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The Problem: The Abuse of the Poor
11: 17-22

The problem: the abuse of the poor DIG: What was the root problem with the "love feasts?" Why were they so upsetting to Paul? Why would such a scandalous report not have been hard for Paul to believe? How are the actions of the Corinthians and the actions of Yeshua contrasted? There are thousands of Messianic Congregations in the world today, how do they view the Lord's Supper?

REFLECT: What are some of the ways a religious observance can be misguided? What factors contribute to the observance becoming misguided? What can be done to keep the focus of a religious practice on God and His purposes? How do the "haves" treat the "have-nots" where you worship? How can you be more sensitive to the poor and needy?

**The Corinthian problem was not their failure to gather,
but their failure to be a reflection of God's people when they gathered.**

There is little doubt that the various practices, rituals, attitudes, and other hangovers from the mystery religions had infiltrated **the church** at **Corinth**. Just what would it have been like to go to **church** there? Imagine visiting that **city** in the first century and you and your family went to attend the First **Church** of **Corinth**.

You arrive on time and go in to find that all the wealthy people have already been there for an hour and are just finishing **the love feast**. There is nothing left for you, and you notice that a lot of the poor people, who are just arriving, will have nothing to **eat** either.

Not only do you notice that the wealthy people are gluttonous as they gobble down the last bits of food, but some of them are also stone drunk. And so there are two groups: the poor people who sit on one side of the room totally sober with their stomachs gnawing, and the wealthier people on the other side, stuffed with food and intoxicated with too much wine. Because of the division, there is arguing and discord.

Someone announces it is time for **the Lord's Supper**, but this also turns into a mockery. Those who have had nothing to **eat** or **drink** become gluttons. Next you go to the worship service, and this finds many people standing up, shouting, and talking at the same time. Some are speaking in ecstatic utterances, while others are trying to give prophecies and interpret what is being said. In other words, chaos. That is close to what it was like on a typical Sunday in the First **Church** at **Corinth**. Now you understand why **Paul** said: **I do not praise you, because when you meet together** (Greek: *synerchomenoi*) **it does more harm than good (11:17)!**[316] The tragic state of affairs, which could only feed arrogance and nourish bitterness, made **him** wish that **they** had not met at all. **Their love feasts** were not only a waste of time, **they** were downright harmful.

Now **Paul** begins to explain *how* **their** gatherings **did more harm than good**, which really extends from **11:17** to **14:40**, for it applies to **the Lord's Supper** and **the spiritual gifts**. **His** concern is clear, and **his** point is singular: **For, in the first place, I hear that when you gather together as a congregation you divide up into cliques (11:18a), the "haves" and the "have-nots." Paul** views these **divisions** as nullifying the very purpose for gathering together for worship in the name of **Yeshua Messiah**. It contradicted what **the Lord's Supper** proclaims as the foundation of **the Church**: **Yeshua's** sacrificial giving of **His** life for others. In **Messiah's Church**, there was to be neither **Jew** nor **Greek**, **slave** nor **free (12:13)**, and as the present context strongly suggests, neither **rich** nor **poor**.[317]

Paul may not have wanted to **believe** the scandalous report; yet, those from **Chloe's household** seemed credible **(1:10)**. So, in the final analysis, **he** had to conclude: **To a degree I believe it (11:18b).** Such a report would *not* have been hard to **believe**. **Paul** began **his** letter by strongly rebuking **the Corinthians** for

their divisions based upon cult "fan clubs" (**to see link click Ak – Splits and Division in the Church at Corinth**) and immaturity (see **Ar – The Immaturity of the Worldly Believer**). Those **divisions** inevitably ended in **quarrels**. **The Corinthians** were also divided socially, as this passage indicates. **The "haves"** brought **their** food and selfishly ate it before **the "have-nots"** arrived. Far from having **all things in common** and **sharing with all, as anyone might have need,** as **Messianic community** did after Shavu'ot (see the commentary on **Acts Ao – The New Covenant Community Begins**), **the Corinthian "haves"** disdain form even sharing a "pot-luck supper" with **the "have-nots."** It was every **person** for **themselves**.[318]

In a statement of ironic rebuke, **Paul** declared: **Granted that there must be some divisions among you in order to show who are the ones in the right (11:19).** In the mess that **Paul** describes here, who is shown to be faithful and truly worshipful? The **divisions** at **the Corinthian Lord's Supper** did not reveal which **ones** were **in the right**. Instead, **they** revealed a **church** that had failed to take to heart of the message of the cross. The Greek word for **divisions** here is *aireseis*, and comes from the verb *to choose.* **The Corinthians** had *chosen* to divide **themselves** along socioeconomic lines, and therefore stand condemned. The splits in **the Lord's Supper** were imposed by prideful, insensitive believers seeking to differentiate **the elite** of society from **the rabble**. The tragedy was that **they** failed to **honor the Body of Messiah** at the memorial for **Messiah.**

Paul then turns to the crux of the problem at hand. **Thus, when you gather together,** presumably in a house large enough to accommodate the group**, it is not to eat a meal of the Lord (11:20).** It was ***their* supper**, not **the Lord's**, because **the Lord's Supper** was intended to convey to each person that he or she is someone precious to **ADONAI**. **The Corinthians meal**, however, communicated that the **"have nots"** were worthless nobodies. **The "haves" arrived** early, but instead of **waiting** for everyone to arrive, **they** immediately began to **eat and drink**, missing the greater purpose of **the meal**. But the time **the "have nots" arrived**, anticipating a decent **meal** in connection with **the love feast**, little was left and **they went away hungry** – both physically and spiritually.[319] **Paul** will soon have an answer to this problem (see **Cc – The Answer: Wait for Each Other**).

The selfish devouring of **their** own food contrasted with **Yeshua's** taking the bread. Both "take." **The Corinthians** "take" on **their** own behalf; **Yeshua** "takes" on behalf of others. **The Corinthians** actions will lead to condemnation; **Yeshua's** action leads to the salvation of others. Each believer gets an equal share of the

benefits of **His** sacrifice.[320]

So, **Paul** declared: **Because as you eat your meal, each one goes ahead on his own; so that one goes away hungry while another is already drunk (11:21)! They** mocked the very purpose of the occasion, and turned the memorial of selflessness into an experience of selfishness, and had made a symbol of unity a chaotic mess. **They** acted no differently than the wealthy pagans in **Corinth** would have acted. As a result, fellowship was broken. This was certainly no way to remember **the Savior** who died for all sinners, **rich** and **poor** alike. Call it what you like, but you could not call it **the Lord's Supper**.

The descriptions of hunger and intoxication in this passage may sound strange to modern readers. **Messianic Congregations** and **churches** today generally celebrate communion much differently from the way believers did in the first century. Now believers observe the ordinance with a pinch of **bread** and a modicum of **drink**, but the early **Church** celebrated **the Lord's Supper** with great banquets. These **meals** came to be known as **love feasts** and were probably climaxed in an observance of **the Lord's Supper**.[321]

How do **Messianic** believers handle this today? There is no unanimity of thought or practice. In general, **Messianic** believers do not tend to wrestle with labeling, a distinct partaking of the bread and wine, in remembrance of the Last Supper between **Yeshua** and the twelve apostles, as **the Lord's Supper**. **Messianic** believers have some challenges and disagreements concerning how contemporary Christianity completely removes **the Lord's Supper** from **the Passover Seder**. Some of this has to do with differences within **the Messianic community** itself. Some will remember **the Lord's Supper** at a regular or semi-regular time, whereas others will only remember **the Lord's Supper** once a year at **the** annual **Passover Seder**.[322]

The situation **Paul** had just described filled **him** with such indignation that he wrote a series of rhetorical questions that hammered away at the evil that **the Corinthians** practiced. The first question responded directly to what has proceeded and is full of irony: **What! Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?** If **they** intended to selfishly indulge **themselves**, couldn't **they** go **home** and do it rather than at **the Lord's Supper** where sharing was expected?

The second question gets to the real issue regarding **their** behavior. **Paul** wrote: **Or are you trying to show your contempt for God's church in Corinth and**

embarrass those who are poor? By **their** behavior, **they** were casting shame on **the "have-nots"** and thus showing how much **they** despised **the church** and **the Lord Himself**. Whatever the reasons may have been, **they** could not justify the harm being brought to **the church**. If **they** could not show **love**, why have a **love feast**?

The third and fourth questions bring the argument full circle. **What am I supposed to say to you? Am I supposed to praise you?** Just the opposite. **Well, for this I don't praise you (11:22)!** Thus, in the strongest kind of language **Paul** asserts by **their** actions **they** despise **God's Church**. No **church** can long endure if the **differences** of **Jew** or **Greek**, male or female, **rich** or **poor**, are allowed to persist. Especially so at **the table**, where **Messiah**, who had made us all one, had ordained that we should visibly proclaim that unity. So, to that issue **Paul** now turns, and **he** does so by first reminding **the Corinthians** of what **the Lord Himself** said about this **meal** (see **Ca – The Problem: The Abuse of the Lord**).[323]