

BOOK REVIEW

Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Community, Conflict, and the Eucharist in Roman Corinth: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006). viii + 168 pp. Pbk. US\$26.00.

In *Community, Conflict, and the Eucharist in Roman Corinth*, Panayotis Coutsoumpos seeks to illuminate key sections of 1 Corinthians in light of socio-historical criticism. In the Acknowledgements section, the author notes that this work is 'a revised and concise version' of his 1996 PhD dissertation at the University of Sheffield ('Paul's Teaching of the Lord's Supper: A Socio-Historical Study of the Pauline Account of the Last Supper and its Graeco-Roman Background' [PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 1996]). A decade has transpired between the original dissertation and this present publication, but the author has not made an extensive revision (it would seem), despite the bibliography showing the incorporation of recent works.

The book has six chapters: (1) Introduction, (2) The Social Meals in the Greco-Roman World, (3) The Social Setting in the Corinthian Church, (4) The Problem of Meat Sacrificed to Idols in 1 Cor. 10.14-22, (5) Paul and the Last Supper in 1 Cor. 11.17-26: The Social Significance of the Meal, and (6) Conclusion.

In the Introduction, the author notes that the Corinthian church was plagued with various factions and social conflicts, and recognizes that there is much debate over the interpretation of these issues. The introduction also gives readers a foretaste of how the author explains the conflict in Corinth. There are two groups in the Corinthian church divided along social (not theological) lines. This problem of social differentiation correlates to their views of meat sacrificed to idols and sheds light on the practice of the Lord's Supper. Coutsoumpos believes that the root of the problem is that the Corinthians were not properly 'resocialized into the traditions of their newly adopted Christian religion' (p. 2). He argues that this is a significant study because it reveals

Paul's approach to socio-ethical problems—especially as they relate to the Eucharist.

In the second chapter, Coutsoumpos discusses three types of meals in the Greco-Roman world: the Greek meal (*deipnon/symposium*), the Roman meal (*cena/convivium*), and the Greco-Roman *eranos* meal. He addresses what he sees to be the standard practices of these meals and the various social implications. I sometimes question the confidence of the author's reconstruction of the meals. Though citing an ancient source is helpful, it does not mean that the practice cited is the norm or even occurred often in such contexts. Granted, reconstructing these meal scenarios is difficult and the inclusion of any information is useful. After describing the three types of meals, Coutsoumpos contends that the meal sections of 1 Corinthians are best described as Christian *eranos* (potluck) meals. He draws a number of useful parallels between general social problems at these meals and similar problems found in 1 Corinthians dealing with social stratification.

The third chapter establishes the social setting of the Corinthian church. It includes a short introduction and history of sociological study of early Christianity. He questions both the older sociological criticism, which suggested that the early Christians were predominantly of the lower class, and the newer criticism that associates urban Christian origins with the middle class. He concludes that the social structure of each church should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis 'in the context of its contemporary society' (p. 38). This is what leads the author to examine the social structure of the Corinthian church. Corinth was a city susceptible to new religious ideas and one that was experiencing an economic boost, attracting a variety of people. By looking at the text of 1 Corinthians, Coutsoumpos draws the conclusion that a minority of the church members belonged to the economic upper class, but most were relegated to the lower class. The author then looks at the social context of Paul's ministry and the early Christian practice of meeting in house churches. Lastly, he analyzes the relationship between the strong and weak and identifies these groups by sociological rather than theological criteria, with the strong being the upper class minority and the weak being the lower class majority. The strong, with their 'excessive individualism', are the source of the conflict by excluding the weak.

The fourth chapter takes up the task of exploring the issue of meat sacrificed to idols with reference to 1 Cor. 10.14-22. Coutsoumpos introduces the problem and illuminates his study with background

material on Jewish and Christian understanding of idolatry as it relates to sacrifice. The author argues that the strong (well-to-do) were in favor of eating meat sacrificed to idols because it was what they were accustomed to, but Paul's response does not directly address the question of meat sacrificed to idols. Instead, Paul demonstrates 'that love and respect for others transcends the rightness or wrongness of the eating of the idol-meat, and participating in the communal meals which were part of the common practice of the society' (p. 80).

The last major section, Chapter 5, looks at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11.17-26) and the social problems surrounding it in Corinth. There were clear divisions based on the social status of church members, who were locked into their old social customs rather than conforming to the new Christian ethic of equality. Coutsoumpos asserts that the upper class, rather than waiting for and sharing with the lower class, had an unsanctioned private (*eranos*) meal prior to the Eucharist. The result of this was that poorer members were shamed and rich members appeared selfish. The author also evaluates Paul's tradition of the Lord's Supper, the sayings over the bread and the cup, and the role of the Eucharist as it 'proclaimed and looked forward to the Messianic banquet' (p. 126).

The last chapter is Coutsoumpos's conclusion, where he ties together and reinforces the arguments of the preceding chapters. He concedes that a sociological interpretation of the problems in the Corinthian church is a valid way of approaching the problems, but not the only way. Other methodologies should be used as well.

This is not Coutsoumpos's first adaptation of his dissertation. He published *Paul and the Lord's Supper: A Socio-Historical Investigation* (Studies in Biblical Literature, 84; New York: Peter Lang, 2005) a year before. The two works are very similar and there is no need to purchase both. The main difference is that the later edition excises a chapter on sacred meals in the Greco-Roman world.

In evaluating the work of Coutsoumpos, it is difficult to assess exactly what contribution he has made to the discussion, although any work trying to explain the conflict in Corinth is welcome. At times the author shows strong dependence on the account of Paul in the book of Acts without giving reason for this dependency, when many Pauline scholars view the historical data on Paul in Acts as problematic. Additionally, his sociological interpretation of the strong and the weak not only disregards theological considerations, but works against them.

At times his writing style is hard to follow, and there are numerous grammatical and typographical errors. Both the Peter Lang volume and the present work contain many of the same typos, which could have been corrected by even the most cursory of proofreads. Inconsistencies are also found in the presentation of the Greek, which is sometimes transliterated, sometimes accented, and sometimes not. In one place there is even a German quotation of J. Jeremias written in a Greek font (p. 125)! Sometimes the author alludes to the wrong chapter number because he failed to update the text to reflect the new chapter numbers of his later edition. This becomes confusing at times.

These errors are only a minor distraction in what is otherwise a helpful work. Coutsoumpos has spent a significant amount of time with many sources and has written a work that gives readers an informed dialogue with the sociological criticism of early Christianity, with specific reference to Roman Corinth.

Brandon Wason

Candler School of Theology, Emory University