

The Biblical and Historical context of the Lord's Supper.

About a month or so ago, some friends of mine and I got into a discussion about the practice of the Lord's Supper. We were going over the account of the Last Supper in Mark's gospel where we find what is traditionally referred to as the institution of the Lord's Supper when Jesus takes bread and wine during the meal and blesses it, indicating the symbolism that these elements would take on after he was crucified and resurrected. I raised some preliminary points about how the practice that is detailed in Mark and the other synoptic gospels tends to differ from the way that we practice the Lord's Supper today. I have been wanting to do an in depth study of the biblical and early historical context of the practice, and this gave me the opportunity to do so, as I asked for a month or so to study the Lord's supper in the primitive church, to observe whether or not my preliminary points were supported by evidence, and make a case for the practice of the Lord's Supper as observed in the New Testament and the early church. Here, I have compiled my research and conclusions for you to read and decide the merit thereof. I am far from the first to do a study such as this, and far from the first to suggest a different view than what is commonly practiced by the majority of Christians today. My words are not infallible, but I do ask that you hear me out before making any hasty decisions. I have tried to put in the leg work to flesh out the biblical and historical perspective of the Lord's Supper, with much supporting scripture and references. I pray we lay aside our own traditions to objectively view the word and witness. Maybe we can even consider the way we do things today to decide whether or not we should reevaluate the practice, shaping it towards the communal experience it has always been intended to be. I am thankful for the opportunity to dive in and study this topic thoroughly.

After much study, it is my conviction that the practice of the Lord's Supper in the early church (in the first century) consisted of, or at the very least was in the context of, a full, communal meal. With the following, I will attempt to explain my reasoning and cite the evidence for this conviction.

The Greco-Roman context of the New Testament.

For this study, I have used quite a few sources for information. However, one of the first and most complete sources I read in preparation for this post was a book entitled *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* by Dennis E. Smith. I highly recommend this book if you want to begin your own study of the Lord's Supper in the primitive church. Smith holds a doctorate in theology from Harvard and specializes in meals in the Greco-Roman world. I wouldn't say I agree with absolutely everything he has to say, but he lays out the culture of the time period very well, and without this context it is going to be much harder to understand the meal stories in the gospels and in Pauline literature. Much of my thesis will be based on this book, along with another book I read in preparation for this post, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* by John Mark Hicks.

What we must remember when we approach the words of the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament) is that the words were not penned in a vacuum. The ministry of Jesus, the early church and the words we have preserved all fall within their own context and culture. In many ways, we miss things in the scriptures that would have been quite apparent to the original audience. For this reason, we have an added responsibility when we approach the text to also attempt to understand the greater cultural setting that it was written in if we truly want to understand what the author was trying to say. For this study, that context is the Greco-Roman world. Dr. Smith does a very good job in his book outlining this context in relation to the banquet of this culture, giving many examples from the primary literature to support his thesis. Perhaps his thesis can be gathered from a point he stresses in the opening chapter:

“The peoples of the Mediterranean world of the period circa 300 B.C.E to circa 300 C.E. tended to share the same dining customs. That is, the banquet as a social institution is practiced in similar ways and with similar symbols or codes by Greeks, Romans, Jews, Egyptians, and so on. The similarities did not nullify the existence of variations here and there. Those variations, however, drew from a common set of banquet customs, symbols and codes that were the same throughout the Mediterranean world.”¹

¹ Smith, D. E. (2003). *From symposium to Eucharist: the banquet in the early Christian world*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress. Kindle format.

With ample data, Smith weaves together what this banquet motif looked like in the ancient world, showing how important this evening meal, the supper (Greek *deipnon*), had become to the people living in this culture. His opening words read thusly:

“Whenever they met as a church, early Christians regularly ate a meal together. In this they were no different from other religious people in their world: for when any group of people in the ancient Mediterranean world met for social or religious purposes, their gatherings tended to be centered on a common meal or banquet. It did not matter whether it was a social or religious occasion; nor what the ethnic group might be, whether Jewish or Greek or some other ethnic group; nor what the social class might be. If it were a special occasion, whether religious, social, or political, more often than not, a formalized meal functioned as a centerpiece of the gathering.”²

The banquet in the Greco-Roman world was more than just a meal. It was a social institution. It meant something, it created social bonds. Plutarch, an ancient Greek biographer, is sometimes quoted to show that those in this time period thought of the banquet as more than just a time to eat: “The Romans... are fond of quoting a witty and sociable person who said, after a solitary meal, ‘I have eaten, but not dined today,’ implying that dinner always requires friendly sociability for seasoning.” (*Table Talk*) The Greco-Roman banquet typically had two well defined courses, the *deipnon* proper and the symposium. The first course consisted of the communal meal that was eaten, followed by the second course known as the symposium (Greek *symposion*), or “drinking party.”³ There were many common elements that are found in the various forms of the banquet across cultures, such as reclining at table, a blessing of the cup, social ranking by seating position, invitations to the banquet and some form of entertainment/proper discussion after the meal. The importance of this meal is indicated by the time and attention that ancient philosophers and ethicists gave to it in their sayings, including Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Epicurus and Hieronymus. This was a shared culture amongst all in the ancient Mediterranean world, including Jews and the early Christians. In fact, many of the common elements I listed above become readily apparent in the pages of the gospel and the writings of Paul, such as reclining at table and the blessing of the cup.

A post of this nature cannot give this section its comprehensive due diligence. For more information, and solid evidence for this cultural context, I would suggest reading Smith’s book. However, the point that I am trying to make here to set up the perspective of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament and early church is that Christianity was born in a cultural context, one in which emphasized the evening meal as an important social institution that people of this time period held to emphasize the commonality they shared. This will become very important when we talk about Paul’s discussion about the Lord’s Supper in I Corinthians 11. However, its importance can also be seen as a backdrop to the events that take place in the gospels, especially in Luke. Before we look at the overall context of the banquet motif in Luke, however, let’s first turn our attention to what is perhaps the most famous meal accounts in the gospels and consider its relationship to the Lord’s Supper.

The context of the Last Supper

The account of the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples before he went to the cross can be found in Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-39 and John 13:1-17:26 (there is some discussion about how John’s version of the meal relates to the synoptics’ record). Reading through these accounts, we can see that this supper fits very well into the context of the Greco-Roman banquet. Jesus and the disciples reclined at table, blessed the bread and the cup, sang a hymn, and have a discussion about who is the greatest (perhaps incited by their seating position). Though this meal certainly falls within the context of the Greco-Roman banquet, there is even more going on here. The Last Supper is described to us by Luke as a Passover meal that Jesus desires to share with his disciples before he is crucified. It is often hard for us to truly understand the context of the Passover meal (see Ex. 12, Deut. 16:1-8). John Mark Hicks says this to contextualize the festival of the Passover:

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The Passover is a memorial characterized by praise, joy and thanksgiving. The Passover does not memorialize the Exodus as a kind of dirge or funerary remembrance. On the contrary, it is a celebration of God's redemption. It evokes praise and joy. Unfortunately, the popular conception of the Passover is tainted by the solemnity and sadness of the depiction of the Passover in Charlton Heston's *Ten Commandments*. But this offers a distorted picture. The Passover was filled with anticipation of the coming Messiah as he was expected to make his appearance at the festival. It celebrated God's redemption. The Passover is always a joyous event (cf. 2 Chron. 30:21-27; 35:16-19).⁴

A passage that contemporary Christians are not all that familiar with today actually plays a key role in the gospels, particularly as the backdrop of the Last Supper and the institution of the Lord's Supper. This motif is the Messianic banquet, which is most transparently found in Isaiah 25:6-9:

*“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”
(Isaiah 25:6-9)*

The Messianic banquet had great significance in Jewish thought and writings during the second temple period, and this is certainly not the only passage in the Old Testament that alludes to the banquet (cf. Ps. 23:5-6, Ez. 34:11-24, Is. 55:1-2, Joel 2:26). Jesus makes reference to the Messianic banquet motif earlier in the gospels (see Mt. 8:10-12 and Luke 13:29). As Hicks attests, the Passover has deep Messianic overtones. Even more the Last Supper as Jesus, the Messiah, is about to fulfill the prophecies of old (in an “already, but not yet”⁵ fashion). It is in the institution of the Lord's Supper that Jesus brings the Messianic banquet overtones into focus by saying, “*For I tell you I will not eat it [the Passover meal] until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God*” (Luke 22:16) and perhaps more specifically in verse 18 after he tells them to divide the cup saying “... *from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.*” I do believe that in some sense, Jesus' words refer to him being present during the supper when Christians partake of it in the church, as the kingdom is “already, but not yet”. However, it seems clear that Jesus is ultimately alluding to the eschatological banquet when the kingdom of God will have fully come. This becomes even clearer with the words that Jesus speaks to the disciples after they have an argument about who is the greatest just after the institution of the Lord's Supper:

“You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

⁴ Hicks, J. M. (2002). *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood.

⁵ The phrase “already, but not yet” indicates that in some way, the event or topic in question has already been instated, however, its full consummation is still yet to be. It is in this way we understand the kingdom of God. In some sense, the kingdom has come already, that is in the church. However, in its full sense, we still await the consummation of the full kingdom of God, when we abide forever where God dwells with man in the new heavens and new earth.

(Luke 22:28-30)

So what's my point in all of this? Besides it just being very interesting to me to see all the connections and understand the context of the supper better, I believe there are definitely some important implications that we by and large miss out on. The Lord's Supper (as perhaps should be inferred from the name) is instituted⁶ during a meal, and further anticipates the eschatological banquet. It should come with no surprise, then, that the early church took the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal. One might even go so far as to say that the analogy and imagery of the Messianic banquet wouldn't even make sense outside of the context of a meal. It is hard to anticipate a full meal if the ritual itself has lost almost all resemblance of a meal.⁷ But even further, we miss out on the rich context and future blessing that this communal meal is supposed to symbolize. Though the kingdom hasn't fully come, we are already invited to share in the blessings of true life with the Messiah. At the very least, I think what we have to admit here is that this is the example from which much of the practice of the Lord's Supper is drawn (even Paul appeals to this setting when discussing the supper), and in this example, the Lord's Supper is taken in the context of a full meal.

Meals in Luke-Acts

The Last Supper isn't the only place that the banquet motif is found in the gospels. If you are at least a casual student of the gospels, you will likely know that a lot of Jesus' time and teaching is recorded in the context of a meal setting. Dr. Smith attests, "Meals in the gospels consistently reflect the Greco-Roman banquet tradition."¹ He further makes this point by listing out the instances:

The meals of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels contain typical elements of the Greco-Roman banquet and/or symposium tradition. These include such features as reclining (Mark 2:15; 6:39; 8:6; 14:3; 14:18 [and synoptic parallels]; Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:7; 24:30), washing of the feet prior to reclining (Luke 7:44; John 13:3-5), anointing the head with perfumes (Mark 14:3), saying prayers before the *deipnon* (Mark 6:41; 8:6-7; 14:22), ranking at the table (Luke 14:7) and at the symposium (Mark 14:7-24), ending the meal with a hymn (Mark 14:26), and a host of other literary features that will be discussed further in the analysis of Mark and Luke below. These and other motifs in the Jesus meal tradition derive from Greco-Roman meal customs as associated especially with the archetype of the formal meal, the banquet.⁸

Luke, in particular, seems to favor the banquet motif as a persistent element in the ministry of Jesus. Meal stories can be found in Luke 5:27-32, 7:36-50, 9:10-17, 10:38-42, 11:37-52, 14:1-24, 19:1-10, 22:14-38, 24:28-32 and 24:36-43. As John Mark Hicks has pointed out, Luke often uses 'bread' to mean 'food' (cf. Luke 4:3; 9:3; 11:3, 11; 15:17).⁹ We can see then, that Jesus has a lot to say in the context of a meal. The background of the meal motif, specifically the meaning behind the "breaking bread" language, in Luke will become important when we discuss certain passages in the book of Acts, written by the same author. When Luke uses the terminology, "the breaking of the bread," it is his way of referencing a communal meal, especially ones that anticipate or describe the Lord's Supper.¹⁰

What we must remember when reading Acts, is that the author of Acts has already defined his terms and assumes we will know what he is talking about when the focus is shifted from Jesus' ministry full of breaking bread in meals with people to the church breaking bread together as a communal meal. There are five instances where Luke refers

⁶ Note also that it is we who call this the "institution of the Lord's Supper". This is not indicated in the text. The reason, I assume, that we call it thus is because Paul uses the term "Lord's Supper" in I Corinthians 11 and then refers to the Last Supper as an archetype for the meal.

⁷ My wife has cleverly coined the term the "Lord's nibble" as opposed to the Lord's supper in light of the way we partake today.

⁸ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 3216.

⁹ See <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2009/03/22/breaking-bread-in-luke-acts-ii-narrative-context/>

¹⁰ LaVerdiere, E. (1998). *The breaking of the bread: the development of the Eucharist according to the Acts of the Apostles*. Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications. p. 105

to breaking bread in Acts: 2:42, 2:46, 20:7, 20:11 and 27:35-38. The first four of these are in the context of Christian assemblies. I have heard much discussion about some of these verses over the years, but I think much of the discussion has missed the overall context of Luke Acts. In attempt to ascertain the correct liturgy of the Lord's Supper, many have pulled these verses out of their own context to proof-text or justify a current practice. Some draw a hard distinction between "breaking bread" that refers to a 'common' meal (as they would say is indicated in Acts 2:46 and perhaps in 20:11) and "breaking bread" which refers to the Lord's Supper (as they would say is indicated in Acts 20:7 and perhaps 2:42). The argument is made that it must be the context that informs our understanding to which it is. Thus, if we think there is a meal involved, then "breaking bread" must refer to a common meal. If we think that the Lord's Supper is being taken, then "breaking bread" must refer to the Lord's Supper.

The problem with this line of reasoning, however, is that it is circular. It assumes the premise. Notice that we are the ones who decide whether or not the Lord's Supper is indicated in the text, and therefore define "breaking bread" accordingly. Further, the argument claims to be using the context to define "breaking of bread", when in reality it is completely taking the verses out of their overall context in Luke-Acts. I think it much more proper to allow Luke to define his own terms in this regard. "Breaking bread" in Acts 2 is the same phrase as "breaking bread" in Acts 20. But these two instances are not the only time that Luke uses the language of "breaking bread." As I have shown above, Luke uses this terminology in the context of a meal. There is no textual reason to assume that Luke means something different than a meal when he says "breaking bread". To the contrary, all indications show that a meal is exactly what Luke has in mind when he uses this terminology. In Acts 2:46, Luke ties "breaking bread" with "*they received their food with glad and generous hearts,*" with no indication that "breaking bread" means something different than it did just a few verses earlier. Similarly, in Acts 20:11, "*broken bread and eaten*" clearly indicates that the context for breaking bread is a meal, and there is no indication that Luke means something different by "breaking bread" earlier in verse seven.¹¹ The only reason we would assume the terms mean something different in each place would be due to reading our own tradition and culture into the passage. The text itself does not give any indication of this.

I would like to take a moment here to caution us about the way we so often use Acts 20:7 as a proof text that the Lord's Supper is to be done exactly the way we do it every Sunday morning. This is the danger of trying to ascertain exact liturgy when an exact form is never explicitly given.¹² To begin, Acts 20:7 is most often appealed to in my fellowship to 'prove' that the Lord's Supper must be taken every first day of the week (preferably on Sunday morning). I do believe you can make a case that early on, Christians began to meet on Sundays. However, I do not believe the intention of this passage is to make any statements about the frequency of the Lord's Supper. Why? Because the reason that Luke records this meeting of Christians is not the Lord's Supper, but rather because of Eutychus, the boy who fell out of the window and died, and whom Paul subsequently raised from the dead.¹³ The claim has been made before that the indication of Paul staying seven days in Troas points to the weekly gathering of the saints on the first day of the week, since he had to stay a week to see the church. The major problem I have with this interpretation is that the text never makes this claim, nor does it even try to. I would actually say it's more reasonable to assume that Paul met with the church most of the seven days he was there, since Paul is a traveling missionary that doesn't get to spend a lot of time with the Christians at Troas, and that this particular meeting is then recorded because of what happened with Eutychus. This is the position that LaVerdiere takes, making the comment that if Eutychus had not died and subsequently been raised on this occasion, Luke would not have recorded this particular meeting (as there were a great many meetings that Luke doesn't record).¹⁴ Further, Christians in Troas could have met once a month for a communal meal, as would be the precedent in the Greco-Roman world, and that is why Paul waited seven days to meet with the church. Maybe it was the third Sunday, not every Sunday. The point

¹¹ Actually, the most natural reading of the text, in my opinion, is that the breaking of bread in verses 7 and 11 are referring to the same meal, a meal that was not eaten until after midnight.

¹² In other words, this is the danger of binding an example as a command for all Christians.

¹³ Think of the symbolism this story would have held for the early church (and for us), retelling of a resurrection that happened on the first day of the week.

¹⁴ LaVerdiere, E. (1998). p. 206.

is, we don't know, because the text does not explicitly indicate any of these scenarios. Thus, we should be very cautious before we bind Acts 20:7 as a command for anyone.

Further, there is much inconsistency when we bind Acts 20:7 as a command to take the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week. Let me demonstrate. Here is the full verse, not even in the context of the whole passage:

"On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight."
(Acts 20:7)

If we are going to look at this verse and say, "This verse indicates that we have to take the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week," yet we do not say, "and the preacher must speak until midnight," then I believe we are being inconsistent. We have effectively bound half a verse. Even further, the "breaking of bread" did not occur until after midnight. We don't bind this practice, or say the Lord's Supper could be taken on Monday mornings since the supper in Acts 20 did not actually happen until the early hours of Monday morning (or perhaps they broke bread both on Sunday night and on Monday morning).^{15,16} Nor do we say that we should take the Supper in the evening, since this was an evening meeting.

If we take the overall context of Luke-Acts and see how the author uses the language of "breaking bread", I believe that it is pretty clear that these passages refer to a communal meal. This fits well into the Greco-Roman context of the banquet. We should also see later that this completely fits with the practice of the Lord's Supper as indicated in Pauline texts. The concept of Lord's Supper as a communal meal is completely coherent and consistent throughout the relevant passages in the New Testament. I think we should at least be asking the question at this point, "Does the way we practice the Lord's Supper today have any basis in the text of the New Testament?"

The Lord's Supper in Paul's letter to Corinth

Perhaps the clearest window that we have into what the Lord's Supper looked like in the primitive church can be ascertained in the letters of Paul. Dr. Smith makes the point that the only two texts that specifically deal with Christian meals are found in Paul (Galatians 2:11-14 and I Corinthians 1:20-34).¹⁷ Certainly the more well-known of these two is found in I Corinthians 11:17-34a. However, by this point you probably know what I'm going to begin with; I Corinthians 11 doesn't live in a vacuum. In fact, the context of the Corinthian letter makes chapter 11 make complete sense, at least in my opinion. However, many times I have heard proof texts from this passage pulled out of context to make this or that point which the text is not making. In fact, I am going to contend that the passage teaches the opposite of how some interpret it. The key to understanding this is context.

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, a church that he played an integral role in starting and one that it seems he remained very close to in spirit, the church was having many problems. Much of the content of his first letter is aimed at addressing these problems. Even though different issues were transpiring, I believe it is clear that there is one main underlying factor that was the base of most, if not all, the problems that they were experiencing: disunity. Often I have summed up Paul's overall message to the Corinthians in two words: "Stop dividing." This is the way Paul opens the letter:

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul

¹⁵ Or, perhaps, the day upon which the supper was to be taken doesn't matter as much as we like to say it does. See Appendix I.

¹⁶ LaVerdiere, E. (1998). p. 208.

¹⁷ Smith, D. E. (2003).

crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"
(I Corinthians 1:10-13)

Cliques and factions were forming in the church, and Paul was very displeased. This is quite apparent amid Paul correction and rebuke of their abuse of the Lord's Supper. That is why Paul begins his rebuke with this line, "*For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.*" (I Corinthians 11:18a). Notice how Paul ties his rebuke of their abuse of the Lord's Supper all the way back to the beginning of the letter, about the divisions in the church that had been reported to him. We must see his rebuke in context; the problem with their practice wasn't fundamentally liturgical- it was social.¹⁸ The reason Paul could not commend them was because they were not coming together as one body. We will see this develop throughout his rebuke, but I just want to point out that Paul has this in mind from the very beginning.

This is the only account in which the early Christian meal is called the 'Lord's Supper.' It is also the passage that gives the most detailed attention to the meal in the New Testament. Ironically, it is a rebuke.¹⁹ However, though it is a rebuke, there is a lot of valuable information we can learn about the practice that is presumed. Perhaps the most transparent thing that we can learn from the pericope is that the meeting was indeed a full meal. Verse 21 makes this apparent: "*For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.*" The supper, as practiced today, would not fill anyone. Even if we used actual wine in our practice today, a small cup would come far from making anyone drunk. Further, Paul makes explicit mention of "eating" and "his own meal". Whatever is said about the rest of the passage, I think it is rather clear that the gathering, with the Corinthians came "together as a church" (v. 18) was for the purpose of sharing a meal together. This certainly makes sense as to why Paul would call the practice "the Lord's Supper." Luke prefers the phrase "breaking bread" to describe the same event.

At this point one might object, as I have heard and previously believed, that even though the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian church had the context of a meal, Paul is indeed rebuking them for it. Further, those who object would point to verse 22 and 34 to back up their position:

"What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not." (v. 22)

"...if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment." (v. 34)

However, these objections miss the entire point that Paul is making, attested by the overall instruction he gives to them to correct their error (which is ironically in verse 33, which is often not quoted in the process of proof texting):

"So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another..."
(I Corinthians 11:33)

Paul does not tell them to stop eating the meal. On the contrary, his instruction actually assumes they will continue to eat the meal. What does Paul tell them to do to correct their actions? "*Wait for one another.*" This makes complete sense in the context of the point that Paul is making about the supper and in the overall context of I Corinthians. Their issue is not the meal, it's the fact that they aren't eating the meal as a community. They are, once again, being divisive even in the act that is supposed to fundamentally show that they are one body- the communal meal. Paul sarcastically chides those who are not waiting for others to arrive by telling them, "If you're so hungry that you can't wait on one another, then eat at home before you come to the meal!" Paul's rebuke and the way he

¹⁸ See also McGowan, A. B. (1999). "Is There a Liturgical Text in This Gospel?": The Institution Narratives and Their Early Interpretive Communities. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 118(1), 73-87. doi:10.2307/3268225

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that had the Corinthians not been abusing the supper, we would probably have very little persevered in the New Testament to derive our liturgy of the Lord's Supper. This is interesting to me, since we often place much more importance on getting the liturgy correct than it would seem the New Testament does.

tells the Corinthians to correct their issue becomes very coherent when we better understand the problem itself. I believe Jan de Jonge does well in describing the problem:

The participants brought their own food. In principle, the idea was that the poorer members of the community, the "have-nots" (11:22), could consume the food which the more well-to-do brought with them but did not consume. This created the *komoma* of the community and gave the meal the function of a chancy meal. This is why it was also called agapē (Jude 12; Ignatius, Smyrn. 7:1; 8:2; etc.).

The abuse which Paul wanted to correct among the Corinthians stemmed from their failure to share their food with each other. Instead of gathering in all the food before the meal started and then dividing it in equal portions among the participants, each of them only ate the portion which he or she had brought with him (her). Thus, each participant "took his own supper" (11:21). The result was that the wealthier members ate larger and better portions than the poorer members. This inequality gave rise to divisions within the community. The Corinthian abuse also confirmed the social differences between the members of the community instead of cancelling and abolishing them. In this way the Lord's Supper missed its mark.²⁰

Dr. Smith says similarly,

Paul takes the position that all such actions [referring to matters of individual conduct that detract from the communal nature of the meal] are schismatic, including the imputing of rank to individual members. He does this because he is working with a model of unity as an inherent aspect of a communal meal. Consequently, his main argument in 11:17-34 is to provide that the meal truly be a communal one so that the discussion of unity can naturally follow and build on that fact. And whatever the problem with the "individual supper," Paul felt it could be resolved by eating together. Consequently, while the differentiations in food may have implied a difference in status connected with social class either because some were free to start eating earlier than others²¹ or because some simply brought more food for themselves, these differentiations were not of such gravity to be a concern in themselves. Rather, they were indicative of a more serious problem, in which a sense of status as applied especially to spiritual gifts was threatening Paul's concept of a proper meal community, which was characterized by unity.²²

We must recognize the highly rhetorical style that Paul utilizes here in his diatribe against the abusers of the meal. His questions are sarcastic and hyperbolic.²³ If they were just going to eat their own meals without taking part in the community, they might as well have stayed home- where individual meals take place (in relation to the Christian assembly). If they were so hungry that they couldn't wait for the rest of the assembly to get there, then they should eat at home, so they wouldn't be coming together for judgment.

What would be the cause of this judgment, then? Our answer to this question comes from the interpretation of what Paul says in verse 27:

²⁰ De Jonge, H. J. (1999, January). The Early History of the Lord's Supper. In J. V. Henten, & A. Houtepen (Eds.), *Religious identity and the invention of tradition: Papers read at a Noster Conference in Soesterberg* (pp. 209-237). https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/961/279_123.pdf

²¹ The wealthier may have been free to come earlier because they didn't have to work in the same way that the lower classes did. Thus, they could come early, and eat most of the food before the poorer of the community could get there and have a chance to partake in the meal ("one goes hungry, another gets drunk").

²² Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2831.

²³ This is one of Paul's favorite literary devices in his writing. Hyperbole is evident even in the context of the letter to the Corinthians- "...and if I had all faith, so as to move mountains", "...if I talk with the tongues of men and of angels", "...if I deliver up my body to be burned" in chapter 13, using this device to emphasize the importance of love. See also Gal. 5:12.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.”
(I Corinthians 11:27)

What I have heard many do here is read this verse and then stop to decide what “in an unworthy manner” means. To decide, we simply use our own presuppositions and culture to define “an unworthy manner.” Maybe I have unrepentant sin. Maybe I haven’t thought about the cross enough. Maybe I have the liturgy wrong- perhaps the prayer wasn’t specific enough, or maybe we shouldn’t be using multiple cups. However, Paul tells us exactly what he means by “an unworthy manner” in verse 29:

“For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”
(I Corinthians 11:29)

We see that eating and drinking in an “unworthy manner” is to eat or drink without discerning the body. Unfortunately, this phrase too has been the subject of controversy. The history Christian argument over this verse is whether or not the bread and wine actually become the literal body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation) or whether or not it’s symbolic in some way (consubstantiation). However, I propose a much simpler explanation that fits much better with the context of this specific pericope, as well as with the larger context of I Corinthians as a whole. To discern means “to perceive by the sight or some other sense or by the intellect; see, recognize, or apprehend;”²⁴ Merriam-Webster defines it as such: “to come to know or recognize mentally.”²⁵ Thus, to “discern” the body means to recognize the body.²⁶ The issue that the Corinthian church were having is that they were not understanding the unity of the meal, and by extension, the body of Christ. They were not taking part in a communal meal, but rather each went ahead with “his own meal.”

Notice that Paul switches terminology from the “body and blood of the Lord” in verse 27 to simply the “body” in verse 29. The transubstantiation/consubstantiation interpretation doesn’t fit well with this switch, since Paul does not say “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body and the blood...” I believe it is clear that Paul is using “body” as a metaphor for the church here, especially since he continues on with this metaphor in the next chapter (many members, but one body). Further, Paul having the church as a community in mind here when he says “discerning the body” is very coherent with his instruction to fix the problem: “wait for one another.”

“Let a person examine himself” (verse 28) then is informed by the opening of the rebuke, as this is where Paul defines the problem, particularly from verse 18-19:

“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”
(I Corinthians 11:18-19)

Smith states,

Here, rather than being “genuine,” one is in danger of being “guilty” (*enochos*, 11:27). One should therefore “examine” or “test” oneself (*dokimazein*, 11:28) lest one fall under “judgment” (*krima*, 11:29). This happens when one has not properly “discerned” or “judged” the body (*diakrinein*, 11:29). Thus Paul concludes: “But if we judged [*diekrinomen*] ourselves, we would not be judged [*ekrinometha*]. But when

²⁴ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/discern>

²⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discern>

²⁶ As in, the body of Christ- the church. Paul will continue to use this metaphor extensively in chapter 12, comparing the church to a body. This term “body” as describing the whole made up of individual parts, such as people, was a very current metaphor in the Greco-Roman world, see De Jonge, H. J. (1999, January), footnote 10.

we are judged [*krinomenoi*] by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned [*katakritomen*] along with the world" (11:31-32).²⁷

Smith continues about those who are "genuine,"

Paul, however, uses it [the term 'genuine'] in an ironic sense. The "genuine" to which he is referring are not those who have been given the formal positions of status, but instead they emerge when the individualized "factions" separate from them (11:19). The term, then, is being applied to the group that continues to cohere as a community though some have separated themselves. Their status is not one imputed by the community directly, but Paul implies that it is imputed indirectly nonetheless by the events. Indeed, theirs is a status imputed by God, for it is God who designates the true ranking at the "Lord's supper": "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body" (12:24-25). Thus the "genuine" are those judged by God to be of that category: "For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved [genuine, *dokimos*], but those whom the Lord commends" (2 Cor 10:18). And they are identified as such in this community by the fact that they continue to cohere as a community in the face of the separation of others into individual meals.²⁸

Even that Paul says "*you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes,*" (verse 26) can be better understood in this context. If we understand the context of the Lord's Supper in the church at Corinthian as a communal meal, we can ask the question why this community even existed in the first place. The question is still relevant today. How does a group of people so different from one another, from every walk of life, cultural background and ethnicity, come together as a group? It is clear that the Corinthians had their differences- yet they were all (supposed to be) coming together as a cohesive, unified group. Why? Because of the death and resurrection of Christ. That is the bond that held them together; faith in their Lord. That is the bond that holds us together. Thus, when they came together as a church (which was in the context of a communal meal), they proclaimed to the world their Lord. They showed to the world that they were a community, and the only explanation for their community was their common bond in Christ. In this way, they proclaimed the death of the Lord (and, implied by their unity/community/faith/Christianity after his death, his resurrection) until his return. And so, we too continue to proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord until he comes when we partake in the Lord's Supper as a community. Smith ties it together in this way:

The "proclamation of the Lord's death" referred to here is best understood not in the sense of words that are said but as a reference to the act of eating and drinking itself. In other words, when the meal takes place in its proper form, then that in itself is a "proclamation of the Lord's death." It is that proper form that has been the focus of Paul's discussion. According to his argument, then, when the community eats with unity and equality, that is when they proclaim the death of the Lord. For Paul, the purpose of the death of Christ was to create a saved community. More specifically, it resulted in the inclusion of the Gentiles into the community of the people of God. Over and over again, Paul argues that point, and more than once he refers to the meal as the locus for the experience of that community. At Antioch, the meal had to be inclusive of Gentiles or else "Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21). At Galatia, as I have argued above, it is at the community meal that they experienced "Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified" (Gal 3:1). In Romans, Paul argues that Christians should "welcome one another ... just as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom 15:7), thus emphasizing the interrelation between the inclusion into the community that the death of Christ provides and the acting out of that inclusion to others that the church should practice. The ritualization of that "welcome," as I argue below, would most likely have taken place at the community table. Here in 1 Cor 11:17-34 Paul finds the most profound meaning of the meal as "Lord's supper" in its ability to bring together a disparate people into one community... To experience inclusion in the community at the table, and to extend that experience to others, is in the most profound sense "to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."²⁹

²⁷ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2841.

²⁸ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2849.

²⁹ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2896.

By now, you may have realized that just about the only section of this passage that I haven't dealt with in detail is verses 23-25, which is the part in which Paul appeals to the Last Supper as the model for the Lord's Supper. For fear of going too long (as if I haven't already done that), I will just make this comment. In recalling the earlier tradition of the Last Supper, Paul affirms the context of an actual meal when he says "*In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying...*" Paul knew the context of the ministry of Jesus, specifically the context of the "institution of the Lord's Supper."

"When you come together"

It would seem that when the church in Corinth assembled together, they did so in the context of a communal meal. However, if we look further in the epistle, Paul gives us more of the snapshot of a typical meeting of the church at Corinth in chapters 12-14. We note the assembly by the phrase "when you come together," found in 11:17, 18, 19, 33, 34. It would seem that Paul is making it clear that he is talking about the assembling of the church together as a unified community. The next (and final) time this phrase appears in the epistle is in 14:23, even more explicitly:

"If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?"
(1 Corinthians 14:23)

I think most would agree that Paul is dealing with the Christian assembly in chapter 14. What is interesting, then, is to note that chapter 14 is the concluding chapter of a section, chapters 12-14. Thus, both sections, chapter 11 with the gathering for the meal and chapters 12-14 with the discussion of spiritual gifts and orderly worship are described in the same way- as an assembling of the church. De Jonge concludes strongly that this indicates that Paul is dealing with the same meeting in chapter 11-14.³⁰ Smith argues similarly:

The question, then, is whether the text indicates that these worship activities are still being undertaken at table. Certainly there is something to be said for the fact that the multiple references to the "gathering" of the community use the same basic terminology. Thus the problems at the communal meal take place "when you come together" (*synerchesthe*, 11:17), "when you come together as a church" (*synerchomenon hymon en ekklesia*, 11:18), "when you come together ... to eat the Lord's supper" (*synerchomenon hymon epi to auto kyriakon deipnon phagein*, 11:20), and "when you come together to eat... so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation" (*synerchomenoi eis to phagein hina me eis krima synerchesthe*, 11:33-34). Later in the same letter, then, when Paul refers to the occasion "when you come together" (*hotan synerchesthe*, 14:26), at which various worship activities take place and during which they respond to one another as "the church" or "the assembly" (*ekklesia*, 14:4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28) and as "the body" (*soma*, 12:12-31), it is reasonable to assume that he is talking about the same gathering that began with the meal in chapter 11. Consequently, I propose that the worship activities described in chapters 12 and 14 take place at table. Indeed, these activities would have a logical connection with the meal, for they would take place "after supper" (*meta to deipnesai*, 11:25) and during the symposium, at a time when meal customs designate an extended period of entertainment or conversation.³¹

It makes sense to me to take the unit as discussing one meeting, which would mean worship for the Corinthian church was at the table (at least for a good proportion of the number of meetings). The reason this makes sense, other than the coherence with the cultural context of the Greco-Roman world and the textual links, is that when Christians assemble as one body, worship should naturally follow. Not because of any legal requirement, but rather because of the nature of the assembly. When a basketball team meets together at a court, a pickup game is likely to begin. When a group of actors meet together at a stage, impromptu improvisation sessions are likely to break out. When Christians assemble together at table, worship is likely to ensue.

³⁰ De Jonge, H. J. (1999, January)

³¹ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2900.

The Lord's Supper in other Pauline texts and beyond

Though I Corinthians 11 is the most thorough attention that Paul dedicates to the practice of the Lord's Supper, it is not the only place where he deals with the topic. There is a less discussed (at least in circles that I run in) passage dealing with the bread and cup in the preceding chapter.

“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”
(I Corinthians 10:14-22)

Though this passage deals explicitly with the bread and the cup, it doesn't get a lot of attention when we discuss the Supper. However, I believe that there are some insights that we can gain from this pericope which will correspond well to what Paul says in the next chapter and fit the overall theme and context of I Corinthians very well. It is not surprising here that when Paul discusses the cup and the bread, he does so with a focus on unity. However, here the topic of unity expands beyond just that of the unity in the church. It would seem that though the Corinthian church was having problems with unity amongst themselves, some seemed to have no problem being unified at the table of demons. Paul uses sacrifice typology and language here and applies it to the cup and the bread. The context of the passage is Paul's discussion about sacrifice and idolatry, and what it meant when people participated in the meal of sacrificed meat. It is likely that we miss much of what is going on here because we are not very familiar with the culture of sacrifice and the meaning that it telegraphed. The reason that eating meat sacrificed to idols was a problem in the Corinthian church (and in other churches in this time period as well) had nothing to do with the meat itself. It had everything to do with participation. By partaking in the sacrifice at the table³², the participants were telegraphing loyalty and sharing with the one to whom they were sacrificing. When Paul makes reference to the people of Israel who are made participants in the altar by eating the sacrifice, he could be talking about various sacrifices that are laid out in Leviticus. I tend to think he is talking specifically about the peace/well-being offering referenced in Leviticus 3 since he says “the people of Israel” instead of the “priests of Israel.” In the well-being offering, the donor (the one who brings the offering/sacrifice) participates in the meal that comes after the offering. He could be talking about any offering then that the donor participates in the sacrifice, I suppose. The point is, it's a fellowship meal that happens after the altar. Dr. Heiser states, about Leviticus 3,

...what makes this particular sacrifice of well-being, the “peace offering”, distinctive is that it's a communal celebration of worshipers, the [donors], occasioned by and...constructed around the meat of the offering. It's a fellowship meal. It's a communion meal that indicated the fact that there was peace between God and the person bringing the offering and of course the priests.³³

When Paul applies this language to the table of the Lord, he is making the point that we cannot eat at the table of the Lord and at the table of demons. The problem at Corinth with eating food sacrificed to idols is the way they were doing it. In so eating, they were telegraphing (at least to the weaker members) that they were fellowshiping with the gods to whom the sacrifice was offered. This is the irony of the whole situation. Some in the Corinthian church had no issue in sharing fellowship with idols, yet they couldn't even fellowship properly with one another.

³² Note here that the altar, where the sacrifice takes place, and the table, the meal following the sacrifice in which the remaining substance of the sacrifice was eaten, are distinguished.

³³ Dr. Michael Heiser, podcast. Naked Bible 65: Leviticus 2 & 3. <http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com/naked-bible-65-leviticus-2-3/> Quote taken from the transcript of the podcast available at the aforementioned link. Accessed 2/19/2017.

We can see here, then, that Paul's main focus is still on unity. This is explicitly stated in verse 17, as Paul uses the symbolism of the one bread to show how Christians, though many, were all unified in one body. At this point, a question of liturgy comes up in partaking in the Lord's Supper. Does the bread, then, have to come from the same loaf? As I have stated before, I think deriving a list of "rules" for the Supper and insisting that there is one right way to do it is a bit foreign to the text. If this were the case, then I believe we would have been given a list of specific, prescriptive rules. Instead, what we have are a few accounts that mention Christians meeting together for a meal and Paul's instructive texts on specific abuses of the Supper.³⁴ However, it is true that Paul draws a strong metaphor for unity in the one bread. I think the importance here is that we telegraph unity and community clearly during the Supper. If we need to do that through a single loaf of bread, I'm not opposed. Practically speaking, that would be difficult. It was likely much easier to do such in smaller Christian communities in the primitive church, or perhaps from house to house such as in Acts 2. I don't think we should get too caught up in the details of ritual, but rather apply the point that Paul is trying to make- when we share the Lord's Supper, we should do so as and signifying one, unified body.

Another thing that we should notice about Paul's discussion about the bread and the cup in chapter 10 is the fact that Paul links the Supper with the meals following the sacrifices of Israel in a more general sense than just the Passover meal. In fact, Paul never explicitly links the Supper with the Passover meal. The only connection that Paul gives is when he references the "institution" tradition, which was during the Passover festival. Hicks puts it this way,

Instead of appealing specifically to the Passover as the background for understanding the Lord's supper, Paul alludes to the whole sacrificial system. Passover is one of the sacrifices of Israel, but it is not the only one. Paul calls us to consider the meaning of Israel's sacrificial meals in order to understand the Lord's supper. To understand one is to understand the other.³⁵

Again, another liturgical question is addressed here. We often place a high significance on the unleavened bread that must have been present at the Passover during the "institution" of the Lord's Supper. However, it seems that none of the other biblical writers who actually discuss the Supper place the same importance to the bread being necessarily unleavened. In fact, using unleavened bread in the Eucharist is a relatively new idea. No New Testament text commands the use of unleavened bread in the Supper.³⁶ In fact, it would seem rather unlikely that they continually used unleavened bread daily from house to house in Jerusalem in Acts 2. None of the early church fathers speak of using unleavened bread in the Eucharist. Rather, they speak of using common ordinary bread. The practice of using unleavened bread in the Eucharist wasn't begun until the ninth century, and the question of leavened or unleavened bread found its greatest climax in 1064 when the Catholic Church split east from west.³⁷ The Eastern Church still uses leavened bread today. Indeed, the bread that Paul uses as a metaphor here in I Corinthians 10 could very well be a leavened loaf. In my opinion, this seems to be what is appealed to by Paul.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians indeed contains the most lengthy and explicit dealings with the Lord's Supper. However, this is not the only place that Paul references the Christian meal. Paul seems to make an indirect reference to the Christian meal in Galatians 2:

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas

³⁴ It should be noted here that the abuses in question should be obvious abuses (disunity which goes against the whole concept of the supper, and fellowship with demons, which Jesus makes clear is not a part of following him), not small liturgical details that were not "discerned properly".

³⁵ Hicks, J. M. (2002). p. 40.

³⁶ Though Acts 20:6 mentions the days of unleavened bread, Acts 20:7 takes place almost two weeks after the days of unleavened bread were ended.

³⁷ See <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2011/05/12/the-bread-on-the-table-an-ancient-controversy-that-changed-the-supper/>

was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"
(Galatians 2:11-14)

We know this story more for the conflict between Peter and Paul than for the implied backdrop that is in the text. Yes, it is true that Paul had to rebuke Peter for what he was doing here. However, why would the issue even have arisen in the first place? What opportunity would Peter have to forsake the company of Gentile Christians when Jewish Christians of the circumcision party came to visit? It is clear that Peter was participating in regular meals with the Gentile Christians, as this would have to be the case for him to stop doing it when the Jewish Christians came. Following with the examples we have seen in Acts 2, 20 and I Corinthians 11, it is reasonable to assume that Paul is indirectly (actually, I guess it might be quite direct) referencing the early Christian meals. This would then be the earliest reference we have to such meals, though the Christian meal was already being practiced before Paul.³⁸ Even here the issue is unity. When the Jewish Christians came to visit Antioch, Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles, thus causing a division. We can see clearly the power these meals had to unite and divide socially. Similarly, Paul indirectly adds witness to the early Christian meals in Romans 14:1-15:13. In this passage, which is similar to I Corinthians 8, Paul is dealing with matters of conscience, and explaining that Christians are not to put a stumbling block in the way of their brother. However, notice that much of this pericope is dedicated to the meal. Indeed, Smith says about the passage in Romans, “the implication of the argument throughout is that the context for the debate is that of the community meal.”³⁹ Again, the problem that Paul addresses here is division. As this is the abuse that is seen in almost every instance of the Lord’s Supper in Pauline literature, I would suggest that unity at the table should be our number one priority. This is the purpose of the meal, to bring together the body of Christ as one community. We see from scripture that it seems to be very easy to get off track in this goal.

There are a few other interesting references to the feast outside of Pauline literature that are worth noting. Perhaps the most explicit and famous reference of the Christian meal, or the love feast, is found in Jude:

“These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted;...”
(Jude 12)

We will discuss the love feast, or the agapē, some in the next section. For now, I just want to show a direct reference to the early Christian meals that were being practiced in the time period of the New Testament. II Peter also has a reference to the feasts, and some manuscripts even say “love feasts”, in II Peter 2:13. In these references, the context is much different than in Paul. Both Peter and Jude are writing about false prophets and teachers that have come into their number, specifically in their love feasts. This presupposes that the love feasts are a regular practice. We see then that the practice of the early Christian meal was quite widespread in Christendom, likely due to the shared cultural context of the Greco-Roman world.

I want to end the biblical portion of this text with the banquet scene found in the New Testament. This meal, however, is not one that is pictured in the first century, but rather looks prospectively to the future after the judgment of the Lord and the resurrection. It pictures the fulfillment of the Messianic banquet, as the marriage supper of the Lamb:

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

*“Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God*

³⁸ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2479.

³⁹ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 2647.

*the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure”—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*

*And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”
(Revelation 19:6-9)*

Truly, what a day that will be, when we feast with the Lamb. It is for this time with our Lord that we long and wait. But the good news is that we can have a part of that now. When participating in the Lord’s Supper, we anticipate this feast. I pray that we can begin to experience the eschatological meal in the blessing intended for us in the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’ Supper in the Early Church

The final line of evidence I bring is that of the early church, in their own writings and writings about them. It is not my intention here to say that non-canonical writings are inspired, but rather to show that the practice of the communal meal is attested and practiced beyond the New Testament. Tracing the history of the practice of the Lord’s Supper in the early writings is somewhat difficult before ca. 200 AD, but there is a fair amount we can learn. Before we look at the writings, however, I think it would be beneficial to discuss a few terms.

Throughout this study, I have mostly used the terms “Lord’s Supper” and “breaking of bread” to refer to the meal that was shared by early Christians. It should be noted here that the term “Eucharist” is also often applied to this concept, so that the Lord’s Supper, Breaking of Bread, Communion and the Eucharist are interchangeable in this discussion. Eucharist simply means “thanksgiving” in Greek, and is applied to this ceremony because of the blessing of thanksgiving that is said over the bread and the cup. Ferguson attests that in the second century, the term Eucharist, though technically part of the ceremony, had come to be representative of the act as whole.⁴⁰ Indeed, in the text of the New Testament, and as we will see in the early writings, it is hard to distinguish between the Lord’s Supper and the Eucharist, because they had the same context. The way I parse the terms, at least relation to the New Testament and how we see the ceremony today, is that the Lord’s Supper refers to the communal meal in which the Eucharist takes place. With this idea, the Eucharist is the portion of the meal that is dedicated specially to blessing the bread and the cup, whenever those elements are singled out. I don’t know if this is the way it was seen in the primitive church, since the communal meal was the focus of the Christian assembly. Over the course of the second and third centuries, we see a separation between the Eucharist and the evening “agapē” meal⁴¹ that Christians share together, where the ritualized Eucharist becomes more important and the evening agapē meal becomes less important. However it is important to note that there is no clear line from point A to point B in this regard, as different groups witness to different traditions.⁴² Smith puts it this way:

The form of meal known as the agapē or "love feast" seems to have developed along with, or perhaps more appropriately, alongside, the Eucharist. It is unclear when the two became separate strands of tradition. In the time of Paul, as we have seen, the Lord's Supper is one and the same with the communal meal. In Jude 12, however, and in Ignatius (e.g., Rom. 7:3 and Smyrn. 8:2) the agapē is already being mentioned, so that by the end of the first century C.E. we know that there was such a meal, though it is still unclear in what

⁴⁰ Ferguson, E. (1971). *Early Christians Speak*. Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing Company. p. 95-96

⁴¹ Or “love feast”, as in Jude 12.

⁴² De Jonge, H. J. (1999, January).

way it was related to the still developing forms of the Eucharist. The Eucharist, meanwhile, developed into a stylized symbolic meal governed by church order traditions that specified the prayers and the appropriate order and hierarchical leadership.⁴³

We will see this blurring of terms and concepts as we look into the early Christian writings. The earliest witness to the Eucharist, and really one of the earliest non-canonical Christian writings we have, is called the Didache, also known as the teaching of the twelve apostles. It was written over a period of years (ca. 50 – 100 AD) and contains a collection of early Christian traditions, practices and prayers. LaVerdiere gives a great introduction and overview of the Didache, especially in relation to the Eucharist.⁴⁴ I recommend reading his section for a complete synopsis of the work. Perhaps the most relevant section of the Didache to our current study is found from chapter 9 to 10:1:

“And concerning the Eucharist, hold Eucharist thus: First concerning the Cup, "We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the Holy Vine of David thy child, which, thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy child; to thee be glory for ever." And concerning the broken Bread: "We give thee thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy Child. To thee be glory for ever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy Kingdom, for thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever." But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs." But after you are satisfied with food, thus give thanks..."⁴⁵

We can see even here that the Eucharist did not follow a path of linear development from the supper of I Corinthians 11 to the ritual procedure found in the third century, but rather different communities of Christians practiced the meal in different ways, emphasizing different aspects of Christ.⁴⁶ This is evident from the blessing that is said over the cup and the bread. Notice that there is no mention of the body and blood of Christ, as in Pauline literature. The time periods are contemporary. Rather, the blessing in the Didache takes the form of traditional Jewish meal prayers.⁴⁷ Scholars have often noted the differences of the Supper in different communities.^{48,49,50} However, one thing does seem to be clear from the context. The Eucharist still held the context of a communal meal, as is indicated by the line “But after you are satisfied with food,” or in some translations, “after you are filled.” Ferguson attests, “The eucharist in the *Didache* appears to be set in the context of a social meal.”⁵¹ Later on in the Didache, we get a reference to coming together on the “Lord’s Day of the Lord” to “break bread and hold Eucharist” (Didache 14:1).

Perhaps one of my favorite witnesses to the early Christian meal as I was doing this study comes from a non-Christian source. Pliny the Younger was a Roman governor in service to the Roman Emperor Trajan who was tasked with investigating whether certain accused Christians were actually Christians (and if so, they were to be punished). We have preserved a letter he writes to Trajan ca. 112 AD that actually details some of the Christian’s practices at this time:

“They [the accused Christians] asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery,

⁴³ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 4172.

⁴⁴ LaVerdiere, E. (1996). *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the early church*. Collegeville (Minnesota): Liturgical Press. p. 128-145

⁴⁵ Didache 9-10:1, ca. 50-100. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lake.html>

⁴⁶ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 4187.

⁴⁷ Hicks, J. M. (2002). p. 130.

⁴⁸ LaVerdiere, E. (1996).

⁴⁹ Smith, D. E. (2003).

⁵⁰ De Jonge, H. J. (1999, January).

⁵¹ Ferguson, E. (1971). p. 99.

not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food."⁵²

There are several things we learn from this hostile witness about the practices and early traditions of Christianity. We learn that there was a certain day that Christians gathered together. We also learn that they met together twice on this day, once in the morning before sunrise and then again later to eat a meal together.⁵³ The character of Christians, binding themselves by an oath, not to do something evil as would be expected, but rather to do good. Pliny's witness is sometimes taken to indicate the beginning of the separation of the Eucharist and the fellowship meal during the second century. Ferguson states, "Justin's accounts [of the Eucharist] (VII.2; VIII.4) leave no room for a meal. In the second century the fellowship meal developed separately as the "love feast".⁵⁴

One of the earliest references to the agapē comes from Ignatius (ca. 35 - ca. 108 AD) as he writes to the Smyrnaeans. In chapter 8 of his epistle, we read,

"See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is[administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude[of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid."⁵⁵

It seems that this reference can go either way in relation to whether or not the Eucharist and the agape were separated at this point. I would lean towards them still being in the same context, since there seems to be parallelism between the terms "Eucharist" and "love-feast" in this passage. Regardless, what we can and will see, the agape was clearly a function of the church, as indicated by the emphasis on having a bishop present to preside. The agape also had a purpose of charity, as the wealthier members would share their wealth (food and drink) with those who had less.⁵⁶ In later apologies we will see that the ethical aspects of the meal are discussed at length, with the Christians defending the meal by showing the godly nature of them compared to the pagan meals. For example, Minucius Felix writes in chapter 31 of *The Octavius* (ca. 160-250 AD),

"But we maintain our modesty not in appearance, but in our heart we gladly abide by the bond of a single marriage; in the desire of procreating, we know either one wife, or none at all. We practise sharing in banquets, which are not only modest, but also sober: for we do not indulge in entertainments nor prolong our feasts with wine; but we temper our joyousness with gravity, with chaste discourse, and with body even more chaste (divers of us unviolated) enjoy rather than make a boast of a perpetual virginity of a body."⁵⁷

Similarly, Tertullian writes in ca. 197 AD,

"Our feast explains itself by its name The Greeks call it *agapē*, i.e., affection. Whatever it costs, our outlay in the name of piety is gain, since with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy; not as it is with you, do parasites aspire to the glory of satisfying their licentious propensities, selling themselves for a

⁵² Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-10.97. <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>

⁵³ The Christians likely met in this two fold manner because Sunday was a work day in the Roman world. Thus Christians presumably met before dawn before they went to work, and then in the evening for a meal after the work day was over.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, E. (1971). p. 99.

⁵⁵ Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans, chapter 8. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-smyrnaeans-roberts.html> (underlining mine)

⁵⁶ Ferguson, E. (1971). p. 133.

⁵⁷ *The Octavius* of Minucius Felix, chapter 31. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>

belly-feast to all disgraceful treatment-but as it is with God himself, a peculiar respect is shown to the lowly. If the object of our feast be good, in the light of that consider its further regulations. As it is an act of religious service, it permits no vileness or immodesty. The participants, before reclining, taste first of prayer to God. As much is eaten as satisfies the cravings of hunger; as much is drunk as befits the chaste. They say it is enough, as those who remember that even during the night they have to worship God; they talk as those who know that the Lord is one of their auditors. After manual ablution, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing,-a proof of the measure of our drinking. As the feast commenced with prayer, so with prayer it is closed. We go from it, not like troops of mischief-doers, nor bands of vagabonds, nor to break out into licentious acts, but to have as much care of our modesty and chastity as if we had been at a school of virtue rather than a banquet.”⁵⁸

By the third century, it is clear that in many places, the Eucharist and the agape are separate entities. Michael White attributes this separation to the change of location of Christian assemblies from houses to assembly halls.⁵⁹ Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 215 AD) applies the term “Lord’s Supper” to the communal meal, and specifically not to the Eucharist,

“When they dine, the faithful present shall take from the hand of the bishop a small piece of bread before taking their own bread, because it is blessed. Yet it is not the eucharist, like the body of the Lord. Before they all drink, they shall take their cups and give thanks for them. Thus they will eat and drink in purity. However, give the catechumens exorcised bread and cups. The catechumen may not take part in the Lord’s Supper.”⁶⁰

Hicks states, “By the middle of the third century, then, the separation of the Eucharist from the meal was complete. The Eucharist was generally celebrated in the morning and the *Agape* in the evening.”⁶¹ The agape continued for several centuries, but the ritualized Eucharist became more important. Several church counsels met in the fourth century to address abuses of the agape, and by the end of the seventh century, the agape had almost entirely stopped, though the Eucharist continued on.⁶² The Eucharist in its present form has had profound influence on how we view the Lord’s Supper in the present age of Christendom. However, as I have shown, this has not always been the case.

Practical and Theological Implications of a Renewed Understanding of the Lord’s Supper

So what does this all mean for us, then? At the very least, I think it should cause us to consider some questions concerning our own practice of the Lord’s Supper and what we are conveying when we participate in the table of the Lord. We should have an open discussion about what we are doing, if it in any way relates to the concept pictured in the New Testament, and if change is needed. I’m sure the opinions on this will be on a spectrum. As can probably be expected, I am of the opinion that we should model the way the early church came together regularly for a meal. I do not hold this opinion out of legalistic obligation. I hold it because I think the meal played an important function in early Christianity, and that function is not all that present in many churches today without the meal. To conclude, I would like to share my thoughts on the matter, what questions I think a study like this raises and some practical suggestions if we were to in fact restore the early Christian meal as it was originally intended.

The first question a study like this should raise has the potential to be rather uncomfortable. The way we observe the Lord’s Supper today- is it wrong? This is not the easiest question to answer, since our culture is so different today than the Greco-Roman culture of the primitive church. Perhaps the best way to analyze this is in light of the abuses of the supper in the New Testament. If we think back to the Pauline instructions, what was the main problem he was

⁵⁸ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 39:16-19. http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-05.htm#P425_201743

⁵⁹ Smith, D. E. (2003). Location 4180.

⁶⁰ Hippolytus of Rome, *Apostolic Tradition*. Chapter 26-27:1. <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>

⁶¹ Hicks, J. M. (2002). p. 132.

⁶² Hicks, J. M. (2002). p. 133.

trying to correct in terms of the Supper? I think the issue is more than clear- division. The Corinthian church in particular was having terrible problems with division. The communal meal of the Lord's Supper was supposed to be the practice that proclaimed the unity of the body. Yet even here, in bitter irony, the Corinthian church divided. I would argue that the Lord's Supper is one of the few expressions of worship that is fundamentally communal. You can't share a meal by yourself. You can't telegraph the concept of many members, yet one body by yourself. You can't show unity in solidarity. The Corinthians (and the Galatians and Romans, apparently) were having issues because they were forming cliques and factions instead of being a unified body. Sometimes I wonder if we haven't taken it even a step further, and created an atmosphere of individual isolation during the Supper. You could probably make the case that we do sometimes stress the communal nature of the Lord's Supper, how we are all partaking together, and in a sense with many Christians around the globe. I think there might be some merit in that argument. However, I question if what we do in practice mimics what we say we are doing, or if we are just paying lip service to what should happen, yet not acting it out. John Mark Hicks makes this statement,

The table is a communal experience. It is not a private, individualistic moment... Unfortunately, the church practices the supper in private silence. But this is unlike any table that I have experienced. Indeed, the only table where private silence is valued is the Lord's table as it is currently practiced in the church. Yet, this undermines the very nature of the table and the function of communal fellowship that table should serve. A "private table" is a meal for one, but the Lord's meal is where we "discern" the church and enjoy the fellowship of fellow believers.⁶³

This statement is reminiscent of what Paul rebuked the Corinthians for, when each took their "own meal" instead of truly partaking in the "Lord's Supper" (I Corinthians 11:20-21). The only instances that Paul addresses the individual in this passage is when he is either rebuking them for causing division at the table or charging them to "examine themselves" so that they are sure they are discerning the body by truly participating in the communal meal. It is about unity and community, and that's what the Corinthians were missing. I wonder if we are not sometimes missing the same thing.

Another question I think we should consider is whether or not we are anticipating the eschatological banquet in our observance of the Lord's Supper. We saw that the Last Supper where the Lord's Supper was instituted had deep messianic banquet overtones. In I Corinthians, Paul tells us that in partaking of the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the death of the Lord, *until he comes*, which has overtones of the eschatological banquet. Further, John paints a beautiful picture of the marriage supper of the Lamb that is to come when this age is ended. We await that glorious day when we shall be with the Lord forever, on the mountain of the Lord dining in the consummated Kingdom of God. But Jesus offers us something here and now, so that we can be participants with him in the banquet before it fully comes. Does our "banquet" anticipate this? I would suggest that our practice is far from what we will be doing in the Kingdom yet to come. But if we could have a taste of the Kingdom now, why wouldn't we? I think we are missing out on a blessing that is being offered to us. We should note here that we have turned the table into the altar. We tend to focus on deep introspection and remorse for our sin, or the gruesome death that Jesus had to die because of what we have done. Yet, that's altar language and thought. Yes, we are all sinners, and yes, Jesus died to take care of that. The bread and the cup are indeed symbolic of his body and blood. That was the sacrifice; we are reminded of what happened at the cross as the altar. Now we participate in the sacrifice at the table, just like the children of Israel participated in their sacrifices (cf. I Corinthians 10:18), which is a time of celebration for what happened at the altar (cf. Deuteronomy 12:6-7,12,18; 27:7). Jesus' death on the cross, though filled with agony, is good news to those who sit at the table.⁶⁴ We are able to eat at the table of the Lord not only because Jesus died, but also (and perhaps even more so in terms of the eschatological banquet) because he rose. His resurrection is the key to defeating death, so that we may have life everlasting to recline at the table of the Lord in the coming Kingdom forever more. Paul makes this abundantly clear in I Corinthians 15. Without the resurrection, everything we do is vanity. Thus, the table of the Lord is truly a celebration of what our Lord has done for us. The glimpses that we see of the Supper in the New Testament make this celebration evident (cf. Luke 24, Acts 2, 20).

⁶³ Hicks, J. M. (2002). p. 187-188.

⁶⁴ Hicks, J. M. (2002). p. 189.

Perhaps more pressing to our situation today, however, is the reason that I truly believe we should restore the practice of the communal meal of the Lord's Supper. It is true that our culture differs heavily from the cultural context of the first century church. However, I don't think eating together has fully lost its power. We might not really think about it, but I think sharing a meal with other people has great meaning and power even in our culture today. I believe this is why the dinner table was of vital importance in American culture some 30 or 40 years ago. This is why we discuss things over dinner. This is why inviting people into our homes to share a meal creates a deeper bond than chatting with them at the store (or, to hit closer to home, in the church building). Strong families eat together. I don't know why we would assume that it would be any different in terms of our spiritual family. The power of sharing a meal transcends time and culture. Throughout the Bible, not just in the New Testament, we see meals being shared together. Implicit in the definition of hospitality is sharing a meal together (cf. Genesis 18 and Hebrews 13:2). I honestly believe that if we restored the early Christian practice of the communal meal, we would be a stronger, more connected church. Isn't that what becoming part of the family is about? I think there is much wisdom in the practice that the primitive church took part in, and we would be wise to follow. Not necessarily out of obligation, but rather out of our love for one another. The table isn't about walking on eggshells to determine the "correct" procedure (though it became such early on). It's about fellowship with the family of God.

I come from a fellowship that has traditionally sought to restore the New Testament church. We often make the claim that we want to simply be like the first century Christians. However, I must point out that if we actually met the church of the first century, I think we would be very surprised. There would be several things that would probably make us very uncomfortable. This post is not the place to talk about all those items, however. Yet it is the place to ask the question if we are really willing to live up to what we claim. I believe that there is ample, demonstrative evidence to show that the church of the first century partook of the Lord's Supper as a communal meal. I think we stand at a cross roads then. We have a choice. We can either try to live out our claim by restoring the practice of the communal meal, or we can stop claiming to be just like the first century church. I don't pose this as an ultimatum in the sense that there is an obvious correct answer. I honestly think there is merit in both options. Whereas I do believe we should restore the meal, I think there is something to admitting that we do live in a different culture, and living out the gospel looks different in different cultures. However, I don't think we can continue to claim that we practice just like the first century Christians did if we continue to practice as we do. This probably has some deep theological and hermeneutical implications that would make us uncomfortable as well. But it's better to ask the hard questions than to sit back and pretend like they don't exist.

Practical Suggestions.

I do understand that even if we were all to embrace the notion that the Lord's Supper was practiced as a meal in the first century, we would quickly run into some practical questions that the early church may or may not have dealt with. I don't think these problems are insurmountable, nor do I think they should discourage us from "revisoning" the Lord's Supper. For a good list of suggestions, I would suggest John Mark Hicks *Come to the Table: Revisoning the Lord's Supper*. However, I want to give a few practical suggestions to how we might restore the Christian meal.

To be honest, the Lord's Supper may have been quite similar to our pot lucks we have today. Though there are likely some cultural differences, I think the concept is much the same. Thus, it might not be too difficult, depending on the church, to incorporate a pot luck into our Sunday evening services, perhaps even the purpose for gathering on Sunday evenings. In answer to the objection of cost, I would suggest that we all are likely going to eat on Sunday evening anyway. The pot luck would simply offer a change in location (and I guess type of food).

Another way of going about restoring the meal, especially for large congregations, would be to do so in the context of small groups. Many churches have implemented small group meetings either as their Sunday evening meeting time or another time during the week. I would suggest that if you have a small group setting in place, it would not be difficult to implement the Lord's Supper as a meal in the various homes in which the small groups met. This might be how the primitive church in Jerusalem did it, breaking bread in their homes (Acts 2:46), as it would be hard to accommodate a full communal meal for 3,000+ people at one time. I would warn here, however, that we be careful not to use this model to create divisions during the Lord's Supper. Whatever we do, we must emphasize unity and

the shared experience of the meal with the whole church, even if we are sharing that meal in different homes. I think we would need to be diligent also to mix up the small groups, perhaps one meeting a month, so that we share the meal with the whole church rather than just with our own small group all the time. It is important to have a steady small group that we grow close to, but it is also important to build connections with the whole congregation.

In each of these settings, we would need to be conscientious about directing the conversation to be about our Lord, what he has done for us, and what he is doing for and through us. At a designated time, a blessing for the bread and the cup would be said (though this doesn't have to be at the same time, as even in the New Testament it would seem that they are separate), and I would suggest discussing their meaning. Unity and communion with one other should be emphasized, along with our hope of the coming Kingdom where we will dine with our Lord forever. Prayers, hymns and discussion could all take place at the table, or after dinner in a more accommodating room (due to our own cultural context of comfort, I suppose). In all things, we should glorify God.

There are other less dramatic suggestions that could be made, such as changing our focus when speaking at the table as currently practiced, or singing to emphasize community during communion, or even talking to each other about what Jesus has done and is doing for and through us as we pass the plates during communion. Maybe these are the first steps we need to take if we are to eventually restore the supper as it was practiced in the first century. Or maybe these steps would be successful in changing our mindset in the Supper. I'm more of a "if you're going to do something, go all the way" kind of guy myself. I think it could truly deepen our relationships and build a strong church. But I am aware that this is a contentious matter, one that can easily spark argument and division, and I truly do not in any way want that to happen. I value unity, and if the Lord's Supper becomes a division point, then all is already lost in the restoration, since the main purpose of the meal is unity. Whatever we do, I pray for unity.

If you are still reading at this point, I thank you for your diligence. What you do with the information is up to you. I have my own opinions about what we should do, but as I said, unity is my number one priority. I seek both truth and unity, and sometimes that is a delicate balance. However, I believe that is what we are called to do, and by the power of my Lord, I believe good things can be accomplished. In all things, I pray that we glorify Him.

Come share the Lord.

-Walt

Appendix I: Frequency of the Lord's Supper

The question some time arises of how often we should partake in the Lord's Supper. Can this question be answered through scripture? I will admit, before doing this study, I was not convinced that the New Testament had much to say about a designated day of worship, though it records a few worship stories. The New Testament isn't as clear as to the "proper" frequency of the Lord's Supper.⁶⁵ However, after doing this study and reading different positions, I do believe that you can find evidence for early Christians meeting on the first day of the week. You might even be able to trace the tradition back to early after the resurrection, when Jesus broke bread with the two from Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). There seems to be record of disciples gathering on the first day of the week as a group (Acts 20:7, I Corinthians 16). It is also clear in the early Christian writings that Sunday became an important day for Christians early on, even if there wasn't any evidence in the New Testament itself. Further, the first day of the week would and does hold significance in the Christian eye as the day of resurrection. Therefore, I am comfortable saying that Sunday is indeed traditionally a day that Christians chose to gather as a group for meals and worship.

The question is not, then, if Sunday is a good day to come together as a church, but rather, are these accounts prescriptive for us. In other words, are we commanded to come together on Sunday, and partake in the Lord's Supper on Sunday, and only Sunday? This is a much more complex question. Though some would definitively say they have the answer to it, I am not as convinced. To begin, I am no longer comfortable binding examples as commands. There is no instruction in the New Testament that tells us to do this, nor do we bind examples in any consistent way. The stories that we read in the narrative sections of the New Testament are just that- records of what happened. They are not necessarily prescriptive of what should happen. Secondly, if we bind this example of the early church as a command for what must take place to be "proper" worship, then where do we stop binding? Which examples do we bind, and which do we let go? Do we bind the whole example? Part of it? Which part? The parts that are most comfortable to us? If we must bind the example, why do we not bind the preaching until midnight? Why do we not bind the examples that show Christians gathering in each other's homes? Or even in a designated home? Why do we not bind the meal? What about the Jerusalem council? Why do we not bind foot washing? My point here is that there is no consistency in our practice of binding examples. Third, though I think you can successfully make the case that Christians shared the Lord's Supper meal on Sunday evenings very early on, I don't think you can show that that was the *only* day they did so. In fact, Acts 2 attest that at least at the beginning, they gathered daily. Technically, the breaking of bread at Troas was on Monday morning. Fourth, the "institution" of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper did not occur on the first day of the week. This is the account that Paul refers back to as being instructive of the meal, the tradition he recalls when he is rebuking the Corinthian church for abusing the meal. Fifth, and in my opinion the strongest reason not to bind a day, is when Paul is talking about the Lord's Supper, right after he recalls the institution, he says "for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup..." Paul could have put a time requirement here, but he doesn't. He leaves it open- as often as you do it. If we are going to speak where the bible speaks, let's do so. It would seem that Paul's answer to frequency (though I believe he would have found this to be a perplexing question) would be "as often as you do it."

⁶⁵ And I think trying to get a list of "rules" for the Lord's Supper out of the New Testament is a bit misguided.