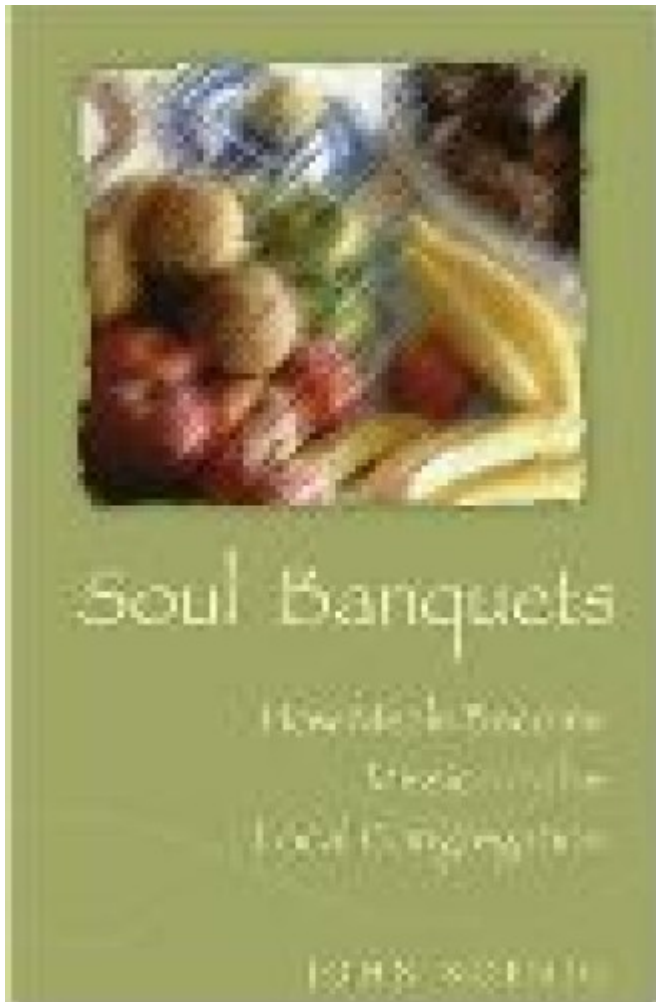


Soul Banquets/Of Widows and Meals

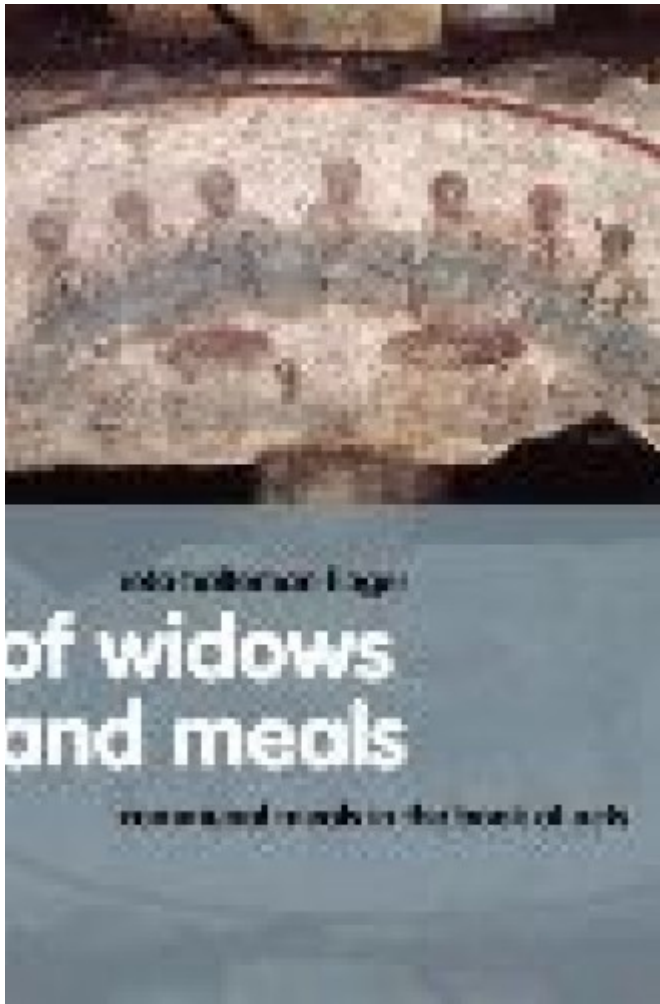
reviewed by [Matthew L. Skinner](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation

John Koenig
Morehouse



Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts

Reta Halteman Finger
Eerdmans

Thanks to the room's dreadful acoustics, for a few hours each weekday the cafeteria at my daughters' elementary school is one of the loudest places on earth. Last year some of the lunchroom supervisors tried to solve the problem by requiring all students to remain silent as they ate. Anyone speaking above the softest whisper was sent to the office and deprived of recess. Predictably, this hard-line policy failed, and to the delight of all the children and many of their parents it was soon abandoned.

Reta Halteman Finger and John Koenig might not make a principal's short list of candidates for the thankless job of lunchroom monitor. In very different ways and for different audiences, they try to amplify the voices that can be heard around tables,

calling attention to food's capacity for fostering meaningful, Spirit-filled communication and to the way meals express the values of groups that dine together. Corporate meals and the activities surrounding them can be public demonstrations of the gospel of Jesus Christ and can mobilize people in service of the gospel.

Koenig, a New Testament professor at New York's General Theological Seminary, urges Christians, particularly in congregational settings, to enlarge their conversations around the meals they share. He offers both a biblical and a practical basis for understanding meals as catalysts for the embodiment of Christian identity and mission. As people speak and listen during a congregational meal or even a coffee hour, they can discern God's voice in their midst leading them toward a renewed or expanded sense of vocation.

Finger, who teaches New Testament at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, conducts a technical analysis of short passages from Acts describing the communal life of the believers in Jerusalem and asserts that the earliest church's dining practices clearly echoed its theology. The meals shared among members of the nascent church made a symbolic declaration that the reign of God dissolves distinctions based on social class, as well as the value systems that reinforce such distinctions.

Most North American congregations offer opportunities for people to come together for shared meals, but those events are too often conceived as functionally separate from other aspects of the church's ministry. Leaders typically use the promise of food to attract people to meetings and programs or to create opportunities to achieve the nebulous goal of community building. Koenig challenges readers to understand corporate meals in a different light: as integrally related to Christian ministry. Meals have the sacramental potential to foster spiritual discernment among those who break bread. By their very nature, they propel the church into mission while creating communal settings in which genuine ministry can occur.

Koenig has long been interested in questions of hospitality, feasts, mission and Eucharist. In *Soul Banquets* he builds on the focused scholarship he advanced in *New Testament Hospitality* (1985) and *The Feast of the World's Redemption* (2000) and follows that scholarship's trajectories into the life of the contemporary church. Koenig the biblical scholar is not content merely to conclude from his exegetical studies that meals were "the primary settings in New Testament communities for the naming, receiving, and practice of spiritual gifts." Koenig the practicing

theologian moves from that historical judgment to take seriously the possibility that when a community of faith today gathers around food, the Holy Spirit is still present to equip the community with what it needs to do its God-given work.

Koenig peppers his biblical and theological discussions of meals with insights he has gathered from 50 interviews with people from various congregations. From the interviews come ample illustrations of what it looks like when believers make corporate meals opportunities for expanding the church's capacity to enact its mission on behalf of the world.

Written in a joyful and inviting tone, *Soul Banquets* is full of practical guidelines to help readers be creative about weaving meals into the fabric of their congregational life. Koenig encourages readers to examine how food might already play important roles in their churches, to assess meals' potential for mission according to specific benchmarks that are informed by scripture and practice, to identify and correct destructive tendencies that can arise in corporate meals, and to probe the depths of the Eucharist to strengthen awareness of the potential that exists when believers share around tables. This book can be served family-style to groups of congregational leaders eager to put its ideas to use.

In *Of Widows and Meals*, Finger suggests that a congregation's corporate dining practices can potentially proclaim or mute the gospel. She investigates two texts: Acts 2:41-47, which describes the post-Pentecost community sharing possessions and eating together in households on a daily basis, and Acts 6:1-6, which tells of Hellenist widows being overlooked in the daily meals. Taking a historical-critical and social-scientific approach, she considers the nature of these meals and their significance within the socioeconomic landscape of mid-first-century Jerusalem.

Contrary to many interpreters of Acts, Finger contends that the description of communal ownership and commensality in Acts 2 does not constitute a romantic attempt to idealize the values of the Jerusalem community but represents actual historical practices that enabled the impoverished church to take root and grow. These practices were not just the community's survival strategy; they were reflections of the way Jesus dined, and they stood in deliberate contrast to many of the society's conventions of status and hierarchy. The widows highlighted by the controversy recorded in Acts 6 were not pathetic, forgotten recipients of charity. The communal meals of Acts 6 were the same gatherings mentioned in Acts 2, and the widows were being excluded from the honors associated with administering the

meals.

Of Widows and Meals reprises arguments that Finger first put forth in her doctoral dissertation, which explains the book's protracted summaries of previous scholarship and concentrated attention on specific verses. Some readers will wonder whether Finger's efforts to describe the social realities and theological ethos of the Jerusalem church give enough attention to Acts 4:32-5:11—a different summary of the community's life that suggests interesting things about the apostles' roles and the hazards of defrauding the Holy Spirit via the communal fund. Even though this passage does not mention food, its depiction of the church and some of its members (appearing where it does in the story) commends its importance within the narrative rhetoric of Acts and, by extension, within Luke's theological outlook.

While any case for the historicity of the practices described in Acts 2:41-47 remains open to objections, a valuable aspect of Finger's approach is that it exposes how interpreters of Acts often fall prey to certain misguided assumptions. For example, the biblical text and a social-scientific perspective on first-century Palestine give no reason to assume that Acts distinguishes between the Jerusalem church's household meals and its care for the poor. The observation that this community of faith, founded by subsistence-level Galileans, was a community of poor people is widely recognized. Yet Finger instructively points to many instances in which mainstream biblical scholarship has assumed that "the poor" were a separate group from those engaged in the daily learning, fellowship, eating and prayers mentioned in Acts 2:42. Throughout the book she asserts that the commensality described in Acts reflects a solidarity that speaks a powerful word about belonging and mutuality in the community of those set free through Christ.

Koenig makes some assumptions that resemble those that Finger decries. For example, when Koenig discusses meals' potential for community outreach, he usually assumes rather than challenges the class distinctions that characterize so many mainline congregations. Apparently as long as Sunday morning at 11:00 is still the most segregated hour in American life in terms of race and class, Sunday lunches and Wednesday evening potlucks may be doomed to remain a close second. Koenig is certainly aware of these problems, but one hopes for more practical suggestions for helping churches overcome them.

When Finger turns from historical and exegetical analysis to address the social stratification of our congregations in her concluding paragraphs, she does not

naively assume that churches today can or should duplicate the community life depicted in Acts 2:41-47. Rather, she suggests that analogous practices are needed that can reflect the gospel within (and over against) the socioeconomic currents of our cultures, making meals occasions for inclusion across barriers that divide groups. After all, does not a church that too clearly separates its congregational meals and celebrations from its food pantry, soup kitchen and outreach to its neighbors misrepresent the gospel in some way?

Where can a congregation begin to address these issues? Perhaps a manageable way forward is to take a cue from my daughters and their classmates and start talking around the table—and from one table to another—with a little more fervor.