

"Do This in Remembrance of Me": A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

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ABSTRACT

The Lord's Supper is one of the most fundamental liturgical practices in the Christian tradition. Among the key texts that shape the church's understanding of this sacrament is 1 Corinthians 11:23-29, where the Apostle Paul transmits the tradition he "received" regarding the institution of the Lord's Supper, framed by the command: "Do this in remembrance of Me." This article argues that this command is not merely a memorial ritual but a theological and rhetorical act that forms the identity and communal life of the believing community. Using Vernon K. Robbins' socio-rhetorical interpretation, the study analyzes five textures of the text: inner texture (linguistic patterns, narrative structure, declarative-imperative dynamics), intertexture (connections to Jewish Passover tradition), social and cultural texture (interaction with Mediterranean banquet customs), ideological texture (construction of apostolic authority, deconstruction of honor-shame ideology, and reconstruction of community identity), and sacred texture (discourse on covenant, eschatological presence, and judgment). The findings demonstrate that Paul's corrective response to the Corinthian community, which had allowed social stratification to distort the meaning of the Supper, shows that the Eucharist cannot be separated from communal ethics and social justice. The command "Do this in remembrance of Me" is thus a call for the church to embody the meaning of the cross in solidarity, unity, and faithful witness. This study contributes to the discourse on biblical interpretation and liturgical theology, offering a reading that is contextual, ethically engaged, and relevant for contemporary church practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Lord's Supper is one of the most fundamental liturgical practices in the Christian tradition. In this celebration, the church remembers the death of Jesus Christ while simultaneously affirming its

identity as a community that lives from the saving work of God. Among the key texts that shape the church's understanding of the Lord's Supper is 1 Corinthians 11:23-29, where the Apostle Paul transmits the tradition he "received" and "passed on" to the Corinthian congregation regarding the institution of the Lord's Supper, framed by the command: "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Fee, 1987, p. 548). This statement carries not only liturgical dimensions but also profound theological and social implications for the life of the Christian community.

However, this statement does not emerge in a vacuum. Paul delivers the tradition of the Lord's Supper precisely in the context of a crisis within the congregation. First-century Corinth was a cosmopolitan commercial center in the Greco-Roman world, characterized by sharp social stratification between the wealthy and the poor (Meeks, 2003, p. 51). When the Christian community was formed within this social reality, social tensions did not simply disappear. The letter of 1 Corinthians reveals that patterns of status competition, social pride, and divisions had infiltrated the life of the church (1 Cor. 1:10-12; 3:3-4) (Witherington, 1995, p. 33). This problem becomes concrete in the practice of the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, Paul sharply criticizes the way the congregation gathers, which he says "does more harm than good." Some members arrived early and consumed their own food, while others—most likely from the poorer classes—came later and received nothing. In this situation, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which should have been a sign of fellowship, became a mirror of social inequality. Instead of displaying the unity of Christ's body, the practice revealed the fragmentation of the community (Fee, 1987, pp. 555-557).

Gordon D. Fee emphasizes that the central issue in this passage is the congregation's failure to understand the nature of the church as the one body of Christ (Fee, 1987, pp. 555-557). The Supper is not merely a sacred ritual but a communal act that proclaims the reality of salvation. When the congregation eats without regard for one another, they sin against the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:27). This statement demonstrates that for Paul, the vertical relationship with Christ cannot be separated from the horizontal relationship with fellow members of the congregation.

It is in this context that Paul quotes the tradition he received: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you" (1 Cor. 11:23). Many interpreters recognize that this formula contains an early church tradition parallel to the Synoptic Gospels (Fee, 1987, pp. 548-551; Dunn, 2003, pp. 806-810; Thiselton, 2000, p. 868). However, what is striking is that Paul places it as the theological foundation for correcting social deviations. In other words, the Lord's Supper in this text functions as a declaration of salvation that simultaneously serves as a critique of injustice within the Corinthian community. The concept of "proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes" (v. 26) demonstrates that the Lord's Supper has a proclamatory dimension. Every time the congregation eats the bread and drinks the cup, they not only remember a past event but actively proclaim the saving work of Christ. Anthony C. Thiselton emphasizes that the expression "discerning the body of the Lord" (v. 29) must be understood in light of the reality of the church as the concrete and historical body of Christ (Thiselton, 2000, p. 890). Furthermore, Paul's warning regarding eating and drinking "without discerning the body of the Lord" (v. 29) has often been interpreted individualistically, as though it only concerns personal introspection. However, in the social context of Corinth, this warning is closely related to the community's failure to embody solidarity (Alabi, 2022, pp. 1-2). Thus, an overly spiritualistic reading risks obscuring the social and ecclesiological dimensions of the text.

To avoid such reductionism, a socio-rhetorical approach is essential. The term "socio-rhetorical" was first introduced by Vernon K. Robbins in 1984 in New Testament studies (Robbins, 1996, pp. 1-3). Since then, he has intensively developed this approach into a multidimensional interpretive analytic that is widely influential. As noted by John S. Kloppenborg, the emergence of socio-rhetorical criticism represents a rare methodological event in the relatively conservative discipline of New Testament studies, as it integrates diverse currents—semiotics, narrative criticism, classical and "new" rhetoric, intertextuality, social-world studies, and ideological analysis—into a newer framework (Kloppenborg, 2002, p. 64).

Unlike a standalone method, Robbins' socio-rhetorical analysis is an interpretive analytic that understands the text as a network of relationships. The text never stands in a vacuum; it always interacts with prior traditions, the socio-cultural world of its readers, and the ideological and religious dynamics that shape and are shaped by it. Therefore, the goal of this approach is not merely to explain linguistic structure or argumentative form but to trace how the text works—intellectually, emotionally, and socially—in shaping perceptions, beliefs, and community practices.

In his programmatic works, Robbins formulates the concept of "textures" as a metaphor for understanding the complexity of meaning. He distinguishes several layers of texture: (1) inner texture, encompassing linguistic patterns, narrative structure, repetition, argument progression, and internal persuasive strategies; (2) intertexture, highlighting the text's relationship with other traditions through quotation, allusion, recontextualization, or refiguration of prior events and themes; (3) social and cultural texture, examining the text's interaction with the norms, values, and socio-cultural practices of its time; (4) ideological texture, analyzing the positions, alliances, and conflicts produced or assumed by the text and its interpreters; and (5) sacred texture, attending to how the text constructs the relationship between humanity and the divine (Gowler, 2010, p. 195; Robbins, 1996, p. 7). Through these five textures, 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 can be understood not merely as a liturgical formulation of the institution of the Lord's Supper but as part of Paul's rhetorical strategy to restructure the life of the Corinthian community experiencing social tensions. The tradition of the Lord's Supper is used as the theological foundation for correcting communal practices that do not reflect the unity of Christ's body.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a socio-rhetorical interpretation method to analyze 1 Corinthians 11:23-29, following the interpretive framework developed by Vernon K. Robbins (1996). This approach was chosen because it enables a multidimensional reading of the text by examining five interconnected textures: inner texture (linguistic patterns, narrative structure, repetition, and argumentative progression), intertexture (relationships with other traditions, particularly the Jewish Passover and Old Testament covenant theology), social and cultural texture (interaction with Greco-Roman banquet customs, honor-shame dynamics, and patron-client relations), ideological texture (construction of authority, deconstruction of social hierarchies, and reconstruction of community identity), and sacred texture (discourse on divine reality, covenant, eschatology, and judgment) (Gowler, 2010; Robbins, 1996). The primary source for this analysis is the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 11:23-29, examined through lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical analysis, while secondary sources include scholarly commentaries, socio-historical studies of Corinth, and works on early Christian liturgy and Greco-Roman banquet culture (Fee, 1987; Thiselton, 2000; Meeks, 2003; Smith, 2003). Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature review of relevant biblical, historical, and theological sources, followed by textual analysis that integrates linguistic examination with socio-cultural contextualization. The analysis aims to demonstrate how the command "Do this in remembrance of Me" functions not merely as a liturgical formula but as a theological and rhetorical act that shapes community identity, critiques social inequality, and calls the church to embody the meaning of the cross in solidarity and faithful witness.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inner and Intertexture: Literary Structure and Tradition

The analysis of inner texture in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 reveals that Paul's presentation of the Lord's Supper tradition is carefully constructed through deliberate linguistic choices and structural patterns that reinforce its theological significance (Robbins, 1996, p. 7). The repetition of key terms—σῶμα (*sōma*, "body"), αἷμα (*haima*, "blood"), and ἀνάμνησις (*anamnesis*, "remembrance")—creates a cohesive theological framework that connects the liturgical act with Christ's sacrificial death (Fee, 1987, pp. 548-551). The formula of tradition transmission, παρέλαβον...παρέδωκα (*parelabon...paredōka*, "I received...I passed on"), places Paul within an authoritative chain of tradition originating "from the Lord" (*apo tou*

Kyriou), thereby establishing the normative character of the Supper practice for the Corinthian community (Thiselton, 2000, p. 868). This linguistic strategy serves not merely as historical reportage but as a rhetorical foundation for Paul's subsequent corrective response to the community's liturgical and social deviations.

The parallel structure of the institution narrative further demonstrates the intentional literary design of the pericope. The actions over the bread—λαβὼν ἄρτον (*labōn arton*, "taking bread"), εὐχαριστήσας (*eucharistēsas*, "giving thanks"), ἔκλασεν (*eklasen*, "he broke")—are symmetrically mirrored in the actions over the cup, framed by the temporal marker "ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ἣ παρεδίδετο" (*en tē nykti hē paredideto*, "on the night He was betrayed") (Fee, 1987, pp. 552-556). This narrative symmetry creates a rhythmic structure that reinforces the unity of the two elements—bread and cup—as together constituting the memorial of Christ's saving work. The declarative statements "τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα" (*touto mou estin to sōma*, "this is My body") and "τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι" (*touto to potērion hē kainē diathēkē estin en tō emō haimati*, "this cup is the new covenant in My blood") assert objective theological realities that are then followed by the imperative command "τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν" (*touto poieite eis tēn emēn anamnesin*, "do this in remembrance of Me"), demonstrating the necessary connection between theological confession and liturgical practice (Dunn, 2003, pp. 806-810).

The dynamic interplay between declarative and imperative forms constitutes a distinctive feature of the inner texture of this passage. The present imperative ποιεῖτε (*poieite*, "do") demands repeated, ongoing action, indicating that the Lord's Supper is not a one-time event but a continuing practice that shapes the identity of the community (Thiselton, 2000, p. 890). This imperative is grounded in the declarative reality of Christ's self-giving, creating a relationship between indicative (what God has done in Christ) and imperative (what the community is called to do in response). The climactic verse 26 functions as the interpretative key: "καταγγέλλετε τὸν θάνατον τοῦ Κυρίου ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ" (*katangellete ton thanaton tou Kyriou achri hou elthē*, "you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"). Here the act of eating and drinking becomes a performative declaration—a proclamation of the central event of salvation history that also points toward its eschatological consummation (Horrell, 2006, pp. 98-100). This integration of past remembrance, present proclamation, and future anticipation forms the theological core of the pericope.

Beyond its internal literary structure, the text displays significant intertexture with the Jewish Passover tradition. The Lord's Supper tradition in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 echoes the Passover memorial pattern established in Exodus 12-13, where Israel was commanded to remember and re-enact the liberation from Egypt as an ongoing liturgical practice (Morales, 2020, p. 132). The term ἀνάμνησις (*anamnesis*) in the LXX tradition carries the sense of an active, performative remembrance that makes past salvation events present to each generation (Cavaletti, 1990, pp. 17-18). Paul's presentation of the Supper functions as a *reconfiguration* of this Passover pattern: the bread and wine are no longer merely symbols of the Exodus liberation but become the body and blood of Christ, signifying a new exodus accomplished through the cross (Leonhard, 2006, p. 31). The formula "ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη" (*hē kainē diathēkē*, "the new covenant") explicitly evokes Jeremiah 31:31-34, where the prophet announces a future covenant that would be written on the hearts of God's people. By placing this language in the context of the Supper, Paul presents Christ's death as the inauguration of this promised new covenant, establishing the community of faith as participants in the eschatological redemption of God (Hays, 1989, p. 89).

Social, Cultural, and Ideological Texture: Community and Power

The social and cultural texture of 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 reveals the profound connection between the liturgical practice of the Lord's Supper and the social dynamics of the Corinthian congregation. First-century Corinth was characterized by sharp social stratification, where status and honor were determined by wealth, patronage networks, and civic position (Meeks, 2003, p. 51). The Greco-Roman banquet (*deipnon* and *symposion*) functioned as a primary arena for displaying and reinforcing these

social hierarchies, with seating arrangements, food quality, and portion sizes reflecting the status of each guest (Smith, 2003, pp. 23-27). When the Christian community gathered for the Lord's Supper, they brought these cultural patterns with them, resulting in a practice where wealthier members consumed abundant food and drink while poorer members—likely workers or slaves who arrived later—received little or nothing (Fee, 1987, p. 538). This reproduction of social inequality within the sacred meal contradicted the fundamental meaning of the Supper as a celebration of unity in Christ's body.

Paul's critique in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 demonstrates his awareness that liturgical practice cannot be separated from communal ethics. He declares that their gatherings "do more harm than good" (v. 17) and that when they come together, it is "not to eat the Lord's Supper" (v. 20)—a radical statement that a practice formally identified as the Eucharist can lose its identity when it fails to embody the reality of fellowship (Thiselton, 2000, p. 869). The phrase "one goes hungry while another gets drunk" (v. 21) exposes the scandal of social division within the body of Christ, where the community's shared meal mirrors rather than overcomes the inequalities of the surrounding culture. This critique indicates that for Paul, the Lord's Supper is not merely a ritual performed within the church but a practice that must reflect and form the community's identity as a reconciled, egalitarian body (Witherington, 1995, p. 33). The social texture of the text thus reveals that the Supper's meaning is fundamentally tied to the quality of relationships among those who celebrate it.

The ideological texture of the passage demonstrates Paul's intentional deconstruction of the honor-shame system that dominated Mediterranean society. In the world of Roman Corinth, honor was a limited good that required constant defense and competition; social status was performed and maintained through visible displays of wealth, patronage, and recognition (Malina, 2001, p. 27). Paul's presentation of the Lord's Supper tradition challenges this ideology by grounding community identity not in social honor but in the self-giving death of Christ. The command "do this in remembrance of Me" redirects the community's attention away from status competition toward the memory of One who "emptied Himself" (Phil. 2:7) and gave His body and blood for others (Mitchell, 1991, p. 74). The call to "discern the body" (v. 29) functions ideologically as a demand to recognize that the community itself is Christ's body, where distinctions of social status are relativized by participation in the one loaf and the one cup. Paul's rhetoric thus works to delegitimize the hierarchical patterns that had infiltrated the church and to construct an alternative identity based on solidarity in the crucified Christ.

The ideological texture also reveals Paul's construction of apostolic authority as grounded in revelation rather than social status. By using the formula "I received from the Lord" (v. 23), Paul claims an authority that is not dependent on rhetorical skill, social position, or patronage networks—the conventional sources of authority in Corinthian society (Fee, 1987, p. 548). This claim positions Paul's teaching as normative for the community, challenging those who might have appealed to other leaders (Apollos, Cephas) or claimed spiritual superiority based on their social standing (Thiselton, 2000, p. 868). The authority Paul exercises is not coercive but pastoral, aimed at restoring the community to its true identity. Through this ideological move, Paul establishes a counter-cultural standard for the community: the crucified Christ, not social honor, becomes the norm by which all practices are to be evaluated (Horrell, 2006, pp. 98-100). The Lord's Supper thus becomes an ideological practice that shapes the community's perception of reality, defining who they are and how they are to live in relationship with one another.

Sacred Texture: Covenant, Presence, and Proclamation

The sacred texture of 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 reveals the profound theological dimensions of the Lord's Supper as an encounter with divine reality. The phrase "τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι" (*touto to potērion hē kainē diathēkē estin en tō emō haimati*, "this cup is the new covenant in My blood") establishes the Supper as the liturgical actualization of the covenant relationship between God and the community of faith. The term διαθήκη (*diathēkē*) in the LXX tradition carries the sense of God's sovereign initiative in establishing a relationship of faithfulness and

obligation with His people (Fee, 1987, pp. 555-557). By identifying the cup with the new covenant in His blood, Jesus presents His death as the sacrificial foundation of this covenant, fulfilling the prophetic promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 that God would write His law on the hearts of His people. In this context, the Supper becomes more than a memorial; it is a participation in the covenant relationship that God has established through Christ, a liturgical act that reaffirms the community's identity as the people of the new covenant (Dunn, 1998, pp. 606-610).

The eschatological dimension of the sacred texture is expressed in the phrase "ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ" (*achri hou elthē*, "until He comes") in verse 26. The Lord's Supper is situated between the two great events of salvation history: the cross, where Christ accomplished redemption, and the *parousia*, where God's kingdom will be fully realized (Schmemmann, 1986, p. 80). This eschatological awareness shapes the meaning of the Supper as an act of hope and anticipation, pointing beyond the present reality toward the consummation of God's purposes. The community's proclamation of the Lord's death is not merely a recollection of the past but an announcement that shapes the present and orients the community toward the future (Murphy-O'Connor, 2002, p. 152). The Supper thus becomes a space of encounter between *kairos* (the decisive time of salvation) and *chronos* (the ongoing time of human history), where the community lives in the tension between "already" and "not yet"—saved yet awaiting full salvation, unified yet striving toward perfect unity. This eschatological orientation prevents the Supper from becoming a mere ritual repetition and invests it with transformative power for the community's life.

The sacred texture also reveals the performative character of the Supper as proclamation. The verb καταγγέλλω (*katangelō*) indicates an active, public declaration: every time the community eats and drinks, they are "proclaiming the Lord's death" (v. 26). This proclamation is not limited to verbal witness but is embodied in the liturgical act itself. The breaking of bread and sharing of the cup enact the gospel, communicating the reality of Christ's self-giving love in a form that engages the senses and the whole person (Huck, 1994, pp. 1-3). The Supper thus functions as a *locus theologicus*—a place where theology is not merely discussed but experienced and lived. In this perspective, symbols are not arbitrary signs but participate in the reality they signify, creating what Robbins calls a "symbolic universe" where the community comes to see the world and their place in it in light of God's saving work (Rowe, 1968, pp. 6-15). The sacred texture of the text, however, is not separated from its ethical implications; the proclamation of the Lord's death calls the community to embody the self-giving love that the Supper proclaims.

The warning regarding unworthy participation in verses 27-29 introduces the dimension of judgment within the sacred texture. Paul states that those who eat and drink "without discerning the body" bring judgment upon themselves, and that this is why "many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (vv. 29-30). This sobering reality demonstrates that participation in the Supper is not a neutral act but one that bears serious consequences for the community (Thiselton, 2000, p. 990). The unworthiness Paul refers to is not primarily about individual moral perfection but about failing to recognize the body—both the body of Christ in the bread and the body of Christ as the community. When the community fails to live in solidarity and mutual care, its celebration of the Supper becomes a participation that brings judgment rather than blessing. This connection between liturgical practice and communal ethics is central to Paul's argument: the sacred act of communion cannot be separated from the concrete life of the community. The Supper confronts the community with the reality of Christ's presence and demands a response that is both faithful and ethically responsible. Thus, the sacred texture of 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 presents the Lord's Supper as an act of profound theological significance—a participation in covenant, a proclamation of salvation, and a call to live in the reality of God's kingdom that is already present and yet still to come.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This socio-rhetorical interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 has demonstrated that the Lord's Supper is far more than a memorial ritual recalling the historical event of Christ's death. Through the analysis of inner texture, the study has revealed that Paul's presentation of the tradition is carefully

constructed through linguistic repetition, structural symmetry, and the dynamic interplay between declarative and imperative forms, all of which reinforce the command "Do this in remembrance of Me" as the theological center of the pericope. The intertexture with the Jewish Passover tradition shows that the Supper stands in continuity with Israel's memorial practices while simultaneously transforming them through a Christological and eschatological reinterpretation. The social and cultural texture has exposed how the Corinthian congregation's practice of the Supper had been corrupted by the honor-shame dynamics and social stratification of Greco-Roman banquet culture, leading Paul to issue a sharp critique that connects liturgical practice with communal ethics. The ideological texture has revealed Paul's deconstruction of hierarchical social structures and his reconstruction of community identity grounded in the crucified Christ, while the sacred texture has presented the Supper as a participation in the new covenant, an eschatological proclamation, and a call to ethical responsibility in the face of divine judgment. Together, these five textures demonstrate that the command "Do this in remembrance of Me" functions not merely as a liturgical instruction but as a theological and rhetorical act that shapes the identity, relationships, and mission of the believing community.

The implications of this study for contemporary church practice are profound. The Corinthian crisis reminds us that the Lord's Supper cannot be divorced from the concrete life of the community; when the church gathers at the table, it is called to embody the solidarity, equality, and mutual care that the Supper signifies. The warning against eating and drinking "without discerning the body" challenges modern congregations to examine whether their celebration of the Eucharist reflects the unity of Christ's body or merely reproduces the divisions and inequalities of the surrounding culture. The proclamatory dimension of the Supper—"you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"—calls the church to a faithful witness that is both retrospective (remembering the cross) and prospective (anticipating the consummation of God's kingdom). This study thus contributes to the ongoing theological and pastoral reflection on the Eucharist, offering a reading that is historically grounded, contextually sensitive, and ethically engaged. It invites the church to recover the radical social and theological meaning of the Lord's Supper as a practice that forms a counter-cultural community, challenges unjust structures, and bears witness to the transformative power of the crucified and risen Christ. In a world marked by division, inequality, and fragmentation, the church is called to celebrate the Supper in a manner that embodies the reconciliation, solidarity, and hope that it proclaims, thereby becoming a sign and instrument of God's coming kingdom.

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