The power of Bread

By Jeff Couzins

The Bible says, “Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink” (Col. 2:16, NIV); however, the symbolic and cultural idea of food extends beyond what we eat. Eating involves both biological and cultural elements, and sociologists believe that “human meal practices can be understood as a kind of language system.”

This idea can be applied to families in the Apostolic Era, where every member of the household—family or otherwise—was subject to the authority of the father. The father was patron to all. A powerful symbolic representation of being under the headship of the father was captured at mealtimes, when all were dependent upon the father in order to eat. Consequently, some powerful practices were built up around eating and drinking.

More Than Sustenance

The apostles’ devotion to sharing food together (Acts 2:42) can be said to describe a first-century Christian’s normal way of life. Here, food provides more than sustenance; it is the means to achieving a deeper fellowship between believers and their Lord.

Furthermore, with repeated references to eating and drinking in Jesus’ teachings, alongside His desire to share meals with people marginalized by mainstream society, we get the impression that to Jesus, eating and drinking together has significance beyond its biological and cultural functions.

When we look further, we find that food is everywhere in the Bible. It’s almost everywhere we look in Scripture. The place of food and fellowship in the Bible is sometimes overlooked when we focus on the commandments and doctrines, yet so much in the Bible seems to happen around the proverbial dining table. Are these references there just as a record of practical necessity, or is there some spiritual relevance to food and fellowship?

Food and Salvation

Food has a place in the plan of salvation. For example, it was eating the forbidden fruit that led Adam and Eve into sin through an appeal to the appetite. It was also through food that God taught us about the means of salvation. The Communion emblems are just one example of the symbolic link between food and salvation.

Another example is the Old Testament sacrificial system, which pointed to the sacrificial ministry of Christ in its varied forms and functions. For instance, all the main feasts in the Old Testament point to the ministry of Jesus. A feast isn’t just a small portion of food; it is a large meal. The main feasts were (1) the Passover, which pointed to the death of Jesus Christ; (2) Pentecost, which pointed to the outpouring
of the Holy Spirit; (3) Tabernacles, which pointed toward the second coming of Jesus; and (4) the Day of Atonement, which pointed toward judgment.

There was a greater purpose, however, than simply teaching about the plan of salvation through the offerings. The sacrificial system was not just to mediate forgiveness for sinners but to bring the people into fellowship with God (see Lev. 9:22). Sin offerings symbolized the confession of sin and an appeal for atonement through God’s forgiveness. Burnt offerings expressed worship, gratitude, and dedication to God. Peace offerings symbolized alliance with God and fellowship with other believers through eating the sacrifice together. More modern versions of the Bible (such as the NIV) translate “peace offering” as “fellowship offering,” indicating the social and cultural nature of the final offering.

The Old Testament worship service culminated in a fellowship meal, which all worshippers shared in God’s presence. Worship of God in the Old Testament was not complete until all the assembled people—prophet, priest, Levite, and laity—sat down to enjoy a fellowship meal together. And this concept of sharing food together continues through to the New Testament times as well. Jesus had finished teaching the people, for instance, before He fed the 5,000.

QUESTIONS

1) In paragraph 1 the author mentions that sociologists believe that “human meal practices can be understood as a kind of language system” to express the idea that:
   a. Human beings need to be in close relation to their Father.
   b. Each father is the leader of his own family.
   c. God is the authority of His people.
   d. Eating involves only cultural elements.

2) In relation to the text, write T (true) or F (false) next to each sentence:
   a. The symbolic sharing of food is only mentioned in the Old Testament. ____
   b. Most of the principal feasts in the Old Testament represent the different parts of the plan of salvation. ____
   c. One purpose of the sacrificial system was to make people understand the plan of salvation. ____
   d. Peace offering is translated to indicate the death of Christ. ____

3) The word “it” in paragraph 3 refers to:
   a. Apostle
   b. Christian
   c. Sustenance
   d. Food
4) The phrase “sharing food together” in paragraph 3 refers to:
   a. Deeper fellowship between believers and their God.
   b. To the help given to poor people.
   c. The achievement of spiritual life.
   d. The meals shared among believers.

5) Match each word with its correct Spanish translation:

   1. Passover ___
   2. Pentecost ___
   3. Day of Atonement ___
   4. Offerings ___

   a. Dia de expiación
   b. Pascuas
   c. Ofrendas
   d. Pentecostés

6) In which verb tense is the sentence: “It’s almost everywhere we look in Scripture.” in paragraph 5?
   a. Simple Present
   b. Present Progressive
   c. Simple Past
   d. Present Perfect Simple

7) In which verb tense is the sentence: “The father was patron to all.” in paragraph 5?
   a. Simple Present
   b. Present Progressive
   c. Simple Past
   d. Present Perfect Simple

8) In paragraph 7 the word “which” refers to:
   a. The sacrificial system
   b. The sacrificial ministry
   c. The Old Testament
   d. The ministry of Jesus