

Queerer Meals: Paul and Communal Anti-Norms in Corinth

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ABSTRACT

This article employs two strategies to understand Paul's dissatisfaction with the meal practice of the Corinthian assembly in 1 Corinthians 11:17-31. First, it uses a form of queer reading to interrogate the text for its assumptions about normativity and deviance. Second, it puts the Corinthian meals in conversation with modern queer potlucks and their emergence as sites of alternative community formation. Together, these strategies help create a reading of the text of 1 Corinthians that contextualizes the norms inherent in Greco-Roman dining practices and the ways Paul expected the practice of the "Lord's Supper" to deviate from those norms and establish new norms.

KEYWORDS

Meals; Paul; Queer theory; 1 Corinthians; Queer potlucks

Introduction

When I first became aware of specifically "queer potlucks" and began researching them for this article, I polled many of my queer-identifying friends and asked them if these queer-specific communal meals had been part of their lives.¹ Every person I asked said yes, though in their diverse experiences the meals were more important for some people than for others. At least anecdotally among my peers, the experience of attending potlucks organized specifically for queer-identifying people appears widespread. This informal system of meals had been invisible to me, but for others, it was an important part of their sense of self, and a critical network of support.² As I had conversations about these meals, it became clear to me that part of the impetus for queer potlucks is the need for alternatives to the kinds of social and familial events that I participate in without much

¹ I wish to distinguish the queer potlucks under consideration here from other kinds of potlucks; as someone who grew up in American South on the border of Appalachia, potlucks were a regular part of everyday life. This was especially true in religious and family contexts, although potlucks also figured in other settings of daily life like school, interest groups, and friend groups.

² It is important to state at the outset that I am not a queer-identifying person. I am aware of the fraught ethics of employing a hermeneutic that originates with persons occupying a different social location than me, and that leverages those persons' experiences and insights. My appreciation of queer hermeneutics derives from my experiences teaching in a theological school context, where as many as two out of five students identify as LGBTQi+. Years of studying and reading biblical texts and traditions with these students have made me aware of the profound insights produced by queer interpretation (broadly defined), and of the gifts that this way of reading has to offer.

thought. Family meals and other kinds of social functions—including other kinds of potlucks—are not fraught with friction and danger for me as they are for some, and so I have rarely sought alternatives to them. Likewise, the structures of power and inertias of heteronormativity that are embedded in meals mostly have been invisible to me, because the ways my own identity nestles into normativities make them invisible.³ But through this research and through conversations with friends and colleagues, I began to notice for the first time how much the power of normativity is baked into our meals, and also the power of meals to function as sites and engines of *antinormativity*. Meals are among the most potent signifiers of power within systems, with potential to create and perpetuate both dominance and oppression.⁴

1 Corinthians 11:17-31 is a discourse of normativity and antinormativity, which is to say that it is a queer and queering discourse.⁵ Already by this point in the letter Paul has been fielding substantial and complicated questions of normative and deviant behaviour, often characterizing the behaviour of Jesus-followers in Corinth in ways that engage with prevailing cultural and ethical codes by accounting for how those codes should be upheld, overturned, or altered in light of Jesus-devotion.⁶ In this passage, Paul emphatically condemns one of the Corinthian assembly's practices before he even describes it, signalling his displeasure from the outset.⁷ At the heart of his criticism is verse 20: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper."⁸

³ Scholarship on homeless youth sometimes surfaces this aspect of kinship and home life; many queer-identifying youth leave home precisely because of the ways norms are instituted and enforced among families of origin, and they form networks of "fictive kin" to replace or supplement biological relationships. Carin Tunåker, "'No Place Like Home?': Locating Homeless LGBT Youth," *Home Cultures* 12.2 (2015): 241-59.

⁴ I am grateful for my colleague Katherine Turpin for expanding my thinking about this, and for pointing out the many ways—children's and adults' tables, Thanksgiving invitations, seating charts at weddings—that social structures are concretized in meal settings.

⁵ The discursive field covered by the terms "queer" and "queering" is broad and somewhat contested. Below, I discuss some of the roots of this discourse and the ways in which the study of gender and sexuality has come to encompass broader considerations of normativities.

⁶ Questions of sexual immorality (5:1-13, 7:1-16, 7:25-39), legal proceedings (6:1-8), status (7:21-24), and diet (8:1-13) dominate chapters 5-8. The passage immediately preceding the one under consideration here, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, considers gendered appearances in the context of communal worship, and the slippage between normative gender expressions that seems to trouble Paul. Townsley considers this passage first in a book chapter, and later in a monograph. Gillian Townsley, "The Straight Mind in Corinth: Problematizing Categories and Ideologies of Gender in 1 Corinthians 2-16," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011). Gillian Townsley, *The Straight Mind in Corinth: Queer Readings Across 1 Corinthians 11:2-16*, *Semeia Studies* 88 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

⁷ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia, ed. SJ George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 193.

⁸ This and all other citations are NRSV.

This way of phrasing his complaint points to the competing norms of Jesus-devotion and Greek and Roman meals, and the way those norms conflict and interfere with one another. Paul identifies a particular norm regarding the Lord's supper, and also the community's failure to meet that standard; that is, Paul articulates a norm and then accuses the Corinthians of being insufficiently congruent with it. But this norm of "the Lord's supper" already represents a *departure* from other more ubiquitous norms about communal dining. Scholars disagree about the precise ways the Corinthian meals are deviant, as will be seen below, but most interpreters see Paul arguing that the Corinthian Jesus-followers' meals adhere to broader cultural norms at the expense of being normative by the standards of "the Lord's supper." Paul's response to this deviance (which would have looked like normativity to the broader culture) was to rearticulate and re-inscribe the norms expected as part of "the Lord's supper."

In this article, I put this passage from 1 Corinthians in conversation with two interpretive frameworks. First, I employ a form of queer reading in which I interrogate the text for its assumptions about normativity and deviance, and the ways it constructs the norms the reader expects to encounter.⁹ This provides different words—*queer* and *queering*—to use where other interpreters of 1 Corinthians have used words and phrases like "turns away from the pivotal values of the Mediterranean world,"¹⁰ differentiation from "common household conventions that were broadly assumed,"¹¹ "the distinct nature of the Christian community in Corinth as a 'holy people of God,' whose lives stand in contrast to the society in which they live,"¹² and other such formulations. It also provides another word—*normative*—to use where others have understood "stratification,"¹³

⁹ The degree to which antinormativity represents a "field-generating consensus" for queer studies, and the generative capacities of that consensus, will be considered below. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26.1 (2015): 1–25.

¹⁰ Rachel M. McRae, "Eating with Honor: The Corinthian Lord's Supper in Light of Voluntary Association Meal Practices," *JBL* 130.1 (2011): 180.

¹¹ James C. Walters, "Paul and the Politics of Meals in Roman Corinth," in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society*, ed. Steven Friesen, Daniel N. Schowalter, and James C. Walters, *Novum Testamentum, Supplements* 134 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 359. Walters is following Barton. Stephen Barton, "Paul's Sense of Place: An Anthropological Approach to Community Formation in Corinth," *NTS* 32 (1986): 243.

¹² J. Ayodeji Adewuya, "Revisiting 1 Corinthians 11.27-34: Paul's Discussion of the Lord's Supper and African Meals," *JSNT* 30.1 (2007): 97.

¹³ Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 151. Adewuya, "Revisiting 1 Corinthians 11.27-34: Paul's Discussion of the Lord's Supper and African Meals," 100.

“cliquishness,”¹⁴ or “segregative commensality,”¹⁵ to draw attention to the kinds of broader normativities against which Paul is arguing. Second, I draw an analogy between Paul’s ideal queer meal and the contemporary discourse of potlucks as sites of alternative community formation among queer-identifying persons. This modern emergence of potlucks as spaces for the development and flourishing of gay and lesbian identities and as safe(r) spaces where resources can be shared in solidarity mirrors the ideal queer meal envisioned by Paul. In both cases, meals are a site of community formation, where norms are inverted and subverted, and where deviance (as defined by the broader culture) is valorised. This juxtaposition helps us to understand the social function of meals among Paul’s communities. Together, the practice of reading the text for assumptions about normativity and deviance and the analogy to modern queer meal practice helps make sense of Paul’s sharp rebuke of his Corinthian correspondents, who had abandoned the queer meal practice he had attempted to instil.

Implicit Meanings of Meals

The meal at Corinth was a significant and signifying event in both the life of the community at Corinth and in Paul’s theological imagination. The question offered by Mary Douglas has been influential in provoking scholars to ask of meals in Corinth what she asked of food in general: “If food is a code, where is the precoded message?”¹⁶ Douglas enquires about the structures of food and eating, and the performances of meals within the patterns of expectations that accrue to them. “Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals,” she writes, “each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image.”¹⁷ Meals signify both order and deviation from that order, and they *mean* in both explicit and implicit ways. This is true of all meals, from the mundane eating that characterizes our everyday lives to formal and ritualized meals that are themselves rehearsals of order and power.

The most immediate contexts for the meals in Paul’s view in 1 Corinthians 11 are the banqueting traditions of Mediterranean antiquity. Banqueting was a long and entrenched practice across multiple cultures in the region.¹⁸ Although the Greek symposium

¹⁴ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 194.

¹⁵ Richard S. Ascough, “Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations,” *CW* 102.1 (2008): 37.

¹⁶ Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101.1 (1972): 61.

¹⁷ Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” 69.

¹⁸ Although the volume focuses on funerary banquet imagery in particular, the *Dining and Death* collection illustrates this geographical diversity well. C. M. Draycott and M. Stamatopoulou, eds., *Dining*

sometimes receives attention as the most visible predecessor of Christian meals, communal dining was important both trans-locally and locally, and it was common across the region and also especially developed in Roman contexts.¹⁹ Christian meal practice fits neatly into broader Roman meal practice, with the form of the meals readily recognizable as a species of the broader genus.²⁰ Christian meals therefore reproduced many of the forms—and many of the codes, to use Douglas’s language—of broader practice.²¹

This broader Roman meal practice may be summarized as both communal and stratified. Grignon noted a dichotomy between segregative and transgressive practice within meals, with associations separating themselves from broader society by their meal customs and then stratifying their membership within that smaller group. Dining associations were an opportunity “for a group to gain self-identity, to keep tabs on its members, and even to confirm internal divisions or hierarchies.”²² This internal stratification could be complex, and took on a character that in the 21st century we might call *intersectional*; wealth, status, honour and shame, identity, and patronage were all implicated in the ways meals could order persons within a group. Meals displayed a “fictive equality” even as they were “sites of intense competition.”²³ The sheer variety of ancient communal dining makes direct comparisons to Christian dining difficult, but provides rich analogies that help to underscore the exercise of power encoded in meals. Meals could be a way of signalling generosity for someone running for office, implicitly inscribing a hierarchy of both wealth and status and a kind of mutual benefit from a common social experience.²⁴ They could be venues for implicit competition over status within professional associations, even as they explicitly performed an egalitarian ethos.²⁵ Because meals occurred both inside and outside of household structures, domestic

and Death: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the “Funerary Banquet” in Ancient Art, Burial and Belief, Colloquia Antiqua 16 (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 2016).

¹⁹ Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11–35.

²⁰ Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 175–202. Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 174.

²¹ Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 21–54.

²² Claude Grignon, “Commensality and Social Morphology: An Essay of Typology,” in *Food, Drink, and Identity: Cooking, Eating, and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Scholliers, Peter (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001), 104. But note Ascough’s critique of Grignon, whom he sees as having oversimplified Roman associations. Ascough seems to accept this basic taxonomy while insisting, rightly, that the situation was somewhat more complex than Grignon makes it out to be. Ascough, “Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations,” 35–36.

²³ John S. Kloppenborg, “Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth,” *NovT* 58.2 (2016): 201.

²⁴ Walters, “Paul and the Politics of Meals in Roman Corinth.”

²⁵ Kloppenborg, “Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth,” 170–71.

hierarchies could be either reproduced or resisted within meals, or both.²⁶ Perhaps the broadest category was honour and shame, which McRae sees as being played out in meals generally and in Corinthian meals specifically. Honour and shame were encoded into the proceedings of meals, with seats of honour or tokens of honour distributed at meals and attendance offered to those an association wished to single out for praise. Membership in an association itself could be an honour, and exclusion a detriment. McRae points to Paul's praise of Titus in 2 Corinthians 8:7 as exemplary of the kind of praise that could be meted out or withheld in the context of communal meals, suggesting that the association of Jesus-followers in Corinth was familiar with and participating in just such a system of honour and shame.²⁷ Returning to Douglas's observation that meals encode messages, ancient dining practices were a venue for displaying hierarchies as well as for the agonistic establishment of them, with even the spatial arrangement of dining spaces communicating and reinforcing status.²⁸

Meals were therefore powerful and normative instruments of class and status distinction, with strong inertia of established practice behind them. People were used to understanding meals as participating in, reflecting, and establishing hierarchies. Certainly this seems to have been the case in Corinth. All we have is Paul's characterization of the Corinthian meal practice, and not any first-person account of it from a participant, but Paul's impression was that the balance had tipped too far away from egalitarianism and too far toward blatant expressions of status differentials. "One goes hungry and another becomes drunk" is easy to imagine as an indictment of how the Corinthian assembly was exercising power within its meals.²⁹ "Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" Paul asks, pointing to a misuse of power by those with an excess of wealth, status, or both.³⁰ Paul was reacting against behaviour by a privileged class within the Corinthian assembly, but it's important to notice that the thing against which he was reacting was merely an example—an extreme one, perhaps—of the kind of competition and signalling of hierarchy that banqueting traditions normally included and sanctioned. He was disputing specific instances of practice, to be sure, but he was also taking issue with meal practice generally, and with its norms and traditions. To construct a framework for thinking about Paul's reactions to these norms, and his

²⁶ Barton, "Paul's Sense of Place: An Anthropological Approach to Community Formation in Corinth."

²⁷ McRae, "Eating with Honor: The Corinthian Lord's Supper in Light of Voluntary Association Meal Practices," 171–72.

²⁸ McRae, "Eating with Honor: The Corinthian Lord's Supper in Light of Voluntary Association Meal Practices," 175–76. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 8–12. Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 26–32.

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:21.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:22.

alternative suggestions, I now turn to some insights from queer theory about the ways normative practices can be questioned, subverted, and deviated—the ways they can be *queered*—to understand Paul’s reaction.

Queering as Active Antinormativity

Queer theory is difficult to summarize and distil into a single focus or commitment, but perhaps the closest thing it has to a “field-generating consensus” is the examination and puncturing of norms.³¹ The field of queer studies, emerging out of gender studies more broadly, has always been concerned with “the tyrannies of sexual and gender normativity” and associated normativities like “heteronormativity, homonormativity, whiteness, family values, marriage, monogamy, Christmas.”³² Attention to these tyrannies betrays their paper-tiger nature; norms are normative because they are normalized and normalizing, and because they are expressed in embodied and practiced ways, not because they hold any ontological power. In this regard, queer theory’s manoeuvres parallel those of feminist theory or critical race theory, revealing the social constructed-ness of social systems and thereby revealing pathways to resistance or deconstruction.³³ Villarejo understands queer analysis done by people of colour to be “making good on the understanding of normativity as variegated, striated, contradictory.”³⁴ Normativities derive power from their intersections with other normativities, so practices of antinormativity are likewise strengthened by intersectional connections. Nyong’o proposes a provocative framework:

I want to suggest...that the word *intersectional* might also point in another direction. What if we take “punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens” as neither exhaustive nor programmatic, still less as a grand unifying theory of social oppression, but instead used this nonce taxonomy to express creative discontent with settled categories and an identification with the punk spirit?³⁵

³¹ Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” 6. In their introductory chapter, the editors of *Sexual Disorientations* summarize the “antinormative turn” in queer studies and note that it produces work that “strays from overly narrow notions of the sexual” both in their volume and more broadly. Kent L. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 7. {Citation}

³² Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” 1. The latter normativity seems like a punchline until one begins to consider the ways it is interwoven in other webs of norms.

³³ Amy Villarejo considers some of these intersections explicitly. Amy Villarejo, “Tarrying with the Normative: Queer Theory and Black History,” *Soc. Text* 23.3–4 (2005): 69–84. Villarejo is reading Ferguson closely. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

³⁴ Villarejo, “Tarrying with the Normative: Queer Theory and Black History,” 70.

³⁵ Tavia Nyong’o, “Punk’d Theory,” *Social Text* 23.3–4 (2005): 20. Emphasis in the original.

Puar, too, cautions against simplistic models of normativity and antinormativity in queer analysis, privileging the Deleuzian idea of “assemblage” rather than relying on binaries and working to theorize queerness as embedded within and beholden to broader systems of power and control. This strikes me as an especially useful observation and epistemological strategy for thinking about communities of early Jesus-followers like the one(s) in Corinth, implicated as they were in broader systems of politics, religion, belonging, culture, economics, and kinship.³⁶ Although I will go on to claim that Paul was arguing for antinormative practice against certain normativities in meals, he and his Corinthian correspondents were all implicated in overlapping and intertwined exercises of power and norms. One need look no further than Paul’s characterization of the proper meal as “the Lord’s;” the possessive word he uses (“the Lord’s;” *κυριακός* in Greek) was just as easily usable to describe an empire belonging to an emperor or an enslaved person claimed by a master. Paul is not arguing for the destruction of all normativities or hierarchies, but for a realignment of allegiances and practices to a new set of commitments, perhaps just as hierarchical and stratified, but in a different direction.

Wiegman and Wilson wrestle with this tension between norms and the antinormative gravity of queer theory. They suggest that the oppositional character of queer inquiries can actually offer normativities further trappings of monolithic permanence and power.³⁷ In response, they gesture toward the ways norms reproduce themselves in slightly altered forms, shifting to account for new circumstances and conditions. This is already visible in Paul’s words to the Corinthians; he does not want them to abandon the meal or to forsake its forms, structures, or instantiations. Instead, he is asking them to reconfigure normativity, or better yet to recognize that it *has been* reconfigured, and to adhere better to this new norm. Paul is not advocating an overturning of anything, but instead already assumes that the norm has shifted under his and his interlocutors’ feet, and that the meal now demands new behaviour. What perturbs him is not that his community is insufficiently antinormative, but that it is ignorant and dismissive of the emergent norm.

Queerer Meals

³⁶ McRae conveys Linton’s claim that there may have been multiple smaller communities meeting within the broader Jesus-following community of Corinth; Linton detects six such groups. McRae, “Eating with Honor: The Corinthian Lord’s Supper in Light of Voluntary Association Meal Practices,” 167. Gregory Linton, “House Church Meetings in the New Testament Era,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8 (2005): 233.

³⁷ Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” 13.

In this regard, Paul is demanding deviance, but deviance *only from the perspective of an outsider to the community*. This is in fact Paul's chief critique: that the behaviours of certain persons within the Corinthian assembly, and therefore the behaviours of the assembly as a whole, are adhering to the *wrong* norm—the norm of broader Roman society that understood meals as agonistic venues and arenas for the display and exercise of status and power. In rules governing meals from the second and third centuries CE, for example, The Statutes of the College of Diana and Antinous give some sense of the performative aspects of communal meals and the ways power was enacted in them. Careful instructions governed the timing and frequency of the meals of an ancient club banquet, and who was to provide the food and drink and who was exempt from this provision:

Masters of the dinners in the order of the membership list, appointed four at a time in turn, shall be required to provide an amphora of good wine each, and for as many members as the society has a bread costing 2 asses, sardines to the number of four, a setting, and warm water with service...It was voted further that any member who becomes a *quinquennalis* in this society shall be exempt from such obligations for the term when he is *quinquennalis*, and that he shall receive a double share in all distributions.³⁸

Likewise the Statutes of the *lobakchoi* dictates the conditions for meals and the behaviour of those participating:

The *lobakchoi* shall meet on the ninth of each month, and at the yearly festivals, at the *Bakcheia*, and on any extraordinary feast of the god; and each one is to speak or act or try to distinguish himself, and pay a fixed monthly contribution for the wine. If anyone does not fulfill his obligation, he shall be excluded from the *stibas*. [...] If anyone starts a fight or is found being disorderly or occupying the couch of another member or using insulting or abusive language to anyone, the one who has been abused shall present to *lobakchoi* testifying under oath that they heard him being insulted or abused....³⁹

Given these strong norms around meal practices and the places of individuals within them, Paul's reaction to the Corinthians' behaviour makes sense. From Paul's perspective, he is asking for *better* and *different* normative practice; he wants deviance from old norms and adherence to the new norm. He wants, from the perspective of an outsider, queerer meals. Paul is convinced that, in light of Jesus's appearance and ministry, the Corinthian community's reconfiguration of practice has been insufficiently queer.

The characterization of the early Jesus movement as queer might surprise some readers, but it is one that is made with increasing frequency in the study of early

³⁸ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 126–28. Emphasis in the original.

³⁹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 129–30. Emphasis in the original.

Christianity.⁴⁰ Moreover, the *structure* of that argument is familiar to many students of the tradition. It has been common for both Christians and scholars of the Christian tradition to understand the early Jesus movement as unusual within the context of Mediterranean antiquity—sticking out in some ways, and appearing as odd or eccentric to its neighbours and to government authorities. The recent use of empire studies among scholars of the New Testament has underscored the ways Jesus-followers were (and were not) resistant to Roman power and cultural norms. Christianity's own narrative about itself has often centred its resistance and the consequences of its unwillingness or inability to fit in, as martyrdom narratives proliferated in the third and fourth centuries and came to dominate Christianity's characterization of itself.⁴¹ Though there are critiques of it, this way of thinking of early Christianity likely will be familiar to persons both inside and outside of the Christian tradition.⁴² This way of viewing early Christianity as strange, unusual, oppositional, antinormative, eccentric, or odd is a well-worn trope in scholarship and in Christian self-understanding, but only recently has it come to be described using one of the most accurate and precise words available: *queer*.

The text of 1 Corinthians 11:17-31 demonstrates the value of thinking with queerness in the interpretation of biblical texts. In verse 17, Paul's language about the Corinthian meal practice is clear and condemnatory. "I do not commend you," Paul begins, and then continues to reiterate a clear judgement on their practice: "not for the better but for the worse." Paul stands in opposition to the practice of the Corinthian community, so much so that he feels the need to condemn it twice before even describing it or his objections to it. He does then enumerate his objections; I wonder whether we ought to translate the

⁴⁰ The second chapter of Kotrosits's book is titled "On the Historical Queerness of Christianity." Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), chap. 2. Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). Joseph A. Marchal, *Bodies on the Verge: Queering Pauline Epistles* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019). Gil Rosenberg, *Ancestral Queerness: The Normal and the Deviant in the Abraham and Sarah Narratives* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019). Deryn Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, The Bible in the Modern World (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012). Frederick Roden, ed., *Jewish/Christian/Queer: Crossroads and Identities* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).

⁴¹ Moss's critique of this tendency only serves to underscore its power. Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013). Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁴² Moss is one example of this critique; her argument is that Christianity emphasizes its opposition or unusualness more than it practices it (op. cit.). The study of ancient religious movements and Christianity's production of its own identity within them also demonstrates how Jesus traditions can be thought of as normative rather than aberrant. Jeremy M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging*.

Greek *πρῶτον* of verse 18, rendered “to begin with” in the NRSV, as “first of all” or “for starters,” to better capture Paul’s pique. He begins with an objection to “divisions” among his readers, a concern that was foreshadowed early in the letter (1:10). In 11:20, having established that there are divisions and factions (11:19) in the group, he addresses the mode of communal life that characterizes the whole: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper.”

Paul qualifies his expectations: he would have expected them to gather not just for any meal, but for “the Lord’s supper,” but he accuses them of not really doing so. The text of the letter assumes a contrast between “the Lord’s supper” and the kind of meal that other associations undertook—indeed the kind of meal that the Corinthians seem to have been having. It assumes that this “Lord’s supper” that he thought they should be having was somehow aberrant with regard to other similar meals, or else its queerness would not need to be signalled with the adjective “Lord’s.” There are two possibilities for interpreting this phrase “Lord’s supper:” first, that it was a common name for the meal that he would have known his audience would understand, and second, that it was a “momentary Pauline rhetorical flourish” made up on the spot.⁴³ The matter is complicated by the absence of other early references to “Lord’s supper” in the New Testament or even in other early Christian writing. McGowan notes that while scholars often assume and claim that the term “Lord’s supper” was the preferred name for the communal meal in the first few centuries of the early church, there is little or no evidence of this beyond the text of 1 Corinthians 11:20.⁴⁴ Other names like *Agapē* or Eucharist seem to have been used in very early Christianity, but this part of 1 Corinthians stands out for its use of “Lord’s supper.”⁴⁵ Because of this silence around the term, it does not seem likely that Paul was simply repeating a name for the Christian meal that was common across the early Christian tradition, but that he was either using a local Corinthian term that he knew was in common usage there, or he was highlighting something especially noteworthy about the meal the Corinthians were supposed to be having: that it should have been not just any supper but the “Lord’s supper.” Either way, his specificity of language means that he meant to distinguish the meal that the Corinthians *ought* to have been having from the meal that they *were* having, which were the kinds of meals that would have been normative for them to have in the eyes of the broader culture.

⁴³ Andrew McGowan, “The Myth of the ‘Lord’s Supper’: Paul’s Eucharistic Meal Terminology and Its Ancient Reception,” *CBQ* 77.3 (2015): 519.

⁴⁴ McGowan, “The Myth of the ‘Lord’s Supper,’” 505–6. As an example, McGowan points to Fitzmyer. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), 434.

⁴⁵ McGowan, “The Myth of the ‘Lord’s Supper,’” 505.

The nature of this distinction becomes clearer in verse 21. A conjunction elides the end of 20 with the beginning of 21, “for,” in the language of nearly all English translations, and then Paul continues (in the language of the NRSV), “when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.” Finally, five verses after beginning his condemnation of the Corinthian meal practice, Paul provides his rationale and specifics. He perceives a violation of commensality—a violation of the principles by which the Corinthians ought to have been sharing meals. There had been a violation of the egalitarian spirit of the meals, which implies that the “Lord’s supper” was meant to have proceeded differently. If each one going ahead with their own meal is a violation of the ideal meal, then the ideal meal must have consisted of meals shared at the same time, and if some being hungry while others are drunk is a violation, then the ideal meal must have depended on equal access to food and drink, both in terms of quantity and temporality.⁴⁶ The former describes a meal at which one or more benefactors provide food for a larger group as a display of favour, benevolence, or concession. These meals might have been relatively simple, with not much more than bread and wine, and they did not necessarily include the benefactors among the diners.⁴⁷ Kloppenborg ultimately concludes that some variation of this eranic model makes the best sense of the evidence, although the evidence is too limited to allow for certainty about which version of this model the Corinthians adopted—a rotation of meal providers, contributions of food from all persons each time, or a collection to fund the food.⁴⁸

Kloppenborg dismisses as anachronistic the arguments of some scholars that wealth and status as free or enslaved were behind the disparity.⁴⁹ The reasoning behind these arguments is that wealthier participants would have had more of their time at leisure, and could have arrived at the meal on time or early, and the poorer members or those who were enslaved would have had more restrictions on their time because they were obligated to work longer hours. Kloppenborg counters with a variety of observations about the ancient economy and the structure of labour. Still, Paul’s phrase “humiliate those who have nothing” in 11:22 suggests that *some* aspect of wealth and poverty was at play in Corinth. The outcome of disparities at the meal was that some eat and drink and others didn’t, and “each of you goes ahead” probably implies some temporal aspect to this

⁴⁶ Scholars disagree on the roots of these disparities. Kloppenborg characterizes the two major options as the “peer-benefaction model” and the “eranic model.” This latter term implies reciprocity within an association or group. Kloppenborg, “Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth,” 171–72.

⁴⁷ Kloppenborg, “Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth,” 172–79.

⁴⁸ Kloppenborg, “Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth,” 202–3.

⁴⁹ Kloppenborg, “Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth,” 193–98.

difference.⁵⁰ Despite Kloppenborg's well-reasoned arguments, I still find it most likely that some economic disparity meant that wealthier members were arriving earlier than "those who have nothing," whether that meant that they were arriving early or simply on time, and that they were showing a lack of consideration for their disadvantaged associates by beginning the meal without them.

Thinking with queerness might help us understand the expectations Paul had of the communal meal and the disappointment he felt with the Corinthians' failure to live up to them. Whatever the specifics of it, the kind of difference described by Paul likely was a normal aspect of life in the ancient world, and therefore the kind of disparity that would be exploited in the competitions inherent in communal meals. Economic and class distinctions were deeply embedded into everyday life in the ancient Mediterranean, and they were obvious, and more than that, they were emphasized by the ways systems of patronage and economies of honour were organized. Just like in our own times and places, some people had advantages over others, and those advantages were thought of as both normal and normative. It would not have surprised anyone or violated any sense of propriety to acknowledge those advantages and to act as if they existed, and it seems that some of the Corinthians were doing just that. The meal of the Jesus-followers in Corinth had become another place for the rehearsal and reinforcement of systems of honour and shame, wealth and poverty, patronage and subordination. It was normative in this way, but Paul's quick condemnation of it meant that while it was conforming to one set of norms, the community was neglecting and abandoning the norms of the "Lord's supper." By Paul's contrasting language we can assume this supper centred on values of shared food at a shared time, without any exercise of privilege by anyone present. This kind of meal would have seemed queer to outsiders, but that was just what Paul was after.

Queer Potlucks

An advertisement in the June 1992 edition of the publication *Entre Nous* in Santa Clara, CA invites "everyone," especially "newcomers," to a "Lesbian Social Potluck." The advertisement requests that people bring their own food to share. "We'll BBQ and perhaps spend some time at the ocean," the ad says, adding that "everyone is welcome for a womany relaxing day."⁵¹ This advertisement gestures toward a fulsome community

⁵⁰ See, however, Kloppenborg's resistance to the temporal reading of *προλαμβάνει*. Kloppenborg, "Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth," 198–201.

⁵¹ "Lesbian Social Potluck." *Entre Nous* (1992). *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* (accessed July 13, 2020). <https://link-gale-com.du.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/VARJEA640685857/AHSI?u=udenver&sid=AHSI&xid=98b904a0>.

waiting to be encountered—one open to outsiders but clearly defined by its use of words like “lesbian” and “womany.” This potluck and others like it have been fixtures of queer movements since at least the 1950s, flourishing as sites of alternative community and elective kinship.⁵²

One participant-scholar describes these one of these potlucks as “a space rich with more body positivity, fluid identity, and ritualism than I had ever encountered at one time before.”⁵³ Niedt added that participants “were not as self-conscious about their overt expression of queerness; they cared more about safety and survival, an atmosphere of home, recognizing and understanding each other.” Reflecting on the findings of Kath Weston’s foundational text about the networks, affiliations, and affects produced by queer persons, Niedt noted that “certainly there was all the language and structure of ‘fictive kin,’ interactions that indexed a familial connection, echoing Weston’s descriptions of dinner with a self-declared family of choice.”⁵⁴ While the potlucks have become a “stereotype” among queer communities, they have remained a vital instrument of community and fictive familial bonds.⁵⁵ In contexts from urban centres to rural agricultural networks, potlucks have helped to create community support structures for persons identifying as queer, and have helped to ease the isolation and discrimination they experience from broader society.⁵⁶ These spaces mirror kinship structures and

⁵² Reina Gattuso, “How Lesbian Potlucks Nourished the LGBTQ Movement,” *Atlas Obscura*, 2 May 2019, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/why-do-lesbians-have-potlucks-on-pride>. Michelle Kim, “How the Potluck Became an Essential Tool for Queer Community Building,” *Them.*, 27 November 2019, <https://www.them.us/story/queer-potlucks>?fbclid=IwAR1jhTgLMsZs6cCmbsO5K6JlpjS67Cndsbfvo1IRx73I76Bg8iQNMv9zdA.

⁵³ Greg Niedt, “Dispatches from Queer Potluck: [Extra]Ordinary Affects as a Project of Belonging,” *DisClosure* 28 (2019).

⁵⁴ Niedt, “Dispatches from Queer Potluck.” Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also: Joanna Mizelińska and Agata Stasińska, “Through the Stomach to the Heart: Practices of Kinship of Families of Choice in Poland,” *Lambda Nordica* 24.2–3 (2020): 104–35. For more on the role of food in troubling normativities, see: Alice McLean, “The Intersection of Gender and Food Studies,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*, ed. Albala, Ken (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁵ Gattuso, “How Lesbian Potlucks Nourished the LGBTQ Movement.” The use of the word “fictive” is not meant to question the reality, efficacy, or importance of these relationships. Rather, I use it in its anthropological sense, to describe kinship relationships not undergirded by biology.

⁵⁶ Jaclyn Wypler, “Lesbian and Queer Sustainable Farmer Networks in the Midwest,” *Society & Natural Resources* 32 (2019): 947–64. Antje Lindenmeyer, “‘Lesbian Appetites’: Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” *Sexualities* 9.4 (2006): 469–85. Julie A. Podmore, “‘No Queers Out There?’ Metronormativity and the Queer Suburban,” *Geography Compass* 14.9 (2020). Geoffrey Vendeville, “A Meal for Solidarity in Facing Hate, Violence: Mulim and LGBTQ Communities End Daylight Ramadan Fast by Breaking Bread and Denouncing Islamophobia and Homophobia,” *Toronto Star* (Toronto, 27 June 2016). The Fall 2020 issue of *Gastronomica* extended this to the digital realm, reckoning with the impact of the 2020 pandemic on the practices of “promoting and supporting queer safe spaces” in a time

domestic environments, but they are not freighted with the same histories of rejection, marginalization, and sequestration of identity that often plague queer persons' experiences of biological family and more normative domestic environments.⁵⁷

Christopher Reed understands potlucks as an example of an informal but powerful claiming of space by queer persons. Responding to the entanglement of capitalism and identity, in which representation becomes either a product to sell or a strategy for selling a product, Reed includes communal meals among the non-commercial spaces where identity is claimed and worked out, underscoring the ways queer spaces emerge into and out of more dominant and normative structures.⁵⁸ The inertia of consumerism and the commodification of identity are powerful producers of norms and normativity, and queer potlucks claim and produce spaces outside of those systems of production and consumption. They are places where alternative ways of being in community can flourish, and they depend on their separation from the self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating patterns of heteronormativity that reproduce within our social systems.

Interestingly, Reed's placement of the production of queer identity in non-commercial spaces mirrors the abandonment of privilege and honour that Paul seems to be advocating in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22. It is necessary, in both cases, to move outside of normative structures and sanctioned patterns in order to find an authentic expression of self and an ethical expression of group identity. For queer potlucks in the 20th and 21st centuries, those normative structures and sanctioned patterns include heteronormative family and domesticity, and the powerful tides of production and consumption and commodification of identities that drive capitalism. Queer potlucks recognize the necessity of separating from these broader contexts to create space for queer belonging to flourish, and to order life antinormatively to produce newer, queerer norms. In 1 Corinthians, Paul was recognizing the "Lord's supper" as a site of separation from the normative patterns of relationality that inscribed and reinscribed hierarchy and power. He was arguing for it as an antinormative alternative space in which the kinds of competition and displays of status that were typical of communal meals would be replaced by egalitarian commensality.

when gathering in-person and sharing food is fraught with danger. Gabrielle Lenart, "Adapting Queer Foodways," *Gastronomica*, 2020.

⁵⁷ For a diachronic account of the ways food and dining structure communities and communal life, see: Susanne Kerner and Cynthia Chou, eds., *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

⁵⁸ Christopher Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," *Art Journal* 55.4 (1996): 66. Although the piece does not pursue this line of argument, Reed's observations are in some sympathy with those of spatial theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Michel de Certeau, who describe (in different ways) the irruption of alternative spaces into more dominant and normative spaces.

Conclusion

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is arguing not only for antinormativity, in the levelling of hierarchies, but also for a reorientation of practice away from typical Mediterranean meals and toward a new archetypical meal, the “Lord’s supper.” This reorientation has long been recognized and debated in scholarship and Christian theology, but neither tradition has very often dwelt on the fundamental *queerness* of Paul’s argument. Both queer theory and the analogy to queer potlucks help draw out the similarities. Queer theory often has been predicated on antinormative ethics, working to expose and question norms as they insinuate themselves into practice.⁵⁹ But in doing so, queer theory also produces the possibility of radically reconfigured or new norms that guide practice according to queer ethics—norms that *queer* communal life. The tension in contemporary queer theory often lies in this production of normativity out of antinormative practice, and its ethical implications, but Paul does not seem to have been burdened by any such concern. He confidently calls out for the reconfiguration and abolishment of old norms and the establishment of new, in ways that may appear as unambiguously queer to our 21st-century eyes.

Likewise queer potlucks offer us a way to think about the kind of queer and queering meal Paul was arguing for. In both Paul’s writing and in the invention of queer potlucks, the inertia of traditional meals precluded true inclusion and egalitarian behaviour; in both cases, a new and newly configured foundational intentional ethos was required. Queer potlucks began with a familiar form and reoriented it toward a new set of values and social commitments, so that heteronormativity and other normativities were eroded and replaced with new norms. As Mary Douglas puts it, “the ordered system which is a meal represents all the ordered systems associated with it.”⁶⁰ Perhaps thinking in these terms, Paul thought that the example of Jesus’s behavior and the admonition to remember that meal in the “Lord’s supper” meant that the hierarchies and power plays of communal meals should be abandoned. His apparent anger and frustration in 1 Corinthians 11 derives from his expectation that a new norm should have been inaugurated, but the old norms continued to be honoured—that the Corinthian meals remained insufficiently queer. “In this matter,” he wrote in 11:22, “I do not commend you!” The Corinthian church had fallen back into old norms, but Paul wanted queerer meals.

⁵⁹ Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” 6. Nyong’o, “Punk’d Theory,” 20.

⁶⁰ Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” 80.

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