

## A Word About Corinth

You might call Corinth a suburb of Athens – it was only about forty miles southwest across an Isthmus. Corinth had been a sizable place under Grecian rule but was sacked in 146 CE by the Romans during the Achaean War. A century later in 44 CE, Julius Caesar gave the city new life, establishing it as a Roman outpost, and Corinth eventually became the provincial capital. Freedmen and retired Roman soldiers flocked to the city. And so too did commerce, arts, and athletics. By the middle of the First Century, Corinth had everything one would desire in a cosmopolitan city. (Welbourn, p. 1999)

Paul made his way to Corinth sometime around the year 50 CE, approximately two decades after the death of Jesus, and at least fifteen years after his initial calling. (Sampley, p. 2035)

In Corinth, Paul found a city enthusiastic about Roman culture, and with special zeal for both the patronage system, and the emperor cult. Karen Armstrong notes that the Roman Empire thrived on keeping many clients (marginalized or subordinated people) dependent on just a few wealthy patrons. These key decision-makers in Corinth and other outposts were the only ones that could offer access to resources or advancement for people in lower classes. And of course, these outpost patrons were but clients to the even-wealthier and even-more-powerful patrons back in Rome. (Armstrong, p. 65)

One way the outpost patrons could win favor from their patrons back in Rome was to assist in the construction of temples and other civic buildings honoring the emperor cult. And if you took Latin in high school and had to watch *I, Claudius*, or maybe you are a graduate of the Jonathan Eidson School of Humor and have watched Mel Brooks' *The History of the World Part I*, you'll know that the Romans had a kind of looseness about them. Their dietary practices, sexual behaviors, ritual sacrifices, culture of violence and domination, etc. would have been enough to make most modest people blush. But remember also the culture – Corinth was full of new money and

new freedoms – success, excess, upward mobility all had a special lure to men and women beaten down by centuries-old systematic oppression.

Paul bristled at the dominance and influence of Roman culture. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul believed the world had been fundamentally changed, and in the very near future, Caesar’s oppressive structural systems would be dissolved. He amplifies such a belief in his letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:8).

And Paul is a seasoned missionary by now. He considers himself a parental spiritual figure to his new converts. And while there are a few wealthy patrons among his community, it is mostly made up of younger, poorer, more vulnerable residents of Corinth. He’ll be tempted to use the metaphor of infants and children to describe their growing faith – I think teenager is better. Paul is authentic, but he preaches a hard and rigid gospel. And when he leaves for Ephesus, his spiritual family struggles to live and practice a faith that is so countercultural to their present environment.

The first letter to Corinth is composed around 53-54 CE, or about a year and half after his departure. And Paul learns of fissures and divisions in the church, and of their struggle to separate Christ’s world from Caesar’s.

Read the whole letter if you have a few minutes. If nothing else it’ll start a conversation. I can’t cover it all, so today we’ll cover what’s most relevant: Paul’s stern advice regarding the Eucharist.

### **1 Corinthians 11:17-26 (NRSV)**

17 Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. 18 For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. 19 Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it

become clear who among you are genuine. 20 When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. 21 For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. 22 What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for[a] you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

### **Words from Corinth**

Imagine if you can, a wealthy patron hosting a banquet in Corinth. There is a grand room filled with grand furniture and grand food and even grander people. The more important you are, the closer you sit to the host. And if you are lucky enough to have a seat at the table, servants and slaves fulfill your needs: dangling grapes, filling wine and water glasses, standing at attention for what comes next. Of course, there are other people, too. They don't get mentioned, because they're not at the table. Maybe they were given a wall to hold up, or a seat on the floor, and some portion of the meal. And then there are those that aren't in the room – they're in the annex awaiting any scrap of food or recognition.

But that's what makes a good host in Rome. Not how he/she treats their guests, just that there are lots of guests, all craving to be there. And all of this just mimics the emperor in Rome. Caesar was proclaimed a savior because he brought the peace of Rome to the world. And his patrons were

an extension of that salvation – that is the peace and security and stability of the existing order.

Some peace. And some salvation if you didn't happen to be a patron.

Paul reminds the Church at Corinth, and us as well, of the good news of another savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus throws parties, too, but they aren't like Caesar's. He, the host of the party, gathers friends at a table, and even though they will betray him, deny him, and abandon him, and even though he knows it, he serves them. He says, "Here's the last bit of my bread, and here's the last bit of my wine, and I want to share it with you." (And Paul was too old to hear this memory of Jesus because it wasn't made public in John's Gospel until many years after his death, but I think he'd like it anyway – Jesus not only hosted his friends, but he insisted on serving them, too. He even washed their feet.)

Paul proclaimed Jesus as a savior – one whose servanthood and humility will ensure that God's peace will be present in the world. And unlike Caesar, Jesus does not maintain this salvation through coercion, or dominance, or exclusion, or power, or violence, or the extravagant trappings of Lordship. Jesus maintains our salvation – God's peace in the world – through love, and through servanthood, and at a banquet, with bread that has good crust, or lacks gluten if you are intolerant, and is open to all who would seek it.

Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us as well, that when we come to Christ's table, we proclaim that day when God's realm will burst into the present, and overwhelm the tired, predictable, sordid order of Caesar. Paul tells us that when we gather at the table, that is to say, when we come together as people proclaiming that God is good, and that we are made good in God's image, and that with God's help and our hard work, this world has always been, is now, and is always gonna be ultimately good. And Paul tells us that each time we gather in that spirit, Jesus is with us, until the time arrives that transcends all we know and understand.

The people at Corinth wanted to feel special in a world that told them special could only be tied up in a patronage system. I think if we're honest with ourselves, in some ways we all fall victim to that desire. We still live in a culture that escalates power, wealth, winning, beauty, and status to divine levels. Paul tells us that our table provides an opportunity to re-center such a desire. Christ's table rids us of our dependence on patronage, and fills us with an authentic, unforced, and certain peace.

In the coming season, may we have the courage to live for the world that God is making rather than being beholden to the one that Caesar insists upon. And may we find that strength at a table. Amen.

### Bibliography

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