

## PREFACE

Let's begin by reading from the letter written by James.

**Read James 2:1-13.**

As in our last, in this session we have once again a minority interpretation and a majority interpretation of what was going on during the Lord's Supper as it was being celebrated in the Corinth church. Since both support Paul's overarching point about what *should* be going on, it does no harm to the passage to consider both.

**Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.**

In short, the majority interpretation of our passage, as reflected in almost all of our common translations, is based on a temporal (or time based) rendering of the verb *prolambanein* in v21, translated "first," or "beforehand," or "take before."

Verse 33 offers an important clue for the interpretation of vv20-22. Following the temporal rendering, in most of our translations it corresponds with something like "wait for one another," or "eat together" (NIV2011). That is, instead of "eating before" others arrive, wait so that all may "eat together."

**Read 1 Corinthians 11:33.**

A pretty good case can be made, however, for the minority interpretation as reflected in the more recent *Christian Standard Bible* from Holman (publishers of the NASB) but *not* the earlier *Holman Christian Standard Bible*. Verse 33 in the CSB reads, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, welcome one another." So correspondingly, v21 reads, "For at the meal, each one eats his own supper. So one person is hungry while another gets drunk!" Note the difference:

NASB v33     **wait** for one another (temporal)

CSB v33     **welcome** one another

NASB v21     each one **takes** his own supper **first** (temporal)

CSB v21     each one **eats** his own supper

**v20**

*Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper,*

It is important that we get a picture of what was going on in the Corinth church during these occasions—love feasts, or common meals—because they would have borne few similarities to ours. It would have been nothing like our typical celebration of Communion.

To begin, it would have been held not at a church building, but at someone's home—and one with room for the entire group, so by definition the home of someone with means. Indeed, it is quite certain that the church did not *have* a church building, but regularly met at a home.

We are accustomed to separating the communal meal from the “Lord’s Supper,” as if first one takes place, followed by the other. But typically in the NT they followed the pattern set by the Jewish Passover meal, elements of which Christ Jesus apprehended for the institution of His “new covenant” in the bread and the wine. We also are accustomed, I believe, to think that on that night of his betrayal and arrest, all Jesus and His disciples consumed was the bread and the wine. But they probably followed the same Passover pattern, which is described in the *New Bible Dictionary* (1984):

After candlelight search for the forbidden leaven, and other careful preparations (cf. Mk. 14:12-16 and parallels), the Paschal supper proper was taken reclining. It included the symbolic elements of roasted lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, some minor condiments and four cups of wine at specified points. The stipulated ritual hand-washings were carefully observed. The table (more probably the floor) was cleared before the second cup of wine, the story of the Egyptian Passover and Exodus recounted in a dialogue between father and son (or some suitable substitutes). The dishes of food were then brought back, part of the Hallel was sung, the second cup of wine followed. Then came the breaking of bread. In the Last Supper, it was probably at this point that Judas received the sop, and departed into the night to betray his Master (Jn. 13:30). On that fateful night, it may be assumed that the institution of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist was associated with the third cup of wine. The singing of the Hallel was completed with the fourth cup [of wine], doubtless the hymn of Mt. 26:30.

From this we see that the meal and the rite of the bread and wine—even during Christ's Last Supper—were blended together.

What Paul had learned was that typically in Corinth this occasion—not a celebration of Passover, but a Christian “love feast” or common meal that included the Lord's Supper (Communion)—had devolved into something more akin to a pagan bacchanal. Rather than a time of holy fellowship, dedicated to the Lord, focused on Him and the fellowship of the church that bears His name, it had become little more than an indulgent revelry—and primarily for those who could afford to supply the more lavish and expensive food. It is proposed by some that the more well-to-do members of the congregation consumed the food, while their lessers received only the bread and wine portion of the meal, that which we refer to as Communion.

*for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.*

This is why Paul says, paraphrasing v20, *Gimme a break. You're not really celebrating the Lord's Supper—it's just another occasion for a party.*

Here is where we run into the two interpretations of the situation. Whether it is a matter of eating *before* the others, or just eating by oneself, the effect is the same: Too many in the church were corrupting the very purpose behind the supper. The picture of the traditional interpretation (temporal) is that the wealthy people in the church would show up early with all their fancy food and begin the meal before the more common individuals could arrive. The working folk could not arrive until they got off work, so by the time they showed up the wealthier folk were already stuffed and drunk, having consumed most of what they brought for themselves. The less-common interpretation, as in the *Christian Standard Bible*, "For at the meal, each one eats his own supper..." is a picture of all the people being together in the same venue, but just eating whatever they brought for themselves, and not sharing with the others.

Thus the setting was not at all like our traditional potluck events where all the food brought is spread on the table and everyone takes from it whatever they like. Hence the injunction of v33 in the *Christian Standard Bible*, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, welcome one another." That is, greet one another, share your food with one another—be a *church*! Compare what was going on in Corinth to the picture of the even younger church, as described in Acts 2.

### **Read Acts 2:41-47.**

*...each one takes his own supper first;*

What a contrast! But here again it is another example of the secular culture invading the church. It was not the custom of the time to share with others. Even if an individual or couple were invited to someone's residence, they might typically bring their own food.

*Garland:* The practice of "basket dinners," or *eranos* (contribution) dinner parties, in which persons make up a dinner for themselves and pack it into a basket to go to another's house to eat, was well known.

That Paul was appalled by this behavior in the church is clear from the last verse in the paragraph.

*What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.*

Once again we require historical context to understand Paul's reference here. About as close as we can get to our own time for a reference would be Edwardian England, around the turn of the nineteenth century and before the first World War. Wealthy landowners would live in stately homes, catered to by a small army of servants. Every evening dinner would be a formal, sumptuous affair with multiple courses, served by attendants who would stand motionless in the background, obediently awaiting the next request from the members of the family. While it is true that these servants were paid a salary, did not go hungry, and, for the most part, welcomed the opportunity to serve, their meals below-stairs were more simple and pedestrian than those of their betters.

In first century Corinth there was an even greater divide between the haves and have-nots. When Paul rhetorically exclaims, "Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?" (obviously directed toward the "haves" in the church), he means this quite literally: the wealthy or even middle class had homes with kitchens where they took their meals, while the regular folk in the city depended on public facilities. They did not have kitchens, but either prepared their meals in public kitchens, public bakeries where their bread was baked, or they ate at fast-food shops. They did not even bathe at home, but used the public baths in the city.

Even at meals where the classes were mixed at the same table, the custom of the day was that the elite would be served the better, more refined food, while the lower class guests would be served the pedestrian fare. Historian Paul Veyne writes, "Guests of different rank were served different dishes and wines of different qualities, according to their respective dignities." The upper class thought nothing of consuming their rich fare in the presence of those who were limited to gruel. That was the custom. At the same time, for those in the lower social strata the opportunity in the church to take a common meal with fellow believers would be for them a hugely important sign of their new life in the church. Nothing would validate better the fact that they truly were brothers and sisters in the Lord than to sit down to a common meal and partake *together* of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Instead of embracing the lower classes as brethren, these Corinthians were blithely superimposing the customs of the secular community on the church. Instead of embracing the new order of life in Christ, they were "despising" it; instead of embracing their fellow believers, they were "shaming" them.

This brings me back to a point I have made before. At some point the earnest believer intent on growing into Christ-like maturity must—*must*—decide which voice will lead him or her. Will it be the voice of this fallen world? Or will it be the voice of Christ and God’s word? It cannot be both; to be mature in faith one must choose.

This was the root failing of the Corinthians. They were listening to the voice of this world rather than the voice of the Savior. They were incorporating the ways of the contemporary culture rather than the ways of the gospel. They were paying greater heed to the philosophers of the day rather than the teachings from Christ’s called apostle.

If you are a Christian, you cannot have multiple lords. If you are a Christian, you have one Lord—and one Lord only.

Even Jesus the Christ.