A woman . . . went up to the priest after Mass and said . . . "Father, I went to communion without going to confession first." "How come, my daughter?" asked the priest. "Father," she replied, "I arrived rather late, after you had begun the offertory. For three days I have had only water and nothing to eat . . . When I saw you handing out the hosts, those little pieces of white bread, I went to communion just out of hunger for that little bit of bread." 1

It takes some effort to perceive the eucharist of later Christian tradition as food, let alone as a meal. Contemporary Westerners may certainly find it hard to imagine that rudimentary meals centered on bread could ever have been of any interest or importance beyond some supposed spiritual or sacramental benefit. Yet Christian liturgical tradition has eating and drinking at its origin, not merely as incidental actions in religious ritual, but as actual food. The power of the story from contemporary Latin America told above lies in the fact that, in most societies, the pursuit of staple food such as bread has been a central part of daily living, with hunger a constant threat. Establishing the meaning of any meal for most of its participants involves considering food and its value in the most prosaic of terms.

The physical necessity of food does not, however, exhaust the significance of meals. Food itself is not merely fodder, and meals are complex rituals that involve many elements beyond food—participants, places, times, words, and rituals—as means of expressing, forming, and transforming religious, social, and other commitments, as well as of meeting physical necessity. All these seemingly prosaic elements have the capacity to convey and construct meaning. 2

Meals were at the heart of ancient Greco-Roman household life. They not only served as occasions for physical sustenance, but were the venue
for basic values to be expressed, confirmed, or critiqued, and the power and status of different diners (or nondiners) displayed or developed. Meals were also central to groups or associations formed for purposes we might describe as religious, political, vocational, and social. Such dining clubs, often referred to as _collegia_,6 might be the most recognizable social formation through which we may understand the life of the first Christian communities and the centrality of meals within them.6

Meals of particular festivity and formality—banquets, we might say—had a prominence in the culture somewhat disproportionate to their literal place in the feeding process. Relatively few people dined often with the niceties depicted on painted vases and in philosophical dialogues, or with the types and quantities of food portrayed in such artistic or literary works. Yet the models of procedure and behavior that center on these prominent banquets—“meal ideology,” as it has been called—had an influence that extended even to those who could participate in them only rarely.7 If few banqueted often, many dined in some semblance of formality and festivity at least sometimes.

Ancient images and debates about issues like types of food, portions, and placement of diners are thus potentially relevant to the variety of ways in which Christians participated in the ancient meal tradition, even in less exalted settings. These elements will all be given at least some attention in this chapter, since diversity must be taken into account if we are to re-envision ancient eucharistic meals from the eaters’ perspectives. As in wider banqueting practice, the specifics of food and ritual and other aspects of the Christian meal tradition varied across time and space. And the potential value of belonging to Christian communities will have included the enhanced dietary and social opportunities involved in access to an important practice. Even the same meal could be experienced quite differently. The meals of the first Christians did often bring together women and men of different social class and ethnicity, transcending expected boundaries and offering experiences to benefit and empower participants beyond their normal expectations.8 Yet many aspects of eating, from the food available to the company kept and roles taken, reflected or created distinctions among eaters, as well as between those present and those absent or excluded. The eucharistic gatherings of the early Christians could thus reinforce or reconfigure power relations, existing or new.

So, too, the theologies that informed and arose from the meal were varied. Christian banquets were not just a universal imitation of one particular model such as the Last Supper. Various groups seem to have had different explicit understandings and purposes in mind and to have used eating and drinking together in a variety of ritual forms. Meals were a way of addressing bodily needs and of expressing and constructing commu-
nity, but also of remembering Jesus in various ways, experiencing the Holy Spirit, sharing traditional and inspired forms of wisdom, and more besides.

Although there were different Christian meals, supposed essential distinctions based on later nomenclature—opposing eucharist to agape (“love feast”), for instance—do little to help interpret these varied gatherings. Different terms were certainly used, and various meanings were attached to the events themselves and to the food elements, but a supposed duality between a more sacred token meal (eucharist) and a more everyday substantial community meal (agape) does not really help make sense of the evidence for Christian eating in the first two hundred years.

Of course, the diverse meals of the first few centuries of Christian history were eventually to give rise to the event—less obviously a meal in the usual sense—that is known as eucharist in subsequent tradition. That process of attenuation or abbreviation of the meal into a food ritual—still retaining certain trappings of ancient banqueting practice—was related to the emergence of the church as an imperial religion. Yet processes of change were well under way before Emperor Constantine’s conversion and the consequent appearance of the eucharistic meal in a form fully suited for civic ritual. The development was not one of transition from real meal to mere ritual or from open community to structured liturgy; from the earliest point, the Christian meal gatherings were about both ritual and feeding, and they involved the subtleties of symbol as well as the clear trappings of power. Even in its eventual state as a token food ritual, characteristics of a meal were and are still sometimes visible at the eucharist.

**Bread and Wine**

Bread and wine were the staple foods of the ancient world, and the most obvious thing about finding and eating them in a communal context would be how ordinary they were. Stories of Jesus sharing food and drink of this kind, whether in the wilderness or in an upper room, certainly influenced the sacralization and consumption of bread and wine in early Christian settings, but would not have been necessary to explain their use.

The best-known rationale for a Christian meal of bread and wine is the story of Jesus’ Last Supper, presented in three of the canonical Gospels and the writings of the apostle Paul. Jesus, taking bread and cup, presents them to his companions as his own body and blood (1 Cor. 11:23–25). These startling word-images, with sacrificial connotations as well as new overtones of cannibalism that still puzzle scholars, seemed to mean that
the simplest food elements could bear within themselves a power otherwise associated with the more expensive and exclusive food offerings of animal sacrifice. Thus the actual food content of the best-known Christian meal tradition may not have been especially appealing, except to those who were literally hungry; yet the capacity of the simplest meal to become a vehicle for power and forms of divine presence otherwise associated with civic ritual and elite dining is significant.

Not by Bread Alone

Bread and wine were not, however, the only foods that might have appeared at all Christian banquets. Typical meals in Greco-Roman households might have centered on bread and been accompanied by wine, but included smaller amounts of other valued and flavorful foods such as cheese, olives, meat, or fish. So too some eucharistic meals seem to have involved a more expansive menu.

In Christian communities where bread and wine were the core of the meal, the complexity or variety of the foods may well have depended on the importance of the occasion, as in many other cultures. In the second and third centuries, milk and honey might be added when baptisms were held in conjunction with the meal. These foods carried with them various symbolic associations of plenty and peace, but they were prized and somewhat luxurious items regardless. Even in the fourth century, when the eucharistic meal had become largely token or symbolic in scale, one liturgical document not only prescribes milk and honey in addition to bread, wine, and water for a baptismal eucharist but also gives blessings for cheese and olives at the ordination of a bishop, another dietary expression of festivity (Ap. Trad. 6, 21.27-28).

Ironic as it may seem, much of the early evidence for Christian meals involving foods other than bread and wine actually comes from strict ascetic traditions and communities, who might otherwise have been assumed to eat fewer foods, and less of them. Novelistic literature from the ancient Christian milieu makes these concerns and choices especially prominent. The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, from the second or early third century, reject meat eating and wine drinking but depict a sacred meal of bread and salt for the newly initiated recipient of sacred books (Letter of Peter to James 4:3; Letter of Clement to James 9:1-2). The apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla present simple meals of, for example, bread, vegetables, and water (not wine) as the substance of the communal meal known as an agape (25). Another early Christian novel, the Acts of Thomas, depicts its apostolic hero presiding at a sacred meal with surprising ingredients: he took “bread, oil, vegetables and salt, blessed them and gave them to them”
(29). Both these sets of Acts also oppose the use of meat and wine altogether. Although these cases are idealized within fictional narratives, they probably reflect real practices. Their extra elements actually reflect a common concern to avoid certain other foods, that is, meat and wine, both connected with pagan meal and sacrificial custom and entirely avoided in these documents and communities.

There are more direct witnesses to this type of avoidance and its tendency to produce meals with other elements: for instance, a group of Christians in Asia Minor connected with the charismatic New Prophecy movement (also known as Montanism) were nicknamed the *Artotyrtau* (“bread-and-cheesers”) because of the form their eucharistic meal took (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.1); again wine was absent, but cheese or perhaps coagulated milk was used, as in the more festive cases already noted. Here the ascetic impulse that rejected impure or idolatrous foods seems to have led to a different pattern of relating eucharistic to everyday meals. In this understanding, all food had to be pure or even sacred, and the distinction between specific community meals with ritual elements and other forms of eating was relativized.

**Meat and Fish**

Fish and meat raise quite different questions. In the Greco-Roman world meat was generally expensive and desirable, and a prominent feature at banquets in wealthier circles as well as on festive civic or domestic occasions. Central in the sacrificial rituals of Judaism and in the many other temples surrounding the newly emergent Christian movement, eating meat was often a form of sociability with the god to whom it had been offered. As Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians indicates, the production and distribution of meat could thus be fraught with the connotations of pagan religion, since even meat in the market had often been sacrificed in the temples. Paul’s own approach was a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, where only meat explicitly known to have been offered to a deity was to be refused.

There is no particular evidence for meat eating at specifically Christian meals, although an argument from silence cannot be definitive. The increasing sense in some communities of Jesus’ body and blood in or as other foods at eucharistic meals may have made the actual use of meat, a different sacrificial element, awkward. At least two

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Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.” If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— I mean the other’s conscience, not your own.

— 1 Cor. 10:25-29
specific attitudes to meat eating in addition to Paul's pragmatism emerged early and were also influential among Christians. As we have already seen, some took a more radical stance and refused all meat eating as well as wine drinking in whatever setting, both elements seen as tainted with idolatry because of their prominence in sacrifice. At the other extreme, some diners relied on a superior understanding whereby faith or knowledge (gnosis) allowed them to partake of any food, regardless of origin (1 Cor. 8:1-7). If the pagan gods were not real, what harm was there in eating their offerings? This sort of attempt to reinterpret or ignore qualms about idolatry on the basis of theological sophistication may have opened the social as well as dietary benefits of relatively prestigious banquets to high-status converts for whom they were an important part of life.12

The significance of these alternative approaches was sharpened as persecution of Christians grew, and sacrifice—including the eating of meat offerings—became a key element in testing faith and apostasy. Those Christians for whom gnos is allowed greater freedom found that their position allowed not just social advantage but literal survival, since they could eat sacrificial meat with impunity, not merely when it was desired, but when demanded. A century or more after Paul's encounter with this suggestion, it was still powerful enough to influence many. A Jewish critic could then be imagined as pointing out that there were many "Christians [who] eat meats offered to idols, and declare that they are by no means injured in consequence" (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 35.1). A bishop in late second-century Gaul, Irenaeus of Lyons, attributes meat eating and a range of other socially accommodating behaviors specifically to such so-called gnostic Christians (Her. 1.6.3, 1.24.5, 1.26.3).

On the other hand, the more ascetic alternative of refusing meat altogether likewise became rather more than a lifestyle matter or expression of dietary dissent when sacrifice became a matter of compulsion rather than of choice. Vegetarian Christians, who included groups labeled Montanists, Marcionites, and Encratites, were often prominent among martyrs, expecting a heavenly banquet as reward for their earthly abstemiousness.13

Despite intriguing literary references in the Gospels (for example, John 21:13) and early Christian artistic depictions (fig. 6.1), there is no clear evidence for Christian use of fish as a specifically sacrificial food. Fish probably was a more acceptable luxury food for Christians than meat. This may again be related to sacrifice and idolatry; although there are various symbolic as well as aesthetic reasons fish might have been prized, the fact that it was not regularly sacrificed was probably crucial to its use, real or artistic. Intriguingly, what may be the oldest surviving depiction of the Last Supper, from the sixth-century decoration of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, depicts Jesus reclining with the twelve at the proper sigma-shaped
table, but with two fish rather than the expected paschal lamb before the diners (fig. 6.2). Conflation of the scene with another Gospel story, a miraculous feeding (Mark 6:30–44), avoids the potential difficulty of depicting both the animal and the human victims in one setting.

**My Flesh Is Real Food**

Bread was the element most often emphasized in Christian meal traditions. Although it was of course used in Jewish temple offerings (for example, Exod. 25:30) and in the ritual meals of Passover, the symbolic usefulness of bread for the early Christians may have been precisely its ordinariness. The ubiquity of bread gave it a capacity to carry a whole variety of associations, rather than just one.

If bread was as common and as necessary in the ancient Mediterranean as such staples are in subsistence-level societies, then the economic value of participating in meals based on bread may have been greater than often assumed, at least for the poorest. Yet one of the most distinctive elements of many Christian meals was the tendency for bread to be treated as central, honored, and sacralized. Those who ate this sacred bread received implied benefits like those otherwise accessible only to meat eaters; thus a characteristic of some eucharistic gatherings was a sort of dietary expression of social reversal.

The most distinctive and powerful understandings of the sacralization of bread invoke the body or flesh of Jesus, which was often understood to be literally present in or as the food (see Ignatius, *Smyrneans* 7.1). This imagery drew upon the words of Jesus in the Last Supper stories and John’s Gospel interpretation of the miraculous feeding of five thousand, where Jesus insists on his followers eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:53–56). Paul’s Corinthian correspondence also made a number of
comparisons between the meal of the Christians and the carnivorous banquets of their neighbors and associates. Although it is hard to know exactly what Paul himself understood the bread of the meal to be or become, eating the bread and drinking the cup amounted to a participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16), and he understood these to be objectively powerful and potentially beneficial or dangerous (1 Cor. 11:30). Ignatius, a Christian leader in Antioch just after the end of the first century, reflects a similar seriousness about the significance of the eucharistic food. He calls on his correspondents in Ephesus to go on "breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote preventing us from dying, so that we might live for ever in Jesus Christ" (Ignatius, Ephesians 20).

These letters also imply that alternative views and practices existed. Paul complains that some eat and drink "not discerning the body," which
seems to be a concern both about behavior at the meal and about the understanding of the meal elements (1 Cor. 11:26-30). Ignatius also bemoans the fact that some do not participate in the preferred form of meal precisely because of difficulty with the belief that the elements are the body and blood of Jesus, the objection apparently tied to an understanding of him as a spiritual rather than a material being (Smyrneus 7).

Yet these Christians who were less comfortable with a literal consumption of eucharistic foods as the remnants of Jesus' sacrificial immolation do seem to have had their own versions of a common meal. The slightly later apocryphal Acts of John give some idea of the understanding and practice of communities who approached the meal, and Jesus himself, differently (see sidebar). That narrative of deeds attributed to the apostle John reflects the ascetic sort of meal practice already discussed, now with an accompanying eucharistic theology replete with symbolism, but not with the specific and difficult imagery of Jesus' body and blood. This different way of sacralizing food is based as much on a different sense of community as on a particular Christology; rather than singling out bread and wine alone among the elements of a sacred meal, these practices attribute a generally sacred character to all acceptable food and to its eaters. The theological emphasis comes not on the distinction between the bread and wine of the eucharistic meal and normal food, but on that between the pure food of the community and the tainted food of idolaters outside.

Where the more focused understanding on the eucharistic foods as Jesus' body and blood held sway, the fearful and fascinating properties of bread-become-flesh could overshadow the importance of the meal setting itself. Although Ignatius had urged common meals with the presence of the local leader or bishop in Asia Minor, not long afterward Roman Christians were carrying fragments of the eucharistic bread away from the community meal to the sick and others unable to attend the banquet (Justin Martyr, 1 Apol. 67). By 200 CE, fragments of the blessed bread were being distributed quite independently of the banquet in North Africa, and carried home for later

And when he had said this John prayed, and taking bread brought it into the sepulcher to break and said:

We glorify your name that converts us from error and pitless deceit;
We glorify you who have shown before our eyes what we have seen;
We testify to your goodness, in various ways appearing;
We praise your gracious name, O Lord, [which] has convicted those that are convicted by you;
We thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, that we confide in […], which is unchanging;
We thank you who have separated the nature that is being saved from that which is perishing;
We thank you that you have given us this unwavering [faith] that you alone are [God] both now and for ever;
We your servants, that are assembled and gathered with [good] cause, give thanks to you, O holy one.

And when he had made this prayer and glorified [God] he gave to all the brethren the Lord’s Eucharist, and went out of the sepulcher.

—Acts of John 85–88
consumption, especially for breaking fasts (Tertullian, On Prayer 19.1–4). Around 250 the Carthaginian bishop Cyprian depicts devotees wearing lockets with the eucharistic bread around their necks as talismans, and these receptacles bursting into flames or their contents turning to ashes in the hands of the unworthy (Laps. 25–26). These practices were signs of a shift that would fundamentally change the nature and place of the banquet.

**FROM FOOD TO MEAL**

Ancient sensibilities could distinguish between mere eating—meeting the needs of hunger—and the more powerful and socially enriching process that makes a meal. Then, as more recently, factors including the identity of the diners, their places at table, the order of proceedings, and the forms of discourse or entertainment would all have to be taken into consideration, along with the food itself, to construct a meal.

**Order at the Meal**

The typical banquet consisted first of a meal where diners reclined at a U-shaped (sigma) table, thus facing one another to some extent (fig. 6.3). After various food courses, tables were removed, and the second part, the symposium or drinking party, ensued. During this time conversation and entertainment were expected, as a number of bowls of wine were mixed, with prayers and libations, for the company. The story of Jesus’ Last Supper as given in most of the New Testament accounts fits this expected order of meal followed by drinking party. A description of a Christian meal gathering or agape from North Africa around 200 ce reflects an adaptation of this structure and process to reflect the specific interests and concerns of one community (see sidebar).

Other versions of the Christian meal tradition were less immediately comparable to the typical Greco-Roman banquet of a meal followed by drinking. Sometimes ritual cups were blessed and drunk at the outset of the eucharistic meal, and not just at the end. This pattern appears in

Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it *agape*, i.e., affection. Whatever it costs, our outlay in the name of piety is gain, since with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy... If the object of our feast is good, consider its further regulations in the light of that. As it is an act of religious service, it permits no vulgarity or immodesty. The participants, before reclining, taste first of prayer to God. As much is eaten as satisfies the cravings of hunger; as much is drunk as befits the chaste. They say it is enough, as those who remember that even during the night they have to worship God; they talk as those who know that the Lord is one of their auditors. After washing of hands, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing—a proof of the measure of our drinking. As the feast commenced with prayer, so with prayer it is closed.

—Tertullian, *Apol. 39*
the earliest known outline of prayers for a Christian meal ritual (called "Eucharistia" or "thanksgiving"), presented in the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, perhaps from Syria in the late first century. The same order of cup and bread is also found in the Mishnah as well as in meals prescribed in the Dead Sea Scrolls, suggesting this pattern may have been a distinctly Jewish tradition. These cases should still be understood as part of the wider banqueting culture of the Greco-Roman world, since it is clear that Jewish meal traditions, including the Passover seder itself, were influenced by the rest of the banqueting genre, even if there were distinctive formal elements (in addition to well-known Jewish dietary rules). In context, this reversed order of proceedings may have reflected the same concern for moderation and proper behavior evident in Tertullian's North African agape account; taking the cup at the beginning seems to have avoided the dubious symposium and the connotations of raucous behavior connected with it.

The Didache also has no knowledge of, or no interest in, either the Last Supper itself or Jesus' death as the basis for its procedure of thanksgiving. This has led some to suggest that the Didache meal has a different character than what Paul refers to as the Lord's Supper. Up to a point this may be true, but it is misleading to suggest that there were two specific forms of meal (least of all eucharist and agape) with essentially different meanings, foods, and procedures and that the diversity of early Christian evidence should be allocated to one category or the other. Rather, these different terms, models, and understandings constituted a variety of ways in which the Jesus tradition and other elements of early Christian theology
And concerning the Eucharist, hold Eucharist thus: First concerning the Cup, "We give thanks to you, our Father, for the Holy Vine of David your child, which you made known to us through Jesus your child; to you be glory for ever." And concerning the broken Bread: "We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through Jesus your child. To you be glory for ever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom, for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever." But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs."

_Didache_ 9

and belief interacted with ancient meal customs, giving rise to a variety of forms and understandings of the banquet.

By the later third or early fourth century, this local diversity would yield to processes of influence and standardization. The outcome was not single or simple, but rather a normative tokenized eucharist with a variety of continuing meal and food practices in its orbit. The preeminent offering remained in some relation not only to a somewhat secularized banquet known as *agape* but to a variety of other rituals connected with consumption of the eucharistic food, meals celebrated in tombs and in honor of saints, and more. At earlier points, however, both eucharist and *agape* had been terms by which particular communities referred to their whole meal tradition, rather than to specific and clearly defined alternative procedures.

### Prayers and Discourse

Appropriate talk could be one of the most important elements of a meal, as the literary tradition about banquets reveals. This is not to say that the philosophical dialogues of Plato represent real expectations for discourse at most ancient banquets. Yet for Christians as for others, meal gatherings may often have been the settings at which teaching, argument, or other forms of formal and serious conversation and debate took place. Many of the written works that have survived from the early centuries of the Christian movement may actually have been formed or used in such traditional _symposia_, whether or not they make any reference to it. For instance, Paul in writing to the Corinthians refers to various forms of utterance at the meal gathering (1 Cor. 12:8-10), and Tertullian's _Apology_ depicts individual diners as singing when called upon at their pleasant Carthaginian evening, but their own works may also have been read in these settings.

The prayers and blessings used in the actual meal ritual have been the major focus of much study of the eucharistic tradition and can receive less treatment here accordingly. At the outset it can probably be assumed that they were relatively brief utterances—the meal prayers of the _Didache_ are the earliest example and are somewhat comparable to contemporary Jewish blessings (for example, _Mishnah_ Berakoth). The _Acts of John_ provide quite different forms of prayer, connected only by the sense of thanksgiving with
those of the Didache, but whose list of epithets for Christ still only amounts to a short discourse.

Neither of these makes any reference to the actual story of Jesus' Last Supper, later regarded as the core of prayer appropriate to the eucharistic meal, but at this point somewhat marginal to the actual performance of its ritual. In some cases, that story may have functioned as a rationale for the meal — told and retold, perhaps, in the course of the Christianized symposium, but not originally used as a blessing for food. In others, that story was probably simply unknown or irrelevant, with other stories or images of Jesus serving to inform and ground the proceedings.

The development already traced, from substantial meal gathering to an assembly focused on the distribution of token amounts of bread and wine, had its impact on the words spoken also. The link with Jesus' death so central in later, and particularly Western, understandings of the eucharist was to be accentuated in the same developments that brought the eucharistic elements to their eventual place on altars in basilicas rather than at domestic tables. And as the reception of the sacral food was separated from banquets and became a more self-contained process undertaken not at meals but at morning liturgical assemblies, the expectation of extended discourse shifted somewhat. While there were still elements of instruction, the communal symposium was no longer part of the process. Sermons and catechisms, on the other hand, continued or expanded, as did the actual prayers and blessings, almost in inverse proportion to the size and scope of the meal itself. As less was eaten, more and more seems to have been said over the sacral foods.

**Equality, Inclusion, Diversity**

The Greco-Roman meal tradition was a vehicle for competing understandings of its own character and purpose. That is to say, banquets were the place where proper meal conduct was debated — at least in the literary tradition. This was no less the case in Christian circles than otherwise. Luke's Gospel, for instance, depicts teaching by Jesus concerning meal behavior taking place at actual meals (Luke 11, 14). The communities in which this and other Gospels were formed had to confront these same basic questions such as appropriate washing, foods, and seating order when they ate together.

The question of who might even properly be present at Christian meals is an important and difficult one. Although New Testament stories about Jesus at table reflect an early tradition of open commensality, Christians retold these in a somewhat different context, where community formation and boundary maintenance had typically become important. Diners did sometimes move between different groups and their meals, and people
who were not identifiably or clearly members of the Christian community may perhaps have taken part in eucharistic meals at times. Generally, however, the Christian meal seems to have drawn and created a distinctive group of participants, usually defined further in terms of baptismal initiation (Did. 9.5). As elsewhere, inclusion in the group that celebrated regular meals meant participation in a specific network of support and friendship, at times the creation of a sort of constructed familial structure. The Christian meal was certainly perceived as an exclusive event and often viewed by outsiders with corresponding suspicion and concern.

These meals may nonetheless be described as inclusive, in the sense that those who did dine together were somewhat diverse in terms of class or status, gender, and ethnic or religious background. Although the range of such participants may have signaled transcendence of such distinctions, the proceedings may have reinforced or reflected some new and some existing differences. Diners sometimes found their status outside the meal reflected in their treatment at it, and, in addition, the new social formation of the church created its own specific structures related to the conduct of the meal.

The question of equality and hierarchy at table was a vexed one in antiquity. Gender was not always marked or treated in the same way, with local and cultural variations determining the participation of women as diners as well as in the expected roles of food preparation and service. This was, of course, a highly stratified society otherwise, and serious critics of that reality were relatively few. Meals were often an expression of that class structure in a variety of ways: at a given banquet, the seating and even the foods given to different guests might be an apologetic depiction of wider social realities. Yet there was also a different and prominent tradition that diners were equals and that sharing meals created forms of sociability in some degree of tension with the wider structures and understandings of hierarchy.

Again, Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian Christians reflects these debates. For some of those more elite diners, separate meals in a common venue was already condescension enough toward their lower-status colleagues, and those of lower status need not have expected anything different. Paul, however, argues strongly that the sharing of self shown by Jesus at his Last Supper demanded a more equitable approach. The Letter
of James also reflects a concern that the order of seating at the meal not reflect class distinctions (James 2:1-7), but the necessity of making the point shows that this was not always clearly accepted.

Scrutiny of Paul’s own letters also suggests caution about assuming just what sort of equality was really intended. Just as his own rhetoric of “weakness” serves to establish his authority, Paul seems to have intended the poor at Corinth to experience acceptance and inclusion within the church, but not necessarily any transformation of their relationships with wealthier Christians outside the meal gathering (1 Cor. 7:24). This approach fits with other ancient constructions of equality, where friendship could actually serve to bind diners into the networks of patronage that dominated social relations.

**Presiding and Patronage**

The physical setting and the roles exercised by individuals at the meal played an important part in the creation of patronage, the fundamental structure of obligation and dependence in ancient Roman society. The most natural patron at a domestic meal was the householder who invited others to dine, but associations also had their own office-bearers who might exercise authority in matters such as seating, recite prayers and blessings, and by implication benefit from the honor attributed to the host’s role. The ministerial offices of the early Christian communities were inevitably linked with such ideas of leadership and patronage at banquets. These roles included the ceremonial; Gospel accounts attribute such actions and words to Jesus in certain cases (see, for example, Mark 6:41), and apostles likewise preside in the accounts of canonical and apocryphal Acts. The Didache specifies that prophets are to use whatever form of words they are inspired to utter when they pray over cup and bread, implying that set prayers are for the bishop (10.7); in other words, either of these persons might have led the meal.

A tension between the roles of actual householders and church office-bearers could emerge. Ignatius of Antioch, writing early in the second century, insisted that the presence of the bishop was necessary for the agape to take place (Smyrnensis 8). Others clearly thought differently and either persisted in a different form of household leadership or even had a flexibility of leadership roles akin to rotation (see Tertullian, Prescrip. 41).

Women may have taken leadership roles at eucharistic meals; as householders they could serve as patrons or hosts and also sometimes as appointed elders, although these cases were often resisted in emergent catholic structures. In second-century Asia Minor the new Prophecy movement later town as Montanism certainly included women who were leaders and
Pretending to eucharistize cups prepared with mixed wine, and extending greatly the word of invocation, he contrives to give them a purple and red color, so that Grace, who is one of those that are superior to all things, should be thought to drop her own blood into his cup through means of his invocation, so that those who are present should be led to rejoice to taste of that cup, in order that by doing so, Grace, who is set forth by this magician, may also flow into them. Again, handing mixed cups to women, he tells them to eucharistize these in his presence. When this has been done, he himself produces another cup of much larger size than that which the deluded woman has eucharistized, and pouring from the smaller one eucharistized by the woman into the one brought forward by himself, he at the same time pronounces these words: "May she who is before all things, Grace who transcends all knowledge and speech, fill your inner human, and multiply in you her own knowledge, sowing the grain of mustard seed in good soil." Having uttered such words, and thus goading on the wretched woman, he then appears a wonder-worker when the large cup is seen to have been filled out of the small one, so as even to overflow from out of it. By accomplishing several other similar things, he has completely deceived many, and drawn them away after him.

—Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 1.13.2
(adapted from AVF)

eucharistic hosts. Irenaeus, in Gaul at the same time, gives a rather pejorative description of the eucharistic blessings associated with one community (perhaps comparable with that behind the Acts of John). The leadership of this group seems to have included not only a prominent male leader, Marcus, but a number of women (see sidebar).

Irenaeus undercuts his own picture of that "Marcosian" church as just a group of gullible women bewitched by a mountebank when he also indicates that they practiced a sort of liturgical lottery to allocate roles in the expected discourse following the meal. Tertullian, writing just a little later, speaks of another Valentinian group who also had a sort of rotational system for the meal presiders, with the full participation of women (Prescr. 41). Yet the assumption that women's leadership and Gnosticism or other heresies were always and everywhere connected is undermined by evidence that ancient Christian women in the catholic part of the church did sometimes hold offices relevant to the meal celebration, such as deacon, presbyter, and perhaps also bishop.22

Third- and fourth-century evidence also reflects a shift away from evening banquets as the primary focus of ritual eating and drinking toward gatherings focused more narrowly on the distribution of sacramental food elements by the bishops. By this time Christian groups were often meeting in adapted or purpose-built spaces rather than private homes, and the changes of space and of meal procedure reflect not just the growth of the church but also the consolidation of the role of clerics as the exclusive hosts and patrons in terms of the sacred food of the eucharist.23

By the fourth century, substantial meals in households and in other small gathered settings were also distinguished clearly from the eucharistic gatherings of whole Christian communities. Various subgroups of what was now a much larger church might still be invited for specific suppers by private hosts, and these might include some specific rituals and prayers, indicating a religious purpose (fig. 6.4). These domestic gatherings of selected Christian
invitees often carried with them the term *agape* that had previously been applied to eucharistic banquets of the wider Christian community. The meal gatherings of the emergent monastic movement were another selective—and often very ascetic—form of banquet that continued alongside the identifiable eucharistic celebration. Interestingly, the dietary concerns of these ascetic specialists continued the exclusion of meat and wine that had earlier distinguished a highly sectarian strand among the diversity of Christian groups.

In other and especially later forms of Christian meal, the fictive equality of the ancient banquet seems to have given way to more explicitly hierarchical expressions of the community's self-understanding. In the fourth-century Syrian Apostolic Constitutions, the bishop is encouraged to arrange the church according to a nautical metaphor: “When you call an assembly of the Church as though you are the commander of a great ship, ensure the assemblies are made with all possible skill, charging the deacons as sailors to prepare places for the brothers and sisters as for passengers, with all due care and decency.” The possibility of rocking the ecclesiastical boat now invokes a sensibility almost opposite to that of the Letter of James: “if any one be found sitting out of place, let them be rebuked by the deacon, as a manager of the foredeck, and be removed into the place proper for them; for the Church is not only like a ship, but also like a sheepfold” (*Ap. Const.*, 2.57).

The detailed instructions for this eucharistic voyage (see sidebar) give a particularly strong emphasis to gender. This is not an entirely new concern, given Paul’s awkward instructions about

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Let the young persons sit by themselves, if there be a place for them; if not, let them stand upright. But let those that are already stricken in years sit in order. For the children which stand, let their fathers and mothers take them to them. Let the younger women also sit by themselves, if there be a place for them; but if there be not, let them stand behind the women. Let those women which are married, and have children, be placed by themselves; but let the virgins, and the widows, and the elder women, stand or sit before all the rest; and let the deacon be the disposer of the places, that every one of those that comes in may go to his proper place, and may not sit at the entrance.

—*Ap. Const.* 2.57
women's participation (1 Cor. 14:13), but the elaborated concern may also reflect that the cultic element of the meal—never entirely absent from formal dining, in any case, it must be admitted—has all but overwhelmed the conventions of banqueting. The arrangement of persons in space now seems to owe more to sacrificial ritual and its characteristic impact on the use of space as hierarchical, and especially gendered. The character of the Christian assembly as the meal of a specific association within society, marked by its own limited equality among diners, has given way to the notion of the church as a kind of polis with internal distinctions of many kinds.

Other forms of power and patronage had also emerged during the age of the martyrs, with their own dietary expressions. Food gifts were already a means of extending the significance of common eating beyond the group physically able to be present. Justin Martyr's eucharistic meal in second-century Rome had already invoked this sort of practice in the custom of sending eucharistic bread home to the sick (1 Apol. 67). When Christians were imprisoned during times of persecution, food gifts of a more general kind were a very practical means of connection with those martyrs who might otherwise have starved in inhospitable surroundings before their own scheduled and spectacular immolation (see Tertullian, Mart.).

After the conversion of Constantine and the end of institutionalized violence against catholic Christians within the empire, the care of the martyrs tended to become a form of devotion to the dead, evoking existing pagan practices of communing with ancestors as well as continuing the specific expression of interest in Christian heroism through food and meals. Christians had already been dining with the dead, as the decorations of catacombs even in the third century attest; these idealized scenes provide oblique evidence for the physical arrangements and roles at meals in other settings as well.

From the fourth century, martyrs and ancestors merged to form a collection of unseen diners with whom one might eat in one form or another. Sometimes older practices of food offerings at ancestral graves were transferred to the martyrs: North African tombs, Christian and other, even exhibit holes through which liquid offerings could be poured, so the faithful dead could partake in what were sometimes rowdy cemeterial picnics. Attempts to guide these practices toward the more orderly celebration of the eucharist proper had mixed success. Perhaps more startling still is evidence that animal sacrifice was assimilated to the cult of the saints, baptized rather than banned in at least one Italian setting around 400. Thus old patterns of using food and meals for earthly and divine patronage were taken up and transformed in these meal rituals, both at and beyond the primary focus of the eucharistic altar.
Christian eucharistic gatherings in the early centuries are best understood as meal forms exhibiting features comparable to those of other ancient Greco-Roman banquets. The diversity of forms and meanings makes it difficult to generalize any further about the ways in which various diners—wealthy and poor, female and male, African and Syrian—experienced these events. At times both inclusive and exclusive, egalitarian and hierarchical, festive and ascetic, they nonetheless constituted a near-universal element of early Christian experience.

The growth of the Christian churches through the second and third centuries raised concrete issues or problems such as the size of the community and more symbolic ones such as the appropriate function of a meal ritual. Both contributed to the change in the nature of the eucharist itself from associational meal to quasi-civic ritual, even before the Christianization of the civic rituals of the empire. Other meals and food rituals were still to play various important parts in the life of the Christian community, beyond the time of the apparent submersion of the shape of the ancient Christian banquet beneath the surface of the medieval mass. Versions of the actual evening banquet or agape continued for some time after the disappearance of the sacralized eucharistic foods into their separate liturgical context. Such “church suppers” continued to have social and economic significance, although within the empire the realignment of the boundaries of church and Roman society meant that such gatherings no longer constituted and reflected the church as such, but defined smaller networks and subcommunities.

Yet the transformed eucharist itself also retained features indicative of its origin. The sequence of bread and cup still echoes the order of the ancient symposium; the mixed chalice, the regular manners of the moderate ancient drinker; and the broken bread, the basic needs and pursuits of thousands.

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FOR FURTHER READING


