

The Lord's Supper Table as Icon for Remembrance in I Corinthians 11:17-34: An Apostolic and Patristic Reprimand for Inclusive, Christlike Table Manners.

Marisa Lapish

Abstract

This paper examines the “table manners” around early church practices of the Lord’s Supper Table in light of I Corinthians 11:17-34. Alongside patristic voices, Paul’s corrective reprimand in this passage demonstrates an inclusive ethic at the Lord’s Supper Table as an icon of remembrance for expressing the gospel of love embodied in the new humanity on earth as it is in heaven. First-century Greco-Roman meal practices are discussed as well as the meaning of anamnesis as “remembrance,” for a Christotelic expression in Jesus’ Last Supper as a kingdom of God prototype for early church table manners. In I Corinthians 11:17-34, the unethical table manners of the rich toward the poor are specifically highlighted by Paul and confirmed through patristic writings. By pointing back to Jesus’ Last Supper table, Paul actually collapses time to point forward, reorienting the church of Corinth to the future kingdom of God—the messianic banquet table where all would feast equitably and peaceably, with love and justice. In this way, the Lord’s Supper practice is a “re-membering” of suffering humanity, an ethic of “just hospitality.” This table represents the kenotic love of Jesus through the love of neighbour, revealing the meaning of the cross, the body and blood given for one and all, expressed through the bread and wine shared by one and all.

The Communion meal is a feast, the place where
Jesus meets with us in a specific way, and if we
may say the table is a place of remembrance, icon,
then no table is ever just a table once the table is
called the place where Jesus comes to be recognized
by us in the breaking of the bread.¹

A predominant theme in the Pauline corpus is the inclusivity of the new humanity as a kingdom expression of the family of God on earth as it is in heaven, wherein “there is neither Jew nor Greek,

¹ Preston Yancey, *Out of the House of Bread* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 144.

slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”² Despite this archetype of the “beloved community”, the early churches were riven with conflict and division, the church in Corinth perhaps being the most notorious for its factions. Naselli asserts that I Corinthians addresses ten controversies, some surrounding eating and meals, but for Paul, the centralizing cipher for all church controversies was the gospel of love itself.³ The “centerpiece” for love and communion in early church worship communities was around the table, with bread and wine, to remember that Jesus gave his body and poured out his blood with love for all people. This is the inclusive, unifying good news expressed in I Corinthians 15: 2-4.⁴

In I Corinthians 11: 17-34, however, Paul’s tone takes the form of reprimand, calling the Corinthian church back into remembrance. The rebuke was Paul’s challenge to remember *one another*, the iconic flesh-and-blood bodies sitting around the Lord’s Supper Table, as they ate bread and drank wine to remember the body and blood of Jesus. Rather than embodying the inclusive festal family, the church of Corinth was divided and fractured, needing to be re-centered through the gospel of love to inclusively express the reality of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. This paper will examine Paul’s corrective reprimand in I Corinthians 11:17-34, alongside patristic voices, to observe the inclusive ethic in the Lord’s Supper Table as icon of remembrance for expressing the gospel of love embodied in the new humanity on earth as it is in heaven. I will do this by exploring first century Greco-Roman meal practices, the meaning of *anamnesis* as “remembrance”, and its Christotelic expression in Jesus’ Last Supper as a kingdom of God prototype for early church table manners surrounding the Lord’s Supper.

In the middle of the first century, Corinth “was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”⁵ In Corinth, higher class people ate food and drank wine of superior quality and in greater quantity than those in the lower class; meals would be eaten in the wealthier class homes to accommodate space needs, and seating was arranged according to social rank.⁶ Greco-Roman culture, however, was undergoing Empire-wide social innovation. Corley elaborates that “since customs

² Galatians 3:28, NIV.

³ Andrew David Naselli, “The Structure and Theological Message of I Corinthians,” *Presbyterion* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 98-114.

⁴ I Corinthians 15: 2-4 “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”, NIV.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Revised Edition, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

⁶ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 201-202.

reflect and symbolize a culture's social and political relationships...innovations in meal practice generally undermine the basic social constructs and relations of a society."⁷ In Corinth, early church worship around meals had social consequences.

The first century Corinthian church was filled with men and women, Jews and Gentiles, enslaved and freed people, all gathered together around the table for a meal for worship and discourse.⁸ The late first century text, the *Didache*, describes this coming together of people for sacred meals like this: "As the broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may thy Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom."⁹ Justin Martyr describes this pattern continuing into the second-century in his travels from Asia Minor to Rome in 150 C.E.:

All those who live in the city or the country gather together in one place on the day of the sun, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read...Then we all rise together and pray; and then... bread and wine and water are brought.¹⁰

At its earliest stage of development, the Jesus-movement was defined by its social diversity, as a marginal group within a changing Greco-Roman world. Smith proposes that powerful social bonding and inclusive belonging for the early church developed through the community meal.¹¹ Maximus the Confessor summarized the meaning brought to the Lord's Supper table with this unifying theme: "All of us who share in the same bread and in the same cup are united with each other in communion with the one Holy Spirit."¹² Similarly, John Chrysostom viewed the custom as "a foundation of love, and a

⁷ Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), xv-xvi. Corley further relates, "Innovations in the meal practice of aristocratic Greco-Roman women undermined the gender and class-based social hierarchy of Greco-Roman society...Women who ventured out into the public in this manner were labeled 'slaves' and 'prostitutes'."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.; see also Acts 2:42-47 as a prototype for early Christian worship practice with the "breaking of bread".

⁹ "The Didache 9" in *Early Christian Writings*, ed. Betty Radice, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 194-195.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2015), 45.

¹¹ D. E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 184-185.

¹² Maximus the Confessor quoted in Gennadios Limouris "The Eucharist as the Sacrament of Sharing: An Orthodox Point of View", *The Ecumenical Review* (1986), 403.

comfort to poverty, and a corrective of riches, and an occasion of the highest philosophy, and an instruction of humility.”¹³

Paul’s rebuke in I Corinthians 11:17-34 is placed within the wider context of this letter concerning the divisions due to the “differences among them”¹⁴, yet he is specifically referring to *how* they are eating the Lord’s supper together—their table manners.¹⁵ Some eat first, and some eat last; some are hungry, and others are drunk. Specifically, the rich were shaming the poor, threatening the identity of the egalitarian beloved community as faithful representatives of God’s kingdom family on earth as it is in heaven. Paul admonishes the Corinthian church to “remembrance”—specifically to remember Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples as they presently eat bread and drink wine together.¹⁶ Lastly, Paul warns the Corinthians about eating and drinking in an “unworthy manner” and the consequences of doing so.¹⁷ .

Richards and O’Brien explain the primary issue in this passage. “The division of haves and have-nots struck against the very heart of Christian fellowship.”¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria declares this as a two-pronged wrongdoing. “First, he adds to the burden of those who do not have, and second, he lays his own intemperance bare in front of those who do have.”¹⁹ John Chrysostom as “hero to the poor and downtrodden, both Christian and pagan”²⁰, is blatant:

What senselessness, what madness is this! The church has so many poor standing around it, and has also so many children who are rich; yet she is unable to give relief to one poor person. ‘One man is hungry, another gets drunk’(I Corinthians 11:21); one man defecates in a silver pot, another has not so much as a crust of bread.²¹

¹³ John Chrysostom, *Homily 27 on First Corinthians*, (2) I Corinthians 11:17.

¹⁴ I Corinthians 11:17-19, NIV.

¹⁵ I Corinthians 11:20-22, 27-34, NIV.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 11: 23-26, NIV.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 11: 27-34, NIV.

¹⁸ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 133.

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Catena*, I Cor 11: 21

²⁰ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 295.

²¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 135-136.

Chrysostom critiques this disregard for the “common table”, referring back to the gospel narrative of Jesus’ Last Supper in kingdom terminology as the “community of the feast.”²² “The Lord’s supper ought to be common to all, because it is the Master’s, whose property does not belong to one servant or to another but ought to be shared by all together.”²³ Chrysostom’s essential rebuke was not only had the Corinthians overlooked the poor, but they had shamed them.²⁴ Chrysostom next points to Jesus, as “he leads us to the remembrance of all those things....by His time, and His *table*, and His betrayal...”²⁵

Paul’s narration of the Last Supper in I Corinthians 11:23-25 is the only time he quotes Jesus’ words directly from the gospels as read in Luke 22:14-30.²⁶ In the Lucan passage, the *table* is mentioned five times in those sixteen verses where Jesus is foreshadowing his kingdom of God table ethic in light of the Passover meal memorial. Clearly, Paul is calling the Corinthian church into remembrance of this table scene where Jesus was commemorating the Passover with his disciples and reinterpreting it in light of the New Covenant which he would be fulfilling through his impending death, burial, and resurrection. Remembrance, *anamnesis*, was a re-presentation of the Lord’s Supper as a *kingdom* reminder through dramatic symbols of bread and wine, where time collapses into moment of remembrance—past becomes present, and present becomes future simultaneously.²⁷ Time collapses into “spiritual time, where past and present and future coexist in the fallow of memory” and is sustained in table remembrance.²⁸ Yancey describes this kingdom table as an icon, a “locator of remembrance drawing us into the contemplation about God.”²⁹ Similarly, Eastern Orthodoxy views icons as “windows into heaven.”³⁰ If the table setting is an icon for kingdom remembrance, what were early Christians to recall about table manners when seated at the Lord’s Supper Table?

The Last Supper was a commemoration of the Passover story in Exodus where Hebrew slaves were set free from their bondage in Egypt. Yet the Old Covenant liberation story of freed slaves with arms full of the plundered riches of Empire, seems to differ from the New Covenant redemption story. With all the kingdom references in Luke 22 might Jesus be saying, in effect, “But I say unto you...my

²² John Chrysostom, *Homily 27 on First Corinthians*, I Corinthians 11:21

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., I Cor 11:22

²⁵ Ibid., I Cor 11:24

²⁶ Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), xvi.

²⁷ Richard Spielmann, *History of Christian Worship* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), 14-17.

²⁸ Yancey, *Out of the House*, 109.

²⁹ Ibid., 114-115.

³⁰ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 301.

body and blood, my life, was ‘poured out’ for you to freely share with *all* people. My kingdom table of remembrance includes an outpouring of grace and love and generosity for *all* people as you live my self-emptied life of servanthood where the ‘greatest among you will be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.’³¹ This is what my abundant banquet table of the already-but-not-fully-yet kingdom of God is like. *Remember*, empty yourselves, and live abundantly by giving to others in love. ‘And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my *table* in my kingdom...’³² The self-giving love of Jesus was the New Covenant table ethic to love one another and to love neighbors, even enemy-neighbor. “Remembering Jesus, in other words, inspires us to remember others,”³³ Wirzba reminds. Jesus gave honor to all regardless of social status, personal accomplishment, purity, health, or wealth. Groenewald explains,

Instead of seeking honour for himself, Jesus was prepared to be humiliated. For him, in contrast to the popular understanding, honour was not limited to supply. His God offered an unlimited supply of honour; in turn, those honoured by God possessed the social resources to accord honour to others without fear of diminishing their own. Non-retaliation thus became the only honourable response to a challenge to one’s personal honour. Meals became an especially prominent occasion for this outrageous giving of honour to all, around a radically inclusive table.³⁴

These were the New Covenant table manners to be embodied by the Church as they proclaimed Jesus’s death, his body and blood, through bread and wine around the table, “until he comes”. In other words, the New Covenant people, as living icons, embodied Christ’s kenotic cruciformity by the way they ate together and shared their resources with one another. By pointing back to “remember” the Luke 22 Last Supper table, Paul actually collapses time to point forward, reorienting the church of Corinth to the future kingdom of God that Jesus was referring to in Luke 22—the messianic banquet table to come

³¹ Luke 22:26, NIV. Note: Perhaps Galatians 3:28 is Paul’s paraphrase of Christ’s kingdom idea here.

³² Luke 22:29, NIV.

³³ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 209.

³⁴ Jonanda Groenewald, *Show, Tell and Re-enact: The Reason Why the Earliest Followers of Jesus Found the Eucharist Meaningful*, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (67)1, Art. #877 (2011): 8.

where all would feast equitably and peacefully, with love and justice. Schmemmann describes the Last Supper as

the manifestation of that kingdom of love, for the sake of which the world was created and in which it has its *telos*, its fulfillment. Through love God created the world...Through love he sent his only-begotten Son...and now, at this table, he manifests and grants this love as his kingdom, and his kingdom as “abiding” in love.³⁵

Chrysostom interrogates the church again with regard to remembrance at the table:

Are you making a remembrance of Christ, and do despise the poor and tremblest not? Why, if a son or brother had died and thou were making a remembrance of him, you would have been smitten by your conscience, had you not fulfilled the custom and invited the poor: and when you are making remembrance of your Master, do you not so much as simply give a portion of the Table?³⁶

Paul and the early church fathers interpret the Lord’s Supper Table as one of kenotic remembrance—a regular and rhythmic reminder that all are included and cared for at the kingdom table—and to beware of partaking in this remembrance in an “unworthy manner”. By referencing the Last Supper, Paul does not seem to be pointing out sin in general as being the “unworthy manner”. According to Paul and the patristic voices in this corrective passage, the “unworthy manner” was the unethical divisiveness between how the rich were treating the poor, the “haves” overlooking, neglecting, and shaming the “have nots”, which often includes those marginalized in other ways, such as by gender, disability, ethnicity or race. When Paul relates that eating in an unworthy manner would bring “judgment”—the reason why many were weak, sick, and dying—Richards and O’Brien provide illumination. “We often misread this passage...we assume that the ones who are getting sick and dying are the ones who were eating unworthily. Paul never says that.”³⁷ More likely, it was the *poor* who were

³⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013), 200-201.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homily 27*, 1 Cor 11:25

³⁷ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 133-134.

weak, sick and dying, however directly or indirectly, due to their neglect by the rich. Early Christian communities were “permeable”, according to Hauerwas.³⁸ Unloving, unethical behavior is contagious, corporately permeating the whole body, shaming the church, and failing to display the cruciform love of Jesus in the context of the present day kingdom of God family as well as the inclusive messianic banquet table of the future. Discernment around the Lord’s Supper table is a place where each member reflectively examines the personal and corporate needs of the community requiring care so that hearts are nurtured with compassion, humility and loving service toward one another, prioritizing poor and vulnerable people. True to historical prophetic proclamation, Volf calls the Lord’s Supper a “toast to remembering” the One who suffered *with* the ones who suffer.³⁹ As Christ’s suffering is remembered around the table, the sufferings of others for whom he died are also remembered, and the body “re-members” itself with embrace as one restorative Body. Re-membering is an ethic of “just hospitality”⁴⁰.

Following Jesus’ example, Paul, Chrysostom, and others, include all in their food-sharing practices, the poor among the disciples *and* others in the community. The practice of the early church was to feed the poor, diminishing poverty in their community.⁴¹ As part of the weekly gathering, Justin Martyr explains,

And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.⁴²

Since the present assembly of church envisions, embodies, and capacitates the future kingdom of God, an open table of welcome prefigures what will one day fully be, especially for those who would hold to a

³⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Sanctified Body: Why Perfection Does Not Require a Self,” in *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, ed. Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 19-38.

³⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 224.

⁴⁰ Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference*, ed. J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 65.

⁴¹ Acts 4: 32-37, NIV.

⁴² Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67, 45.

hopeful and inclusive future restoration of all things. Maximus the Confessor states, “The church transforms spiritually men, women, and children who differ widely in their nature, language, culture, race and mode of living...It stamps all of them with the face of God. It gives to all without distinction a unique, indestructible value that obliterates the many, deep differences.”⁴³ The drawing power of the people of God around a table of kenotic love calls forth Jesus’ body and blood into remembrance through bread and wine and reveals the two basic early Christian ethical values, according to Theiben: love of neighbor and renunciation of status.⁴⁴ Lived out in the family of God, these ethical values are spiritually formative and would serve to draw others to see the love of Jesus in the breaking of the bread at the iconic table of remembrance. Perhaps theological explanation of mysteries is not what draws nor reveals Jesus to a world which suffers, any more than Jesus’ explanations of his suffering prophesied through Isaiah made him recognizable to the downcast Emmaus disciples during the seven miles of walking and explaining. Perhaps, as with them, Jesus is best revealed in the momentous breaking of the bread around a hospitable table of generous grace and abundant love of God and neighbor.⁴⁵ In the Easter Homily of John Chrysostom, the festal song continues to invite and welcome one and all to our future banquet table: “Enter all of you into the joy of our Lord. Whether the first or the least, may ye receive your reward. Rich and poor, dance around together...Let us embrace each other with joy.”⁴⁶

Bibliography

Chrysostom, John. *Homily 27 on First Corinthians*. [CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 27 on First Corinthians \(Chrysostom\) \(newadvent.org\)](#) Accessed May 19, 2021.

Clement of Alexandria. *Catena Bible Commentary*. I Corinthians 11:21. [1 Corinthians 11 - Catena Bible & Commentaries](#) Accessed May 19, 2021.

Corley, Kathleen E. *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.

⁴³ Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia I*, quoted in Gennadios Limouris “The Eucharist as the Sacrament of Sharing: An Orthodox Point of View”, *The Ecumenical Review* (1986), 411.

⁴⁴ G. Theiben, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, trans. J. Bowden, SCM London, quoted in Groenewald, *Show and Tell*, 8.

⁴⁵ Luke 24:13-32, NIV.

⁴⁶ The Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom, quoted in Gennadios Limouris, “Eucharist as Sacrament,” p. 409.

“The Didache 9”. In *Early Christian Writings*, edited by Betty Radice and translated by Maxwell Staniforth, 194-195. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Fee, Gordon. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.

Groenewald, Jonanda. “Show, Tell, and Re-enact: The Reason Why the Earliest Followers of Jesus Found the Eucharist Meaningful.” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67 (1) Art. #877 (2011): 1-10. [Groenewald Show\(2011\).pdf;sequence=1 \(up.ac.za\)](#) Accessed May 19, 2021.

Hauerwas, Stanley. “The Sanctified Body: Why Perfection Does not Require a Self.” In *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, edited by Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

Justin Martyr. *First Apology* 67. Translated by Marcus Dods and George Reith. Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2015. [Justin MartyrV1-0.pdf \(romanroadsstatic.com\)](#) Accessed May 19, 2021.

Kelly, J. N. D. *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Limouris, Gennadios. “The Eucharist as the Sacrament of Sharing: An Orthodox Point of View.” *The Ecumenical Review* (1986): 401-415.

Naselli, Andrew David. “The Structure and Theological Message of I Corinthians.” *Presbyterion* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 98-114.

Olson, Roger E. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999.

Richards, E. Randolph and O’Brien, Brandon J. *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL IVP Books, 2012.

Ruden, Sarah. *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

Russell, Letty. *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference*, edited by J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Schmemmann, Alexander. *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

Smith, D. E. *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003.

Spielmann, Richard. *History of Christian Worship*. New York: Seabury Press, 1966.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019.

Wirzba, Norman. *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Yancey, Preston. *Out of the House of Bread: Satisfying Your Hunger for God With the Spiritual Disciplines*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.