

HOLYHABITS

EATING TOGETHER



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## BIBLE REFLECTIONS

40 READINGS AND REFLECTIONS



Edited by Andrew Roberts

## **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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

ISBN 978 0 85746 831 4  
First published 2019  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0  
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Original design by morsebrowndesign.co.uk & penguinboy.net

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK by Zenith Media NP4 0DQ

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ANDREW ROBERTS



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## About the writers

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## Introduction to Holy Habits

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47 (NRSV)

Holy Habits is a way of forming disciples that is emerging anew from an exploration of this precious portion of scripture, Luke's famous portrait of the early church. As such, it is both deeply biblical and an approach that lives when infused with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit – the same Holy Spirit who brought life, energy and creativity to the first Christian communities.

Holy Habits is based upon a series of ten practices that are shown to be fruitful in the Acts 2 passage: biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing resources, serving, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship, and making more disciples. In this series of material, passages relating to the ten habits are explored one habit at a time, sometimes with reference to other habits. In real life, the habits all get mixed up and





complement each other as part of a holistic way of discipleship. You may want to be alert to such connections.

There are many lists in the Bible, and with biblical lists the first and last items often have particular significance. In this list, it is significant that biblical teaching comes first. All of the habits are to be found throughout scripture, and healthy holy habits will be grounded in regular engagement with biblical teaching. This is a foundational habit.

The last habit is also significant. Commentators have remarked that it is no surprise that ‘day by day the Lord added to their number’ when life was lived in the way Luke describes. Many can be nervous of the word ‘evangelism’. Holy Habits offers a way of being evangelistic that may help to assuage some of those nerves.

Holy Habits is a way of life for followers of Jesus individually and collectively. In Acts 2:42–47, Luke offers clues as to how these practices can be fruitful. Note the devotion he mentions at the beginning and the repeated use of the word ‘all’. Holy Habits is a way of life for all ages (including children), cultures and contexts. The habits are to be lived day by day, in the whole of life, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. And note how Luke attributes the growth that results to the Lord. These are *holy* habits, which flourish when the Lord is at the centre of all.



# Introduction to Eating Together

Luke was particularly keen to place food and eating together at the heart of discipleship community. In his gospel, there are 60 references to food and drink and ten occasions in which Jesus is seen sharing a meal. Eating together was a key holy habit of the early church. The word ‘together’ in the habit title reminds us of the corporate nature of discipleship and the habits that nourish and nurture it. While many of the habits can be practised individually, they all flourish when practised *together*.

The practice of meeting in homes allowed the early Christians to continue the patterns of the table fellowship of Jesus. The atmosphere at the shared meals was one of gladness, and the believers were characterised by their generous, sincere hearts.

People eating together as a sign of God’s reign or kingdom goes way back into the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is a picture painted by the prophets and celebrated in the psalms. Jesus was rooted in and lived this tradition. Just as he shared food with all sorts and conditions of people as a sign of the inclusivity of God’s kingdom, so too did the early church. The gatherings to eat together were down-to-earth representations of the heavenly banquet imagery that had been reinforced by Jesus through his teaching as well as his actions (Luke 14:14–24). Following in the footsteps of Jesus, the early Christians refused to discriminate against the marginalised. Their table fellowship was characterised by welcome and equality.

The joy of eating together, the value of table fellowship for deepening relationships, the missional fruitfulness of shared meals and the opportunities for sharing faith, biblical study, prayer and worship around the meal table have all been rediscovered in recent years by both new and ancient forms of church. New monasticism places a high value on the sacred experience of eating together. Messy Church has a meal as a key ingredient, as does



the most popular evangelism course, Alpha. Café worship at its best integrates worship and food, while Bible study resources have been designed to work around a table sharing food and drink. Churches that work well with students have long realised that the provision of food is a great way to engage with them.

Many of the reflections in this booklet will help you think about how your church can eat together as an act both of fellowship and of mission. As with your reflections on the other holy habits, be attentive to ways in which you can eat together with others at school or work or with your neighbours such that it models the welcome of the kingdom. One other area to be mindful of as we eat together is how our eating impacts creation, for which we have a God-given duty of care. How we eat together today will affect how others can eat together in the future.



| Deborah Humphries

## The blessing of unexpected visitors

### Genesis 18:6–10

Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. (NRSV)



## Reflection

Have you ever been surprised by unexpected visitors? I love it when we get a phone call out of the blue from passing friends who want to stop by, because there has been none of the stress of getting the house clean and tidy. The joy of the visit far outweighs my desire for perfection. Whatever is in the fridge or store cupboard is hastily prepared and we enjoy one another's company and catch up around the table. On occasions such as these, I see the true value of eating together.

In today's passage, Abraham and Sarah are rushing around to provide for their guests, offering hospitality according to the customs of their culture. There is attention to detail. Abraham wants to get everything just right. He gives Sarah precise instructions on how to make the cakes – 'choice flour' is to be used – and the calf is 'tender and good'. This may be a surprise visit, but only the best will do. Notice too how Abraham waits beside the men as they eat, just as a servant would, ready to answer to their every need.

We may find it strange that Abraham and Sarah do not eat with their guests, but in the closing verses we realise just how special these visitors really are. They have not met Sarah and yet they know her name and foretell that she will soon give birth to a son.

What matters most when sharing hospitality at home?



## Entertaining angels

### Genesis 19:1–3

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, ‘Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.’ They said, ‘No; we will spend the night in the square.’ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. (NRSV)



## Reflection

I wonder if you have ever entertained angels without realising it.

As two angels enter Sodom, Lot greets them at the city gate. In those days, the gateway was the equivalent of today's town hall, where administration, trade and legal business were conducted. Maybe Lot's working day is ending or maybe he fears for the visitors' safety.

Lot's eager welcome is marked with reverence and respect. He rises to greet the visitors and bows before them, calling them 'my lords' and himself 'your servant'. Perhaps he knows they are angels or perhaps he is simply extending traditional hospitality.

Lot offers overnight shelter and clean feet. Who could resist after travelling along dusty roads in the heat of the day? Lot advises against a night in the square, the city's meeting place. He provides for them 'a feast' accompanied by bread, which is unleavened as he prepares the meal in a hurry.

As I walk through the city centre, I see people living on the streets. Sometimes I give away a cereal bar or coffee voucher; often I walk hurriedly by, embarrassed by my comparative wealth and inadequate response.

I share more than a cereal bar with one man. Perhaps it is the book he is reading that gives me the courage to share common ground; or perhaps, because I take the time to stop, I see the angel within and become the guest at his feast.

Hospitable God, may we treat everyone we meet  
as a messenger from you.



## Sharing a feast

### Genesis 26:27–31

Isaac said to them, ‘Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?’ They said, ‘We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord.’ So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths; and Isaac set them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. (NRSV)





## Reflection

Prior to this passage, Isaac and his people had been living in Gerar. Abimelech, king of the Philistines, had asked them to move away because they were becoming too powerful. It is understandable, then, that Isaac questions Abimelech's presence. Abimelech, accompanied by his advisor and the commander of his army, wants to make a covenant with Isaac. Perhaps he is afraid that war might break out; certainly, he believes Isaac and his people are 'blessed of the Lord'. In Isaac's time, sealing a covenant with a meal was a sign of friendship, so they share a feast and the next day they exchange oaths.

One of my local churches provides space for Syrian refugees to gather together for mutual support. A group of young Christians from across the city interested in social action wanted to meet with the Syrian young people, so a date was fixed for us to meet them. Imagine our surprise when we were greeted not just by teenagers but by people of all ages. We had come simply to get to know one another, to begin to build relationships, and we were met with an extravagant feast of Syrian food. Although we lacked the language to converse freely, we 'spoke' by eating together and sharing in the generosity of those who had so little. We left knowing that this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

How can food be offered and shared as a way of bringing people together and bridging divides?



## Part of God's family

### Genesis 31:51–55 (abridged)

**T**hen Laban said to Jacob, 'See this heap and see the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm'... So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country. Early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.

(NRSV)



## Reflection

Perhaps you have experienced the pain which follows deception. Not only is trust lost, but relationships can be damaged and often innocent parties get hurt in the crossfire. Somehow, we have to find a way through.

The opening verses of this passage display the uneasy relationship between Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his eldest daughter. Jacob tricked Laban by the way he made the flocks in his care mate. Both have been guilty of deception, which explains why Laban is so keen to define their territory.

Here, Laban and Jacob overcome their differences and make a covenant. According to custom, the deal is sealed with a sacrifice and a shared meal. The tragic consequence of their falling out is that Laban will no longer see his grandchildren and daughters.

Notice how Jacob turns to God, swearing by 'the Fear' and offering a sacrifice. 'Fear' can also be translated as 'Kinsman', better describing the close relationship between God and Jacob.

When the going gets tough, we too can turn to God, the God who took on human form and seeks to be our kin, to welcome us into God's family. If we can bear to eat with those we have deceived or with those who have deceived us, relationships can be restored. It might take 'all night', but 'in the morning' we might find ourselves blessed.

Kin-seeking God, give us the courage to try to rebuild broken relationships so that we might all be part of your family.



## Community celebration

### Deuteronomy 12:4–7

**Y**ou shall not worship the Lord your God in such ways. But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill-offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you. (NRSV)



## Reflection

God's people are here being encouraged to keep their faith despite the temptation of the different religions of the people around them. Moses claims Canaan as the place that God has chosen for his people as a centre of worship. The importance of 'the place that the Lord your God will choose... as his habitation' is highlighted throughout Deuteronomy. Perhaps this emphasis on place is particularly significant for a people who are settling in a new land.

God expects the people to go to this special place to perform the rituals and practices of their religion. As they celebrate God's presence and God's blessing, eating together in community is the climax of all that goes before.

Since becoming a minister in north-west Birmingham, I have attended several Caribbean celebrations. Whether honouring a life that has come to an end or a life that is just beginning, an act of worship is often followed by food. The vast array of home-cooked specialities brought by different guests and family members is a way of honouring a person's life and celebrating community. The worship comes first, then the table is blessed before people eat together and share stories of lives past, present and future.

In my experience, a shared meal always has a real sense of gathering in God's presence and rejoicing in God's blessing. As people eat together, community ties are strengthened, and God is given the glory.

How could your community be blessed by preparing food for one another and eating it together?

**HOLYHABITS** is an adventure in Christian discipleship. Inspired by Luke's model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, it identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them.

These Bible reading notes have been created to help churches and individuals explore the habits through prayerful engagement with the Bible and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.



Whole-church resource book and group study material also available

- Provides eight weeks of Bible reading notes excluding weekends
- Takes a biblical and devotional look at each Holy Habit
- Encourages a habit of regular Bible reading

**Praise for HOLYHABITS:**

'A great tool that just gets better with use.'

Olive Fleming-Drane and John Drane

BIBLICAL TEACHING  
 FELLOWSHIP  
 BREAKING BREAD  
 PRAYER  
 SHARING RESOURCES  
 SERVING  
**EATING TOGETHER**  
 GLADNESS AND GENEROSITY  
 WORSHIP  
 MAKING MORE DISCIPLES

**Writers in this issue:**

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