

Participants in the Altar: ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ in I Corinthians 10: 14-22

In a passage drawing on his readers' experiences of Jewish and of pagan ritual sacrifice, St. Paul emphasizes the continuity of the Holy Eucharist with these familiar, though now superseded, practices.

by Father Stephen De Young

In response to what he viewed as not merely a malformation but a destruction of the Eucharist in Roman practice, John Calvin was dogmatic that the Eucharist is not a sacrifice. He preferred the terminology for the sacrament of “the Lord’s Supper” in order to present it as a meal,¹ which he saw as standing in sharp contrast to the sacrificial conception.² While Calvin himself consistently maintained that the Eucharist represented a real sacramental communion in the body and blood of Christ, this disassociation of sacrament and sacrifice led much of later Protestantism to reject even the sacramentality of the rite. In 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, however, Paul clearly parallels the Eucharist with sacrifice. He does not here speak of the Eucharist as a sacrifice in metaphorical or analogical terms but understands and explains the sacrament by means of the ritual understanding of sacrifice shared by both Jewish and Gentile members of the community at Corinth. Paul sees the Eucharist not as a replacement for sacrificial ritual but as the fulfillment of sacrificial ritual. Sacrificial ritual is for him the *sine qua non* of Eucharistic understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul uses cognates of κοινωνία four times to create a parallel between the eating of sacrifices from the altar of the Jerusalem temple, the eating of sacrifices in pagan rites, and eating from the table of the Eucharist. Here the term has been interpreted in a variety of ways, from participation in the philosophical sense³ to table fellowship,⁴ to the communication of attributes, to arguing for the real, material presence of the

body and blood of Christ in the sacrament.⁵ Not infrequently, the four uses in this single passage are interpreted differently,⁶ occasionally even to reflect a theological distinction between the Eucharist and sacrificial rites which would seem to run directly counter to the rather clear intent of Paul's argument, which seeks to draw these rites into parallel.⁷ The nature of this parallel is found in Paul's usage of *κοινωνία*, and the similar verb *μετέχειν* used here twice.

Fellowship and Participation

Paul, in this passage, makes use of two closely related terms. The first, as an abstract noun, *κοινωνία*, and the plural substantive *κοινωνοί/οὓς*, is used concerning the sacrificial rite, and the Eucharistic rite, as a whole. The second, the verb *μετέχειν*, is used specifically concerning the table and the act of eating. The noun *κοινωνία* and its cognates is broadly used to connote, on one hand, community, fellowship, and association and, on the other, communion and participation as a constituent of the same.⁸ The verb *μετέχειν* refers to taking part or participation in some object, but with a variety of uses which includes participation in various types of associations.⁹ There is, therefore, a degree of overlap in their respective semantic domains.

Paul here makes *μετέχειν* the means by which *κοινωνία* is achieved. By taking part in the one bread, partakers become one body (1 Cor 10:17) with the effect that communion in the one body is created (16). There is here, therefore, no disjunction between the act of eating and the communion established among the participants and between the participants and, in the case of the Eucharist, Christ. Indeed, Paul's purpose here is not to describe the functioning of the Eucharist as such, but to teach the Corinthians to flee idolatry (14) by refraining from the eating of pagan sacrificial feasts or the meats therefrom,¹⁰ and so such a disjunction would directly counter his argument.

Three realities are thus laid out here by Paul, all of which have a means of participation through the altar table. Pagan communities of this world presided over by the patronage of demonic powers, are participated in and made real through the sacrificial banquets of idolatrous meals. The community of Israel presided over by Israel's God, was participated in and made real through the eating of sacrifices from the altar. As a new reality, the Pauline Christian communities were coming into being,¹¹ including in Corinth, with Christ Himself as their patron, and were participated in and made real through the sharing of the Eucharistic meal.

Polemic Against Idolatry

Central to the traditional Jewish polemic against idolatry is the concept that one becomes like the object of worship. In establishing communion between the object of worship and the worshiper, and facilitating communication between the two, there is a communication of attributes from the patron to the practitioner and those on whose behalf the practitioner intercedes. Worship of a created thing is thereby seen to reduce humanity to the level of the lesser creature so worshiped, and in the case of an inanimate object, to impart the blindness, lack of understanding, and ultimately the lack of life which characterize it to the idol worshipper. Worship of the living God, on the other hand, is seen to impart life, love, light, and goodness.¹² Paul, in the passage under discussion, seeks to maintain this traditional polemic, in addition to his further argument, still to be considered, concerning the worship of demons.¹³ For this reason, he returns to the idea that an idol is nothing (1 Cor 10:19), while at the same time arguing that communing with it is communion with demonic power.

A classic example of such a polemic occurs for example in Wisdom, in which idolaters are ridiculed for seeking in prayer, from an idol, qualities which the idol itself does not possess (13:18–19). This idolatrous worship is contrasted by the author of Wisdom with the worship of the true God, which produces His righteousness in the worshipper, specifically with the knowledge of God (15:1–3). Further, idolatry is seen here as the root of all evils (14:27) and in particular sexual immorality (14:26). Paul's condemnation of idolatry in Romans follows a similar pattern, pointing first to the worship of creatures rather than their Creator (1:23) and that the result of this was sin (1:28–32) and in particular sexual immorality (1:24–27).

The knowledge of God, gained through communion with God, by its nature is thereby seen to conform the knower and communicant to the properties of God, specifically here righteousness and life.¹⁴ Correspondingly, communion with idols communicates the properties of those things depicted through the images. If these are lower, animal things man is lowered to an animalistic state. If they are depictions of demonic spiritual powers, communication with them produces all manner of depravity and wickedness.¹⁵ For Paul, the latter category of idolatry and its wickedness continues into the Messianic era and forms the background and purpose of his warning to the Corinthians of which the present passage is a part. The knowledge of God, however, is now had in

Christ,¹⁶ and it is therefore through communion with Christ Himself in worship that humans are formed into the likeness of God, through His express likeness, Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Old Testament Sacrifice

The sacrificial system as such emerges after the creation of the Israelite community and follows upon the construction of the tabernacle, in which the God of Israel comes to live in the midst of the community. Participation in the sacrificial system promotes solidarity in the community as a whole,¹⁸ with the God of Israel as the head and patron of the community. Through the shared sacrificial meal, thanks are given for the life of the community, that life is promoted and extended into the future, and reconciliation takes place between persons of the community, those persons individually and their God, and the community as a whole with its God. Central to this participation is the act of eating, in the offering or its portion which is eaten by fire, allowing its smoke to extend upward as a fragrance, that portion eaten by the priesthood, and that portion eaten by those making the offering. It is through this meal that communion and thereby community are created and strengthened.

The purity codes of the Torah have as their end this very concept that Israel as a kingdom of priests purifies itself to allow for an approach to God and His continued presence in blessing in the community.¹⁹ Ritual purity allows for an approach to offer sacrifice, which itself invites God to draw near to the worshipper, thereby allowing for community, communion, and communication.²⁰ The Divine Presence in the midst of the assembly renders the whole assembly holy. Correct worship of God thereby provides the reason for the maintaining of moral and ritual purity, as well as the means by which this is accomplished. In the same way, idolatrous worship stems from a depraved mind and also produces further depravity.

Paul here sees the presence of God among the assembly of the new era in the person of Jesus Christ. For Paul in 1 Corinthians, this is not so much focused on the incarnation,²¹ but rather in the ongoing presence of Christ amongst His people in worship (1 Cor 3:16–17). This worship is focused no longer around participation in a sacrificial meal attached to the altar of the old covenant, but rather around the table of the Eucharist. It is within the context of the Eucharistic meal that God's hospitality, in Christ, is extended to humanity, and

in which meal humanity invites Christ to draw near to allow for communication with God.

Parallels in Roman Ritual

In popular Roman piety, as that practiced in Corinth, the central act of that piety, both public and private, was the sacrificial meal or banquet.²² It is because of this close association between sacrifice and meal that the Latin terms *ara* and *mensa* are used interchangeably for the central site of cultic worship.²³ The sacrificial meal was seen as both a meal consumed with the deity and a meal hosted by the deity in public worship. In the case of private worship in the home, such a meal was hosted by the head of the household for the deity as a form of hospitality. Through the means of this shared meal, the social unit in question was brought into solidarity, and into solidarity with the divine. It is correct to say that the primary end of sacrificial practice was the development of human, and divine-human communion or fellowship,²⁴ to allow for human-divine communication.²⁵

In the Roman household, certain deities of familial significance, household deities, were seen as a part of the extended family unit. It was, therefore, the responsibility of the *paterfamilias* to maintain community and goodwill not only with the extended family which he oversaw but also with the deities who were the patrons of that family in the spiritual realm.²⁶ *Ara* refers not only to an altar but also to the home itself and a place of refuge.²⁷ The central act of this maintenance was the provision for communal meals, in which the deities were involved through sacrifice. This was extended in Roman civic life to the level of the city and ultimately, through the emperor as father, to the empire as a whole.²⁸ The emperor, not coincidentally, served as *pontifex maximus*, offering the large scale festal offerings to the gods in order to maintain the unity and integrity of the larger society of the empire as a whole.

The question addressed by Paul in the central portion of 1 Corinthians, therefore, is one which impinges upon both the public and private lives of the Corinthian Christians. To not eat food offered to idols, a Corinthian Christian would have had to ostracize himself not only from the culture at large of the city and empire but also from the inner life of his extended family. Not communing with the priests of the civic religion also required, for many of the early converts of Paul, breaking communion and fellowship with their fathers – both their civic and familial elders. This was, therefore, as the Corinthian

converts came out of idolatry, not a call to attend one set of religious services over against another but to renounce one community and family in favor of another (1 Cor 12:2).

Paul does not counter or refute the understanding of his Gentile converts regarding the function and nature of the sacrificial meal any more than he does with that of his Jewish converts. Rather, he places the Eucharist in parallel with these conceptions, applying both to the Eucharist. He does not do this to offer a treatise on the sacrament, but rather to show that the church as the new assembly is itself a community of which Jesus Christ is the head.²⁹ Participation in Christ is thereby shown to be incompatible with participation in any kingdom of this world which is governed by demonic powers. Participation in Christ is also incompatible with full participation in the pagan family unit as that familial communion includes those same powers. The understanding of communal life already inculcated in Paul's auditors in Corinth, whether Jew or Gentile, ought to lead them to understand that the claims of Christ and membership in His body are exclusive.³⁰ Purity and holiness, a setting apart, parallel, but not identical, to that required by the old covenant are therefore necessary for the new community in Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul establishes a parallel between sacrificial practice, both Jewish and pagan, and the Eucharist, not to explain the Eucharist per se, but to show the incompatibility of Christian ritual practice and continued participation in pagan ritual. As there is no fellowship between Christ and the demonic, one cannot be in fellowship or communion with both simultaneously. Implied is the call to leave previous social units, both in regards to community and family, to be joined into a new Christian society with the person of Christ Himself. Membership in this community is then transformational, as fellowship conforms those therein to the likeness of its Patron.

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Notes

1. God has "given us a Table at which to feast, not an altar upon which to offer a victim; He has not consecrated priests to sacrifice, but ministers to distribute the sacred banquet." *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.18.12.

2. There is as much difference between this sacrifice and the sacrament of the Supper as there is between giving and receiving. *Institutes* 4.18.7.
3. As classically defined by Plato in *Gorgias* 508 and *Laws* X, 903.
4. Shawn Strout. "Jesus' Table Fellowship, Baptism, and the Eucharist." *Anglican Theological Review* 98 (2016): 479–494.
5. Edward H. Peters, "St. Paul and the Eucharist." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 10 (1948): 247–253.
6. The tendency to translate them differently can be found as early as the Vulgate, which utilizes both *communicatio* and *participatio* interchangeably.
7. On this passage, B.B. Warfield commented, "He who reads the several comments of the chief commentators, for instance, on our present passage, quickly feels himself in atmospheres of very varied compositions, which have nothing in common except their absolute dissimilarity to that which Paul's own passage breathes." B. B. Warfield. *Faith and Life* (Kindle Locations 2124–2126). Monergism Books. Kindle Edition. He correctly observed a dismaying trend of interpreting this passage according to preconceived theological notions or agendas, rather than pursuing historically that to which Paul originally referred.
8. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Ed., s.v. "κοινωνία."
9. *Ibid.*, s.v. "μετέχω."
10. Corinth was one of three Roman cities (along with Athens and Alexandria) which are known to have had daily markets selling meat from temple sacrifices. Meat was otherwise scarce and mostly unaffordable. F.S. Naiden, *Smoke Signals for the Gods: Ancient Greek Sacrifice from the Archaic through the Roman Periods*. (Oxford: Oxford, 2013), 247.
11. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. "Eucharist and Community in First Corinthians." *Worship* 51 (1977): 63. Through the shared eating of the bread, the community as body is constituted.
12. The sharing in life is here a central concept, both in regard to the living God, dead idols, and the eternal life of the risen Christ. N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1345.
13. Some have seen here a direct allusion to demonic attack inspired by the presence of Christ. This, then, like the reminder of the betrayal of Judas at the recounting of the words of institution (1 Cor 11:23) would represent the danger of false participation, leading to 11:27. See Paul Sevier Minear. "Paul's Teaching on the Eucharist in First Corinthians." *Worship* 44 (1970): 87–88. While this does justice to the reality of the demonic powers reflected here, Paul is more concerned with entering into fellowship willingly with demons here than being subject to their attack.
14. Though otherwise quite different in conception, Roman religion shared this idea in broad strokes that virtues were conveyed through worship. The emperor, for example, was seen as divine in the earliest phase of imperial religion because he embodied the divine virtues of Concordia, Felicitas, Victoria, Salus, and Pudicitia. This placed him in perfect communion with the

gods, especially Jupiter, and allowed his virtue to be communicated to worshippers throughout the empire. Mark Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 68.

15. While Paul is clear here that an idol is nothing, he is no less clear that the demonic powers are being treated here as real. The demonic powers make use of the idols, themselves nothing, in their assault upon man. This is seen in various sources in Second Temple Judaism with various nuances, either the idols being a tool for the worship of demons on the part of wicked men, or the more common options that the demons pose as pagan gods or spirits of the dead, or hijack sacrifices intended for idols for themselves. Rohinton Keki Mody, 'The Relationship between Powers of Evil and Idols in 1 Corinthians 8:4–5 and 10:18–22 in the Context of the Pauline Corpus and Early Judaism' (PhD Diss., King's College, University of Aberdeen, 2008).

16. This concept forms the bridge for Paul between κοινωνία and the individual ἐν Χριστῷ εἶναι. George Viviliers Jourdan. "KOINΩΝΙΑ in 1 Corinthians 10:16." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67 (1948): 112–113.

17. This dynamic is illustrated in the writers of the early church, who not coincidentally still lived in a world in which sacrifice took place outside of the Christian church. So Augustine, "Through [the Eucharistic] elements the Lord wished to entrust to us his body and the blood which he poured out for the remission of sins. If you have received worthily, you are what you have received" (*Paschal Homily* 227, FC 88:196). Likewise, John Chrysostom, "If we are all nourished by the same source and become one with Him, why do we not also show forth the same love and become one in this respect too?" (*Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* 24.4, NPNF 1 12:140).

18. This communal dimension of sacrifice must be reemphasized in the face of more modern and individualized views of religion. Sacrificial ritual not only united an offerer to God, but also the community to one another and to God as a whole. Gibbs, Jeffrey A. "An Exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion: 1 Corinthians 10:14–22; 11:17–34." *Concordia Journal* 21 (1995): 153.

19. Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian*. (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 101.

20. In Roman religious practice, there was a similar, though less fully elaborated demand for ritual purity on the part of the offerer of sacrifice, the chief prohibition being against the shedding of human blood. This extended to the emperor in his role as *pontifex maximus*, hence the bloodthirstiness of certain emperors was not only a moral but spiritual affront to the citizens of the empire. Reasoner, *Imperial Texts*, 87f.

21. As, for example, in the Gospel of John, see 1:14.

22. Indeed, the shrine of Demeter at Corinth contained a series of banquet rooms for sacrificial meals, in which have been found the remains not only of the primary sacrificial animal utilized there, the pig, but also from a variety of other animals which may have been likewise sacrificed, or simply *trapezomata*. Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, 245.

23. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "ara."

24. Sallustius provides an albeit late pagan witness, “From all these things the gods gain nothing...but we gain union with them” (*Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, 15).
25. “What does it mean to please a god? First, the worshipper must approach the divinity...or the divinity must approach the worshipper...Next, the worshipper must present his offering, and some request that went with it, commonly a prayer, and he must also present himself.” Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, 33.
26. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Vol. II*. (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 152–154.
27. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “ara.”
28. “Father of the Roman patria” was one of Caesar’s traditional titles. Reasoner, *Imperial Texts*, 89.
29. Chrysostom sees this as the central thrust of the imagery of the one bread, as it relates to the argument of the larger passage. “For just as the bread, which consists of many grains, is made one to the point that the separate grains are no longer visible, even though they are still there, so we are joined to each other and to Christ” (*Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 24.4*, NPNF 1 12:140).
30. This exclusivity is not only represented by the contrast between the two communities, but also by Christ as head of the community, drawing from the argument of Paul earlier in the epistle that while there are many entities called lords, there is for the Christian only one Lord (8:4–6). This is re-emphasized here in the repeated ‘one’ of the loaf and body in 10:17. Joop F M. Smit, “‘Do Not Be Idolaters’: Paul’s Rhetoric in First Corinthians 10:1–22.” *Novum Testamentum* 39 (1997): 45–46.