

# *Conversion Flowers From Communion*

Christy Penner, MA in Theology Dissertation

## **Introduction**

The expressed purpose of the writing of the Gospel of John is so that those who read it would believe (and continue to believe) that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) and that by believing “may have life in his name” (John 20:31 NIV).<sup>1</sup> This dissertation will seek to explore the hospitality language of Jesus as guest, host, meal, and servant in John with implications for evangelism; inviting others into the transformational community of God.<sup>2</sup> This paper will involve a theological analysis of the Gospel of John based upon the social background of Mediterranean life in the first century.

The context in which many people discovered who Jesus claimed to be, his motivation for his behaviour and how a relationship with him could indeed lead to life eternal, was over meals. Peterson argues that “a primary, maybe *the* primary, venue for evangelism in Jesus’ life was the meal.”<sup>3</sup> At first read, particularly within the Synoptic Gospels, there are indeed multiple examples of Jesus engaging in dialogue with the ‘Pharisees’ and ‘sinners’ alike over meals.<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that these meals were opportunities for ‘contagious holiness,’ that particularly in the Lukan accounts, the radical way of Jesus involved

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<sup>1</sup> All future scripture references in the text will be from John unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Evangelism is subsumed in the Mission of God and is the church’s activity to offer a “valid opportunity . . . to radical reorientation” which embraces Christ as Saviour and Lord by becoming a “living member of his community,” from David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 420.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 215.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Mark 2:15-17; Matthew 9:10-13; Luke 5:29 and 7:36-50.

accepting a wide diversity of individuals into his presence and gatherings.<sup>5</sup> Previous work on the subject of delineating Jesus' inclusive meal practice includes Neale, Mullen and Blomberg.<sup>6</sup> Pohl, Arterbury and Koenig have all engaged with the historical, biblical and traditional expressions of Christian hospitality.<sup>7</sup> Blomberg and Cantarella have identified meal sharing hospitality as critical components of the Christian community while Peterson in addition greatly emphasises the specific role of 'meal sharing evangelism.'<sup>8</sup> This present paper is a small complementary addition to this body of work. Interestingly, while John gives no obvious attention to Jesus eating with 'tax collectors and sinners,' food imagery and meal sharing narratives abound.<sup>9</sup> But despite the overt attention to the meal setting, the hospitality imagery is extensive and may well serve to challenge Christian practice in western society. It may also have significant impact in broadening the meaning and practice of 'evangelism' in the individualistic West.<sup>10</sup> The hospitality imagery from John will help identify evangelism as not "only a conversion to Christ . . . but a conversion into community."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals With Sinners* (Leicester: IVP, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> David A. Neale, *None but the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), J. Patrick Mullen, *Dining With Pharisees* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) and Blomberg.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality of a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005) and Craig S. Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Blomberg and Tatiana Cantarella, "Hospitality Language in the Gospel of John and its Implications for Christian Community" (MA diss., Nazarene Theological Seminary, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See for example: 2:1-11; 4:1-38; 6:1-15, 25-29; 7:37-38; 12:1-11; 13:1-17:26; 21:7-14. Also note that the issues of dating and authorship of the Gospel of John are beyond the scope of this dissertation and irrelevant for this work. Any references to 'John' or 'John's Gospel' aim only to the content of the Fourth Gospel and not its author.

<sup>10</sup> "As Enlightenment individualism began to take root, it shaped evangelism into its own image and evangelism lost its ecclesial character," Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 143.

<sup>11</sup> Webber, 143.

According to Neale and Chilton, Jesus' meal sharing was always for the purpose of repentance and reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> In the reverse of much practice in the church, for Jesus, communion came first, then conversion, "contact triggered repentance: conversion flowered from communion."<sup>13</sup> This phrase from Ben Meyer has been chosen as the title of this work for several reasons. In John, Barrett accepts that the language of John reveals that "life is a gift from Christ, received by faith."<sup>14</sup> It is the language of following, accepting, receiving, believing and becoming.<sup>15</sup> Conversion is thus a process that happens over time, not only or exclusively an event.<sup>16</sup> A sociological definition is; "the formation of self-identity in accordance with the central features of a faith."<sup>17</sup> While 'conversion' is not a Johannine term, process and formation language is evident: we 'become' children of God (1:12), we are 'born again' (3:3), and we 'come' to and 'remain' in Jesus (6:35, 56). The formation of 'self-identity' however is limiting language and Jones counters this:

The invitation to God's Kingdom, the call to conversion and new life, is an invitation to discover our selves, not as some thing to be 'possessed' or obsessively concerned about, but as people called into communion . . . We are called out of our obsession with ourselves by the One who invites us to friendship with God and with one another in Christian community. Such friendship is . . . substantive and enduring relationships characterized by a continual giving and receiving of life with others and the Other.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Neale, 125 and Bruce Chilton, *Jesus' Prayer and Jesus' Eucharist: His Personal Practice of Spirituality* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997), 53-54.

<sup>13</sup> Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 161.

<sup>14</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPK, 1955), 136.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in chapter one.

<sup>16</sup> Mike Booker and Mark Ireland, *Evangelism – Which Way Now?* (2nd ed.; London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>18</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 47.

Hospitality in the Mediterranean context of Jesus' day was understood primarily as the custom of hosting strangers or travellers.<sup>19</sup> Malina stipulates that in this time period, it was always about dealing with strangers, and never about entertaining friends and family, as we often think of hospitality today.<sup>20</sup> More than just *receiving* strangers, hospitality in Jewish culture was also about the *process* of "changing them from strangers to guests," from outsider to friend.<sup>21</sup>

In the Gospel of John, Arterbury asserts that, "Jesus is repeatedly portrayed as a divine stranger who has come into the world."<sup>22</sup> The idea is that his true home is a heavenly one<sup>23</sup> and that he has in fact become "vulnerable to the welcome of human beings"<sup>24</sup> for the purpose of reciprocating the welcome into his father's house (14.2). Ogletree suggests that "the ramifications of hospitality are not fully manifest" unless one also knows the meaning of being a stranger<sup>25</sup> - something Jesus solely personally experienced. Jesus fully embraces this hospitality throughout his whole life and ultimately through his death and resurrection.<sup>26</sup> He is the "welcoming God who comes to be welcomed"<sup>27</sup> and it is the

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<sup>19</sup> Arterbury, 2 and 6.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Malina, "Hospitality," *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (eds. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 115.

<sup>21</sup> Malina, "Hospitality," 115.

<sup>22</sup> Arterbury, 113. For example: 1:10-14; 3:13, 19; 4:3-43; 8:14, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Koenig, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Christine Pohl, "Welcoming Strangers: A Socioethical Study of Hospitality in Selected Expressions of the Christian Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School of Emory University, 1993), 66.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>26</sup> "In light of the whole Gospel of John the meaning of the cup [18:11] is the ultimate hospitality of God through Jesus' giving his life on the cross. In the way John relays these events [death and resurrection] can be discerned a strong sense of Jesus' control, 'hosting' the events, rather than his defeat. It was not a disaster that Jesus could not avert, for he knew exactly what was coming . . . It is a generous giving of his life for the sake of the world, for to speak of the Cross is to speak of God's hospitality," Cantarella, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Cantarella, 53.

purpose of this paper to explore the attributes of this welcoming God through a select study of key hospitality themes.

Through an initial examination of the prologue of John 1 leading into the narrative of the wedding at Cana in John 2, chapter one will identify key characteristics of Jesus entrance. He himself underwent the transition from ‘stranger to guest’ and his behaviour is as a guest who gives abundant gifts. Chapter two will explore the theme of Jesus as host by way of the feeding of the five thousand in John 6. To understand Jesus as host is to understand his purposeful, his practice and his inclusive ‘contagious holiness.’ The latter part of John 6 is where we discover a Jesus who is not only host and ‘table-fellow’ but also food himself – Jesus as meal. This third chapter highlights the ‘bread of life’ discourse, focusing on the position of bread in society, the function of the language used by Jesus and the implications for those who ‘feed’ not only *with* Christ but *on* Christ. The last category of Jesus as servant is investigated in chapter four. The environment for this portrayal begins in John 13 and features the last meal of Jesus and his followers prior to his death and resurrection. The footwashing of the disciples by Jesus invokes strong reactions from his disciples and the two-fold response given by Jesus is enlightened by a discussion on footwashing in ancient times. The value of exploring these four themes is shown in chapter five, where practical implication for evangelism in today’s postmodern society will be discussed. The overwhelming focus is on how John portrays Jesus as “the transcendent giver who ‘feeds’ his people”<sup>28</sup> who are then “invited to participate in the

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<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (London: Epworth Press, 1971), 107.

very mutuality of the triune God”<sup>29</sup> and commissioned to “take up their master’s table ministry and become...suffering servant hosts.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kent Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>30</sup> Koenig, 42.

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