

Andrew Francis

Eat, Pray, Tell



**a relational approach
to 21st century mission**

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 565 8
First published 2018
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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1

Introduction: Jesus' instruction to his disciples

We all eat. We need to eat to survive. Those of us who are affluent enough to choose what we eat can often choose who we eat with. We do that in different ways. Some of us eat with our work colleagues every day, eating our own packed lunches in a staff room or eating at shared tables in a cafeteria. Some families gather daily for their evening meal or weekly on a Sunday for lunch. Solo pensioners often rejoice in the company shared at a weekly lunch club – and so on. Whether it is a birthday or Christmas Day, many people mark such occasions with a celebratory meal. Eating is part of the fabric of life.

I write from a white British cultural context, but of course we do not have to look far to realise that the practice of eating together is at the centre of daily life across many other cultures, both in other cultural contexts within Britain and also around the world. Think of how extended families in Caribbean, East European or south Asian communities in Britain regularly gather to cook and eat together. And I have experienced this same daily habit whenever I have journeyed abroad, whether visiting North American Mennonite communities, living in Mediterranean Europe or travelling in Asia.

‘Eat, pray, tell...’

It takes a hard heart to resist the image often seen on film or TV of large Mediterranean families gathered on a sun-drenched terrace, laughing and eating around a well-stocked table. How many holiday-makers who venture beyond the confines of their package-tour hotel

return with stories of shared meals and others' rich hospitality? That traditional pattern of life is part of a culture stretching the length of the Mediterranean and back through Levantine history. Any reader of the classics or the Bible can find many reminders that a life involving the sharing of food was part of those cultural histories.

At the end of his earthly ministry, just before his ascension into heaven, Matthew tells of Jesus' great commission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them...' (Matthew 28:19–20). Many Christians are wrestling with how to exercise that mission today. We need to (re)discover a relevant model that works in our culture now as clearly as it did for the apostles and the early church after the first Pentecost. For without mission, the Christian community will die.

Sometimes, when speaking at a conference, I invite the audience to break into small groups and share with each other the best moments in their lives. While some people will rank a solo experience as their best – standing alone on a mountain peak at sunrise or some moment of great courage or skill (or even rank stupidity) – the vast majority of people quickly recall a time that involved eating with others. Indeed, the best conversations at such conferences come not always from the seminar room but over the meal tables or in the afternoon queue for tea and scones. Our listening and learning is enhanced as we eat together.

When travelling solo across the United States between speaking appointments, I hardly ever visit a diner without someone sharing my booth and engaging me in conversation while we eat. In several of my other books, I document my similar experiences of hospitality and meal-sharing across the world, from the Americas through the Mediterranean islands to the Far East. When developing a retreat house ministry in France, I adopted the rich patterns of local hospitality, echoed in the Bible, to enable our guests – both friends and strangers – to feel welcome.

I say all this to encourage you that your life's journey and everyday experiences can enable you to reflect on Jesus' eat-pray-tell pattern of mission, and to realise this is just as relevant today.

Learning from Jesus' earthly ministry

Jesus told his disciples, 'Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave' (Matthew 10:11; see also Mark 6:8–13; Luke 9:1–6). That is, eating within the community would help the disciples to establish local contacts, build friendships and create bonds of trust. The disciples were then to seek the welfare of others by praying for and healing them; in other words, meeting their obvious and self-declared needs. It was only then that teaching and telling about the 'reign of God' would begin.

Jesus could hardly have advocated this pattern without the social mores of his time involving the practice of hospitality. People would welcome newcomers, whether friend or stranger, to their homes with a meal and space to sleep. Except in the worst weather, such a daily meal would normally have been outdoors and a sheltered corner of a courtyard would have been secure enough to safely sleep in.

In the New Testament, the Gospels provide us with different representations of the life of Jesus and his first followers, who came to be called Christians. The four Gospels give us four different portraits of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke share a similar viewpoint; scholars call these three Gospels the synoptics, from the Greek meaning 'with one view' (or literally 'with one eye'). The Gospel of John comes from almost a generation later, drawing on a different community that was heavily influenced by Greek philosophical thought. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Gospels give us helpfully contrasting patterns of meals in the early Christian communities.

Despite their different perspectives, all the Gospels have a variety of references to Jesus eating with both his disciples and with others,

such as Zacchaeus the collaborating tax collector (Luke 19:1–10) or the unnamed Pharisee (Luke 14:7–14). Moreover, two of the few episodes that are recorded in all four Gospels, although with variations on the details, refer to shared meals: the feeding of the multitude (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:5–13) and the last supper (Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–23; John 13:1–30). Narratives of shared meals, therefore, are a central part of the Gospels’ trajectory, and the feeding of the multitude and the last supper, in particular, demonstrate how ‘eating together’ declares the ‘reign of God’.

When it comes to the rest of the New Testament, consider how often the various writers of the letters send greetings to churches by name. Such relationships would not have occurred instantly but only over time, living and ministering together, which would have naturally involved several meals and conversation. Eating together helps us build relationships within the Christian community – however diverse and in however many congregations. Part of my rich joy in travelling to different churches to preach or to speak at conferences is to share in the hospitality of others’ homes.

In the 21st century, we must heed Jesus’ way of doing things, but we have to recognise that our society has different cultural norms and avoid placing ourselves and others at risk as we consider an eat-pray-tell ministry. Another purpose of this book, in its later chapters, is to offer you the example and encouragement of others who are working out their eat-pray-tell reflections in practical ways.

What this means for us now

Why does this practical strategy have application for the contemporary Western church? In recent years, there has been a significant growth of literature re-examining how the practice, lifestyle and spirituality of the early church can help us live faithfully as Christians in multicultural Britain (and other countries). In many

communities and regions in what was once called Christendom, the church is becoming increasingly marginalised. Fewer and fewer people have any real understanding of the Bible, of the Christian origins of our customs and festivals, or what it means to be a Christian. Many commentators and academics regard the West today as being in an era of post-Christendom.

We briefly reviewed above how shared meals are a common denominator across many cultures and were a central feature of the life and mission of Jesus and the early church, as narrated in the Gospels and New Testament letters. We can learn from the life of Mediterranean communities and church history how our festivals and faith gather both the enquirer and the faithful through the melange of hospitality, community and prayer.

My own life has been richly flavoured by many different experiences within different expressions of Jesus' radical communities. Looking back, I realise what a debt I owe to those Franciscan and Mennonite houses of welcome, to the influence of South American liberation theologians and northern hemisphere eco-feminist theologians, as well as the communities of Taizé and Iona. I have also had heroes of mine, such as Archbishop Tutu or Thomas Merton, who along with my spiritual directors helped me understand how prayer and activism must intertwine. My eat-pray-tell education was often around others' tables – so some of these encounters appear in the following pages.

We have to find ways in which others have had vibrant and transformative Christian experiences, learn from those ways and apply what we have learned in our own context, congregation and neighbourhood. In Britain, particularly in the cities, it is not hard to find someone who has been on an Alpha course. Often, whatever else their experience of the course, they will speak of a sense of welcome at the shared meal and of being listened to. Equally, in many cities, towns and suburbs, you can quickly discover those who have encountered the hospitality of Messy Church. You do not have

to go far into the life of the church to realise that, despite problems with the church building, the mockery of TV comedians or the antagonism of the media in general, Christians have things to say that are relevant, life-changing and creative. Vibrant prayer and rich spirituality are far more prevalent than dry rot in British churches!

How far do you have to go in your memories and life experience to recall actively the role of those who patiently waited until you were ready with your questions in your search for truth and answers? I have many good acquaintances who bear testimony to a particular individual, such as a vicar or a pastor, or a community, such as Iona, St Michael-le-Belfry in York, Durham's Claypath URC, Yorkshire's Scargill House, Devon's Lee Abbey, Bradwell Othona, London's St Helen's Bishopsgate or Bloomsbury Baptist Church, Catholic Worker houses (and the list goes on), who brought them to a fuller understanding of Jesus' personal call to them. Someone in the *right* place at the *right* time spoke the word of life to them. Eating, praying, telling is about building the trust for that *right* moment to occur.

Recently, I was preaching a series of post-Easter sermons preparing for Pentecost that interactively invited the listeners to share together their congregation's stumbling blocks for mission. You can probably guess their answers, some of which we will return to in more detail later. In summary, many people today recognise that inviting others to church is like the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15): most of the invitations, like the seeds in that story, fall on barren ground or deaf ears; some are choked by the weeds of competing demands; and so on. Going to or being part of a church has fallen outside the experience and even the wish of the vast majority of the British population. Whatever term we use to describe it, we have moved into a post-church age for nearly all our friends, colleagues and neighbours. Yet we, as believers, must continue to wrestle with Jesus' great commission, mentioned above and which we return to later.

It is no wonder that some Christian commentators recognise that the centre of world Christianity is now rooted in the global South, particularly in Africa and Asia. The contemporary Western church needs to learn directly from Christians in those communities.

My first real spiritual director was Lesslie Newbiggin, a British missionary who became a bishop in the Church of South India, then later a missionary theologian for the World Council of Churches. One of the many things he taught me was always to retain a personal dialogue with those whose Christian experience was forged in the white heat of a culture different to mine. He told me how this would become even more important in the future when thinking and learning about mission. To learn from a 'far country' is a rich gift.

Tom Stuckey, a Methodist lecturer at one of my former colleges, then later president of the Methodist Conference, tells of his deep learning from travelling in Asia: 'The "far country" affected me deeply, for I found in the friendliness, deportment and dignity of the people a simple joy and grace which we in this country seem to lack.' For Tom, that manifested itself most often in the shared meals or hospitality of small Christian communities or the quiet ways in which people gathered for daily prayer before or after their day's labour.¹

The contrast between such examples and the Sunday oriented, privatised faith that characterises much of British Christianity is obvious. It is time for a change, and the eat-pray-tell model will help you do that without fear or embarrassment.

Eat

2

Welcome!

Some Christian friends of mine in a nearby town always answer their front door with 'Welcome!' That really surprised the man from the gas board whose unscheduled visit coincided with another meeting's participants. I have visited their home for meetings and have stayed overnight, always feeling a sense of welcome there. Their words and practice marry up. But what does welcome and being welcoming mean?

The concept of welcome comes from Old English and literally means 'well coming' or 'gladly arrived'. It often drew a 'pleased to greet you' or, as we are more likely to say, 'pleased to meet you'. We are pleased when a visiting guest or a stranger has safely arrived. We welcome them.

In my childhood in Scotland in the 1950s, one always took a small gift to one's hosts which enhanced that sense of 'well coming'. We've already seen, in the Introduction, how hospitality to travellers is a virtue across different parts of the world. Until we are subjected to or live in places of violent oppression, our natural humanity is to welcome others.

Jesus' earthly ministry was epitomised by welcome. Most notably, he welcomed those devalued by society and its ruling elites – women, children, outcasts and sinners – into his inner circle of hospitality, eating and teaching. Jesus did this as a practical demonstration of his declaration of the 'reign of God' (some may prefer the older term 'kingdom of God').

‘Tell me the stories of Jesus’

As a child at Sunday school, our beginners’ class always seemed to sing ‘Tell me the stories of Jesus’. But as I look back, I realise how many of those narratives talked of shared meals, food and hospitality – as part of a welcome. Even my barely trained Sunday school teachers made the point that this was all part of Jesus’ mission.

The parable of the prodigal son – and the angry brother and the forgiving father – speaks of the welcome afforded to the returning prodigal: ‘kill the fatted calf’ (Luke 15:23). The account of the Syro-Phoenician woman who challenges Jesus at the meal table (Mark 7:25–30) about her daughter’s healing reminds us that Jesus welcomes her intervention. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the innkeeper is commanded to welcome the beaten-up traveller until the Samaritan returns (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus affirms Mary’s action as she anoints him with oil at the meal table (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8); he welcomes the honourable service of others.

No doubt every Christian has their own favourite stories of Jesus they would add to that list. When teaching at conferences, I so often find the episode involving Zacchaeus, the collaborating tax collector (Luke 19:1–10), helpful for understanding several different aspects of welcome. First, amid the throng of people, Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from the tree he had climbed in order to watch; Jesus’ welcome is inclusive of those who find themselves at the margins. Second, good English translations of verse 6 in this passage use the verb ‘welcome’ to describe Zacchaeus’ thankful response to Jesus. Third, Zacchaeus welcomes his rehabilitation, as shown by his own repentance and desire to repay others for the hurt he has caused them. Finally, by implication, Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus and the disciples to stay at his home; local custom would inevitably include a meal.

A theology of welcome

Do not worry about that word ‘theology’. It literally means God-talk or, more practically, the way we explain our understanding of God’s life in the world.

A key biblical concept is that of redemption. In each of the above-mentioned stories of Jesus, the individuals involved receive different forms of inclusive redemption, as Jesus in story or action declares and demonstrates the reign of God. Despite their fears or failings, Jesus welcomed them without reserve and helped them to feel affirmed by what he asked of them next.

Welcoming others without reserve, and not judging them, is a vital Jesus-style response. Incorporating this attitude as natural behaviour within our discipleship expresses our faith and theology without using words. We have to avoid becoming over-earnest, like some of the pastors in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon writings, but it is better to be inclusive and warm in our welcome than stand-offish or seemingly judgemental.

On my first Sunday in Princeton, USA, I pitched up for Sunday morning worship at a large brick building, advertising robed choirs and goodness knows what, to find the front door steward looking disdainfully at my open-necked shirt and jeans, when the temperature was pushing 30°C. The next Sunday, I headed over the railway track to a small clapboard church, where Jon, the African-American senior elder, clasped my hand in welcome and reminded me to stay for coffee and cookies after worship. Guess which church in Princeton I went to every Sunday after that?

Getting our theology and practice of welcome right is very important. Recently, I was leading worship in an English United Reformed Church, when a couple of children ran joyfully up the aisle with the adult stewards who had been gathering up the collection. As I led the people in thanking God that we ‘are a rainbow people, young and

old' who all want to give thanks for 'these everyday blessings', one tiny child clutched on to my leg and another looked trustingly into my open eyes. Our theology of welcome is not just about the front door but about how it is woven throughout worship and liturgy.

In the early 1960s, I was accompanying my grandfather to a printer in central Birmingham. A 'gentleman of the road' stopped us, asking for money to buy food. Grandpa looked at him sternly. 'Please, don't send me to the knees bend,' the man said. We diverted past a café, where Grandpa took him in and bought him 'tea and a slice', leaving him to enjoy the warmth at a café table on a cold day. 'God bless you,' said the man. 'And you,' replied my grandfather. Later, Grandpa explained that the 'knees bend' was a soup kitchen, run by Christians, where you had to go to an hour-long prayer meeting before getting fed. Recently, I was in London and bought a coffee to take away; I had not even sipped it when a homeless girl in a Tube station begged for money to buy one too. Thanks to Grandpa, giving her my coffee rather than some coins was the natural thing to do. Did I remember to say, 'God bless you'? Our theology and practice of welcome have to learn also how to cope with the momentary or transitory encounter.

But if our theology is only worn at Sunday worship or at the midweek Bible study, will it ever become part of the fabric of our lives?

Making our guests feel at home

One of our best learning places is when visitors come to our homes. True hospitality enables visitors and guests to feel at home – and not under pressure. Christian hospitality must exemplify that.

How we welcome people and what we invite them to share are part of the fabric of this book. Another of my good friends, dubbed Mr Cricket, always says 'be incoming' when I arrive at his door – often in response to his invitation to watch cricket on his satellite TV. When

I was a pastor in northern England, I quickly learned the importance of having the teapot and caddy visibly close to the kettle as my parishioners popped their heads around my back door with a ‘time for a chat?’ When the Leeds team ministry I once led had a city-centre drop-in office, my first task each day was to load up the coffee machine so that anyone and everyone could be welcomed with a mug of decent filter coffee. Later, as an area minister, I found that meeting colleagues with a problem for a pub lunch somewhere off their patch was a great way of instigating the necessary conversation. It is easy to offer can-do hospitality.

I now have an increasing circle of acquaintances who are church leaders, from a variety of denominations and traditions, who are rediscovering the importance of encouraging congregational groups to eat together. Clearly the size of the group will determine both the menu and the way of eating – at the table, a fork-supper or al fresco. We need to be aware that nowadays more than ten per cent of people are vegetarian, even more are pescatarian, and some are vegan or have food allergies. We should not make anyone feel guilty or unwelcome or ‘too much trouble’ because of their dietary needs and choices. Unless we know our guests really well, we should heed Joppa’s lesson and enable folks to choose from enough so that they can eat whatever is set before them (Acts 10:9–16).

At one clergy supper, I was asked not to drop the pile of used plates, which I had been asked to carry into the kitchen, ‘as each one cost £36’. Despite our host requesting that help, their remark did not make me feel very welcome. I far prefer to have all white china and tableware (with the exception of some gifts of French earthenware and brightly coloured central American serving dishes). We buy only inexpensive tableware and glassware, so if a guest breaks a glass or drops a plate we can easily move on without any rancour or recrimination and just replace it later.

Show homes may look nice in glossy magazines but they do not reflect how extended households live. Of course, we should

vacuum, clean and dust but we need to enable people to relax and enjoy wherever we are welcoming them to. Folks are coming for a conversation, coffee or a meal not to inspect us for an *Ideal Home* photo shoot or to grade us for the Michelin guide – and not be drowned with too many cushions.

In many contexts, our invitation to shared meals may mean utilising a church's premises. Think about what that means. Ensure the entrance is well lit and easily accessible – not around the back, past the dustbins and the neighbour's barking dog. Make sure that it is more than spiders who can use the toilets, by repainting washrooms and installing soap dispensers, hot water and hand dryers (or fresh towels, as at one's home). The Americans do not call it a 'comfort break' for nothing!

Becoming a mindful host

For a couple of years, I had the privilege of living in rural France while overseeing the renovation of a derelict barn into a retreat house, with three self-catering units and a communal lounge and library around a shared courtyard garden. As its ministry began and the numbers of guests grew, I became aware again of the joy of unobtrusive hosting. Welcoming new guests was an art, making them a pot of tea or coffee after their long drive south from the ferry port, while they checked in, had their comfort breaks and tested the beds. Only then did they have a million questions – and it was the right time to speak in reply.

Whether it was us or other hosts, we each prayed privately in advance for our arriving guests just as surely as we made the beds, put wine and fruit juice in the fridges, swept the terrace or got their log stove ready. The weekly communal summer barbecue or shared winter casseroles presaged many more conversations – all wrapped in the prayer and tranquillity of the Charentaise countryside. Eat, pray, tell became our cycle of serving others.

But that time in France convinced me that what I had learned as a child at home, at youth camps, as a pastor, from house-sharing and Alpha courses, is vital to that natural eat-pray-tell cycle of Christian hospitality and mission. I returned to the UK in answer to the call of Emmanuel United Reformed Church, in Haydon Wick, who believed that God was calling them to renewed mission and life together.

As we become increasingly aware of what it really means to offer Christian hospitality, we are not only learning how to be hosts ourselves but how to be better guests. Some of our close friends help us wash up after a shared meal, enjoying the camaraderie, the conversation and more coffee. Our previous dishwasher was so temperamental that we could never ask guests to load it as it would often then malfunction, occasionally causing breakages, to their embarrassment. Offering to help clear the table may be welcomed, but then criticising or reordering the kitchen is a definite no-no.

Becoming a mindful community

All of us have learned lessons from the style of hospitality offered at the above-mentioned 'knees bend' and altered our hospitality. It has to be offered without demand or expectation of particular response. Our welcome has to be inclusive and encouraging to the newcomer. Mission relies on an open, can-do approach and attitude by the whole Christian community.

In my late teens, I volunteered with The Simon Community, and subsequently with another local charity, meeting the residential needs of ex-addicts, destitute alcoholics or former prisoners. The first lesson was to learn respect – for everyone, as well as the residents' newly acquired rooms – as we soon became a community mindful of each other's different needs and lifestyles. Friends trace my lifelong campaigning for and commitment towards better mental health services and fuller housing provisions to that mindfulness of being part of that community on the margin of society.

If we have ears to hear and eyes to see, we can quickly realise that the 21st-century church in Europe is once again a community on the edge. How many of your friends, work colleagues and adult family are still committed churchgoers? Part of what has happened is that the church has become ineffective at being a Jesus-shaped community in this era of increasing materialism and social isolation. We not only need to relearn how to be that Jesus-shaped community, we need to rediscover the ways that friends, neighbours and colleagues can become part of that community.

Christians often fail to see the mission-on-their-doorstep while prioritising the more socially needy. So, across Britain there are many strong Christian initiatives to work with those almost beyond the edge of society – the homeless and those living on the streets:

- In London, the ministry of St Martin's-in-the-Fields, partly funded by its excellent basement café, is nationally renowned.
- In Leeds, the work of St George's Crypt has a widespread outreach for supportive volunteers, funds and practical resources across that city and region.
- In Scotland, the ecumenical Julius Project, inspired by the campaigning charity Housing Justice and delivered in several locations, has the practice of befriending and welcome as a central tenet of its outreach.

My personal database details another 43 church-based initiatives with homeless people across the UK – and there are more.

Based on my experience as an itinerant speaker, perhaps a majority of British Christians perceive that such outreach to the homeless is necessary, but the patterns of welcome within their congregational life do not need to be reviewed. Why is this?

We need to recommit ourselves to becoming a 'welcome-mindful' community. The problem is that regrettably many congregations are unrealistic about the gulf which exists between the general populace

and the Christian community. We have to think afresh about Christian hospitality and how we begin to welcome others who may have only a distorted view, if any, about what contemporary disciples of Jesus believe, do and say. Churches need to develop a can-do lifestyle of hospitality towards friends, neighbours, newcomers and strangers, if we are serious about Jesus' mission.

Group discussion questions

- 1** How good is our church/congregation's welcome and hospitality?
- 2** When we host meals or 'welcome events' at our church, how accessible and welcoming are our buildings?
- 3** What helps us to create the invitation to others to eat with us? At home? At church? and so on.