a couple of significant moments...

The fall of man

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither

shall you touch it, lest you die.” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Genesis 3 v 1 - 7 (ESV)

Does this win the award for worst shared meal in history?

This was the moment when sin (rebellion against God) entered the world, bringing with it pain, fear, destruction, hate, anger, war, poverty and hunger. It was the starting point for man’s separation from God, our inability to be able to have a relationship with him due to our own actions, our poor choices. It was the moment that brought death to a perfect world.

They ate an apple.

And yet, there was something else going on, something bigger, something they couldn’t begin to comprehend.

The last supper

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 26 v 26 - 28 (ESV)

This is the moment when Jesus reiterates that his death (which was to occur very soon afterward) would bring salvation to many. Over this meal he declared the consequences of Adam’s actions were about to be undone. Where Adam & Eve’s meal brought separation from God, Jesus meal pointed toward reconciliation with God.

Was this the best shared meal in the world ever?

They ate a bit of bread and drank some wine.

And yet, there was something else going on, something bigger, something they couldn’t begin to comprehend.

The early church

Returning to the passage in Acts, the question is - what's really going on here?

Biblical times - most people were manual workers or farmers, ate breakfast on the way to work, lunch on the job and dinner at home with the family. Evening meals were shared with family or occasional honoured guests. (Not the same for the rich, for whom 'being seen' eating with 'important' people was the order of the day).

Eating with each other then was a representation of family ties, of kinship, unity with one another. It said 'you're my brother' more clearly than saying 'you're my brother' ever could.

Matthew Henry (WHO?) when writing about this passage observes that the significance in doing things 'together' lay in the social divisions in existence at the time on the lines of 'language, nations or other associations'. Meeting together then with people who spoke a different language, from another nation or different social position was counter-cultural. Remind you of anything?! Rather than just meeting together though, they regarded people with whom they wouldn't normally associate as brothers and sisters, and expressed this by sharing food in each other's homes.

Eating together then had more significance than just sharing a meal. They were doing something totally contrary to the culture of the time. More than that though, you get to know people when you share a meal with them. You chat. You talk about the things that are important to you. You grow in love for the people with whom you are sharing a meal. There's something more than just eating going on - something intensely personal, spiritual even. Just being together is a sign that there's something extraordinary going on.

When people eat together there's so much more happening - be it lovers sharing a meal at a restaurant, lunch with your extended family at home, coffee and a cake with an old friend, beer and a burger with the boys, a cousin's birthday party. **It can be difficult sometimes to put into words exactly what's happening, but something's going on, something bigger, something we may not fully understand.**

A further thing that was achieved was the continuing of 'keeping all things in common', as it said earlier in the passage; the poor amongst them were being looked after and fed. And the attitude was not begrudging, rather it was being done with 'gladness and sincerity'.

Common objections

Observation about conflict at meal times leading to unwillingness to share food with others.

Can't cook (won't cook?)

- Example of meal with student friend.
- The effort can often make an impact.
- It's never too late to learn to cook.

Poor view of food

Easiest to see in an eating disorder - 'using destructive eating patterns to gain control over life'.

Bulimia - bingeing or frantic eating and drastic purging (vomiting or using laxatives or diuretics) to rid yourself of the food consumed, or periods of fasting and great exercise.

Anorexia - weight and food become central issues in life, can include fasting and reduced food intake to constantly reduce weight.

Bulimia - affects 1 to 2 % of women aged 15 to 40, anorexia affects 1 to 5 per 1,000 people (5 - 10 % of which are boys).

Compulsive eating - differ from bulimics in that they don't tend to purge themselves of food that they've consumed. Feelings of powerlessness to control the urge to comfort eat.

Viewing food as fuel, and so misunderstanding that it is there to be enjoyed (and shared).

The diet industry - diet food and drinks market worth £61bn in 2006, 95% of slimmers regain their weight.

The media - front pages of trashy magazines all about weight loss, weight gain fat celebs and the like.

Food should be enjoyed, not ignored and not feared. Issues like these become cyclical in that we allow fear to control us and our actions, and we feel shame about the things we do. We then keep it quiet for fear of what people may think of us. We are relentlessly pursued by a media and marketing blitz focussed on telling us that we're overweight, imperfect and if only we could be more like Ferne Cotton, Mark Owen, Julio Iglesias or Kareena Kapoor people would like us more.

There's nothing wrong with going on a diet, watching what you eat or wanting to become more healthy. The problem is that we allow ourselves to be overtaken by fear - fear of being disliked, fear of being ugly, fear of being unloved. It affects our self-esteem and inhibits our ability to fulfil our potential in serving God (you can't serve two masters after all). God says that perfect love casts out all fear (1 John 14 v 8). We are to find our self esteem in him, not in our appearance.

- Where to find help

No time/ no money

- there's always time to eat - if not then it's an unhealthy relationship with food...
- too busy to eat = too busy!
- for people with little time, giving up time to simply hang out (and have a bite to eat) with people is a strong message about how valuable and important they and their friendship are. We can always find time for the things that are important to us.
- no money - refer to earlier story
- eat cheaply and give generously.

Lauding it over others

Celebrity come dine with me

[Jesus] said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

Luke 14 v 12 - 14 (ESV)

Eating with others isn't a chance to show off your wealth or how clever or cultured you are, and shouldn't be something done to get something in return.

Application

Eat together!

Free space in your diary and ask someone over for dinner.

Why?

- because we'll grow in love for one another
- so the poor are cared for
- so the world will know that Christian brotherhood transcends national, cultural and language barriers
- because it's fun
- because there's more to it than just eating together

You don't have to cook. You can get through life perfectly comfortably without lifting so much as a wooden spoon. Fine. Do that. What I want to say is that if you do decide to go through life without cooking you are missing something very, very special. You are losing out on one of the greatest pleasures you can have with your clothes on. Cooking can be as

passionate, creative, life-enhancing, uplifting, satisfying and downright exhilarating as anything else you can do with your life. Feeling, sniffing, chopping, sizzling, grilling, frying, roasting, baking, tasting, licking, biting, savouring and swallowing food are pleasures that would, to put it mildly, be a crime to miss out on. Add to that the buzz, the satisfying tingle that goes down your spine when you watch someone eating something you have made for them, and you have one of the greatest joys known to man.

Nigel Slater, 'Appetite'

Links

<http://www.b-eat.co.uk/Home> Beat – UK’s leading eating disorder charity

http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/disorders_eating.shtml

BBC pages on eating disorders

<http://www.raisingkids.co.uk/bttt/home.asp> Website encouraging families to eat together

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/> BBC food pages

<http://www.jamieoliver.com/> Jamie Oliver’s site

<http://www.nigelslater.com/> Nigel Slater’s (Observer’s food writer) site

<http://www.rivercottage.net/> River Cottage (Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall) site

Recommended Books

ESV Bible (<http://www.esv.org/>)

“Appetite”, Nigel Slater (or anything else by Nigel Slater for that matter)

“The River Cottage Family Cookbook”, Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall

“Jamie’s Ministry of Food”, Jamie Oliver (And pretty much his entire back-catalogue too)

“How to eat”, Nigella Lawson

And, of course, anything by John Stott, Wayne Grudem, JI Packer, Mark Driscoll, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, R.T. Kendall, John Piper or Rick Warren. None of whom, as far as I can tell, have written on this subject.