

Examining Ourselves (1 Cor. 11:27–34)

By Jacob Gerber

The sum of the preceding statements about the Lord's Supper, along with Paul statements in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, affirm that the Lord's Supper is a spiritual experience by which we participate in the benefits of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. As a result, Paul gives two main warnings about how we should receive the Lord's Supper, along with corresponding exhortations. Paul closes his discussion of the Lord's Supper by reminding us that, *at the Lord's Supper, Christ gives us communion with himself and with his church.*

Examine Yourselves Concerning Christ (1 Cor. 11:27–28)

First, Paul warns us that to receive the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner will incur guilt “concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). This does not mean that we must be sinless to approach the Lord's Table, for part of Christ's very purpose for feeding us from his Table is to strengthen and encourage the weak and doubting.¹ David Garland puts point this well: “Although no one is worthy of the Lord's Supper, one can eat it worthily.”²

In the immediate context, Paul is clearly warning those who would continue to despise the church of God, and to humiliate the poor, during the administration of the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17–22). More generally, however, Paul's words warn all those who would abuse the Lord's Supper by coming without true faith in Christ, or by willfully harboring any unrepentant sin (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9–11).³ This would include anyone who eats and drinks from the Lord's Supper with the primary design of feeding the belly, not of feeding on Christ by faith (1 Cor. 11:21–22, 34). When Paul writes that someone who thus eats and drinks in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord, this does not require us to interpret Paul's words as teaching that

¹ Q. 172. May one who doubteth of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation, come to the Lord's supper?

A. One who doubteth of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation to the sacrament of the Lord's supper, may have true interest in Christ, though he be not yet assured thereof; and in God's account hath it, if he be duly affected with the apprehension of the want of it, and unfeignedly desires to be found in Christ, and to depart from iniquity: in which case (because promises are made, and this sacrament is appointed, for the relief even of weak and doubting Christians) he is to bewail his unbelief, and labor to have his doubts resolved; and, so doing, he may and ought to come to the Lord's supper, that he may be further strengthened. (*Westminster Larger Catechism* #172).

² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 551.

³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 385–87. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

Christ's body and blood are in the elements on the sacrament. Rather, Paul means that to misuse or to abuse the Lord's Supper is to treat irreverently the symbols (i.e., "signs") that portray Christ's broken body and shed blood, and in this way does someone incur guilt concerning Christ's body and blood. As Charles Hodge points out, just as trampling a nation's flag is irreverent to the nation itself, and just as mistreating a representative of the king is irreverent to the king, so also is mistreating the bread and the cup irreverent to our Lord Jesus himself.⁴

In light of this, Paul insists that we must examine ourselves as we come to eat of the bread and drink of the cup (1 Cor. 11:28). If we believe that eating and drinking wrongly may incur guilt, then we need to examine ourselves actively to discover whether there be any offending sin in our lives or our attitudes as we approach the Lord's Table. Paul may give this as an application to the significance of understanding the Lord's Supper as a real sacrament that symbolizes the body and blood of Christ. If so, then the exhortation that we must judge ourselves in v. 30–31 may be Paul's application of discerning the body in v. 29.

Judge Yourself in Discerning the Church (1 Cor. 11:29–32)

Second, Paul insists that we must discern the body (1 Cor. 11:29). What does it mean to "discern the body"? Some take this as a reference to distinguishing the holiness of the Lord's Supper from common food.⁵ Others take this as a requirement to meditate on the loving, sacrificial death of Christ's "body" on the cross, resulting in transformed attitudes toward fellow believers.⁶ It is probably better, though, to understand Paul as referring to discerning/recognizing the *church* as the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17).⁷ That is, to approach the Lord's Supper worthily requires us to recognize the way the sacrament gives us communion with Christ (1 Cor. 11:27; cf. 1 Cor. 10:16) and with our fellow believers (1 Cor. 11:29; cf. 1 Cor. 10:17). As we prepare to receive the Lord's Supper, we should examine ourselves how we relate toward each member of our fellowship and communion (1 Cor. 11:28).

If we do not, then Paul gives an explanatory warning: failure to examine ourselves in regard to how we are treating Christ and Christ's church may result in temporal judgment of weakness, illness, and even death, just as some of the Corinthians have already experienced (1 Cor. 11:30). Thus, Paul exhorts us that we must not only *examine* ourselves, but *judge* ourselves by condemning our sin in repentance to the Lord (1 Cor. 11:31). If we judge ourselves in repenting from any sin we discover in ourselves, we may find discipline from the Lord, but we will avoid condemnation along with the rest of the world (1 Cor. 11:32).⁸ This last verse echoes what the author of Hebrews writes elsewhere when he urges us to endure God's discipline, since by it we may know that we are sons, and not illegitimate children (Heb. 12:7–17).

⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 230.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 389. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 552–53.

⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623–24.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 392–93. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iv.html>>

Practice Christ's Hospitality in the Church (1 Cor. 11:33–34)

In v. 33, Paul once again identifies for us the implications of his preceding statements, using the same conjunction of result, “so then” (ὥστε; *hōste*), as in v. 27. When the Corinthians “come together” (i.e., as a church for corporate worship), they must “wait for one another” (1 Cor. 11:33). While this verb often does carry the idea of waiting *for* other people (cf. Acts 17:16; 1 Cor. 16:11), in the context of meals, this word in ancient Greek often carried more of the idea of welcoming, demonstrating hospitality and compassion for one another, especially by sharing food.⁹ To put this into an English idiom, we might translate this not as waiting *for* one another (a matter of time), but as waiting *on* one another (a matter of hospitality). If this sense accurately captures Paul’s meaning here, it would connect well with what Paul criticized earlier in vv. 17–22. The rich should not feast and get drunk, but they should share what they have with the poor who have nothing.¹⁰ Even more, the Lord’s Supper should not be treated as a feast to satisfy hunger, so that people should eat first at home, and then come together for the exclusive purpose of receiving the Lord’s Supper in the context of corporate worship (v. 34a). Finally, Paul states that he has other directions to give, which he will relate when he comes (v. 34b).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to eat the bread and drink the cup “in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor. 11:27)? What does it mean to “be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27)? In light of these warnings, how should we examine ourselves as we prepare to receive the Lord’s Supper? As you prepare for receiving the Lord’s Supper next, what sins do you need to repent from? How are you asking God to cultivate a deeper desire for Christ in you?
2. What does it mean to “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11:29)? What does it mean to “judge ourselves” (1 Cor. 11:31–32)? In light of these warnings, how should we evaluate our relationships to other Christians as we prepare to receive the Lord’s Supper? Whose forgiveness do you need to seek? What relationships do you need to reconcile?
3. What does Paul mean when he urges us to “wait for one another” (1 Cor. 11:33)? Why should we eat to satisfy our hunger at home before coming to the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:34)? In light of everything we have read, what role is the Lord’s Supper supposed to play in the church? Does that goal match your own preparation and practices? What is one way you might prepare differently for the Lord’s Supper? What is one way that you might receive the Lord’s Supper differently?

⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 554–555.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 249.