

Research Article

Contextualizing Christ through Chinese Dining Tradition

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Abstract.

The cultural and traditional diversity in Indonesia indirectly aids in making the process of spreading the gospel more accessible. Contextualization theology emerges as a viable option for disseminating the gospel message, with the goal of making the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant in contexts that are easily understood in all human aspects. By bringing up the subject of “eating together,” the author hopes to make it easier and more relevant for readers to understand Jesus Christ’s love for mankind. Just as “eating together” is significant for the Chinese as a sign of family, love, and respect, Jesus declared to sinners.

Keywords: Tuan Yan Fan, communal eating, contextual theology, evangelism, love

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1. INTRODUCTION

Culture and religion are frequently discussed and debated topics. Culture encompasses the practices, management, advocacy, and adherence to ethical-humanitarian principles, including values such as justice, equality, locality, humanity, independence, and dignity (Salam Aprinus, 2014). On the other hand, religion serves as a guiding principle that elucidates the fundamental meaning of life (H. M. Ridwan Lubis, 2017). Ideally, based on these definitions, culture and religion should coexist in a balanced and complementary manner. However, conflicts often arise, sometimes contradicting the Bible, although not all cultures oppose it.

At times, culture can serve as a tool for contextualizing the gospel of Jesus Christ within society. This is motivated by the observation that societies deeply rooted in culture, with a continuous preservation of cultural heritage from generation to generation, indicate the significant impact and influence of culture on a community’s life. This holds true for Gospel ministry in society, especially in Indonesia, characterized by diversity in culture, ethnicity, race, and religion.

This diversity provides an opportunity for evangelists to share the gospel. However, evangelists must not overlook the necessity to contextualize the gospel or Christ to the

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community with a thorough and targeted understanding. Presenting the gospel indiscriminately or teaching it to a community without first understanding their background is not advisable. While openly presenting the gospel is feasible, it appears that doing so may not have a lasting impact on the minds and hearts of those who hear it.

Bevans argues that theological contextualization is an effort to understand the Christian faith in terms of a specific context. Tomatala states that contextualization theology is the ideal reflection of every Christian in their life context on the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Y. Tomatala, 1996). Therefore, when evangelists can present the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the context of culture or the context of the Gospel's listeners, it can make it easier for the listeners to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ through examples drawn from their culture or traditions.

Based on the title of the journal that addresses the topic of "eating together," the word "eating" is not merely about satisfying physical hunger; rather, eating is also a part of life itself. Eating is also used as a vessel for communication and encounters. During meals, the communication that occurs is not solely about the food and eating utensils used, but goes deeper into the interpersonal relationships of those sharing the meal (Peter Farb and George Armelagos, 1980). Hence, the communal dining tradition often practiced by the Chinese becomes a fitting target for reference in contextualizing Christ for those who are not yet acquainted with Him.

2. METHODS

In composing this journal, the author employs the accommodation method, which entails integrating Christian values with cultural values (Dicky Kansil, 2022). Furthermore, the author incorporates literature and studies from various reading materials and pertinent journals related to the key topics addressed in this journal.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Chinese tradition of communal dining, known as "Tuan Yan Fan," is often practiced during the entry into the Chinese New Year, also commonly known as the Lunar New Year, as the determination of the New Year's time is based on the lunar cycle (Kelly Jackson-Nash, 2016). In Chinese belief, the full moon is believed to symbolize family reunions. Ancient poets wrote poems about the moon, making it a symbol of their memories of family and hometown. On the festival night, families come together once

again for a communal dinner (Joey Yap, 2021) With traditions like these, the bonds of family and togetherness among relatives and extended family are strengthened. The gathering of relatives on the Chinese New Year's Eve is not just a casual gathering or a common dinner; rather, the coming together of family members for a communal meal holds deep significance. Communal dining is an important event symbolizing a time for family members to reaffirm the love and respect that binds them together as a unit (Matthew Matthews, 2017).

Through this tradition of communal dining, it becomes apparent that "eating" is not merely about the composition or cost of the food; instead, it signifies the meaningfulness and sense of family that occurs when extended families gather together.

In the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament frequently mention "communal dining." However, particularly in the New Testament, we often encounter various instances of "communal dining" performed by Jesus Christ, both with His disciples and with sinners. Communal dining is significant in the Eastern world because it expresses a commitment and symbol of brotherhood (Roberth Davidson, 1998) Thus, the phrase "communal dining" is often found in New Testament texts to denote the fellowship between Jesus and humanity, whether they are sinners or His disciples.

Peter Altmann states that in the tradition of communal dining in the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy, it reveals the vision of the Israelite community by constructing and maintaining stories about Israel within the framework of sharing their identity (identity formation) (Peter Altmann, 2011) In the New Testament, Andrew McGowan asserts that the tradition of communal dining in Christianity, in awareness of the community as a complex entity with its uniqueness, is often referred to as the "Eucharist," which has the purpose of full engagement (Dennis E. Smith, 2003).

In Christianity or the Bible, it is evident that the meaning of eating and drinking together does not refer to a physical understanding or meaning but points to the communion of the saints (*communio sanctorum*) or a relationship of communion between the people and God. As explained by Simon Holt:

When we look back at the life of the early church, the most potent way for the community of believers to affirm their identity as followers of Christ was through communal dining. By breaking bread as part of their daily meals, the church declared its unity, identity, and purpose as the people of God (Acts 20:7, 11, 1 Corinthians 11:32, 2 Peter 2:13, Jude 1:12) (Smith, 2003).

The origin of the communal dining tradition within Christianity stems from the practice of sharing food among themselves and gathering daily (Acts 4:46). Jesus Christ often reminded His disciples and followers to partake in the Holy Communion as a means of remembering Him and enjoying His presence (Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20) (Robert Banks dan R. Paul Stevens, 2012) The communal dining activities frequently depicted in the Bible indirectly signify the love expressed by Jesus towards both His disciples and sinners.

Speaking about the fellowship that occurs around the dining table, there are many cultural, social, and ritual/theological meanings embedded in it. In Jewish tradition, food signifies the integrity and identity of the group, fellowship, moral and political position. Jewish dining traditions were also influenced by Greek and Roman dining traditions. For traditional Jews in Jesus' time, it was uncommon to dine with non-Jewish strangers. This was rooted in the Jewish tradition where sharing a meal held profound significance. Dining together symbolized an intimate relationship. Even to express a relationship, one would invite someone to dine together (Gunawan Ardiyanto, 2003).

Jews had many regulations related to meals. For example, they would clean their hands before eating, signifying their belief that only those included in the covenant with God's chosen people are holy. Jews avoided contact with non-believers, so before meals, they would perform symbolic cleansing rituals with water from hands to elbows, cleaning the food and utensils (David Rhoads and R. Paul Stevens., 2004).

Similar to Jesus and the twelve disciples during the Last Supper, William Barclay argued that in Jewish tradition, meals were often taken in a reclining position, with a maximum of three people at one table. Typically, the host would dine with only close friends or honored individuals (Purnawan Kristanto, 2009). This also holds the same significance as the act of breaking bread and sharing portions with fellow diners, symbolizing friendship (Emanuel Martasudjita Pr, 2020).

Jewish religious teachers had many regulations regarding meals. When someone willingly dined with tax collectors and sinners, they considered themselves equal to them, and for the Pharisees, it was deemed inappropriate to associate with them (M. K. Sembiring, 2014). With such reasons, it becomes clear why the Pharisees felt compelled to continuously criticize what Jesus was doing.

As we know, discussions about communal dining often appear in biblical texts to express love, fellowship, and togetherness. The author takes the story found in Matthew 9:9-13 about Jesus dining with tax collectors to further clarify the purpose of this journal

with contextualization. In line with the understanding of contextualization theology that makes the Gospel and mission relevant to societal contexts, the existence of these two traditions can better explain and help readers understand Jesus Christ through this communal dining tradition.

In Matthew 9:9-13, we see how the Pharisees criticized Jesus for sitting and eating with tax collectors. Upon hearing this, Jesus stated that He came to call sinners, and everything He did was an act of mercy towards His people. Tax collectors had a negative stigma in Jesus' time because they could collect extra taxes for personal gain, enriching themselves, and thus, the position of tax collector carried a negative stigma.

Moreover, Jesus, being considered a respected teacher, was not expected to dine with sinners like tax collectors. However, Jesus wanted to show those present that dining with sinners did not bring any harm or change to Him. Jesus indirectly demonstrated His love for all His people without exception.

Jesus seized the moment of communal dining to transform the traditional values or practices prevalent during His time. While people of Jesus' era tended to avoid those marginalized, Jesus opened Himself to receive everyone without regard to their status through communal dining. This is frequently encountered in New Testament texts, where both men and women, considered sinful and marginalized, deemed unworthy in the eyes of society in Jesus' time, were embraced by Him.

The act of communal dining, chosen by Jesus, aimed to make those around Him feel accepted regardless of their backgrounds. Effectively, this practice facilitated Jesus in His evangelism efforts, communicating with others, and even teaching the masses. The personal relationship between Jesus and sinners becomes evident when He readily accepts tax collectors who come to dine with Him.

Through these moments, Jesus wanted to declare to people that all humans are equal in the eyes of God, and God does not differentiate His people based on their status or background. This action also signifies that Jesus's love for people is not conditional; rather, it is Agape love for His people. Jesus set an example and provided a model through His actions so that disciples and those who witnessed them could implement these actions in their lives towards those around them.

In a contextual sense, this communal dining tradition allows us to easily understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Eating not only pertains to physical sustenance needed to satisfy our bodily hunger but also signifies eating to fulfill our spiritual needs, addressing our spiritual hunger. This is evident when Jesus expressed His love for sinners by

providing them with spiritual food—His Word, actions, love, and direct expressions of His love before them.

Jesus overturned the negative stigmas ingrained in the minds of people during His time regarding sinners by sitting and gathering in the midst of sinners through the symbolic act of communal dining, deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. This gesture aimed to show that Jesus came with His love to save sinners, considering all His people as His friends. When He observed that some of His people were still trapped in the bondage or stigma associated with sinners, He desired to liberate them, as expressed through the act of communal dining. This occurred due to the interconnection between human relations and God, leading God to rebuild this relationship through the sacrifice of Jesus. Throughout His journey, Jesus also demonstrated the true essence of love and how believers should act (J Vincent Miller, 2017).

This aligns with the meaning found in the Chinese tradition of communal dining, symbolizing family ties, love, and respect. All of these aspects seem similar to what Jesus did in the story of Matthew 9:9-13. In the Chinese tradition, extended families gather for a meal, rekindling the bonds of brotherhood, love, and family. Jesus did the same with the goal of freeing them from negative stigmas and the influence of sinners, bringing salvation to them, making them friends, and expressing Jesus's Agape love for all His people.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the communal dining traditions practiced by both the Chinese and Jesus throughout His journey in the world, it is demonstrated that His love is unconditional. He profoundly loves all His people, regardless of their backgrounds. Jesus continually dismantled value systems that contradicted the purpose of His presence in this world.

By employing the accommodation method within this contextual theological evangelism, it leads us to an understanding that, with the same tradition of "eating together," people who are less acquainted with God, those who do not yet believe in God, can feel and see that God's love is so immense for all His people—a love that is unconditionally expressed to everyone regardless of their background. Jesus revolutionizes all systems and negative stigmas that others may have towards someone by immersing Himself in the group of "sinful people" so that they may attain salvation and break free from the bondage of their old lives

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