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Social Identity and Conflict in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 11.17-34 in Context¹

Mark Finney

A. Social Identity and Honour

Within the broad context of social identity in the ancient world, numerous studies have noted the significance and primacy of honour and that the lust for its accrue ment was an irreducible fact of life.² This was true not only for those of elite status but also for the *humiliores*, whether it be those existing as slaves, those involved in what were described as the ‘vulgar’ professions, or those simply reliant upon the largesse of the rich for their meagre provision of dole.³ Dio Chrysostom observed that even slaves jockeyed with one another over ‘glory and pre-eminence’, and, for Valerius Maximus, ‘There is no status so low that it cannot be touched by the sweetness of prestige’.⁴ In the more poetic words of Horace, ‘Glory drags in chains behind her shining chariot the obscure no less than the nobly born’.⁵ In short, ‘The

¹ Some of the material in the following chapter is derived from my monograph, Mark T. Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World: 1 Corinthians in Its Greco-Roman Social Setting*, LNTS 460 (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

² See Jon E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Finney, *Honour and Conflict*.

³ Ramsay MacMullen notes of the lower ‘classes’, ‘[They focussed] their energies on the pursuit of honor rather than economic advantage... Like everyone else, they sought status’. Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 BC to AD 284* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 76-77.

⁴ *Cel. Phryg.*, 41; Valerius Maximus, 8.14.5.

⁵ Horace, *Sat.*, 1.6.23-24.

plebeian was as preoccupied with honor as the patrician, the client as the patron, the woman as the man, the child as the adult'.⁶

The rivalry for honour within Roman society subsumed all other social power struggles and became overwhelmingly important to its participants. Honour was, in essence, the pre-eminent value of social identity in the Roman world. Roman social historian Jon Lendon asserts, 'Honour was a filter through which the whole world was viewed, a deep structure of the Graeco-Roman mind, perhaps the ruling metaphor of ancient society'.⁷ Men, particularly, lusted after honour and were determined to be seen, and *publicly* acknowledged, as having the social rewards which honour brought – status, respect, power, influence, entourage, genuflection, and particularly envy. Cicero writes,

By nature we yearn and hunger for honor, and once we have glimpsed, as it were, some part of its radiance, there is nothing we are not prepared to bear and suffer in order to secure it. (*Tusc.*, 2.24.58)⁸

So, too, Dio Chrysostom assumed without question the proposition that it was the quest for *honour* that stood at the root of male motivation,

For you will find that there is nothing else, at least in the case of the great majority, that incites a man to despise danger, to endure toils, and to scorn the life of pleasure and ease. This certainly is clear: neither you nor anyone else, Greeks or barbarians, who are considered to have become great, advanced to

⁶ Barton, *Honor*, 11. And see also, Lendon, *Empire*, 51, 97; Sandra R. Joshel, *Work, Identity and Legal Status at Rome: A Study of the Occupational Inscriptions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), CIL 1.2.1210; 6.2.6308; Cicero, *Parad.*, 36-37; Plautus, *Mil. Glor.*, 349-51; *Stic.*, 279-80; Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.*, 10.3.7; Seneca, *Constant*, 5.1.

⁷ Lendon, *Empire*, 73.

⁸ On the craving for honour, see also Cicero, *Arch.*, 28-29; *Rep.*, 5.9; *Fin.*, 5.22.64; *Off.*, 1.18.61; Augustine, *Civ.*, 5.12.

glory or power, for any other reason that you were fortunate enough to have men who lusted after honour. (*Rhod.*, 17, 20)⁹

B. Social Identity, Dining, and Conflict

The fellowship meals of the many voluntary associations or, indeed, any form of dining in the Roman Empire, appear to demonstrate the same social concerns regarding the appropriation of honour, and with it, the potential for conflict.¹⁰ That is, a social gathering around a meal was a setting of considerable consequence in terms of social identity, both for those determined to display or secure their status (and perhaps relative wealth), and for those desiring to improve their honour standing *vis-à-vis* their social contemporaries.¹¹ The Greco-Roman literature reflecting this will be examined below.

An added dimension with regard to 1 Cor. 11.17-34 is the importance of placing the apostle at the very centre of the community's liturgical praxis.¹² Following Paul's formation of the Christ-movement in Corinth, and during his eighteen-month stay there, one can safely assume that the congregation met numerous times to partake of the κυριακὸν δεῖπνον. Further, one may posit that the practicalities of the meal were originally settled by Paul (or

⁹ Further, *Rhod.*, 20 speaks of the rewards of such honour (and see the wider context of vv. 16-22).

¹⁰ See John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996); Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Dennis Edwin Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). See also two other essays in this volume: Andrew Clarke and J. Brian Tucker, 'Social Identity and Social History', x-ref, and R. Alan Streett, 'The Agapé Feast in 2 Peter, Imperial Ideology, and Social Identity', x-ref.

¹¹ So, MacMullen, *Social Relations*, 106-120; Harland, *Associations*, 2.

¹² Mark Finney, 'Honour, Head-Coverings and Headship: 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 in Its Social Context', *JSNT* 33, no. 1 (2010); Finney, *Honour and Conflict*.

under his direction) and that the theological significance of particular aspects of the meal was drawn out by him for the benefit of the nascent community.¹³ Even if one recognizes that by the end of his time in Corinth some or all of the above could have been undertaken by others – as in the case of baptism (1 Cor. 1.14-17) – the meals, and the theological significance of those meals, would have taken place under the guiding influence of the apostle himself. So, over the tenure of Paul's stay there are valid grounds for suggesting that the meal became in some way 'institutionalised' within the community's liturgical practice and that, following Paul's departure, the tradition of the meal would continue to be a, or *the*, focal point of the community's liturgical gatherings.

What needs to be assessed, therefore, is how and why the socio-theological function of the meal disintegrated so badly as to provoke not only Paul's severe rebuke upon the factionalism that now existed during the meal, but the issue of a direct warning of judgement and condemnation upon anyone partaking of the meal in an unfitting way (11.29, 34). As the early Christ-movement was likened to a voluntary association,¹⁴ an analysis of the wider social context of fellowship meals within such groups is appropriate, and this will be followed by an attempt to answer some of these engaging questions.

C. Fellowship and Meals in the Voluntary Associations

¹³ Bradley B. Blue, 'The House Church at Corinth and the Lord's Supper: Famine, Food Supply, and the Present Distress', *CTR* 5 (1991): 232; David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 153; and Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), are among the few scholars who make note of this point, although it is only Winter who asks pertinent questions of what this may mean for the social context of the text.

¹⁴ See Finney, *Honour and Conflict*, 66-67.

Although voluntary associations were typically composed of freedmen who practised the same craft or trade, they mirrored wider civic culture in that their internal structure was associated with honour and prestige.¹⁵ Several lists of club membership survive and these are headed by the names of patrons, predominantly wealthy men, sometimes of senatorial rank, who had often made gifts to the club.¹⁶ In return for such beneficence a club would honour the patron with titles and dedications which added to his status (and which were, in some sense, a suitable *quid pro quo* for his investment). Other members of the club bore titles imitating municipal officials: presidents of a club might be given the title *magistri*, *curators* or *quinquennales*; the accounts were held by the *quaestores*; below these came certain officials, the *decuriones*, followed by the ordinary members (*plebs*). Here, those club-members excluded from overt civic honours could find suitable recompense within the familiarity of the association.¹⁷ The meal played an important part in this process because particular procedures provided a highly visible means for acknowledging status. The clubs offered, as Meeks notes, ‘the chance for people who had no chance to participate in the politics of the city itself to feel important in their own miniature republics’.¹⁸

¹⁵ On the social composition of clubs, see Gerd Theissen, ‘The Social Structure of Pauline Communities: Some Critical Remarks on J. J. Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival’, *JSNT*, no. 84 (2001): 76-77.

¹⁶ Hermann Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (Berlin: Berolini, 1892-1916), 6174-6; 7216f.; 7225-7.

¹⁷ So, MacMullen, *Social Relations*, 75-77; Dennis E. Smith, ‘Meals and Morality in Paul and His World’, *SBLSP*, no. 20 (1981): 328; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983; ~~2003~~), 31, 34.

¹⁸ Meeks, *First Urban*, 31.

In general, a formal meal or banquet would have consisted of perhaps two main courses, the δεῖπνον (the main meal), followed by the συμπόσιον (the drinking party).¹⁹ The transition to the συμπόσιον was normally marked by a libation, and other religious rituals may also have been included such as the singing of hymns.²⁰ The provision of food was almost entirely made by the patron or by those of comparatively greater wealth and resources, and this obviously meant that the relatively poor were wholly dependent upon the generosity of others. At the same time, the actual division of the food was demarcated upon lines of status, for not only would the wealthy receive larger portions, but as the more honoured guests, they would also receive a better quality of food.

Such practice is well attested for the period and simply served to reinforce status distinctions.²¹ For instance, the *collegium* in Lanumium (136 CE) established a rule on the sharing of food that read, ‘any member who has administered the office of the *quinquennalis* honestly shall receive a share and a half of everything as a mark of honor’.²² Here, a larger share at the meal was an obviously distinct and *highly visible* sign of honour, and it was, of

¹⁹ A small appetizer prior to the δεῖπνον may have constituted a third course, see Martial, *Epigr.*, 11.31.4-7; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.*, 734A. Further on table fellowship, see Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 93-116. On the symposium, Oswyn Murray, ed. *Symptica: A Symposium on the Symposium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

²⁰ See Ben Witherington, III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 192-195, 241-247.

²¹ Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, trans. E. O. Lorimer (London: Routledge, 1941), 270-71; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 82; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 154, 156 and cf. Pliny, *Ep.*, 2.6; Juvenal, *Sat.*, 5; Martial, *Epigr.*, 1.20; 3.49, 60; 4.85; 6.11; 10.49. Xenophon (*Mem.*, 3.14) notes Socrates’ difficulty in attempting to have food shared equally, as does Plutarch in the case of Lycurgus (*Mor.*, 226E-227A; *Lyc.*, 11).

²² Quoted in Theissen, *Social Setting*, 154.

course, inconceivable that any protest would be made about larger and better portions going to those whose contributions made the meal possible in the first place. So, even though the clubs fostered fellowship and mutual concern, the fact that in the distribution of money or food a larger share was given to the patron and officials demonstrates that the club functioned as a microcosm of wider civic culture wherein honour played a vital part in the club's social objectives.²³

Other significant and highly visible marks of status centred upon one's seated position at table and, with it, one's reclining posture. Such attitudes are well attested in respect of private meals and dinner parties but are equally true of clubs and religious organizations. The statutes of the College of Diana and Antinous, for example, an Italian funerary society of the second century CE, included a rule against 'moving from one place to another,' and the statutes of the Iobakchoi, a second-century CE Athenian religious association dedicated to Bacchus or Dionysus, included a fine if 'anyone is found...occupying the couch of another member'.²⁴ Particular seating positions at table represented varying degrees of honour, and these rules demonstrate the use and regulation of ranking systems at table and the importance of maintaining such distinctions.²⁵ In a similar way, to recline at table was considered a

²³ Smith, 'Meals', 327.

²⁴ Smith, 'Meals', 324.

²⁵ The same customs are reflected in Jesus' parable of the places of honour at a banquet (Lk 14.7-11). Here, the astute guest has the potential to be honoured in sight of all the other guests (who are reclining at table) by initially choosing a lower place than his status would normally allow him. The converse, for the arrogant guest, is that his status does not allow him to seat himself at a particular place at table, and he is subsequently asked to move to a more appropriate place. In having to do so he is disgraced before all. The relevance of the parable is the observation of the distinct demarcation which associates one's status with a particular position at table. With it, of course, go notions of honour and shame. Cf. also Mk 12.39; Lk 11.43; Plutarch, *Mor.*, 149A-B.

posture associated with elegance and social rank and was traditionally reserved for the free-born male. Women, children and slaves were expected to sit.

Although by the first century CE such customs were slowly changing and, for example, women were allowed to recline,²⁶ the indelible mark on social perception left by these earlier traditions meant that for a man to have to *sit* at table was imbued with the social stigma of a particular class and was felt to be dishonouring. This is evident in Lucian's description of a late-arriving male guest to a banquet at which all of the reclining positions were taken (and at which women were present). He is invited to sit, but he refuses on the grounds that *sitting* at a banquet is 'womanish and weak'. Rather, he elects to recline *on the floor*.²⁷

But knowing one's social place in a group context did not mean that procedures at fellowship meals were always calm and relaxed. Rather, the opposite is the case. As has already been noted, the notion of strife and enmity in public gatherings is entirely consistent within the antagonistic environment of ancient social life, and this is especially so over questions of honour. It appears, for example, that the ancient Celts were notoriously sensitive over such questions, particularly at meals and banquets. Diodorus Siculus reports that disputes during meals often led to challenges of single combat, and Athenaeus notes that at dinner the Celts sometimes engaged in fights, occasionally to the death, over question of who was the best among them and so worthy of the finest portions of the meal.²⁸ Centuries later, Plutarch remarks on similar social scenarios,

²⁶ See esp. Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 28-29; Carcopino, *Daily Life*, 265, 317, n. 121. On the wider changes in meal etiquette amongst Greco-Roman women, see Corley, *Private Women*, chapter 2.

²⁷ *Symp.*, 13.

²⁸ Diodorus Siculus, 5.28; Athenaeus, *Deipn.*, 4.154; other examples are found in Harland, *Associations*, 75-76.

Those who eat too much from the dishes that belong to all antagonize those who are slow and are left behind as it were in the wake of a swift-sailing ship. For suspicion, grabbing, snatching, and elbowing among the guests do not, I think, make a friendly and convivial prelude to a banquet; such behavior is boorish and crude and often ends in insults and angry outbursts. (*Mor.*, 2.10.643-44)

He concludes, ‘the taking of another’s and greed for what is common to all began injustice and strife’.²⁹ Such observations qualify the evidence collected by Dennis Smith on the common rules and injunctions of various clubs for banquet meetings. Smith found,

1) injunctions against quarreling and fighting; 2) injunctions against taking the assigned place of another; 3) injunctions against speaking out of turn or without permission; 4) injunctions against fomenting factions; 5) injunctions against accusing a fellow member before a public court; 6) specifications for trials within the club for inter-club disputes; 7) specifications for worship activities.³⁰

It is of interest that Paul is required to address most of the concerns of this list within the letter of 1 Corinthians.³¹

In sum, appropriate recognition of status distinction at either private dinners or at fellowship group meals was deemed essential for the majority of the guests. The failure to make a gesture of suitable acknowledgment of status and honour was seen as a highly public affront and could be a source of potential humiliation. Hostility, insult, and anger could

²⁹ *Mor.*, 642F.

³⁰ Smith, ‘Meals’, 323.

³¹ See Witherington, *Conflict*, 244. Such attitudes are not exclusive to the first century CE (cf. Aristotle, *Pol.*, 2.4.1; Aristid. *Or.*, 23.65).

quickly follow. The notion of social equality at table may not only have appeared unworkable in his first-century cultural milieu but was likely to have been considered anathema by many. So, too, the attempt by the nascent believing community of Corinth to suggest (or impose) a more equal framework of commensality upon neophytes steeped in honour-bound traditions involving various forms of social antagonism may well have occasioned difficulties from the outset. That said, it is to the text of 1 Corinthians 11 that we now turn.

D. Social Identity and Conflict at the Lord's Table

The subject matter discussed in 1 Corinthians 11.17-34 is the third item of the community's behaviour brought to Paul's attention, perhaps as an oral report by Chloe's people or by the Stephanas delegation. In it, Paul is made aware of the *σχίσματα* and *αἰρέσεις* which existed when the whole congregation came together to share a fellowship meal and the Lord's Supper.³² If the community met in some type of club-house,³³ then food would have to be taken to the gathering (relatively wealthier members may have been expected to take extra food for the poor or may even have provided most of the food). But the situation was open to abuse, for the factional groups striving in pursuit of greater honour were competing over the type and amount of food taken and eaten. Such groups are typically seen as just two in

³² Paul's recounting of the Last Supper tradition (11.23-26) assumes that the taking of the eucharistic elements is done within the framework of τὸ δεῖπνον; that is, there is an actual meal *between* the word spoken over the bread and that spoken over the cup; so, Theissen, *Social Setting*, 152; cf. Bruce W. Winter, 'Secular and Christian Responses to Corinthian Famines', *TynBul* 40, no. 1 (1989): 102. Τὸ δεῖπνον normally designates the main meal of the day in the Greco-Roman world, typically eaten in the evening. As Andrew McGowan reminds us, there may have been a plurality of forms of the celebration of the Eucharist within the early Christ-movement; Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³³ See Finney, *Honour*, 63-68.

number, the haves and the have-nots.³⁴ But the scenario may not be quite so simple for there may have been a number of factions in competition with one another, and here, consideration and sensitivities towards the poor were left to one side.³⁵

The major exegetical points of debate in this section surround the meanings of the verbs προλαμβάνω (v. 21), and ἐκδέχομαι (v. 33). Traditionally, the compound verb προλαμβάνω has been understood in the temporal sense of ‘to take beforehand’ (that is, to begin eating before others do), and this was then presumed to relate to the imperative ἐκδέχεσθε (v. 33) in that Paul’s injunction to the ‘haves’ was to urge them to *wait* for the ‘have-nots’.³⁶ But the verb προλαμβάνω occurs only three times in the NT, one of which, Galatians 6.1, provides an example of the verb being used non-temporally (here, simply equivalent to ‘be taken’).³⁷ In light of this, the use of προλαμβάνω in 1 Corinthians 11.21 is not as certain as at first seems, and Paul’s usage in Galatians may better reflect the usage here. Further, Fee points out that, within the social context of eating (ἐν τῷ φαγεῖν, v. 21), there is no decisive evidence that προλαμβάνω in Greek literature is used with a temporal

³⁴ So, Theissen, *Social Setting*, 148; Winter, ‘Secular’, 100; O. Hofius, ‘Lord’s Supper and the Lord’s Supper Tradition: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 11:23b-25’, in *One Loaf, One Cup: Ecumenical Studies of 1 Cor 11 and Other Eucharistic Texts*, ed. Ben F. Meyer (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993), 92; James D. G. Dunn, *1 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 77-78; David Horrell, ‘The Lords's Supper at Corinth and in the Church Today’, *Theology* 98, no. 783 (1995): 198 and n 7; Witherington, *Conflict*, 248.

³⁵ The factionalism may well have been linked to the divisions of 1.12, which may have developed from particular house-groups.

³⁶ So, Theissen, *Social Setting*, 151-53; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 161; Stephen M. Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians*, SBLDS 134 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 243; Witherington, *Conflict*, 248 n 23; RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJB, KJV, NKJV.

³⁷ The third text is Mk 14.8. See Tucker’s analysis in J. Brian Tucker, ‘*You Belong to Christ*’: *Paul and the Formation of Social Identity in 1 Corinthians 1-4* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 121-22.

meaning at all,³⁸ and more recently, Bruce Winter has suggested a more convincing alternative.³⁹ Winter argues that here προλαμβάνω does not retain its temporal sense (and so does not refer to the prior eating of food by the wealthier believers), but simply points to the ‘haves’, ‘devouring’ or ‘consuming’ their own food while the poorer believers were going without (μὴ ἔχοντας, v. 22). His proposal is supported by an inscription which refers to a meal in the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus (i.e. pointing to a similar social scenario), in which προλαμβάνω is employed three times and where, in each case, the temporal force of the prefix is lost and the verb simply denotes the sense of ‘to take’ in the context of eating.⁴⁰ Given the similar social context of a meal in 1 Corinthians, it would appear entirely reasonable to render προλαμβάνω in an equivalent way (e.g. ‘consume’;⁴¹ ‘take’ for oneself;⁴² or ‘to (par)take of’⁴³).

³⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), concludes that the verb is ‘likely to be an intensified form of ‘take,’ meaning something close to ‘consume’ or ‘devour’. But one cannot totally rule out a temporal sense’ (542, cf. 568). Cf. BDAG, sv 1.c.

³⁹ Bruce W. Winter, ‘The Lord’s Supper at Corinth: An Alternative Reconstruction’, *RTR* 37, no. 3 (1978): 73-82. Winter’s thesis is followed by Blue, ‘House Church’; Hofius, ‘Lord’s Supper’; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ‘Proclaiming the Lord’s Death: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and the Forms of Paul’s Theological Argument’, in *Pauline Theology, Volume II: 1 & 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997); Anders Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof: Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1998); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000). Cf. Fee, *First Epistle*, 542.

⁴⁰ Cf. MM, 542; BDAG, 872.

⁴¹ So, Winter, ‘Lord’s Supper’.

⁴² So, Engberg-Pedersen, ‘Proclaiming’, 110.

⁴³ So, Hofius, ‘Lord’s Supper’, 91.

The second verb, ἐκδέχομαι, has a particularly wide semantic range and depends upon the wider context for its precise nuance.⁴⁴ As noted above, it has traditionally been taken with the earlier understanding of προλαμβάνω by which it has been defined as, ‘to wait for one-another’.⁴⁵ Together with the reappraisal of προλαμβάνω it has been re-examined within the wider framework of these verses, for the primary meaning of the verb is not necessarily ‘to wait’, but can mean ‘expect someone’ (cf. 1 Cor. 16.11), or ‘look forward to someone/something’ (cf. Heb. 11.10), or ‘receive someone’ (in the sense of ‘entertain’ as a host), or ‘welcome/accept someone’.⁴⁶ On this reading, Paul’s point is that the wealthier believers are to display hospitality by welcoming and receiving the poorer believers to the fellowship meal and Lord’s Supper (cf. Rom. 12.13, 15.7). The strength of this proposal is that it makes greater sense of Paul’s admonitions in 11.33-34, for if the meaning of Paul’s imperative ἀλλήλους ἐκδέχεσθε in v. 33 were simply to ‘wait for one another’, this would not alleviate the problem that there were poorer believers who had little or no food to eat. Rather, if Paul’s demand is that the wealthier believers welcome and share with the poor, then the passage becomes more intelligible.⁴⁷

The social setting of the text is now apparent. At the fellowship meal there is division and factionalism as the community separates into a number of groups which seek to outdo each other in the volume and quality of the food and drink consumed. In the secular meetings outlined above, this accords with the expectations of voluntary associations where both greater quantity and better quality of food and drink were provided for a patron and for

⁴⁴ So, Fee, *First Epistle*, 568.

⁴⁵ For exegetes who hold this view, see n 35 above. Also Peter Lampe, ‘The Eucharist: Identifying with Christ on the Cross’, *Int* 48 (1994).

⁴⁶ So, LSJ; and see also Fee, *First Epistle*, 540-43, 567-68; and especially Hofius, ‘Lord’s Supper’, 93f., and footnotes.

⁴⁷ Winter, ‘Secular’, 102.

higher-status members, than for those of lower status. In this sense, as Theissen remarks, the richer members of the community were ‘simply adopting a pattern of behaviour customary at that time’.⁴⁸ Although some food may have been provided for the poor, this was probably very little, and certainly of lower quality and the result was that as one member went hungry another had the opportunity of becoming drunk (11.21).⁴⁹

Herein lay the *σχίσματα*: although the believers eat together in the same space, they are yet separated into antagonistic social groups demarcated by cultural concepts of appropriating honour. So, too, as the groups of wealthier believers enjoy their feast in the presence of the hungry poor, their arrogant display of insouciance serves to shame and humiliate (*κατασχύνειν*, 11.22) those who have nothing.⁵⁰ The action of the wealthier groups also has the effect of treating the community with contempt (11.22), and their disdain towards the poor is, at the same time, a visible demonstration of contempt for the body of Christ.

The wealthier members may have possibly justified such behaviour by appealing to a feeling of hunger (cf. 11.22, 34), or to normative cultural practice. In terms of the *ἐκκλησία* however, Paul deems that such practice has no place at the Lord’s Table, and he seeks to undermine cultural expectations within a radically conformed Christ-centred concept of commensality. In effect, he calls upon the wealthier believers to actually remove the barriers of status differentiation and to receive the poorer members as equal participants of the fellowship meal and Lord’s Supper. Meeks (following Theissen) sees this as ‘a compromise...so that at the Lord’s Supper the norm of equality can prevail’,⁵¹ but within an

⁴⁸ *Social Setting*, 154.

⁴⁹ For the thesis that the provision of food may have been influenced by grain shortages and potential famine, see Winter, ‘Secular’; Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 852-53.

⁵⁰ The verb *κατασχύνειν* occurs more frequently in the Corinthian correspondence than in the rest of the NT combined.

⁵¹ Meeks, *First Urban*, 159.

honour-shame culture Paul's admonitions are much more radical than Meeks allows. For within the Corinthians' conventional social mores which deemed as entirely appropriate suitable distinctions of rank and status to be recognized at table, Paul's directives represent nothing short of a direct challenge to this status-orientated ideology. He requires that the wealthier believers adjust both their expectations and their behaviour to accommodate the needs of those of lower status, which in itself, in Greco-Roman culture, would have meant a reversal of normal status expectations. In short, the higher-status believers would have to undergo severe loss of honour to participate in Paul's uncompromising model of 'egalitarian' commensality.⁵²

E. Social Identity and the Cross

Paul's defence of this radical command is twofold. Firstly, he makes an appeal to Christ's death and the institution of the meal as the essential paradigm of self-sacrifice (vv. 23-26), and, secondly, he issues a warning of judgement against inappropriate behaviour at the Lord's Table (vv. 27-32). The first point instructs the Corinthians that they are to remember Christ's sacrifice as they eat together. This is an essential and largely ignored point, for, in Paul's absence, the Corinthian neophytes may have had little instruction on the historical basis of the meal, or the Last Supper tradition(s), nor indeed on Pauline thinking and 'theology' related to it.⁵³

⁵² Here Paul's proposal is comparable to that of Pliny (*Ep.*, 2.6), who maintained that in a common meal, one of higher social status should adjust his eating habits to those appropriate to one of a lower social status.

⁵³ *Contra* Engberg-Pedersen who claims here, 'He [Paul] is not teaching them anything new' ('Proclaiming', 125). Rather, Paul's outline in 11.23-26 may well have been the first articulated expression of the Last Supper tradition for many of the neophytes.

Paul states categorically that the meal they take together stands in continuity with the Last Supper tradition,⁵⁴ most likely a Passover meal,⁵⁵ wherein Jesus reinterpreted the elements of bread and wine as representations of his body and blood, shortly to be given over in death on the cross. The act of remembering (11.24, 25) points indelibly to the memory of the crucified one and his saving work, and the prepositional attributive τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν...κτλ designates the framework within which this is now conceived: it is for *all* of the Corinthian believers. At the same time, issues of honour-shame come to the fore, for in the very act of remembering Jesus' death on a cross the community is forced to remember the one who was an *accepting* victim of extreme humiliation and shame.

In light of this tradition, Paul castigates the behaviour of the wealthier believers, for it stands in contradiction to the very essence of what Jesus founded. The eucharistic actions that encompass the meal and that make it the κυριακὸν δεῖπνον allow all of the participants an equal share in the expiatory death of Jesus Christ and in the future consummation of the salvation realized by that death. Christ and his saving act remain fundamentally essential to the Eucharist. A denial of the corporate nature of the παράδοσις (cf. the plurality of ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν) disregards Christ's saving death and constitutes a sin against Christ himself. Consequently, Paul's explanatory gloss in 11.26 ('For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'⁵⁶) looks back and reminds the reader/hearer of 1.18–2.2. The fundamental message of Paul's preaching remains Christ crucified.

⁵⁴ Hofius notes, 'Each Lord's Supper wherever and whenever it is celebrated is a continuation of the Last Supper of Jesus' ('Lord's Supper', 100).

⁵⁵ See Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964; 1966), 15-88; I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College; Paternoster, 1980), 57-75; Hofius, 'Lord's Supper'; Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 871-74.

⁵⁶ All Bible quotations are NRSV unless otherwise marked.

Furthermore, 11.26 asserts that the remembering is thus realized in the proclaiming. The verb *καταγγέλλω* is almost exclusively used in the New Testament for making a verbal proclamation towards *outsiders*, either of the gospel as the word of God⁵⁷ or of Christ as the means of salvation through his resurrection from the dead.⁵⁸ So, the Corinthians' fellowship meal around the Lord's Table is not an exclusively internal event; the community is actually participating in a gathering which should proclaim the *good news* of the Christ-event to outsiders.

But Paul recognizes further that one cannot properly proclaim the radical nature of life 'in Christ' without also *conforming* oneself to it, and failure to do so can lead only to one being, 'answerable for the body and blood of the Lord' (11.27). Paul may actually conceive here that such a one will thus demonstrate an allegiance with the 'rulers of this age' who crucified the Lord (2.8) and who are thus responsible for his broken body and shed blood. And this may be the reason why he is able to recognize that the factions (*αἰρέσεις*, 11.19) at the Lord's Table may have the positive effect of demonstrating which members of the congregation are the *δόκιμοι*, the approved and genuine ones, those who are able to pass the test (cf. 9.27).⁵⁹

Louw and Nida allow a definition of 'honoured' within the semantic field, and define *δόκιμος* as 'pertaining to being respected on the basis of proven worth, "respected, honoured"'. They write, 'In a number of languages, meanings such as those of *τιμῖος*, *ἔντιμος*, *ἔνδοξος* and *δόκιμος* may be rendered by a type of clause involving people's attitudes toward an individual, for example, "one who people think is great" or "one of whom

⁵⁷ Acts 13.5; 15.36; 17.13; 1 Cor. 2.1; 9.14.

⁵⁸ Acts 3.24; 4.2; 13.38; 16.17; 17.3; Phil. 1.17-18; Col. 1.28.

⁵⁹ Seven of the thirteen uses of (*ἀ*)*δόκιμος* and cognates are found in the Corinthian correspondence.

everyone approves” or “one to whom everyone looks up””.⁶⁰ In this way, the δόκιμοι can be construed as those who are, in the present through worthy actions, predicated of honour – either by men,⁶¹ or by God or Christ.⁶²

In short, the cross stands supreme over the criteria of social identity and what it means to be a believer. The divisions seen in chapters 1–4 together with the factionalism found in the sharing of the Eucharist undermine the very heart of why the worshipping community celebrates the Lord’s Supper at all. Ironically, due to the social constraints surrounding the appropriation of honour and with it the correlative nature of bringing shame upon others, what should have been the focus of ecclesial unity had become the focus of factionalism and division and an opportunity for some to shame others.⁶³

F. Conclusion

The context of this section of Paul’s letter highlights an aspect of first-century CE social identity wherein the love and lust for honour is clearly demonstrated. Here, it is one of antagonistic groups or individuals at a fellowship meal striving and competing for greater honour. There is factionalism and division, and a number of believers are being humiliated and shamed in the process. So, too, certain groups are demonstrating an air of contempt

⁶⁰ L&N *sv.* Also, LSJ *sv.*, ‘of persons, *approved, esteemed, notable*’.

⁶¹ Rom. 14.18; 2 Cor. 13.7; Jas 1.12

⁶² Rom. 16.10; 2 Cor. 10.18. This is contra Fee (*First Epistle*, 538f.) who simply sees here an example of Paul’s eschatological end-time perspective. But the revealing of the δόκιμοι need not be a future end-time event; rather, attitudes and behaviour toward the congregational factionalism could manifest the δόκιμοι in the present as those deserving of human or divine honour.

⁶³ As Louise Schottroff writes, ‘This meal must have been a humiliating situation for the poor, whose dignity as children of the one Creator of all human beings was called into question’. Luise Schottroff and Brian McNeil, ‘Holiness and Justice: Exegetical Comments on 1 Corinthians 11.17-34’, *JSNT*, no. 79 (2000): 53.

towards what should have been a unified meeting of the body of Christ. In bringing to mind the Last Supper παράδοσις and the imagery of the ‘body of Christ’, handed over and broken *for you* (v. 24), Paul utilizes the theological premise upon which he conceives the believing community to be founded. Here, the social ‘body’ of Christ (vv. 27-29), the Corinthian ἐκκλησία, finds its meaning and is predicated upon the sacramental body of Christ (vv. 23-26). The dual metaphor of the ‘body’ inextricably connects Christ’s death on the cross with a profound understanding of the type of community brought into being by that very action (which Paul will further explicate in 1 Corinthians 12–13). The current incongruity between the paradigm that the cross establishes, which should be an adequate demonstration for the on-going life of the community of faith, and the current social reality of a disunified, bickering community causes Paul to reflect upon the nature of divine judgement to which such behaviour is leading (and has, in fact, already led). In recollecting Christ’s ignominious death upon the cross Paul confronts the community with a stark reminder that the Lord for whom they gather in thanks and commemoration is also the one who was a victim of extreme shame, and this is an uncompromising observation on the behaviour of those who would seek to humiliate others in lusting after honour.