



Dear Fellow Eagles

Greetings to all those who have recently joined the Eagles' Wings community, and to everyone else! I hope you will find this email a blessing; you can read previous letters on the Eagles' Wings private page: www.rhythmsofgraceuk.org/eagles-wings-4024

I hope you are being blessed with fresh revelations of our wonderful salvation this Eastertide!

Last time we talked of the covenant meal we can share personally with the Lord, where we give ourselves to Him, and receive from Him our covenant blessings, represented by the bread and wine. A shared meal, however simple, formed an important element of cutting a covenant with another party in the ancient world. By sharing common food, and often a common bowl, both parties expressed a mutual commitment and investment in the others' well-being.

For this reason, breaking bread with other Christians is also important; a visible demonstration of our mutual life in Christ, and our love and commitment to each other. And like in our personal times, it also gives a prophetic announcement to the heavenly powers of these things.

The New Testament has clear references to communal examples of breaking bread. However, nowhere does it prescribe *how* this is to be undertaken. It is so important that we don't read back our historical practices and conventions and make rules out of them.

Some of the references include: a gathering of 12 men and Jesus, who 'broke bread' as part of a festival meal [Luke 22:7-23]; Jesus 'breaking bread' as part of a meal with two others in their home [Luke 24:13-35]; new believers who 'broke bread' from house to house [Acts 2:42-47]; a gathering of believers, of unspecified size, in an unspecified location, who broke bread at regular intervals [1 Corinthians 11:17-34]; and a gathering, again of unspecified size, late on a Sunday night in Troas [Acts 20:6-12].

As we re-evaluate our understanding of 'church practices', it is really helpful to understand the historical context in which the early church grew, and some of its characteristics before it became institutionalised, and acquired church buildings (in the third century).

There are several historical documents which can help us towards some understanding. They show, for example, that when the Romans conquered the Greek empire, they took over many Greek customs, which then became common social practices across the Empire, including Judea, as it expanded. One of these was the hugely-popular custom of gathering in small social groups or societies for regular symposium-meals*. Each group had a common interest, sometimes as a trade guild; sometimes a religious or political purpose, sometimes for the purpose of discussion, or the absorption of new ideas, and sometimes purely social. The gatherings mostly took place in private

homes, were of varying numbers (but most often between 3 and 10 individuals), and followed a prescribed format: a prayer would be offered to a 'god', followed by a meal; then a libation of wine would be poured out on the ground as a religious offering, and a song of praise sung. Then dessert would be served, accompanied by the after-meal 'entertainment'. This 'entertainment' ranged from unscripted discussions on topical issues and philosophical ideas, to manuscripts read aloud, after-dinner speakers, story-tellers or musicians.

These meals were traditionally limited to free men, and social rank was expected to be emphasised through the placing of the seating on which they reclined. By the first century, some women of means were initiating their own gatherings, and some wives were admitted to the men's symposiums, but sat demurely, rather than reclined, and were not allowed to speak. The only other women in attendance were 'flute-players', who provided entertainment, and were often prostitutes. Slaves were employed to serve all guests, washing feet on entry and serving food and copious amounts of diluted wine. By the end of the period it was common for guests to be a little 'merry'.

Because these symposiums were common practice across the Roman world, Christians could (and did) gather in a similar manner without exciting too much curiosity from the 'authorities'—but with obvious differences. Men, women and slaves met on an equal basis, and the worship was of course directed to the one true God. After the meal, Holy Communion was substituted for the 'poured out libation'; then a travelling teacher might share, letters might be read out, or a discussion might ensue—along with prayers and the use of gifts of the Spirit. And of course, drunkenness was frowned upon. It is very interesting to read Paul's instructions about church-life against this background!

It seems that both Scripture and these other historical references suggest that 'Breaking Bread' was often in the context of a meal, and is my favourite way to share Communion with friends and family. There is a closeness built into a communal mealtime* where we can expect and experience the Lord's presence, which makes Breaking Bread very special, and creates the space for the Lord to do some amazing things.

However, it is important that we don't make a new set of rules out of that understanding! Jesus' command is the one that stands, 'Do this (ie take bread and wine) in remembrance of Me.' He didn't say anything about numbers and settings; our responsibility is to obey Him according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

I have broken bread (and led the celebration) in many different contexts: during personal devotions, liturgical church services, independent charismatic church gatherings, and house meetings; at the top of mountains, and on the beach; with friends round the coffee table; on picnics, and latterly by the way of Zoom!

If you don't already Break Bread regularly, why not ask the Lord to give you creative ideas about how to celebrate the power of His death and resurrection, both individually, and with other Christians in a way that works for you?

If you have a story to share about the Lord's Supper, why not get in touch? It would be great to hear from you.

The next Eagles' Wings email will be on April 19th.

Until then,

God bless you & go with you,

Kate W @ Rhythms of Grace

*If you are interested in learning more about the Symposium-meals, I will put links to some academic explorations on the Eagles' Wings page.

You can read more about **Spirit-Led Breathing Spaces: The Rhythm Of Mealtimes** by clicking on the link in the Kingdom Living section in the menu bar.