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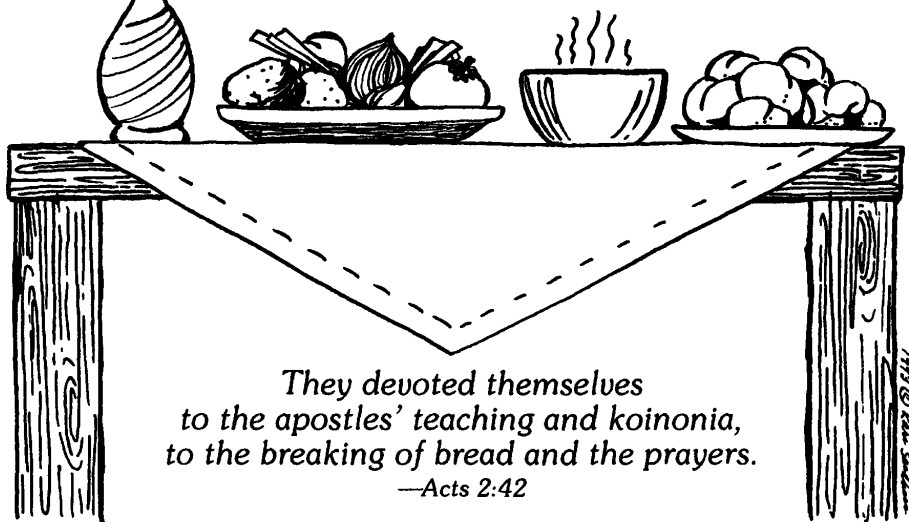
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Cooks, Waitresses, and Nurses at the Table of the Lord

by Reta Halteman Finger



*They devoted themselves
to the apostles' teaching and koinonia,
to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

—Acts 2:42

It is dusk on a spring evening in 45 CE in Thessalonika in the province of Macedonia. Inside a shop along a street lined with crumbling tenements, the shoemaker and his apprentices clear aside their tools in the failing light, making room for the daily meal. Here fifteen or twenty believers in Jesus will crowd around the rough worktable to break bread together. A single lamp is lit.

Each person or family must bring food—a loaf of bread, a jar of wine diluted with three parts water, some olives or raisins—so there will be enough. Those unable to work bring a few crusts they have begged. This meal is the high point of their day, for it sustains them physically and spiritually. Together they share food, remembering the broken body of their now-exalted Lord. A matronly woman who has brought a bowl of cabbage soup in which to dip their bread leads in the prayers. A psalm is sung. A hymn is taught to the newest members. A story from Jesus' life is retold. This common meal is an everyday supper for the

Thessalonian Christians. It is also Eucharist, where Christ is present.

* * * * *

One hundred twenty years later in Antioch of Syria, 800 miles to the east, the scene is different. Now there are numerous cell groups of Christians scattered throughout the crowded city. Eating together regularly while celebrating Eucharist has become an unbroken tradition, binding the tiny communities together and at the same time caring for the poor and disabled among them.

But this year one of the plagues which periodically ravage the Roman Empire has struck Antioch. People clog the streets in their panic to escape the city, leaving behind dying parents, children, slaves, and clients.

This does not happen in the Christian communities and cell groups. They are organized and their leaders are called deacons (*diakonon*). Believers who fall ill are nursed by others—a cup of water, a bowl of soup, someone to wash wasted dehydrated bodies and

change garments soaked with diarrhea. Some of the nurses will also fall sick from the plague, but others will not, for they survived the previous plague through the nursing care of others—and now are immune.

A depleted group shares supper, where Christ's broken body takes on new meaning. When it is over, those who are well take the bread and wine to the upstairs cells of the ill. It will make the difference between life and death.

* * * * *

The above reconstructions are based on recent research and analysis of the social setting of pre-constantinian Christianity. Its communal nature has been largely lost to those of us in mainstream Western Christianity. The "eating bread from house to house" and having all things in common described in Acts 2 and 6 is usually interpreted as an early experiment that failed when the money ran out. It wasn't long, we have been told, before everyone reverted to their nuclear families and capitalistic lifestyles.

Such anachronistic explanations say more about European and American individualism than about life in the Roman Empire. There, people in social groups and clubs ate together frequently. Some churches met in homes of wealthy patrons, who probably provided most of the food for the agape meal, or love feast. We hear of such suppers gone awry from 1 Corinthians 11:17-22. Wealthy folks who did not work ate supper around 4 PM. In at least one Corinthian house church they would not wait to eat until their lower-class brothers and sisters who worked from dawn to dusk could get there. (Such class discrimination is not surprising, of course, since pagan clubs and organizations of that day charged initiation fees, and thus were usually composed of members of the same class. Only Christianity was open to everyone.)

But most cell groups of believers had

no such wealthy patron. All but the richest 2 or 3 percent lived in high-rise tenements and were fed from a common kitchen, or cooked on a small brazier in their rooms. Lacking a patron, each believer would have to bring food in order for all to eat.

Some of the evidence for this seamless blend of communal meal with Eucharist comes from Bo Reicke's *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos in Verbindung mit der altchristlichen Agapenfeier* (Uppsala: A.B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951). He shows how the New Testament terms "bread-breaking," "Lord's Supper," "love-feast," and "eucharist" all refer to the same event, even in post-canonical writings of the *Didache* and church fathers.

Robert Jewett has done groundbreaking work on the tenement churches of the New Testament. A chapter in his forthcoming book, *Paul, the Apostle to America*, refers to a specific command in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 that no one should eat unless they are willing to work. Since food can only be withheld in a context where people eat together, one can deduce that the tenement church (or churches) in Thessalonika were regularly having meals in common, and that a marginal existence demanded that everyone contribute equally.

*Each person
or family
must bring food so
there will be enough.*

Rodney Stark's essay, "Antioch as the Social Situation for Matthew's Gospel" (from *Social History of the Matthean Community*, ed. David Balch, Fortress, 1991), describes the deplorable conditions in Antioch of Syria

as an example of a typical city of the Roman Empire. As evidence for Christians' behavior during plagues, Stark quotes the bishop of Alexandria's Easter letter of 260 CE, which describes how Christians there attended to the sick, in contrast to pagans who "pushed the sufferers away and fled their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead."

* * * * *

What are the implications for early Christian women if the most sacred ritual of the church's faith was the agape meal, commemorating the one at which Jesus himself had washed the feet of his friends (Jn. 13:1-20) and declared, "I am among you as one who serves"? (Lk. 22:27). What are the implications for women if nursing the ill through repeated plagues in the Roman Empire was a major factor in the survival of the Christian faith, as Stark suggests? Can we infer that women were at the very heart of Christianity and that without their *diakonia*-style of leadership the church would never have survived? Knowing that women have done most of the cooking, serving, and nursing throughout history, I think we can. It is possible that much of our early Christian herstory was buried at the same time the Eucharist was torn from its context in a communal, all-inclusive love-feast and gathered into the hands of men.

For many centuries now the table of the Lord has been guarded jealously by males who are supposed to better resemble Jesus, but who serve only a meager fare of one wafer and a swallow of juice. Perhaps it is time we merge the ritual that takes place at the altar with the potlucks and soup kitchens in the church basement. In that context, we might be able to see more clearly who best resembles the servant Jesus.

RETA HALTEMAN FINGER is writing on some of these topics for her doctoral dissertation.

FROZEN PIZZAS IN GOD'S KITCHEN

by Jo Ann Faber Jensen

Could you feed 150 hungry people a well-balanced meal on a budget of less than \$50? It would take a miracle—but that's what this story is about. Such miracles can be seen every week at a soup kitchen in Rogers Park, a neighborhood on the north side of Chicago.

The first seed was planted nine years ago by a call to "Contact Chicago," a crisis hotline. A hungry man spoke to the emergency-line volunteer, angry because he had to beg for money to buy food. The volunteer shared the caller's frustration with a group at the United Church of Rogers Park, my place of worship. There was enough food to feed everyone. Why were so many people hungry?

The church's large, well-equipped kitchen was seldom used. Jo Hodges,