

Religion and Food

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The connection between food and religion runs deep in the southern “Bible Belt.” Eating has been an incentive for and aspect of going to church for many a southerner. Religious foodways have had a big hand in preserving and signaling change in southern cuisine. In the fellowship of church meals, many southerners feel strong connections to elements that sustain a southern as well as evangelical Christian worldview: the sacrality of family, the providence of God, and the holiness of place. Religious ways of understanding and using food also extend outside religious institutions to express the sacredness of southern culture.

Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of southern food and religion is the practice of “dinner on the grounds” after worship. Sharing a “potluck” meal spread under the trees of the churchyard may have had practical origins in the evangelical camp meetings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Distances traveled to camp meetings might be almost as long as the sermons; worshippers were encouraged to bring provisions to share. When evangelicals (Methodist, Baptists, and others) established churches, eating “camp meeting style” persisted. After the Civil War, it proliferated and is still observed by many a church today. It is still often called by the old name, although the “ground” is more likely to be the church basement fellowship hall. The popularization of another name, “covered dish supper,” parallels other changes: the evening main meal and the ubiquity of casseroles made with convenience products.

Practical adaptations keep the church dinner feasible, but the feeling the food evokes ensures its endurance. The church dinner is a type of ritual, a practice that follows the sacred model of a community's myths or sacred stories. Rituals help to connect the truths of myths to human experience on a basic level through meanings attached to symbols. Food is highly symbolic, and food rituals exist in most religions. They tend to have similar functions, although a tradition might emphasize some functions over others. The dominant evangelical Protestantism of the South is no exception.

Dinner on the grounds, for example, is a type of feast that celebrates the idea of divine blessing on a particular land and people, especially when the foods reflect the bounty of the land. Feasts usually involve sacrifice, the ritual slaughter of an animal that invokes the divine. Overtones of sacrifice remain in church suppers, where game and barbecue are the main dishes.

Ritual meals reaffirm the boundaries of community, as often by the absence of forbidden foods as the presence of special dishes. The teaming of evangelical Protestantism with alcohol prohibitions is such a boundary marker. (It has not gone uncontested in the southern Protestantism, however. For example, bourbon whiskey is often attributed to Kentucky Baptist preacher Elijah Craig.) While other traditions might employ alcoholic beverages to connote the sacred (wine in the Catholic Mass), southern Protestantism's prodigious use of sugar in church meals, from gallons of sweet tea to desserts by the dozens, reflects the special status of these meals as well as the sweet tooth of southern cuisine.

For evangelical Protestants, however, the primary religious functions of church meals follow their theological understanding of Christ's Last Supper. This is reflected in

the parallel meanings of a term they use for the ritual meal in worship, *communion*, and the term they use to describe what a church meal is, *fellowship*. Both emphasize the community of believers. Partaking in activities such as church dinners reinforces the bond of community and belonging to the church family. The covered dish supper laid out for everyone to help themselves to food taken from the same pots and eaten at communal tables symbolically relates to the supper at which Christ and his disciples shared common dishes. This points to another function of church meals: commemoration. Christ told his disciples to continue to eat together, “in remembrance of me.” Southern Protestants do this ritually in Communion and in their fellowship meals.

Remembrance and community are reinforced and extended on multiple levels through a variety of foodways that connect church to the rest of life. Church eating can symbolize the bond of community that goes back to early Christians and in the local congregation at present. It can remind of community here and beyond. Particularly at homecoming celebrations, which center around a dinner on the ground, the idea of ancestral community is reinforced. People who no longer live in the community might return home for the occasion; it might take place in sight not only of the church building but also the church graveyard. A sense of the community’s ancestry is evoked by foods associated with tradition. Cultural myths and food traditions overlap with church rituals—church food *is* southern food in the South. Churches are among the remaining places where some traditional dishes appear with any regularity. The connections reinforce the holiness associated with both the church and culture of a special people and place.

The two-way flow between church and family is often expressed in food. A big Sunday dinner around grandma's table is sacred for many southerners, even if more often experienced in nostalgia than reality. Churches express their family character in foodways that extend into homes. Especially during family transitions or crises, churches nourish bodies and souls alike. Church members take dishes to the homes of grieving families during mourning. After the funeral, a meal might be prepared by church members in the home or fellowship hall. The earliest evangelicals often substituted church family for kin, but the holiness of family for evangelicals today serves as a model for church community. Church meals are now frequently referred to as "family night suppers," reflecting as much an orientation to families and children as the idea of church as family.

The traditional role of nurturer of home and church assigned to women is foundational for this connection and central to foodways in southern churches. While churchmen may preside over cookouts, church eating has been largely the domain of women. Foodways both reinforce the gender hierarchy and subvert it. While the responsibility for church meals means more labor for women, it also provides opportunities for creative expression. Early church dinners might have been "make do" affairs and still might be depending on supply, money, and time. But even in tough times, church dinners have provided opportunity to celebrate as best one could through special fare. They gave cooks so inclined (or socially pressured) the chance to show off with dishes they might not make for home meals, providing a means for status and recognition. Church foodways also gave leadership and ministerial opportunities to women who were (and often are) otherwise denied them. Through food events, women

have raised money for church causes, enticed men into church participation, fed the hungry, sick, celebrating, and grieving, and acted as “ritual specialists” when they could not preside at the Communion table or preach “the bread of life” from the pulpit.

Churchwomen’s cookbooks have been important sources of fundraising for their communities. They also preserve a “herstory” of southern Protestantism and a means by which traditions are passed down. While the introduction to the cookbook of the Second Presbyterian Church of Spartanburg, S.C., gives a history of male leadership, the rest of the book documents women’s activity in recipes and anecdotes. Cookbooks can be personal expressions of devotion as well as community legacies. Mrs. Rose Marie Horne, a south Georgia church cook, dedicated her recipe manuscript to “Jesus Christ, my Strength and Sustainer.” When Mrs. Horne became gravely ill, women in her church financed the publication of her book as a testimony to her and to preserve the recipes that had become a part of the church’s life.

Church cookbooks are important sources for charting preservation, innovation, and devolution of southern foodways as well as women’s history. *The New Kentucky Home Cookbook*, published by Methodist churchwomen in 1884, is a valuable resource on southern white women who did their own cooking. But there is no better way to taste change and continuity in southern eating than to observe (or better, take part in) church meals themselves. A recent project in the Carolinas reveals that church foodways are still meaningful forms of fellowship, with things both lost and gained over time. One mill village church has only 60 members today; but over 300 “came home” to its recent homecoming celebration. The minister, usurping the women’s duty to some consternation, planned the menu of traditional foods as well as preached. The church

maintains itself in part these days by providing space for an after-school meal program. A Holiness church recently employed a dietician to create lighter versions of traditional foods because of health concerns in the African American community. While covered dish suppers have waned in recent years at a suburban Methodist church, a small group eats every Sunday dinner at a southern-themed chain restaurant near the church. And a Baptist church that has grown to megachurch status employs a professional chef who oversees a number of food events and has introduced a popular feature to its Wednesday evening “family meals”: a chocolate fountain in the center of dining hall.

The dominant evangelicals are not the first or last groups for which the South has provided hospitable ground for the combination of religion and food. Native Americans had a rich ritual life involving foodways. Early Anglicans and Catholics often ate together in homes after services. Foods of religious sects like the Moravians have become part of southern cuisine. Jews in the pork-loving South have managed to maintain foodways that preserve their identity and also reach out to the broader community. Spartanburgers think of a certain typical American coffee cake as “Jewish” because it is a popular item at the local temple’s bake sale. During the annual Greek Festival, Baptists come after “preaching” to eat at St. Nicholas Orthodox Church. The first introduction of many native southerners to the faiths of the growing number of Hindus and Buddhists in the South is through the foods offered at their festivals. And new groups adopt and adapt the covered dish.

Connections between religion and food are not exclusive to the South, but they are particularly prominent in southern culture. Friday night fish fries are accompanied by gospel music in some restaurants. Others offer reduced prices to those who bring their

church bulletins to the Sunday dinner buffet. Even when religion is not overtly expressed, the sense of holiness about food carries over in cultural symbols. Southern hospitality parallels fellowship. Fried chicken has symbolic power in part because of its association with Sunday dinners and church suppers. Convenience “bucket” versions play on southern heritage through commercial myths such as Colonel Sanders and PoFolks. Sweet tea and cornbread are “sacraments” for southerners: they commemorate and mark identity with the South. Maybe the best example of a foodway that expresses the connection between religious behavior and southern culture is barbecue. The ritual cooking and eating of a hog commemorates a mythic place and time, communal bond, and identity still sacred in the South.

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