“Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given”: Lukan Table Practices in the Faith Formation of Christian Communities

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Abstract: Luke’s Eucharistic pattern not only serves as a Christological marker, but formative pattern for Christian faith communities. In this article, I appeal to Luke’s Eucharistic pattern to advance the claim that hospitable Eucharistic table practices are not only consistent with Luke’s Christology but also form faith that is capable of confronting and dismantling psychological disgust responses to outsiders. This motif is expanded in Luke–Acts, where acts of table fellowship become the places where socio-moral barriers are transgressed, signaling the good news of the gospel, especially for Gentiles. Drawing from biblical scholarship as well as recent work in psychology, I will advance the claim that hospitable Eucharistic practices not only expose disgust psychology in the faith formation of persons but also act as a potential balm, forming persons according to the good news proclaimed in Luke–Acts.

Keywords: Eucharist; Lord’s Supper; liturgy; Luke–Acts; disgust; psychology; open table

1. Introduction

With eleven distinct stories of Jesus engaging in table fellowship, Luke’s gospel highlights this practice as a means of culture formation and an arena of the gospel’s activity. Karris has shown that beyond meal accounts, food and hospitality are heavily influenced in all major sections of Luke’s Gospel (Karris 2006). The theme carries into Acts as well, where matters of table fellowship become occurrences of transgressive culture-making, disrupting Greco-Roman table mores with practices of welcome and hospitality (Witherington 2007). In short, Luke–Acts presents meals as places where the gospel, enacted in Jesus’ table practices, become occurrences of social transgression, disrupting Greco-Roman table mores with practices of welcome and hospitality (Witherington 2007). In short, Luke–Acts presents meals as places where the gospel, enacted in Jesus’ table practices, becomes occurrences of transgressive culture-making, disrupting Greco-Roman table mores with practices of welcome and hospitality (Witherington 2007).

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2. Table Fellowship in Luke–Acts

Table fellowship, of course, is not unique to Luke’s Gospel in the New Testament, but it is a central feature. Matthew, Mark, and John all give readers examples of Jesus eating and feasting, which Luke often parallels (Smit 2008). Luke’s account, for example, of Jesus
feasting with Levi, a tax collector, appears in Luke as well as Mark (Luke 5: 27–32; Mark 2: 15–17). Jesus dining with the notoriously reviled is a mark of all the gospel accounts to one degree or another. Additionally, Luke includes the miraculous feeding of the multitude, a story native to all four canonized gospels (Matt. 14: 13–21, Mark 6: 30–43, Luke 9: 10–17, and John 6: 1–15). We gather from these accounts that making food available in an act of hospitality is a hallmark of Jesus’s ministry and the community that he is creating. In Luke’s account, Jesus takes loaves that had been offered, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them (Luke 9: 16). In this account, the means of production are mysterious. In the absence of a distinct explanation of how a few loaves of bread and a scant number of fish are enough to feed thousands, readers are left to wonder how exactly there was enough for twelve extra baskets to be taken up afterward. Was Jesus modeling for the multitude an act of hospitality that was replicated in the groups of those seated nearby? While this is unclear, what we do see in Luke’s account is a wide, hospitable offering of food, ostensibly including strangers and those who were outsiders to Jesus’s immediate group of disciples. When his disciples requested that he send them away (Luke 9: 12), Jesus’s response was a command to his disciples to feed the people. When their response catches on to the logistical challenges, Jesus takes up what they had and offers it in an act of table fellowship.

Luke, however, includes more narratives highlighting table fellowship that do not appear in the other synoptic gospels or John. In essence, “there is virtually no part of Luke in which either foodstuffs and their consumption, their (non-)provision, or the theme of table fellowship do not appear” (Smit 2008, p. 116). Often, Luke situates the content of Jesus’s teaching that appears in other gospels around a table or at a meal (Streett 2016). In table fellowship material distinctive to Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’s presence with and among outcasts is pervasive, amounting to a recasting of table etiquette (Green 1997). While reclining around the table at the house of a Pharisee, for example, a “woman in that town who lived a sinful life” follows Jesus into the house, disrupting the meal (Luke 7: 36–50). Lodging at the home of two sisters, Jesus welcomes one of them to sit with him as the rest of his male disciples would, a violation of contemporary social conventions. When Martha, the other sister, objects, Jesus reassures her that Mary “has chosen what is better,” including Mary among the men (Luke 10: 38–42). Another Pharisee is disgusted by Jesus’ lack of participation in cleansing rituals before a meal (Luke 11: 37–44), while a third dinner invitation from a Pharisee affords Jesus the opportunity to offer a parable about the nature of banqueting in the kingdom he is bringing, marked by the invitation of “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14: 1–24). Luke also includes a unique and powerful juxtaposition, placing the third meal invitation from a Pharisee alongside the Pharisaic grumbling about Jesus’s welcome of sinners and tax collectors (Luke 15: 1–2). In the material unique to Luke, Jesus is especially prone to include or welcome those who present a threat of contamination or evoke disgust. His table practices often transgress the social and religious boundaries that operated in his day. In Luke 14 especially, the writer emphasizes the way “Jesus instructed his followers to enact hospitality conventions, not in accord with reciprocity conventions but rather in accord with gracious self-giving and self-sacrificial principles” (Witherington 2007, p. 30). According to Witherington (2007), the table is a primary place where Christian social imagination challenges and remakes the social conventions of the Greco-Roman world, shattering social stratification and establishing fellowship. Whether it is in his actual table practices or his parables that feature meal fellowship, the social norms of his day are being challenged and remade in the new community that he is forming (Blomberg 2005).

Another table fellowship account unique to Luke’s Gospel demonstrates that recognition of the resurrected Christ happens in the act of hospitality and the sharing of food. Luke 24 carries the account of two disciples who share the road with the resurrected Jesus on their way away from Jerusalem following the crucifixion, offering Jesus hospitality and table fellowship when he signaled that he would continue on while they stopped. “When he was at the table with them,” we read in Luke’s account, “he took bread, gave thanks,
broke it, and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24: 30–31).

What Jesus begins in Luke’s Gospel is carried into Acts and the life of the early church. Perhaps the most notable narratives of transgressive table fellowship in Acts are those of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10). Peter’s vision of a blanket being lowered to him containing food that was unclean according to Jewish law, a custom not only represents food that would have evoked reactions of disgust (“Surely not, Lord!”), but calls into question the notion that certain people are also unclean and thus disgusting (Neyrey 1991). The scene concludes with Peter offering hospitality to two strangers who had been sent to him from Cornelius, a Gentile. The Spirit’s voice in reassuring Peter of both the purity of the food and the worthiness of the men to be welcomed further indicates that table fellowship imagination in Acts is transgressing and remaking the boundaries that had previously defined the practice. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean,” is the Spirit’s message to Peter (Acts 10: 15). In the vision of Luke–Acts, this applies to food and people, the two ingredients necessary for table fellowship.

3. Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given: Luke’s Eucharistic Pattern

In several of Luke’s table scenes, Jesus enacts a fourfold pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. Central to the Church’s Eucharistic imagination is Jesus enacting this pattern in his institution of the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22: 19). That pattern, however, is also seen in Luke’s account of Jesus feeding the multitude (Luke 9: 16) as well as his roadside meal with grieving disciples who came to see his resurrected self in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24: 30).

Taking Luke–Acts as a whole, we can say that this pattern is definitive of Jesus’s life. He is taken (or chosen) in his birth, blessed in his baptism, broken in his crucifixion, and continues to be given in his ongoing presence in the life of the Church. Thus, Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection are Eucharistically reenacted each time bread is taken up, blessed, broken, and given in remembrance of him (Luke 22: 19). Whereas Jesus employs the taken-blessed-broken-given pattern at the meals he shares, he himself now becomes the meal that is chosen by God and blessed to be broken and shared. Gathered around bread that has been chosen, blessed, broken, and given, disciples not only continue the pattern of table fellowship initiated by Jesus but locate themselves in him as he not only offers the food but becomes the meal. In his institution of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus’s words, “This is my body...” signal an offering of more than bread; the chosen, blessed, broken, and given food is now also his bodily presence extended to the life of the community.

In Luke–Acts, Jesus’s presence is extended to the Church in the power of the Spirit, seen particularly around table fellowship. Indeed, in the opening lines of Acts, the first time the resurrected Jesus speaks to the disciples, it is “while he was eating with them” (Acts 1: 4), linking the former volume to the latter through table fellowship, extending the pattern of Christ’s life into the mission of the Church. In short, the sending of the disciples to be Christ’s witnesses “in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1: 8) cannot be disconnected from the remembrance of Christ at the Eucharistic table each time they take up bread, bless it, break it, and give it. In the life of the Church, Christ continues to be chosen, blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world. The feasting continues just after Pentecost, as the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2: 42). Acts, then, is the narratival Eucharistic extension of Christ’s life, the account of the various ways in which the Holy Spirit empowers disciples to continue to repeat the pattern of Christ’s chosenness, blessedness, brokenness, and givenness.

The early church in Acts also gives attention to the importance of table fellowship and the distribution of food. While we may read Acts 6 in ways that potentially dismiss the importance of table fellowship, the story of the Twelve choosing those who are “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to ensure fair food distribution to Hellenistic widows signals the importance of maintaining meal practices that carry forward a mealtime ethic
consistent with Jesus’s life and ministry (Acts 6: 1–6). Paul’s mealtime instructions to the Corinthians, too, alert us to the importance of conducting table fellowship in ways that faithfully remember and welcome Christ’s presence at the meal (Witherington 2007). Recalling the fourfold pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving, Paul passes on what he believes he has received, reminding the Corinthian church, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11: 26). We find, then, that table fellowship in the early church is more than the sharing of necessary foodstuffs. It is, rather, a place where Jesus’s life and ministry are extended to the world.

Since Christ continues to be present to the world in this way, the Church’s life and mission as the body of Christ is to continue to live its choseness to be blessed, broken, and given. That is, the Church continues to make Christ present to the world in the power of the Spirit precisely as it is chosen, blessed, broken, and given for the sake of the world. As the Body of Christ in the world, the church in the world is indeed chosen and blessed. That blessing is to be broken and given, thus being defined not by sociomoral boundaries but hospitable table fellowship, forming a church that might be given in the world.

The narratives of Acts recount this Eucharistic mission from Pentecost, through the Jerusalem Council, and into Paul’s missionary journeys, concluding dramatically in a shipwreck as Paul takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to his captors and fellow prisoners (Acts 27: 33–37). In essence, Acts closes in an act of Eucharistic extension of Christ’s chosen, blessed, broken, and given life to the world. In closing Acts this way, Luke signals to the reader that the ongoing life of the Church is to reenact the pattern established by Jesus and carried forward by Paul in the power of the Spirit.

Throughout those stories, of course, the kind of Eucharistic life the Church lives involves the welcome of strangers and outsiders. Indeed, Paul’s own extension of Jesus’s taking, blessing, breaking, and giving pattern is directed toward his own captors, who were transporting him as a prisoner. Stated differently, the kind of table fellowship Jesus modeled, especially as it included the most despised, is the Eucharistic heartbeat of the Church’s life. In Acts, we find a string of accounts of Gentile outsiders being welcomed into the fledgling fellowship of Christ’s followers. We turn now to a brief examination of recent scholarship on the psychology of disgust, giving attention to the ways in which a Luke–Acts Eucharistic vision might help form faith that can move past disgust for the outsider.

4. Psychological Disgust in Community Faith Formation

Drawing from the scholarship of Martha Nussbaum, Jonathan Haidt, Paul Rozin, Charles Darwin, and others, contemporary psychologist Richard Beck has recently offered an examination of the psychology of disgust, especially as it functions in religious communities (Beck 2011). Disgust, of course, carries beneficial connections to the preservation of health and physical well-being. Consider, for example, the disgust we would experience at the invitation to eat food that has spoiled and would likely cause harm if it were to be consumed.

Accounting for these kinds of benefits, Beck points to the way that this preservationist instinct has also shaped the lives of faith communities in ways that are less beneficial. His argument advances along the trajectory set by the reality that human beings, who are the only ‘religious’ creatures, are apparently also the only creatures who experience disgust. Disgust, then, has shaped the kind of faith that is developed inside religious communities, creating powerful moral, social, and theological challenges for faith communities.

Beyond mere distaste to mild dislike, disgust “involves the feeling of revulsion, a visceral, almost nauseous, response. And this revulsion is very often triggered by a judgment or appraisal of contamination or pollution” (Beck 2011, p. 21). Among the most obvious of these types of revulsion have to do with food. In the Lukan corpus, we find that contaminants to ritual purity can be accompanied by a disgust response. Peter’s “Surely not, Lord!” response to God’s command to eat ritually unclean food in Acts 10: 14 and 11: 8 rings with emotion. His response is a refusal on ritual grounds but also charged with feeling; his threefold refusal signals the depth of his emotional turmoil.
Beyond the initial reactions invoked in Luke’s characters, however, our attention is drawn to the kind of faith being formed among the communities who are reading his writing as they deal with their own responses to contaminants and the presence of outsiders. Theologically, Luke highlights the activity of divine grace that forms a community of redemption, graciously overcoming ritual impurity and disgust reactions.

In seeking to map human disgust reactions, Paul Rozin has noted three ‘domains’ of disgust: (1) Core Disgust, which tends to center around food and oral incorporation, (2) Sociomoral Disgust, which often arises from social and moral judgments, and (3) Animal-Reminder Disgust, which often involves reminders of mortality in the form of gore, poor hygiene, and the like (Beck 2011).

Core Disgust is the type of human experience that is especially powerful across cultural boundaries. What may be a delicacy in one culture is considered disgusting in another. While eating a chicken’s leg or thigh is common in my native North American culture, for example, I can quickly recall the difficulty I had trying to eat a chicken’s foot when it was offered to me at the wedding of two Vietnamese friends. The difference in centimeters anatomically was the difference of kilometers culturally, invoking in me a reaction of disgust. This dynamic can play out in faith communities easily. A colleague and mentor recounted a story in which his Southern California, historically white church was plunged into turmoil when its newly welcomed Korean membership began bringing kimchi to after-service potluck meals.

Sociomoral disgust tends to shape faith communities, especially when disagreements emerge around questions of ethics. We need to look no further in the North American context than the current rancor over abortion or homosexuality. While these are often discussed in faith communities as moral issues, they evoke far stronger psychological responses than, say, the care of creation or economic issues. In short, the practice of abortion or homosexuality evokes a disgust response among members of faith communities that is not comparable regarding other moral issues.

Perniciously, this often extends to social groups as well. While sociomoral disgust may not take the form of blatant racism, Beck argues that it is fueled by notions of selfhood defined by boundaries. In this dynamic, ‘me’ is whatever falls inside of the boundaries of my personhood. Whatever falls outside those boundaries is ‘not me’ and tends to invoke disgust responses, even if ever so slight. In offering a memorable example, Beck asks his readers to imagine spitting into a cup and being asked to immediately drink the contents. Most persons are not moved to disgust by the saliva in their mouth because it is held inside the boundary of our bodies. Once it leaves the body and transgresses the boundary from ‘me’ to ‘not me,’ it tends to trigger a disgust response. Beck points to this dynamic in sociomoral terms, such that those persons and groups that are ‘not me’ are far more likely to cause disgust than those who belong to one’s in-group. The implications of Sociomoral Disgust for faith formation are manifold. Consider, for example, the in-grouping that can easily take place when denominational boundaries are invoked. Even inside those boundaries, persons may organize official or casual affinity groups, where others are not only disagreeable but psychologically disgusting.

Animal Reminder Disgust manifests around realities that prompt humans to acknowledge that they share aspects of creatureliness with non-human creation. Biological realities of birth, death, reproduction, and digestion often factor heavily in this form of disgust. While walking a pet dog, for example, we may not be comforted by the dog relieving itself on a nearby bush, but the idea of watching our human walking companion engage in a similar biological function would immediately trigger deep discomfort. Similarly, we may pass a deceased animal on a roadway whose life has ended violently in an encounter with an automobile, evoking only a minor emotional response. If that creature were human, however, the same encounter would likely evoke horror. In faith formation, Animal Reminder Disgust often manifests around sexual reproduction. While sexual reproduction is just as natural to humans as it is to animals, faith communities often tend to make clear distinctions between animal and human sexual activity. In part, this may serve to
differentiate humans from animals, insisting that humans are less like animals than even the opening chapters of Genesis imply.

Beck implicates faith communities as trafficking in the power of disgust. His argument uncovers the various ways that the faith formed inside of those communities is often fueled by the psychology of disgust. Consider, for example, the behaviors considered to be the most objectionable in faith communities. While those faith communities may adhere to certain moral structures, say, shaped by the Ten Commandments, there are certain actions that carry more revulsive weight, evoking stronger reactions than other forms of violation. Beck charges the contemporary church to give attention to its motivations and consider whether the moral imagination of faith communities is being shaped more by disgust psychology than it is theological conviction.

In giving attention to Luke–Acts, we may recall Peter’s reaction of disgust when he is commanded by God to eat food considered unclean (Acts 10). Though the command was threefold, Peter’s disgust never allowed him to follow the command he was receiving. As we have already seen, Luke’s account of this encounter presses the reader to consider not only whether the food offered to Peter is truly unclean but also whether the visitors who were seeking an audience with Peter were as well. The close link between meals, food contamination, and whether certain people are unclean stands out as a marker of Luke’s telling of the gospel. At heart is the question: ‘If the food that evokes disgust is being called clean by God, what of the people who also evoke disgust in the new movement of the church?’.

That theme is also detectable in the Lukan account of an unnamed woman’s contaminating presence at a meal Jesus shared with a Pharisee (Luke 7). In this story, her presence is a contamination, both ritually and socially. By placing this event at a meal, Luke highlights the difficulty the dinner guests would have encountered as they attempted to ingest food in the presence of a person who evokes disgust. Our memories may be prompted to recall a time when eating food became psychologically difficult because of the ‘invasive’ presence of a person we find disgusting.

The story of the woman anointing Jesus also points to the power of disgust psychology regarding moral issues. “If this man were a prophet,” the hosting Pharisee maintains, “he would know who is touching him and what kind of a woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Luke 7: 39). Beck demonstrates that moral disgust is a powerful force in the life of faith communities, especially when purity metaphors become dominant in faith formation. “Some Christians,” he argues, “may use purity metaphors to structure the entirety of the religious experience so that everything from morality to doctrine to worship is regulated by notions of purity and contamination” (Beck 2011, p. 51). By including the ‘contaminating’ presence of those who invoke disgust at several meal accounts, Luke not only highlights this effect but also Jesus’s challenge to this type of moral and religious imagination. While the presence of a sinner at a meal represents contamination to the Pharisee, Jesus turns the situation into an opportunity for hospitality and welcome. The same dynamic takes place in Acts, where outsiders who represent contamination are welcomed into the community through the good news of the gospel.

We may come to read Luke–Acts, then, as a type of critique of disgust-formed faith. Whatever may invoke the strongest disgust reactions, Luke has a story to tell about the way Jesus has engaged that dynamic of disgust. Further, Acts can be read as the fledgling church working out how to be a community that is not formed by disgust of the other but by intimacy made possible by the Holy Spirit. Table fellowship plays a particularly powerful role in this dynamic, especially as it lives in the fourfold pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving.

5. The Table as Location of Hospitable Faith Formation

The Eucharistic table, then, is the place where boundary-building disgust that forms faith is confronted and reversed, forming a faith marked by hospitality. As table fellowship is presented in Luke–Acts, it is not only the place of the fourfold pattern, but it is also
the place where taking, blessing, breaking, and giving confront the boundary-building disgust reactions that may have come to characterize the life of faith. In particular, the Eucharistic practice of Christian communities can be a place where faith is formed in a way that breaks down boundaries and reforms disgust reactions. The table becomes a place where “Jesus plays host to celebrative meals with toll-collectors and sinners,” which is “the salvific activity of God among the outcasts of society” (Green 1995, p. 35).

As Christ’s presence is extended to the world in the fourfold pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving, so too is his pattern of breaking bread with those who would not have been previously welcome, offering the possibility of hospitality and fellowship. At the table, faith is developed that confronts and redeems disgust, making that faith hospitable.

In the Eucharist, Beck finds particular importance for faith formation beyond disgust, especially as it confronts the three major types of disgust. He offers a fascinating observation: “The three disgust domains map onto, almost perfectly, the dominant images and metaphors of the Lord’s Supper” (Beck 2011, p. 19). All three arenas of disgust we have previously examined are confronted by faith-forming Eucharistic practices.

In the church’s ongoing table practices, Core Disgust is confronted by the reality that the Eucharist centrally involves food consumption. In his institution of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus takes everyday edibles (bread and wine) and renames them as materials that would likely invoke disgust. Roman rumors that early Christians were eating human flesh and drinking human blood in their gatherings not only invoked disgust but also served to cast suspicion on the followers of Jesus (Benko 1986). By casting Christians as cannibals, they readily became outsiders and ‘other’ in Roman culture, ‘exotic’ in nature and thus living on the other side of a social boundary (McGowan 1994). Embracing Eucharistic practice, then, is a form of taking a most objectionable form of consumption and allowing it to confront our disgust reactions each time it is received, even liturgically reminding participants at each occurrence that these elements are indeed associated with Christ’s body and blood.

Sociomoral Disgust is also confronted at the Eucharistic table, especially in the reality that all persons are invited to participate, at least in traditions that practice an open table. Remembering the disgust invoked by Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors in the Lukan corpus, the ongoing table practices of Christian communities can be a place where the associations and practices represented by others that we may find objectionable are brought near in the act of eating together. In essence, the Lord’s table is where Christians practice eating with ‘those people,’ whoever they may be. Additionally, those who are ‘not me’ are united with me in the act of eating together. In the words of 1 Peter to an early Christian community, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Peter 1: 10). Or, as Joel Green has argued, Luke’s gospel presents Jesus as “instructing his followers not only to continue sharing meals together but to do so in a way that their fellowship meals recalled the significance of his own life and death in obedience to God on behalf of others” (Green 1997, p. 762). As the community that assembles in the name of Jesus breaks bread, they also embody a transgressive grace, “so that these features of [Jesus’] life would come to be embodied in the community of those who call him Lord” (Green 1997, p. 762).

This is not to say, of course, that the early Christian communities were openly permissive of all associations and behaviors. In light of the resurrection, certain jobs, practices, and associations were simply out of step with the new creation that has opened in Christ’s resurrection (Hippolytus and Stewart 2001). The reality Christians were baptized into, however, was a community formed by faith in which exclusionary disgust was not the reigning moral impulse. Objectionable ethical practices were left behind as persons who had previously been at social and moral odds joined together in table fellowship.

Animal Reminder Disgust is also confronted at the Eucharistic feast, largely in the fact that it is a reminder of death. “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,” Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians, “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11: 26). In remembering the death and proclaiming it, Christian Eucharistic practices confront the impulse in Animal Reminder Disgust to deny death or hide it away.
Eucharistic celebration, we not only confront our own mortality but also Christ’s mortality, an objectionable reality, especially to those who would deny that divinity should not be “subject to death” (Philippians 2).

In confronting all types of disgust in the Eucharistic meal, it becomes a place of hospitality. Hospitality, of course, involves welcoming those who are ‘not me’ to draw near and share association. Often, it includes the welcome of those who we find objectionable, as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 15). The narratives of Luke–Acts, replete with stories of table fellowship with and welcome of outsiders and the unsavory, set a reminder for Christian communities that each time the fourfold pattern is reenacted, extending Christ’s presence into our midst, sociomoral boundaries are going to be transgressed for the sake of a new kind of community is formed. Indeed, the sociomoral forces that hold different kinds of people apart are rooted in strong psychological forces. The ongoing celebration of the Eucharist is the kind of practice necessary to form a faith that rejects disgust-reinforced boundaries, overcoming that which would divide and unite persons to one another as they are united to Christ. “Food, hospitality, salvation, the physical body: every facet of disgust is implicated and blended in the Eucharist. We eat. We welcome. We are purified” (Beck 2011, p. 20).

The table, then, is the location of hospitable faith formation. It is where our psychological reactions, especially to those who are considered outsiders or disgusting, can be exchanged for something more like what we see in Luke–Acts, where the objectionable are offered welcome. In the formation of the new community we see in Luke–Acts, the welcome of the stranger, the outsider, is an impulse that is nurtured around tables and in the act of table fellowship.

What, then, are the boundaries that are necessary for hospitality? So far, we have discussed boundaries as barriers to hospitality, largely because the boundaries we have in mind are those that are triggered by disgust and thus prevent true hospitality. Boundaries, though, have also been shown to be a necessary corollary to hospitality, making the freedom hosts need to offer hospitality possible (Pohl 1999). Space allows only a cursory engagement of the ways in which boundaries interact with hospitality.

The kinds of boundaries Pohl (1999) describes are those that allow for hospitality to take place. Significantly, they are not the kind built around disgust. We may think of a host who needs to stop working and rest so that another meal can be offered tomorrow. This type of boundary is simply an outworking of creaturely finitude. Boundaries may need to be established to protect the vulnerable so that they can be offered hospitality without harm.

As an example, some faith communities have adopted boundary practices around the consumption of alcohol so that those for whom alcohol consumption has been addictive or deadly might find a place of welcome and celebration. Similarly, we may think of the kinds of boundaries that must be established for hospitality to flow to many. Acts 6, as we have seen, recounts a story of the way that food was not being adequately distributed to widows in the early church. Part of Stephen’s work, then, was to order the work of table fellowship in a way that allowed hospitality to function well. Notice that neither of these kinds of boundaries involves exclusionary disgust. Neither of them recoil from entering into table fellowship with a person who we find disgusting. Additionally, the Eucharistic practices of the early church made a way for persons who had been social and moral outsiders to be welcomed into fellowship (Hippolytus and Stewart 2001). Through entering into baptism and renouncing former practices, converts amended their lives as new members of the faith community, but the person received a Eucharistic welcome. Overcoming a disgust response to one who has been brought near through the waters of baptism calls for hospitable faith to be formed in the Eucharistic pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving.

Faith communities may also consider who is being admitted to the table under the examination of boundaries. Most Christian communities have some level of boundaries around table fellowship, some dating back to the time of the early church. While we are not able to discuss these in adequate depth here, I will simply offer the vision of Luke–Acts,
suggesting that the church at large consider the way faith is formed through hospitable table practices. We should also remember that Christian faith formation around hospitable table practices extends Christ’s presence into the world, which implies that our table practices can welcome others into Christ’s presence. That is, Eucharistic practices have a Christological ‘center’. Eucharistic table fellowship, especially as we see it in Luke–Acts, involves persons moving closer to Jesus, whose lives are often transformed in one way or another.


Christian faith communities likely exhibit a faith that has been formed at some level by disgust. Disgust, in turn, erects boundaries that are contrary to the kind of table fellowship we see Jesus establishing in Luke–Acts. By enacting the fourfold pattern of table fellowship found in the Lukan corpus, we can form a faith that is more likely to offer hospitality and be stunted by disgust.

Forming a hospitable faith may benefit from including practices that draw attention to the boundary-transgressing nature of Eucharistic table fellowship. Clergy may want to remind congregations of the many stories we find in both Luke and Acts that gesture to the formation of a new kind of community that is not formed around exclusionary disgust.

Faith communities will also want to consider the role of boundaries in their table fellowship. What boundaries are making hospitality possible, and what boundaries are simply being erected by disgust? For example, if a welcome to the table is being closed because of collective disgust with persons or their behaviors, those boundaries will need to be examined and confronted through the lens of Jesus’s actions in Luke–Acts. If boundaries, however, are those things that are making hospitality more possible, it is possible that a faith is being formed that allows more readily for the formation of the kind of community we see in Luke–Acts. Various faith communities, again, have many different reasons for boundaries. The question is whether those boundaries are being motivated by disgust or whether they are making hospitality more possible.

Practices of an ‘open table’ not only confront disgust reactions but also remake them, forming faith that is Christologically centered while welcoming outsiders. This is the faith formed in the early church as they found their life in the pattern of being chosen, blessed, broken, and given.

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