

The Corinthian Lord's Supper: Paul's Critique of the Greco-Roman Meal Tradition

Abstract: The predominance of various social groups in the Corinthian church created social tension and disharmony in relation to the Lord's Supper. Recent studies on the Lord's Supper take account of the Corinthian social groups but fail to connect it with the wider Greco-Roman Meal tradition of the day and its ramifications. Paul identified the root cause of disharmony as the irrational adoption of the external characteristics of the Greco-Roman Meal tradition such as social ranking, display of honour, social identity and social differentiation. Paul critically looked at the influence of the Greco-Roman Meal tradition and corrected the Corinthian Lord's Supper by appealing to the Last Supper tradition.

Introduction

The practice of common meal was an important social institution in the early Christian church. When a group of people eat together, they form a social order by which they consolidate their group identity and follow certain social customs. The concern behind this assumption is that eating food is a social act, done in the company of others and that such table fellowship has the potential to build links among those who eat together. Peter Garnsey observes,

Outside the home, commensality demonstrated and confirmed the membership and solidarity of the group, paraded the status of the group *vis-a-vis* outsiders, and set out the hierarchies that existed both in the society at large and within the group itself.¹

Corinthian meals in general and the Lord's Supper (1Cor. 11:17-34) in particular have been studied from various perspectives. Till the development of sociological studies, the Lord's Supper was studied from a sacramental point of view.² Abuse of community relationship was given importance in the sociological studies.³ Anthropological analysis gave importance to the severe individualism in the Lord's Supper.⁴ All the above studies shed light upon various facets

¹ Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 128.

² Hans Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper: A Study in the History of the Liturgy*, Translation with appendices by Dorothea H.G. Reeve, reprint (Leiden: Brill, 1979); Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity*; reprint (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Bruce Chilton, *A Feast of Meanings: Eucharistic Theologies from Jesus Through Johannine Circles*, NovTSup, vol. 72 (1994).

³ Gerd Theissen, *Essays on Corinth: The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, trans. by John H. Schutz (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982); Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Paul and the Lord's Supper: A Socio-Historical Investigation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Esther Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and its Historical and Cultural Context* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011).

⁴ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, revised edition (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Stuart L. Love, "Women and Men at Hellenistic Symposia Meals in Luke," in *Modeling Early Christianity: Socio-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context*, edited by Philip F.

of the same meal event as practised in the Corinthian church. This paper illustrates that the division in the Corinthian meal is because of the adaptation of the Greco-Roman meal tradition into the church meal. Paul critiques the ill effects of such meal tradition and integrates the Corinthian church by appealing to the Last Supper tradition.

Greco-Roman Meal Tradition

Any attempt to trace the history of the early Christian meeting has to take the historical setting into account. The origins and early development of the Christian gathering should be seen within the context of the social and religious culture of the Greco-Roman world, of which Christians and Jews formed a part.

New Testament scholars such as Matthias Klinghardt, Dennis Smith, and V. A. Alkin proposed that there was a common meal tradition throughout the Greco-Roman Mediterranean that lay at the basis of all active meals of the Greco-Roman era, whether they be gentile, Jewish, or Christian.⁵

Each religion had its own meal traditions. For example, Jews had Passover meals, and other festive meals to symbolize their relationship with Yahweh and to remember Yahweh's activity on behalf of them in history. Mystery cults also gathered for a common meal in their worship. Special banquets were arranged as part of the initiation ceremony in Mystery cults. No matter what purpose one gathered for a common meal, whether exclusively religious or non-religious, the meal followed the same basic form and customs of the banquet regardless of the group, occasion or setting, and thus becoming a social institution in the Greco-Roman world.⁶ Such tradition of formal meals in Greco-Roman and Jewish world is termed as the Greco-Roman meal tradition.

Characteristics of Greco-Roman Meal Tradition

Greco-Roman society graded people based on their social status, which is reflected in their common meal.⁷ Meals functioned as a social symbol which located the rank of an individual in a

Esler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 206; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge classic edition, 2002(first edition, Kegal Paul, 1966).

⁵ Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, as cited in Hal E. Taussig, *Meals in the Early Christian World: Social Formation, Experimentation and Conflict at the Table*, edited by Dennis Smith and Hal Taussig (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1; Valeriy A. Alkin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden: BRILL, 2010), 1-2.

⁶ Smith holds that if one is to understand properly any individual instance of formalized meals in the Greco-Roman world, one "must first understand the larger phenomenon of the banquet as a social institution." Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 2.

⁷ A common meal is a fellowship meal of two or more people, not necessarily cultic in nature. However, the common meal is an occasion in which social and theological aspects are combined. Taking the definition given

social ladder. It separated one from the other either as socially inferior/superior or as a socially pure/impure.⁸ Similarly, religious purity was the major concern of Jews in their table fellowship. The positions occupied at a banquet were well defined in the Roman period.⁹ Such practices promoted a consciousness of the social rank of the invited guest. Discrimination of the food, in quality and quantity, was yet another characteristic of the ancient societies.¹⁰

Exceptional attempts were made to assuage grievances. Elevated philosophical discussions were special cases. Therefore, Plutarch raised a few questions in his nine-volumes of “Table Talk” in *Moralia*.¹¹ These questions are relevant to understand the social dynamics of the ancient meals. Because of the numerous problems of stratified meals, Pliny the younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia, declared that he attempted not to make class distinctions among those whom he invited to the meals (*Letters* 2.6.3). But we are not sure how far he was successful in making a class-less meal. The meal tradition had external and internal characteristics. Important external characteristics of Greco-Roman meals are as follows.

Social Ranking

Common meals functioned as a social symbol, which located the rank of an individual in a social ladder. Peter Garnsey observed that the elite in the Greco-Roman world developed symbolic systems to which their social inferiors had little access, for “food operated as a powerful signifier in many different contexts and throughout society.”¹² The elite reserved the *symposium* for their own agenda. Those who violated the norms were often ostracized.

In Luke 17: 7-10, the rank and status differences at meals were clearly expressed. The rich had the practice of hosting feasts as part of their luxury in which same status group attended the feasts. It is also clearly evident from Luke 14: 7ff where Jesus reproves his disciples to take the

by Peter-Ben Smit, "a meal is considered a *socially structured gathering during which foodstuffs are consumed and community is established.*" Peter-Ben Smit, *Fellowship and Food in the Kingdom: Eschatological Meals and Scenes of Utopian Abundance in the New Testament* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 14.

⁸ The dinner parties segregated people as per their social ranking. At meals, whether private dinner practice to which a rich patron invited some of his clients or public banquets were given by an aristocrat for his fellow citizens, one's place and even what he got to eat depended strictly on his status; the invitation to "come up higher" would never be extended to one of inappropriate status. John Stambaugh and David Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), 114.

⁹ Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Paul and the Lord's Supper: A Socio-historical Investigation*. Studies in Biblical Literature 84 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 40.

¹⁰ Garnsey, *Food*, 100.

¹¹ The important question is if philosophy is a fitting topic for conversation at a drinking party (1.612E); whether the host should arrange the placement of the guests or leave them to seat themselves (1.615D); why did the places at banquets acquire honour (1.619); why is it customary to invite many guests to a wedding supper (4.666); why do large number of invitations to ordinary banquets become more problematic (5.678); what kinds of entertainment are most appropriate (7.710-11); and if it is good to deliberate over wine (7.714). cf. Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' meals with sinners* (Illinois: IVP, 2005), 92.

¹² Garnsey, *Food*, 9-10.

honourable seats as others do. The same parable gives us an insight of the seating arrangement based on the social ranking.

Display of Honor

The issue of patronage was at work in every invitation to a dinner from a social superior to a social inferior. Those eating with superiors were seeking social advancement, and those entertaining people below them on the social ladder used this to gain honour or confirm their superiority. Rules and taboos constantly dictated as to who would be invited to a meal, how it be eaten, who would be served when and where, who would recline or sit where, and the like.¹³

Social Identity

Common meal consolidated social identity.¹⁴ As food moves from being “outside” of a person to “inside,” this “incorporation principle” affects the very nature of the individual and is, at the same time, the basis of group identity.¹⁵ Eating was not mere refuelling; it was an affirmation of family, kinship or civic and religious bonds.¹⁶ This bond among participants in a common meal is termed as the social identity. In other words, as Hal Taussig narrates,

The meal was a construction site for identity in the Hellenistic Mediterranean....
In any case, meals became a place where the almost endless mix of national and ethnic identities in the Mediterranean was contested, expanded, rethought, and improved on.¹⁷

It means social and ethnic identity was explicitly reflected in a common meal as part of the meal tradition.

¹³ Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal meals in the book of Acts* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 171; Smith, *Symposium*, 126ff; Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 21ff. R. Lee Cole, *Love Feasts: A History of the Christian Agape* (Paternoster: Charles H. Kelly, 1916), 24.

¹⁴ Identity refers to that which makes a person socially distinctive human being. In the present study Identity as used to refer the way in which a person or group define themselves in terms of their individuality and difference from others. For social identity theory, see Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, *European Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁵ Kobel, *Dining*, 37.

¹⁶ John M. Wilkins and Shaun Hill, *Food in the ancient world* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 63.

¹⁷ Taussig, *Beginning*, 182.

Social Differentiation

Social differentiation is another aspect of the common meal.¹⁸ A few simple questions like, who invites whom, who prepared food, for what purpose, what the sequence of courses is, what utensils are used and what kinds of concepts of purity are at stake, etc reveal the internal social dynamics. Thus, Margaret Visser demonstrates that every aspect of a meal is influenced by the context within which it is held.¹⁹ In establishing commensality precisely who eats what with whom is one of the most powerful ways of defining and differentiating social groups. It may be used to represent kinship. It may also be used to establish community interests, marking close relationship among those who are neither kin nor affine.²⁰ External characteristics of the meal represented boundaries between participants and non-participants. It is assumed that such social differentiation was reflected in the church at Corinth to which Paul was critical of.

As part of the internal characteristics, the Greco-Roman meal was known for fellowship, equality, good order, and festive joy.²¹ Although there were divisions practised, there were literary evidences against such divisions.²² These internal characteristics are not elaborated further in this paper because such qualities gave group cohesion within the group and not among the whole participants from various strata. Most often such qualities were literary projections of the meal tradition. Therefore, it was considered as the propaganda of the Greco-Roman meals. The quality and quantity of food distributed, seating arrangement, and the time of distribution depended on the relative status of the participants. It is presumed that the elites of the Corinthian church mimicked the Greco-Roman meal tradition even at the expense of forgetting the very intention of the Lord's Supper.

Analysis of the Passage: 1Corinthians 11:17-34

In many respects, early Christian gathering had similarity with association/club meeting. People from various strata gathered under a patron for a common purpose. The client is expected

¹⁸ It is the distinction made between social groups and persons on the basis of biological, physiological, and socio-cultural factors, as sex, age, race, nationality, etc. It seems most of the daily activities are acting out of socially defined categories. Each social role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviours that a person has to face and fulfil. In a meal, the quality, quantity, seating arrangements, timing, etc shows the social role of an individual with respect to other participants.

¹⁹ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: GroveWeidenfeld, 1991), 2, as cited by Kobel, *Dining*, 39.

²⁰ Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 11.

²¹ Klinghardt, "A Typology of the Communal Meal" in *Meals in the Early Christian World*, 14-16.

²² For example, Theopompus of Chios (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 4: 149d; equal portions of food and the same wine for masters and slaves); Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.4.26 (the Nabatean king renounces slaves and serves himself); Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 1.2; *Inscr. Stratonikeia* 22 (second cent. CE; from the cult of Zeus Panamaros: "The God invites all people for dinner and he prepares a common and equally honourable table for everybody, from wherever they come"); *T. Job* 15 (Job's sons serve the poor); Philo, *Contemp.* 70-72 (service not by slaves, but by members). As cited in Klinghardt, *Typology*, 17, 21-22.

to pay back the favours s/he received from the Patron in terms of respect and gratitude.²³ Moreover, in the mid-first century, Christians did not have a separate building, a temple, a physical sacrifice, an official priest, in order to view them as a separate entity. In many respects, Christian gathering had been viewed as followers of a philosophy, or an association, or a sort of guild, or a *collegium*. It is possible that some Christians looked at their gathering as one of this kind and tried to conform it to their private gatherings.²⁴ As a result, social differentiation based on their social identity as practised in the Greco-Roman meal tradition reflected in their Lord's Supper.

Church Meal at Corinth

Church meal at Corinth reflected social differentiation and the problems associated with it.²⁵ Theissen makes it clear that the meal conflicts are rooted in social and economic realities, for the majority of the members come from lower classes stand in contrast to a few influential members who come from upper classes.²⁶ Likewise, Fee notes two aspects in relation to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34: first, the nearly universal phenomenon of cultic meals as part of worship in antiquity, and second that in the early church the Lord's Supper was most likely eaten as, or in conjunction with, such a meal.²⁷ Thus, the irrational adoption of Greco-Roman meal tradition created social tension within the church.

Most commentators divide the passage more or less in a homogeneous way.²⁸ The first part of the text is about the abuse of the inferior groups in the meal. Mitchell considers it as the battle

²³ William A. Simmons, *People of the New Testament World: An Illustrative Guide* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 275.

²⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 50.

²⁵ Most writers agree that Corinth was a stratified society and the church at Corinth was a reflection of social stratification. Cf. Theissen, *Social*, 148; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict in Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 248; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 531ff; Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 60 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 70.

²⁶ Theissen asks four questions to analyze 1Cor. 11:17-34: (1) were there different groupings at the celebration of the Lord's Supper? (2) what is the sequence of various actions mentioned in the text? (3) was there a qualitative difference in the food served? or (4) quantitatively different meals for different groups? For all these questions Theissen gives a positive answer in relation to sociological aspects. Theissen, *Social*, 69, 147- 167.

²⁷ Fee, *Corinthians*, 532.

²⁸ Vincent Alappatt divides the passage as follows: (a) What the Christians did (11:17-22); (b) What the Lord did (11:23-26) and (c) What the Christians should do (11:27-34). Vincent Alappatt, "Pauline perspective on Lord's Supper", *Bible Bhashyam XXVI/1-2* (June, 2000): 62-81.

However, Fee finds chiasm in this passage as he divides it into four:

A- 11: 17-22—The statement of the problem: the rich are abusing the poor ("going ahead with their own [privatel meal") at the Lord's Table.

B – 11: 23-26—The repetition of the "tradition," the words of institution, with their emphasis on the remembrance of me" and "proclaiming his death until he comes."

between different parties as they gathered in the Church;²⁹ the second part is an example of the last supper tradition as to how Jesus gave himself for others; and the third part is the expected response from the side of Corinthians. Thus, 1Corinthians 11:17-34 is divided into three parts in this study.

- a) The Meal of Corinthians (11:17-22),
- b) The Meal of Jesus (11:23-26) and
- c) The Meal of the Body of Christ (11:27-34).

The Meal of Corinthians (11:17-22)

It seems that the Corinthians considered the church gathering as just another gathering. The verb “gather together” (συνέρχεσθε) repeated five times in vv. 17-22 and vv.33-34. Along with 14:23 and 26, it probably becomes a semi-technical term for the “gathering together” of the people of God for worship. The Corinthian problem is not their failure to gather, but their failure to be God's new people. Paul does not want them to come together for a private meal as such. Thiselton argues that this private meal is more like a patron-client meal; a kind is common in ancient Rome.³⁰

What does the verb προλαμβάνει (11:21) mean as different interpretations come from this verb? The preposition προ has a temporal sense of “before”. It might mean “eat beforehand”, supported by one of the common meanings of the verb ἐκδέχομαι (wait for) in 11:33. With this meaning, it is possible to interpret that some had the meal ahead of others, not waiting for all to come. Thus, Paul asks them to wait for one another so that all have the meal together.

However, In relation to a meal, the temporal sense of προ- is felt very little.³¹ This leads to looking for the alternate meaning of the verb ἐκδέχομαι in 11:33. It is used outside the New Testament in a sense of “receive” or “welcome.”³² Then 11:33 can be translated, “then, my

B' -11: 27-32—“So then”—in response to vv. 23-26, one must “discern the body” as one eats; otherwise one is in grave danger of judgment.

A' -11: 33-34—“So then”—in response to vv. 17-22, they are to “welcome/receive one another” at the meal, so as not to incur the judgment of vv. 30-32. Fee, 1987: 532.

²⁹ Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 151.

³⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 856.

³¹ W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and the Early Christian Literature*, fourth and revised edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 715.

³² In 3 Maccabees 5:26: “The rays of the sun were not yet widely dispersed and the king was receiving (ἐκδέχομενου) his friends when Hermon presented himself and invited him to go forth, explaining that his wishes were now ready to be granted;” Josephus often uses ἐκδέχομαι in the sense of “receive” or “welcome” in

brothers, when you come together, welcome [or, receive] one another." Paul appeals them to receive one another than waiting for one another. Then the problem was not the different timing of the meal as the rich started their meal early and the poor arrived late rather a different menu served among them as per their social status. In the light of 11: 20-21 ("when you meet together... one is hungry and another is drunk"), as the common meal was going on, simultaneously a group remained hungry and other group got drunk. As the Corinthian congregation was gathering in the homes of believing members who were the wealthiest in the congregation, it was easy for them to separate believers based on their social status as the host of the symposium graded people based on social status. With respect to the social dynamics of the Greco-Roman meal tradition, a few privileged gathered around the dining table (*triclinium*) and rest gathered at the atrium. The discrimination meted out in terms of quality and quantity of food and plausibly they gathered in two parts of the house simultaneously to have the Lord's Supper as per the conventions of the day.

The Meal of Jesus (11:23-26)

From the previous section, it is learned that the social group with better status did not share or welcomed the inferior group. Paul did not simply instruct the Corinthian believers to get together regularly for a meal with equal sharing. This passage (11:23-26) functions both as a critique and as a basis for a solution.³³ The purpose of this citation is probably to remind the Corinthians that this is not a private social meal; it is the remembrance of the Lord Jesus as per his command.³⁴ They have to understand their meal as an imitation or implication of the meal of Jesus with his disciples.

Nevertheless, the Corinthians were fighting for their rights and privileges. They differentiated co-believers based on social strata and the amount they contributed to the agape meal. Vincent Alappatt commented that the expressions of self-indulgence, factionalism and lack of concern for the congregation as a whole were in tension with Paul's understanding of the Lord's Supper.³⁵

Jesus builds up his community by love and fellowship. This love and fellowship, for example, is narrated at the last meal before the crucifixion ((Lk. 22:24-27; Jn.13).³⁶ In Luke's

Jewish Wars III. 32; and in Sirach 32:14: "The man who fears the Lord will accept (ἐκδέξεται) his discipline, and the diligent man will receive his approval."

³³ Critique in terms of their practice of inequality and solution in terms of the Last Supper tradition to be inculcated in their attitude and meals. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 73.

³⁴ Paul and Luke narrate to continue the Lord's Supper. David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1Corinthians to 1Clement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 151.

³⁵ Alappatt, "Pauline": 63-64.

³⁶ In a formal banquet, the role of the one who reclined and the one who served is fixed. The role of the servants is to entertain the guests. The servants had formal roles such as removing the shoes, washing feet and hands of guests, leading them to prescribed seats, respecting them with garlands, providing appropriate portions of food,

Gospel, the custom of serving at a table is made into a symbol of community service as a whole. Jesus does not follow the typical social ranking and the idea of stratification of Greco-Roman meal tradition. Participants of Jesus' table are inclusive in nature and experience equality and fellowship, which are the mark of the Kingdom of God that Jesus presents.

The breaking of the bread is associated with and reminds us of that act of self-giving of Jesus' body and life. The disciples are asked to continue what Jesus did for them, for the verb *ποιεῖτε* (11:24-25) refers to a continuous action.

In what way Jesus' tradition of the Last Supper makes the social integration of different groups in the Lord's Supper possible. The sacramental activity also has the power of social integration.³⁷ Paul asks, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1Cor 10:16). Interpersonal tensions are overcome in the self-giving love of Jesus. Each faction is appealed to give away their boasting on peculiar identity and take on the identity of the body of Christ. Unity is achieved as different groups give away their claims of rights and privileges.³⁸ As they come together with the same purpose, and with self-less love, social integration takes place. Different groups become one body by taking the common identity of the Body of Christ.

The Meal of the Body of Christ (11:27-34).

The root cause of the Corinthian crisis is their disrespect to the marginalized community in the church. Their disrespect results in judgment as it is important to notice that juridical language permeates this entire section of the discourse. For example, the use of *ἔνοχος* (guilty/liable, 11:27), *δοκιμαζέτω* (examine, 11:28), *κρίμα* (judgment, 11:29), *διακρίνων* (distinguishing, recognizing, 11:29), *ἐκρινόμεθα* (be judged, vs. 31), and *κατακριθώμεν* (condemned, 11:32). Paul's warning in this section is not for forgetting the sacramental presence of Jesus in the meal rather their eating in a selfish and self-centred manner without taking note of their brothers and sisters with them.³⁹ All participants should partake as one body of Christ, rather than following a private meal which gives importance to the social identity.

The interpretation of *ἀναξίως* (11:27) is often misused to highlight the internal holiness of participants rather than the way of unfitting participation, for *ἄξιος/ἀναξίος* signifies

drinks, etc (Plato *Symposium* 175A, 176A, 213B). John 13 attests the fact that Jesus reversed the typical order in a Greco-Roman meal.

³⁷ The sacramental act of the Lord's Supper is a symbolic accomplishment of social integration. Theissen, *Social*, 167.

³⁸ In two ways their supper dishonoured the Lord: (1) The "haves" have been abusing the "have-nots" by "going ahead with their own private meals." (2) They have been abusing the Lord himself by not properly "remembering" him, especially in terms of his self-giving love and death.

³⁹ Witherington III, *Making*, 59.

fitting/inappropriate attitude.⁴⁰ The use of ἄξιος or ἀναξίως shows that two distinct magnitudes are equal or equivalent; an act that “deserves” praise or punishment.⁴¹

Paul’s strict words are addressed to those who turn the communal meal into an occasion of a class-based division between τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας and τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας. Such people, Paul insists, must test themselves and consider what they are doing before they eat and drink (vs. 28). For failure to ‘discern the body’ (vs. 29), they are warned, leads to judgment, to sickness and even to death (vs. 30).⁴²

It is not the food that made them ill, but the judgment that came upon them for partaking in an unworthy manner. Such disasters can be avoided if the Corinthians will simply examine their behaviour and respect their fellow believers who are their equals in Christ (11:31). Paul appealed them to consider all the participants in a common meal as the body of Christ.

Another practical advice to the hungry ones is to have the food at home (11:34). By this advice, Paul is not subscribing a private party at home as per the conventions of the Greco-Roman Meal tradition. Rather this advice comes in response to a practical concern that if the available food is distributed equally, then it is insufficient for their appetite. Horrell answers that as they share the available food equally for all the gathering, then it is insufficient for their appetite. So they are asked to make up the deficiency at their houses.⁴³ Witherington comments that the purpose of Lord’s meal is neither satisfying the hunger nor considering it just another celebratory meal.⁴⁴ Irrespective of their social status and the food available, all are asked to share and wait for/welcome one another which is the essential character of the Lord’s Supper. This is the way Paul resocialized different social groups into one Christian community.

Paul’s Critique

The misbehaviour in a meal was a crucial point—behavior at meals was taken as an indicator or barometer of the society’s or club’s or group’s character in microcosm. In other words, what went on at meals most revealed the character of the diners, and was supposed to

⁴⁰ ἀναξίως is the opposite of ἄξιος. With respect to prodigal son’s statement, “I am no longer fit to be called your son” (Lk 15:19), ἀναξίως can be unfit. Thiselton, 2000: 889.

⁴¹ Paul uses the expressions only by way of admonitions and therein links the motive and goal of all Christian action. Its motivating power lies only in the preceding action of God, which alone determines its content and thus distinguishes it from all legalism. Hence the warning not to receive the Lord’s Supper τοῦ κυρίου ἀναξίως (11:27) does not denote a moral quality but an attitude determined by the Gospel. Foerster, “α[ξιον, ἀ]ναξίως,” *TDNT*, 1: 379.

⁴² Horrell, *Social*, 152.

⁴³ Horrell, *Social*, 155.

⁴⁴ Witherington III, *Making*, 60.

mirror the values that this particular group upheld.⁴⁵ It is the reason that Paul was upset over the Corinthians' behaviour. Paul tried to correct their attitude.

Paul, as a man of his time, exhibited a mixture of both congruence and incongruence towards the meal traditions of the Greco-Roman world; at times Paul sided with Greco-Roman meal tradition and at other times he confronted it. It is necessary to mention where Paul sided with and where Paul distanced from the Greco-Roman meal tradition.

Agreement with the ideals of Meal Tradition

Matthias Klinghard and Dennis Smith explained four important internal characteristics of meal ideals of the Greco-Roman society such as communion/fellowship, equality, good order, and festive joy.⁴⁶ A common meal was one of the important social institutions of ancient Mediterranean life. The above four points were social idealization or utopian picture of a common meal. It was the vision that festive meal is the place to overcome the meagerness of daily life; a place of equality and absence of social divisions.⁴⁷

Paul is in agreement with respect to such ideals of the meal tradition. Paul stood for equality and fellowship among participants. Those who dined together should be treated equally. This was a standard feature of ancient dining protocol.⁴⁸ When there were divisions in the Corinthian church in relation to the socio-economic status, Paul vehemently opposed it saying it is no longer the Lord's Supper you eat. It is because each one went ahead with his own private supper (ἰδιον δεῖπνον-11:21). If they were not able to treat equally in the common meal, Paul asked them to go home and eat individual supper at home (1Cor. 11:34a). Thus, they had been given an option to go ahead either with an individual private meal at home or the common meal at a church worship context. If they opt for the common meal in a worship context, then Paul wanted them to share and unite together in the Lord. Paul always upheld that believers are the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1Cor. 6:15; 12:12, 27). Those who share one bread shares the same body, for Paul writes, "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1Cor. 10:17). Common meal as a social institution brings unity, fellowship and accommodates people from different walks of life.

Deviation from the Practice of Meal Tradition

Although there are literary evidences that portray meal customs against the popular culture, the majority of literary evidences and epigraphs do not share their propaganda of meal tradition in practice. The study of the Greco-Roman meals in the first part of this paper explains the gap

⁴⁵ Witherington III, *Making*, 35.

⁴⁶ Cf. Klinghardt, "Typology", 14-16; Smith, *Symposium*, 10ff

⁴⁷ In usual pattern, there was segregation based on social status. Klinghardt, "Typology", 17.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Symposium*, 11.

between those who served and were being served; those at the table and those who attended. In other words, there were differences in quantity and quality of food. There was a difference of meal timing for the masters, for the free and the slaves. There were grading in seating arrangements as well. The tension arose only when those at the meal raised their voice against the prevailing gaps. Other times people just considered it as the meal order.

It is to be noted that equality in ancient period was not similar to the modern concept of equality. Equality and order in the ancient period were considered on the basis of social status. Smith quoted Gregory of Nagy to make this point clear, ‘...give everyone their due on an equal basis according to their relative status’.⁴⁹ With respect to such an understanding of equality, it is quite natural to make differences in the modern sense among the meal participants. However, Paul did not share such an understanding of equality but for him, equality and order were equal sharing of the food as per need and equal treatment among all meal participants.

In its practical sense, a common meal in the first century reflected social boundaries and stratification. Such boundary measures and identity projection reflected in social tension and inequality among its participants. In Corinthian Agape meal, Paul says, “For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk” (1Cor 11:21). It is to be inferred that it was not only a practice in Corinthian church but it was the reflection of the culture—a culture dominated by few elite patrons over vast clients or a few masters over a huge number of slaves. What it shows is the tension between the propaganda and practices. Paul virtually disagreed to such inequality and did not commend their practice rather he appealed the congregation to be considerate to the weak and marginalized. Separate seating arrangement according to the social status is also missing in the Pauline corpus.

Another major difference is to be noted that as part of the meal tradition, the importance is given to the presiding officer or the *symposiarch* who was responsible for the orderly arrangement of the meal. It was his duty to start the meal, determine the mixture of the wine and water, allowing the main guest to be seated at the proper seat, paying homage to the emperor and cult deity, and organizing the entertainment during the drinking party. Fine was imposed on improper behaviour. After all, he was responsible for the misbehaviour of participants.⁵⁰ However, Paul had not given any importance to such a symposiarch in a Christian meal function. Even though a lot of problems were traced from the Christian common meal, Paul's address was not directed towards the leader. Pauline instructions were given in the form of appeal to every member of the community so that each one is responsible for the rest. No fine was imposed on any unruly member. These are to be seen as the differing aspects of Paul and the meal tradition of the Greco-Roman world.

⁴⁹ Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 128; Smith, *Symposium*:11

⁵⁰ Smith, *Symposium*, 90; Finger, *Widows*, 173.

Appealing to the Last Supper Tradition

Early church continued the meal tradition of Jesus in line with the Greco-Roman meal tradition. It is because Greco-Roman meal tradition existed even before Jesus. But the changes that Jesus brought to the existing pattern are important for the early church to which Paul always looked into. Paul imbibed the true nature of Jesus' meals which is characterized by equality and fellowship. The purpose of Paul in bringing back the Last Supper tradition is to strengthen the existing Christian community of his time in mutual love, fellowship, and unity.

“Do this in my remembrance” (εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν) is a unique Paul/Luke version. As this phrase is missing in Matthew/Mark version, it can be inferred that Paul effectively used the Last Supper tradition of Jesus to solve the community problems of the congregation. What does it mean by the phrase, “do this”? Either it is about the rite to be continued or it is to continue the loving act of Jesus at the meal. In this study, the latter fits well. Moreover, Jesus does not ask to “eat this” but to “do this” which probably means, blessing, breaking, distributing, eating together, and thanking God in the light of the perception that “this is my body.”

Conclusion

The root cause of the problems in the Corinthian Lord's Supper could be the adoption of Greco-Roman Meal tradition into the church meal. In his repeated encouragement to Corinthians Paul writes about their corporate existence than individual groups based on social status. Many examples point to Paul's concern for the community as opposed to the individual.⁵¹ When they come together, Paul considers all members of the church as the single Body of Christ. Although Corinthian believers came together, they still considered themselves as a separate group of individuals. For Corinthians, church gathering was just another private gathering culminated with a private meal according to the ethos of Greco-Roman Meal tradition. Having granted that some of the individuals had relatively better social status (1Cor 1:26), their status in the common meal and worship is to be dissolved for the unity of the church. Their social identity is to be effectively integrated into the community integration in their meal to which the meal tradition of Jesus was a great help to Paul. Paul's acquaintance with the Last Supper tradition of Jesus which stood for unity, selfless love, and building up one another, helped Paul to keep a critical stand toward Greco-Roman Meal tradition and corrected the malpractices in the Corinthian church with the inclusive social vision of Jesus. Jesus' tradition in Pauline writing emphasized the social integration within the community. Paul was well-versed in the meal tradition of Jesus so as to effectively use the principles of the Last Supper tradition in the Corinthian context.

⁵¹ The examples such as, “when you come together” (συνέρχεσθε) -11:17; “when you come together” (συνερχομένων) as a church- 11:18; “when you come together” (Συνερχομένων) it is not the Lord's supper that you eat-11:20; “when you come together” (συνερχόμενοι) to eat- 11:33; “when you come together” (συνέρχησθε) it will not be for your condemnation 11:34, emphasize the community aspects of Pauline teaching.