

Meals and Christian Origins

Dennis E. Smith
Phillips Theological Seminary

For the Meals in the Greco-Roman World Consultation
AAR/SBL Toronto Meeting, November, 2002

When early Christians gathered for their meetings, they tended to do so at a meal table. In doing this, they were simply following a practice widespread in the culture. Groups of all kinds in the ancient world, when they met together, tended to do so at a banquet.

This phenomenon is part of the data about the ancient banquet as a social institution in the ancient world. The point is that the banquet functioned as a primary means for social formation throughout the Greco-Roman world. So also, it became the primary means for social formation in early Christianity. Christians met at meals, then, not because Jesus told them to, as some would argue, but because it was the thing groups did. Each group that met, whether it was a pagan religious or funerary society, a Jewish sect, or a Christian association, simply adapted the meal to fit their own ideology and social situation. But even in that adaptation, they drew upon the rich meal ideology that was inherent in the ancient banquet.

According to our best data, whenever early Christians gathered together, they tended to do so in private homes. In the Greco-Roman world, one entertained guests to one's home in the dining room. This was the norm; there was no other space in the home where hospitality would normally be practiced. In fact, it could be argued that to invite guests to one's home and not meet in the

dining room would be an insult to one's guests and would dishonor the host. So it simply makes sense that that is where the early Christian groups gathered. This hypothesis is supported by the literary data that describes or alludes to early Christian meetings.

The basic data for earliest Christianity comes from the Pauline letters. Here we find the earliest direct evidence for early Christian gatherings. This evidence describes or at least implies the practice of communal meals in the following Christian communities:

- a) Corinth: As indicated in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, this Christian community was gathering together for a communal meal which Paul defined as "Lord's supper" and which gave some prominence to the tradition of a supper originally presided over by "the Lord Jesus" on the night on which he was "handed over." The correlation of the phrases "when you come together" (11:17), when you come together as an *ekklesia*" (11:18), and "when you come together to eat" (11:33, see also 11:20) suggests that such meals were a regular part of their gatherings.
- b) Antioch: In Galatians 2:11-13, Paul tells the story of a community meal in Antioch, an early Christian group that was primarily Gentile in makeup, at which Peter was an out-of-town guest. This story is told in such a way that one can assume that such meals were normal for this group as well, since, when he tells the story Paul assumes both the normality of the meal and its central importance to the identity of the community.
- c) Jerusalem and/or Judean Christian communities: According to Paul's description in Galatians 2:11-13, while the meal in Antioch was underway,

another group of guests arrived apparently from the Judean Christian communities (described as “from James”). These guests chose to refuse the hospitality of the Antioch community and gather for a meal separate from the others. Peter soon joined them, leading to Paul’s condemnation for his actions (2:14). We can conclude that meeting for meals together was probably a regular practice of the Jerusalem and/or Judean communities as a whole, since this new group accepted it as a practice and saw it as communicating something about their self-identity as a group.

d) Galatian communities: Although Paul does not mention what the community gatherings of the Galatians were like, they must have been accustomed to gathering around the meal table as well since Paul uses the Antioch anecdote as a definitive part of his argument. We can also point by analogy to another Gentile community founded by Paul, the community at Corinth, where communal meals were normative. It is logical to assume that Gentile Christian communities founded by Paul would have similar forms of community gatherings.

e) Rome: The church at Rome was not founded by Paul, yet in his letter to them he assumed that issues of communal meals were as common there as they were at Corinth (compare Romans 14:1-15:7 with 1 Cor 8:1-13). Thus he presented arguments about table hospitality that mirrored arguments he used in 1 Corinthians. Whether or not he had first-hand information about the Roman Christian community, he felt confident in making that assumption about their meetings together.

Studies of early Christian group formation have proposed a variety of models that might have influenced that formation, from synagogues to various other forms of voluntary associations. If we give proper weight to the importance of the banquet as a social institution in its own right, however, we can propose that the banquet functioned as the primary model. Other potential contributors to group formation, whether synagogue or association, might best be considered as sub-categories with the banquet as the primary model for social formation.

This fits the earliest evidence we have for the form of an early Christian worship, namely as presented in 1 Corinthians 14. First, one should note that this gathering is described with the same language as is used for the gathering for the meal in 1 Corinthians 11 (see e.g. "when you come together," 14:26). It fits the data best to assume that we are talking about the same meeting. It also fits the circumstances. If the Corinthian Christians were meeting for a meal in the dining room, why would they adjourn to another part of the house to continue their meeting? To do so would be contrary to the expectations of hospitality, even if one could propose that there was a better place in the house to meet, although such a proposition would be difficult to defend. Furthermore, the ancient banquet was an ideal social institution for a group gathering, for not only was it a time-honored way in which groups engaged in social formation, but it also included a format to fit the needs of early Christian worship. That format was the tradition that the second course of the meal, the symposium, could be a time for philosophical conversation, as exemplified in the symposia literature from Plato to Plutarch, as well as a time for various forms of worship, as seen in

examples from religious associations, such as the Society of the Iobakchoi. The social convention of the symposium as a time for such activities was adapted in various Jewish groups to be defined as a time for discussion of the law at the table (see e.g. Ben Sira 9:15-16 and *m. Abot* 3.4).¹ It was also doubtless adapted in early Christianity as a time for carrying out the worship activities in which they were engaged.

The description of worship in 1 Corinthians 14 fits this model. Note, for example, that the various members have brought “contributions” to the gathering in the form of hymns, etc. (“When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” 14:26). This is reminiscent of the ancient form of the pot-luck dinner, only here it is a pot-luck table talk gathering. This was the practice also in some philosophical gatherings, as seen, for example, in a reference from Aulus Gellius in which each of the participants at the dinner brought with them a topic for conversation (“When [Taurus the philosopher] invited us to his home, in order that we might not come wholly tax-free, as the saying is, and without a contribution, we brought to the simple meal, not dainty foods, but ingenious topics for discussion,” 7.13.1-4).

The banquet as social institution also helps explain another phenomenon of earliest Christian social formation. How is it that a diversity of individuals ostensibly from a diversity of family backgrounds could so quickly be molded

¹“Let all your conversation be about the law of the Most High. Let the righteous be your dinner companions” (Ben Sira 9:15-16). “Rabbi Simeon says: ‘When three eat at one table and do not speak words of torah there, it is as though they had eaten of the sacrifices of the dead. ... But when three eat at one table and

experientially into a fictive family group so that they can call one another “brothers and sisters?” It is the banquet that empowers this formation. Plutarch spoke of “the friend-making character of the table” (*Quaest. conv.*612D) as created by the sharing of wine as well as conversation (*Quaest. conv.* 614E). This concept is echoed by Paul when he speaks of the sharing of bread as the ritual that creates one body (“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread,” 1 Cor 10:17).

Finally, banquet ideology also provided a model for the development of early Christian social ethics. Much of Paul’s discussion about behavior within the community can be correlated with aspects of friendship ethics as exemplified especially in the rules for the symposium. These rules are adapted into statutes among the various clubs and associations. Paul follows these models both in the types of behavior proposed and in the supporting arguments justifying them. For example, Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 14 that worship expressions, such as prophecy or tongue speaking, should be governed by the criteria of *oikodomē*, or that which “builds up” the community as a whole (as in e.g. 1Cor 14:3-5). Similarly, Plutarch argued that “conversation” at the banquet should be conducted in such a way that it could be shared in by all (*Quaest. conv.* 614E), or else “gone then is the aim and end of the good fellowship of the party (*koinōnia*) and Dionysus is outraged” (*Quaest. conv.* 615A). In short, banquet ideology also provided a model for aspects of the development of Paul’s theology.

do speak words of torah there, it is as though they have eaten from the table of God” (*m. Abot* 3.4).

The banquet thus provided the model for early Christian social formation and provided a matrix for the development of worship and liturgy as well as aspects of early Christian theology. A proper assessment of the importance of the banquet can therefore provide significant new insights and new perspectives for reassessing Christian origins.

Note: This paper presents in summary form arguments that I have developed in more detail in my book, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*, which Fortress Press will publish in January, 2003. I have been aided in this study by the work of many of you in this consultation.