

UNWORTHY WORSHIP: PAUL AS PASTORAL THEOLOGIAN TO THE CHRISTIANS IN CORINTH

KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE, PH.D.
HMS Richards Divinity School, La Sierra University, USA

Derek Tidball, in his book *Skillful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology*, understands pastoral theology as the weaving together of theology and praxis—doctrine understood in light of the experience of the church and church life in light of theological convictions.¹ Given Tidball’s definition, an insightful paradoxical truth, this paper begins with the assumption that Paul was first and foremost a pastoral theologian—a skillful shepherd whose responses to the various practical issues in the first-century house churches were shaped by a theology that was grounded in his sacred Scriptures. But this definition also notices how Paul’s theology was informed by the experience of the church at worship. Using 1 Cor 11:17–34 as a case study, the paper will explore Paul’s indictment against the practice of unworthy worship taking place at Corinth, his proposed solution, and the theological foundation underpinning his convictions. This passage in his first letter to the Corinthians is a moving example of Paul as a pastoral theologian, with implications for faithful embodiments of “worthy worship” in Christian contexts today.

1. Paul as Pastor

Given what we know from historical and social scientific sources that help us reconstruct its social situation, the cosmopolitan city of Corinth included people from all over the empire who brought with them various understandings of economic, social, and religious life. For early converts to the Jesus movement living in this thriving city and attending house churches, ethnic diversity was already a reality of life. For this reason, establishing

¹ Tidball further describes pastoral theology as “the relationship between doctrine and practice in both the ministry itself and in the pastoral task generally.” Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 28.

Christianity here probably did not have as many Jew-gentile tensions as in other cities of the Roman Empire. Since Corinth had only been recently founded as a Roman colony, many of the settlers were new to the area. Some settlers were Roman soldiers, paid for their services by the promise of new land in a new colony. Most of the settlers were freedmen, that is, recently freed slaves, who were getting a new start in independent living after having served others all their lives. Corinthian inhabitants, therefore, were a mixture of tradesmen and sailors and entrepreneurs and merchants from all over. Very few had a long heritage in the place with strong ethnic ties. Rather, the city was crowded and full of recent arrivals wanting to make it big. And *this* city was a good place to make it big. Even Homer, in his work *The Iliad 2*, mentions “wealthy Corinth.”² In Corinth, status was not so much based on family name, heritage, and history as on individual abilities and wealth generated from diligent effort.³

Paul’s first visit to Corinth (51–52 CE) had been during the year of the Isthmian games. Even more visitors than usual were arriving at the two ports, and lots of people needed tents. Paul began his ministry among the street vendors and artisans of Corinth, making tents for the sports fans. That was where he met Prisca and Aquila, also tentmakers. Because of their profession, all three of these followers of Jesus Christ would have known about the city’s trade guilds.⁴

Trade guilds were like associations or exclusive clubs, where people with the same status and profession would pay a fee and regularly meet together in a large home or meeting hall. These were particularly popular among those of growing wealth, both men and women. The gatherings involved worshiping the god or gods of their particular profession, honoring members of the society who had donated large gifts or goods to the gods, sharing a meal together, and networking in order to advance in their profession. Most likely the first Christian house churches were thought of like

² Homer, *The Iliad 2*, trans. A. T. Murray (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 570.

³ Michael J. Gorman says that the verb “to Corinthianize” created out of the city’s name meant to become thoroughly immoral and materialistic. Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 228. One can also imagine that not worrying who you used meant that the streets of Corinth contained a lot of used and abused people. A “Corinthian girl” was a prostitute. In a place where so many were making great profits off commerce, others just tried to survive day after miserable day. For more on the urban nature of Christian house churches, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁴ It would be interesting to know if Paul’s wealthy family members in Tarsus ever participated in trade guilds. Were they wealthy through the tent-making business? Through distinguished military service? F. F. Bruce considers these possibilities. F. F. Bruce, “Paul in Acts and Letters,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 679–692.

these clubs. They, too, met in the larger homes of wealthy believers in order to accommodate as many as possible. They, too, came together to worship their God and to share a meal together. They even shared letters, networking with Christians in other parts of the Roman Empire.⁵

But there was a major difference between the clubs and the house churches: unlike the exclusive clubs, the house churches included a much more diverse group of people. Instead of only those having the same trade or profession, in the house churches people from different social classes and professions met together. Founded by Paul, the house churches in Corinth flourished—with a spirit of affirming their shared faith in Jesus and an eagerness to worship, pray, prophesy and share other spiritual gifts.⁶

But then Paul left Corinth. And the Christian house churches soon drifted away from what they had been to become more like the trade guild associations. Paul hears about this through Chloe's people (1:11).⁷ Rather than coming together to celebrate the Lord's meal, wealthy Christians ate and drank all day in the fancy dining hall most likely in the home of Gaius or Erastus or Phoebe,⁸ while lower-class Corinthian Christians ate their more basic food in another part of the house or courtyard and the extremely poor went without any food at all. This on the very day that was meant to celebrate a sense of togetherness in sharing the Lord's meal!

One might imagine that Gaius, Erastus, Phoebe, or other wealthy Corinthian Christians were just doing what was natural—allowing their Corinthian culture to shape the Christian gatherings. After all, they were accustomed to entertaining wealthy people in their multi-room homes, and

⁵ The ideas in this paragraph can be found in a variety of sources, including Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, trans. John H. Schutz (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 145–174; Mark T. Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World: 1 Corinthians in Its Greco-Roman Social Setting* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 147–177.

⁶ See 1 Cor 1:4–7; 11:5; 12:1–7; 13; 14:1–25.

⁷ It is highly likely that Chloe's people represented a group of very poor Christians who might not have even had a "house" but were just referred to as "people." Perhaps they did not have enough space in their tenement apartment to hold anyone other than Chloe's family. If so, they would have had to work from dawn to dusk in quite humble (some would say humiliating) jobs just to survive.

⁸ Gaius and Erastus (Rom 16:23) were located in Corinth; Phoebe lived approximately eight miles away in Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). All three were wealthy Christians who provided for the churches.

wealthy people expected specialty foods and lots of it.⁹ This was particularly the case when the wealthy had provided the bread and wine for everyone else. When you are a benefactor of others, you expect to benefit, so that status determined the quality and quantity of food you received at a banquet.¹⁰ But when the time finally came to share the Lord's Supper, the divisions between people remained stark. Some were falling asleep from overstuffed stomachs, while others were starving. The competitive spirit of the city with its heightened class distinctions had found its way into the church. Paul was upset. He had founded the Christian house churches in Corinth and now some of its members were hurting, and other members seemed oblivious to the fact that they had caused the hurt. What does a pastor do in this situation, especially a pastor who is unable to be physically present among the church members? Today's pastor might generate a series of messages on one's or the church's Facebook page. For Paul, the situation called forth the following section of his epistle:

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you *come together* it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you *come together* as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are

⁹ Katherine M. D. Dunbabin says that the Greek norm of three couches in a room placed in a U shape with each holding three guests (for a maximum of nine in a room) was being modified in the first century to include multiple dining rooms that allowed wealthy people to invite more guests to larger banquets. However, these meals meant that guests would not eat together. Instead guests were placed in dining rooms with proximity to the host based on status. Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40. Dunbabin's book follows these changes in architecture and wall paintings. Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig state, "Those who dined at ancient table were always aware of their differing social rankings. For example, the act of reclining in itself indicated rank, for it was traditionally the posture reserved for free citizens and prohibited to women, children, and slaves." Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 32. For an extended study, see Matthew B. Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Theissen says, "Thus the wealthy Christians not only ate by themselves and began before the regular Lord's Supper, but also had more to eat." Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 155. Theissen also acknowledges, "In all likelihood wealthy Christians probably did not suffer from a guilty conscience in this entire matter. It is more likely that they thought of themselves as having supported the poorer Christians in generous fashion by providing a meal. The conflict thus has its roots in the collision between a consistent theory of community on the one hand and, on the other, behavior produced by social differences, something which existed not only in the Christian tradition but in Greek traditions as well." *Ibid.*, 162.

genuine. When you *come together*, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you *come together* to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you *come together*, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come. (1 Cor 11:17-34, NRSV)¹¹

2. Paul as Theologian

The words from Paul started out quite harshly: it would have been better if the Corinthian Christians did not get together since when they did, it was for the worse.¹² In addition to noticing the repetition of "come together" and the word "body," it is helpful to note that whatever it was they *were* doing, it was *not* the Lord's Supper (11:20).¹³ Why is this? Notice that some ate so much that they became drunk (11:21), while others were left both

¹¹ Emphases added.

¹² Gorman calls it "liturgical chaos." Gorman, *Apostle of the Lord*, 255.

¹³ Probably a better translation of the verse would be "when you meet together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat."

hungry (11:21) and humiliated in their hunger (11:22). Would this have reminded church members of the trade guild meals, meals that excluded the poor and hungry of Corinth?¹⁴ This church conflict seemed less about ethnic differences (Jew vs. gentile) and more about social status (rich vs. poor). Had the wealthy Corinthian Christians anticipated Paul's condemnation when, earlier in his letter (4:1–21), they heard Paul identify with the marginalized in society (esp. 4:10–13)? If so, this must have been culturally difficult to take.

Greco-Roman banquets were opportunities for gaining and maintaining honor. Banquet invitations, placement at the table, reclining positions, and the menu all factored in one's status. Of course, others would be humiliated. That was par for the course. In a limited-goods society, there was only so much honor to go around.¹⁵ If Paul's identification with the marginalized was not enough to shame them, he then reminded them all that the Lord's meal was about remembering Jesus, "a victim of extreme shame."¹⁶

Notice that at the heart of this pericope is a remembering of the tradition that Paul received through the oral traditions about Jesus's final meal with his disciples just prior to his crucifixion. This meal, the supposed reason for the Corinthian Christians coming together, was completely ignored or forgotten or dismissed as unimportant if the focus of the gathering had become networking and status-seeking. The dismissal of the hungry was a dismissal of Christ. So, Paul reminds them of Jesus's body—the one betrayed, broken, poured out, and returning. Here is the remedy for what was sick about their coming together. They must examine themselves, discerning the body of Christ.

When confronted by the parochial, practical, problematic issues in the life of the churches in Corinth, Paul shared insights from his theology to address the issues. The body, Christ's body and the church as a body, became his central metaphor to remind the Corinthians of their Christian theology. They were to participate in a meal that remembered an earlier one—when, at the table, Jesus anticipated the cross. In doing so, they remembered Christ's body. They remembered Christ's blood poured out. They re-

¹⁴ Dunbabin notes that we know little of the meal experience of poor families in the first-century Roman world, even as we know a lot about the meals and banquets of the elite. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 2.

¹⁵ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Jerome H. Neyrey, "He Must Increase, I Must Decrease (John 3:30): A Cultural and Social Interpretation," in *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 123–142.

¹⁶ Finney, *Honour and Conflict*, 177.

remembered Christ's death. They remembered that he will return. While Roman banquets would often remember heroes who had died for Rome, Christians were to remember One who had died *at the hands of Rome*.¹⁷

It is interesting that Paul had mentioned the body and bread in the chapter earlier (10:1–22), with special focus on the “one bread” and “one body” (10:17). If they were to be the “body” of Christ, they needed to reflect “oneness” even in their many diverse and complex lives. What exactly might that mean? It seems that the emphasis of the passage goes to the neglect of the hungry and humiliated. Where in other letters Paul emphasized oneness in Christ that eliminated the barriers between Jews and gentiles, here the focus was on the distinctions between wealthy and poor. Since “all of the participants” shared equally “in the expiatory death of Jesus Christ and in the future consummation of the salvation realized by that death,”¹⁸ all must share equally in the Lord's meal.

Christ's body (bread) finds its equivalent in Christ's body (people). To neglect Christ's body—the hungry and humiliated people—is to betray Christ's body that was broken and poured out. For a meal among Christians to be “the Lord's meal,” all must eat until satisfied by the abundance of God's grace. To be sick from gluttony and drunkenness means that one has not experienced the Lord's meal. To be humiliated and dying from hunger because of low social status means that one has not experienced the Lord's meal.¹⁹

Corinth's fixation on power and privilege, exemplified by the luxurious trade guild meals of the higher classes, must not be embraced by the wealthy Christians even when they meet in the impressive homes of their wealthy members. When Chloe's people went hungry, part of Christ's body

¹⁷ R. Alan Streett, *Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord's Supper under Roman Domination during the First Century* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 207. Streett continues, “When the church ‘proclaims his death’ at mealtimes, it exposes the Roman domination system for what it really is: a vessel of death and destruction.” *Ibid.*, 208. Bruce W. Longenecker says, “To counter this disregard of the needy among the Corinthians, Paul simply reintroduced the narrative of the self-giving Jesus into their consciousness, expecting them to follow in the narrative's wake.” Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 154. Bruce Winter sees this occasion as Paul calling for a shift from “private” dinners to the shared dinner of the Lord's Supper. Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 142–163.

¹⁸ Finney, *Honour and Conflict*, 175.

¹⁹ Stephen C. Barton, “Historical Criticism and Social-Scientific Perspectives in New Testament Study,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 57–58.

was hungry, not discerning *that* body would bring judgment. For Paul, this ecclesiological (mal)practice was a serious theological matter.

3. Paul as Pastoral Theologian

It is helpful to remember that when Paul wrote an epistle to the house churches located in a particular city of the Roman Empire, he was *interpreting* Scripture, he was not (assuming he was) *writing* Scripture. For Paul, the Scripture included the sacred texts of the Jews, now understood through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Paul placed the liturgical section of the Last Supper and Jesus's tradition into the midst of his argument about unworthy worship, he both critiqued their actions and also provided a "remedy for their disunity."²⁰ Their worship was unworthy when they did not discern the body, that is, the poor in the church.

Paul's readers were asked to remember that this is not one more Greek drinking party. It is not merely a social occasion to pass time with select friends. There is no audience watching a performance. Leaders and led are all participants. They have come together as the body of Christ to remember the saving events that created them as a body and to proclaim that salvation to the world.²¹

Perhaps modeled after the diversity of Jesus's followers at the Lord's Supper, Paul believed that a common meal had power—it could "break down boundaries and create the kind of community solidarity that should characterize what the church was to be."²² Without a careful discernment of their current practices, the Corinthians' unworthy worship would hinder such a witness. "The equitable treatment of the poor at the Lord's Supper is required if communities of Jesus-followers hope to articulate and enact the eschatological renewal of all things through what the deity of Israel has done in Christ."²³

When I was a pastor at one particular Adventist Church, I knew where I could find some of the church's teenagers on communion Sabbath. They would be hanging out in the stairwell at the back of the church. "Why aren't

²⁰ James L. Bailey, "Genre Analysis," in *Hearing the New Testament*, 160.

²¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 324.

²² Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*, 69. It should be noted, however, that in doing so, such meals would be understood as anti-imperial in behavior, since social status leveled, rather than upheld, a major function of Greco-Roman banquets. See also Streett, *Subversive Meals*.

²³ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 154.

you all in the sanctuary today?" I'd ask. After a long pause, one of the braver teens would quietly respond, "You know, pastor, we've messed up this week, and, we don't want to die. Isn't there something in Scripture about 'taking communion unworthily and dying'?" Without realizing it, that teenager was referring to 1 Cor 11:30. But is that what Paul meant? Were the young people in the stairwell doing a good interpretation? Is the "body of Christ" referring to their own personal bodies?

I shared with them my conviction: "You know, I had to come out here to find you, and give you a special invitation into the sanctuary, because our church body is incomplete without you." Then, without support from an exegesis paper, but hopefully doing pastoral theology, I suggested: "'Eating in an unworthy manner,' is not about what you did with your girlfriend or boyfriend this week, or if you cheated on a test or lied to a parent. It is not about whether we are 'good enough' or 'perfect' enough to participate. It is about neglecting the body of Christ, that is, our church family — which is incomplete until you join us in the sanctuary in gratitude for the death of Jesus for a world of messed up bodies."

4. Conclusion: "Worthy Worship" in Christian (House) Churches

Paul did not introduce the topic of the Eucharist as a systematic theologian. He was not concerned with issues of what "sacrament" meant, how divinity fused with humanity in a piece of bread (transubstantiation vs. consubstantiation), and issues of Christology or soteriology. Rather, he was concerned with the pastoral implications of the Eucharist.

When Jesus had gathered his disciples around the table, the disciples included fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, and others living in and around Galilee. And this diverse group of people ate together. They passed bread and rubbed elbows and talked with their mouths full and returned for seconds all communally suppressing their hunger for another day. In all their diversity, their eating met a common human need, and as it did, so their eating created community. Paul looked back at how Jesus and the disciples ate, contrasting that meal with the impoverished eating practices at Corinth.

In 1 Cor 11:17–34 Paul, as a pastoral theologian, challenged the practice of unworthy worship taking place at Corinth by reminding the Corinthian Christians that Christ's body was the church—including its most vulnerable members. To take the bread and the cup without discerning the diversity of the church and its oneness was to worship unworthily. But there was also hope for the Corinthian Christians. If they remembered Christ's body betrayed and broken, poured out and returning and remembered Christ's

body made up of *all* in their community, their eating could truly be a reenactment of the meal at the Lord's table, with disciples creating community while being nourished by the Lord's Supper.