

An Exegetical Study of First Corinthians 11:17-32

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Some introductory comments regarding First Corinthians 11:17-34, The Lord's Supper

This section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians falls in the center of the section of the book wherein Paul deals with Church Order. (i.e. 11:2-14:40) Three topics of study are covered, all dealing with abuses and excesses in the Corinthian worship life and practice. This major section on the Lord's Supper (v. 17-34) is sandwiched between the verses on Women's Place and Spiritual Gifts.

The section on Lord's Supper is divided into three parts: Problem, Principle, and Application. Verse 17 serves as a fitting introduction to Paul's remarks on the Sacrament. (v. 17-22): "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good." Something is definitely wrong with their meetings. Their fellowship meals are intermixed with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Instead of Communion (a joining together), there are separations, divisions, envy, hurt feelings, drunkenness, selfishness, and even the judgment of God. Paul plainly tells them, (v. 20): "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat..." What they have is their own carnal concoction.

The next one third of the section (v. 23-26) sets down the Principle involved. Just what is this Supper the Lord left us?? The events of the Upper Room and the very words of the Master are rehearsed. "When we do this, we are proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes".

The final third of this section, (v. 27-32) is the Application of the above principle, and the unhappy results for those who knowingly or unknowingly abuse the Lord's Supper. This final section is the portion our program committee assigned for our exegetical study. We shall examine verses 27-32 in detail, and then wrap up with some practical pastoral concerns.

The following is from *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition, United Bible Societies.

I Corinthians 11:27-32

Partaking of the Supper Unworthily

27 Ὅστε ὃς ἂν ἐσθίῃ τὸν ἄρτον ἢ πίνη τὸ ποτήριον τοῦ κυρίου ἀναξίως, ἔνοχος ἔσται τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ κυρίου. **28** δοκιμαζέτω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτὸν καὶ οὕτως ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ποτηρίου πινέτω· **29** ὁ γὰρ ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων κρίμα ἑαυτῶ ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα. **30** διὰ τοῦτο ἐν ὑμῖν πολλοὶ ἀσθενεῖς καὶ ἄρρωστοὶ καὶ κοιμῶνται ἱκανοί. **31** εἰ δὲ ἑαυτοὺς διεκρίνομεν, οὐκ ἂν ἐκρινόμεθα· **32** κρινόμενοι δὲ ὑπὸ [τοῦ] κυρίου παιδευόμεθα, ἵνα μὴ σὺν τῷ κόσμῳ κατακριθῶμεν.

Translation:

- 27: Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, guilty shall he be of the body and blood of the Lord.
- 28: But let a person examine himself and in this manner let him eat of the bread and let him drink of the cup.
- 29: For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.
- 30: For this reason, many among you are weak and sick and a goodly number have fallen asleep.
- 31: If we were coming up with the right opinion on ourselves, we would not be judged.
- 32: But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined, so that we are not eternally condemned with the world.

Ὡστε signals a change in paragraph and a jamor statement to follow. This emphatic “THEREFORE” is a fitting transition from the Words of Institution to Paul’s application in the following verses. Paul uses this word in similar emphatic situation in I Corinthians 11:33, and 10:12.

The ὅς and the particle ἄν coupled with the present active subjunctives ἐσθίη, πίνη, give us an indefinite relative clause, following the future more vivid conditional pattern. Such a construction signals the all-inclusive nature of the statement Paul makes—*Whoever* does this. Such phrasing emphasizes that what Paul sets down here applies to all who would celebrate the Lord’s Supper. “Whoever eats, drinks, etc”.

The close proximity of the two words ἀναξίως, ἔνοχος (v.27) is lost in most translations but my translation is purposefully stilted to show this emphases of the Greek: “Therefore, whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord *unworthily, guilty* shall he be of the body and blood of the Lord.” Unworthily equals guilty, Paul says. In what sense unworthy? Bauer’s Lexicon gives us a hint as the adjective form ἀναξίως is also said to mean careless:ⁱ “The adverb form, Bauer continues, is to be translated, in an unworthy or *careless manner*.”ⁱⁱ Concerning ἀναξίως, Thayer defines the word as: “unworthy, unfit for a thing”.ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Acts 13:46 for the related word ἄξιως: “We had to speak the Word of God to you first, since you reject it and do not consider yourselves ἄξιως of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.” The Corinthians main abuse was to receive the Holy Supper in a careless manner, in an unworthy manner. Those who fell into such shame were guilty, ἔνοχος. This word is a legal term: liable, answerable, guilty. Paul emphasizes the seriousness of what the Corinthians have done by his placement of this word at the beginning of the phrase. Something is wrong in their midst. They are guilty of sin. The weak, sick, and fallen asleep (v. 30) bear witness to that. In this phrase, the sense of guilt is this: they have sinned against something. What they have not realized or understood is that they sin against the very body and blood of the Lord, The two objective genitives, σώματος and αἵματος, show us the object of their sin. For a similar construction, see James 2:10: “guilty of all” equals “sins against the whole law”.

Paul’s major point in verse 27 is this: anyone who receives the bread and wine in communion in an unworthy manner, is guilty of a serious sin against the Lord’s body and blood. What other conclusion could be drawn from this verse than that Christ’s presence in the Sacrament is real and bodily?

Apparently what Paul had passes on to them previously (v. 23a) had fallen by the wayside. To correct this sin, Paul continues in verse 28 with what ought to be done. The third person imperative δοκιμαζέτω exhorts this. Let a testing, examining go on—a test of oneself. Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:13, “Test yourself whether you are in the faith.”

The general term ἄνθρωπος can but does not here simply apply to male human beings. The sense is general—anyone, a person. “Almost equivalent to the indefinite pronoun with basic meaning greatly weakened.”^{iv}

The second phrase of verse 28, begins with the adverb οὕτως. It serves as a contrast to the ἀναξίως of verse 27. You were eating in an unworthy manner; eat *in this manner*, examine yourself. In contrast to your unworthy partaking, now receive it after examining yourself. This is the better course. The two uses of the hortatory subjunctives in the verb show the course to follow. Don’t stay away, but let him eat, let him drink.

Verse 29 gives the reason why people ought to examine themselves: κρίμα judgment is involved. But before proceeding too far, a few comments or the two variant readings^v that are found in verse 29. Under footnote 3 of the text, we see the question is whether or not to include ἀναξίως or not. One can understand its addition to some texts seeking clarity in what is at first glance a complex sentence.

However, if one understands the final participial phrase in verse 29, the inclusion is not needed. The verse can be properly understood without it. Paul’s whole context here concerns unworthy reception. Moreover, the evidence to support it is all of later origin. When one checks our popular versions, only KJV includes the ἀναξίως, while NIV, NASB, Beck, and Luther do not. The evidence seems to say, leave it out.

The second variant of verse 29 gave us a bit more to think about. Footnote 4 shows the choice to be whether to include τοῦ κυρίου or not after σῶμα. Since the manuscript evidence is virtually the same choices as in footnote 3, one would think, leave it out for the above mentioned reasons. However, the versions above are

not consistent. The NIV, KJV, and Luther include the words, “of the Lord”, while Beck and NASB do not. The question that still is unanswered is this: If the manuscript evidence is the same for both variants, why does NIV reject this late evidence in this first case, but accept it for the second one? Lenski does not include either variant, but gives no comment on his choices. Since the τοῦ κυρίου is not needed for understanding purposes, (Paul has made it clear in verse 27 whose body this is), the shorter reading would be the logical choice. Here Lenski, Beck, and NASB stand together. Consistency would seem to favor the UBS text as printed.

Verse 29 clearly given the reason for the judgment: people μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα: (not discerning the body). But what is the judgment and what is “Discerning”? κρίμα refers to a judicial verdict handed down, a judgment, decision. But mostly this is in the unfavorable sense—the sentence of condemnation. (See Bauer, Page 451) The KJV’s familiar words, “eateth and drinketh damnation to himself”, are too strong. The Greek word can mean eternal damnation, but another word is more exact: κατακρίμα, which Paul uses in the verb form in verse 32. NIV’s translation is preferred here—“judgment”. But what of διακρίνων? This describes the wrong attitude that led to God’s judgment upon them. The verb itself means: Separate, differentiate, pass judgment, clearly distinguish, judge correctly; legal sense: render a decision. The point Paul, drives home is that they are not differentiating or clearly distinguishing between the food of their Potluck and the elements of the Holy Supper. They did not note the presence of the Lord’s Body. The result was judgment. The verse, like 28, is general and refers to everyone. The definite article, ὁ, takes the place of the indefinite pronoun. Paul is clear; the Body of the Lord is here and judgment can result on those who do not know this. Verse 30 gives us the specifics of what that judgment is.

No doubt this verse has caused many a thought as people have considered Paul’s meaning. I believe the context, the New Testament usage of the word κοιμάομαι (sleep) and Paul’s other uses of this word will lead us to a definite answer to the question: what does Paul mean—fall asleep?

But first, the two adjectives in the sentence. The word ἀσθενεῖς means weak, sick. Hodge says, “Those whose strength decays as if by itself.”^{vi} The word is used in a variety of ways to describe the weak, powerless, and ill. (Cf. Acts 4:9, the cripple; I Peter 3:9, the weaker vessel; I Corinthians 9:22, weak in faith.) These are weak from something.

The second adjective, ἄρρωστοι, means sick, ill, or powerless. It is the adjective most used to describe the people Jesus healed in the gospel accounts. (Cf. Mark 6:5 and Matthew 14:14) The two words are synonyms, but they do show us a progression in the sentence: weakened condition, sick, fallen asleep.

The word ἱκανοί is used in several passages, and the basic meaning is many. NIV interestingly translates the term three ways as follows: *Many* gathered at a private home, Acts 12:12; a *large number* of disciples, Acts 14:21; a *number* brought scrolls to be burned, Acts 19:19. This word is used in contrast to the πολλοί (many) who are weak and sick. Without article we take πολλοί as a large number, but not all inclusive as Romans 5:19. In the sentence, the number sick or weak are many, but those fallen asleep are not quite as many, but it is not a small number.

The main verb of verse 30, κοιμάομαι, is also our main concern for the verse. The context of the section states that judgment occurs on those who abuse the Lord’s Supper, Verse 29. It has already been pointed out that the κρίμα of verse 29 is not eternal damnation. But the judgment is a serious one. The progression shows in verse 30: weak...sick...many fallen asleep. The context preceding and following the verse give us reason to think the judgment is serious to the point of people dying, but not receiving eternal damnation (κατακρίνω, verse 32).

The New Testament usage of κοιμάομαι refers to death and sleep, At times, both meanings are used in the same paragraph. The literal meaning is, sleep, fall asleep. In Matthew 28:13, the guards were paid to say they had fallen asleep at Christ’s Tomb. Luke 22:45 applies this verb to what the disciples did in Gethsemane as Jesus prayed. The same verb appears in Acts 12:6, where Peter slept in prison when the angel rescued him. All these refer to literal sleep. The figurative use of sleep is used in extra-Biblical sources and in the Bible. The words of our Lord in John 11:11, 12; “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep... (v. 12) Lord, if he sleeps, he will

get better.” Here Jesus meant death; the disciple meant natural sleep. Both times κοιμα&omai is used. The context will determine which “sleep” is spoken of.

To understand Paul’s use here, let’s see how else he used the word “sleep”. The classic use is one familiar to all who have comforted the bereaved: I Thessalonians 4:13-14, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep...(verse 14)...we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him”. Also, similarly in verse 15. Here, plainly, the death of believers is referred to. Paul makes similar usage in I Corinthians 15:20, 51 “We shall not all sleep...” Paul makes use of another word when natural sleep is referred to: καθεύδω. (See I Thessalonians 5:6, 7, 10 and Ephesians 5:14) To be fair though, Matthew 9:24 uses καθεύδω as the sleep of death; “The girl is not dead but *asleep*.” Paul is consistent in his use of these two words: καθεύδω, natural sleep; κοιμάομαι, a believer’s sleep of death.

With the weight of the context, New Testament usage, and Paul’s other uses of this word κοιμάομαι, I submit that he means many Corinthians died as a result of their abuses.

The commentators available to me were uniformly in agreement. Pre-mature death was part of the judgment visited upon the Corinthian Christians. Here stand Hodge, Barret, Lange, Calvin, and Lenski. Lenski’s comments are worth noting here: “In the language of the New Testament, only those who are saved ‘are asleep’, and this sleeping, of course, refers to their bodies and not to their souls. The ‘judgment’ which Paul has in mind is at worst an untimely physical death and not eternal damnation.”^{vii}

Luther’s words are worth hearing too. In three separate articles, he gives the impression that these illnesses and deaths are literal, not figurative, or spiritual. In a 1519 tract called “The Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ”, Luther records abuses of the thoughtless and unthinking recitation of masses, and the people’s ignorant reception of communion: “It is for this reason also that the world is overrun with pestilences, wars, and other horrible plagues (verse 30 is footnoted here), because with our many masses we only bring down upon us greater disfavor.”^{viii}

Later, in a 1527 book against Zwingli’s “spiritual eating” in the Sacrament, and his wrong use of John 6, “The flesh availeth nothing”, Luther wrote as follows in *This is My Body*:

Therefore you did not need to teach us that physical eating is of no avail. We actually go further and say that physical eating is even poisonous and deadly. But thereby it is not proved that Christ’s body is not there. Indeed, it rather proves that he is there. If he were not there, the physical eating would be harmless and sueful; but now since it is of no avail and even harmful, it must surely be present and be eaten.^{ix}

Next, a 1528 article given to instruct parish pastors, Luther shows that he takes sleep to mean death in verse 30. These words are also good for our pastoral comments later. (Volume 40, Page 292)

All these quotes leave one with the certainty that Luther agreed that Corinthian Christians died of communion abuses. This was God’s judgment upon them.

Verses 31 and 32 make a unit, and Paul’s use of three words for judging make a fitting conclusion to this section on judgment.

The sentence of verse 31 is a contrary to fact conditional. Paul means, “If the case were that you judged your hearts correctly God would not have to be judging you as I mentioned in verse 31.” διακρίνω was also used in verse 29—“not discerning the Lord’s body”. Note other comments there on this word. It means judge correctly. Note that here and in verse 32, Paul tactfully switches to the first person plural, we, to include himself in this judging of one’s own heart. The word κρίνω, used in verses 31 and 32, is the simple word for judging. Its uses are many in addition to the legal ones. Bauer lists over a page of different examples. I take it to mean judged in this extent: condemned or found guilty, in both verses 31 and 32. That this judging or condemnation is not eternal, is witnessed by Paul’s final use of κατακρίνω. Verse 32 is to clarify for the Corinthians the purpose for God judging them. This is instructional, discipline, a teaching for them. The word παιδεύω reflects the usage of Hebrews 12:6—“Because the Lord disciplines those he loves...” it is a wholesome chastisement

for their own good. This judgment is only the Lord's discipline, and the good result Paul expresses in the final clause of verse 32: "so that we not be eternally condemned with the world". The world of course, is the sum total of unbelievers. In Paul's day it nearly was the entire world. The κατακρίνω is the New Testament word for condemn to eternal punishment, or the punishment itself. Our word is damnation. This word appears in Mark 16:16—"He that believeth not shall be damned". This is not what the Lord wants for his Corinthians, nor what has happened. They have been judged, but only as a discipline for their own good.

In summary, Paul has shown us the seriousness of the Lord's Supper and the unhappy results for those who abuse it. An unworthy communicant is one who does not judge rightly what he receives in the Sacrament, nor has he judged rightly his own heart. In the case of the Corinthians, this resulted in weakness, sickness, and even death.

The application to us as pastors is self-evident. How greatly these truths will affect our teaching and practice. The adult or teenager must have a thorough understanding of this doctrine. The uninformed must be warned from communing with us unawares. For all who come to the Lord's altar receive in, with, and under the bread and wine, the true body and blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Some receive it to their strengthening, others to their judgment. Luther's remarks to pastors of his day are as relevant now as then. "Not only do they who receive it unworthily dishonor the sacrament, but also those who carelessly give it to the unworthy."^x Also see "First, the pastor needs to instruct the people how great a sin it is to dishonor the sacrament and to misuse it. For Paul says in I Corinthians 11:27f: 'You are guilty of profaning the body and blood of Christ,' and 'You receive it to judgment upon yourself.' Also, 'Many of you are ill and many among the Christians have died.' For God declared in the second commandment (Exodus 20:7): Whoever dishonors his name, he will not hold guiltless. Undoubtedly also this dishonor to the body and blood of Christ will not go unpunished. This shall be taught the people carefully, so that they may avoid this sin and be urged to reverence, penitence, and improvement."^{xi}

As further part of our instruction, make clear to those troubled, the unworthy reception of Communion is not an unpardonable sin. Rather, as Paul said, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat...and drink." "For he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: Given and shed for you for the remission of your sins." That forgiveness of God even covers the previous sin of unworthy communion reception. May Paul's words build up our own faith and understanding, and help us to properly instruct those the Lord places in our hands.

Endnotes

ⁱ W. Bauer, *Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, page 58.

ⁱⁱ Bauer, page 58.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*, page 40.

^{iv} Bauer, page 68.

^v Cf. the following textual apparatus from *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition, United Bible Societies.

⁵ 29 {A} πίτων Φ^{46} \aleph^* A B C* 33 1739 it^o cop^{sa, bo} geo Hesychius^{lat}; Pelagius // πίτων ἀναξίως (see 11.27) \aleph^2 C² D F G Ψ 0150 6 81 (104 ἀναξίως after γάρ) 256 263 365 424 436 459 1175 1241 1319 1573 1852 1881 1912 1962 2127 2200 2464 Byz [K L P] *Lect* it^{ar, b, d, f, g} vg syr^{p, h, pal} arm eth slav Basil Chrysostom (Cyril) John-Damas-cus; Ambrosiaster Pacian Jerome Augustine

⁶ 29 {A} σῶμα Φ^{46} \aleph^* A B C* 6 33 424^c 1739 it^o vg^{ww, sl} syr^{pal} cop^{sa, bo} Pelagius Augustine^{1/2} // σῶμα τοῦ κυρίου \aleph^2 C³ D F G (Ψ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ) 0150 81 104 256 263 365 424* 436 459 1175 1319 1573 1852 1881 1912 1962 2127 2200 2464 Byz [K L P] *Lect* it^{ar, b, d, f, g} vg^{cl} syr^{p, h} arm (eth) geo slav Basil Chrysostom (Cyril) Hesychius^{lat}; Ambrosiaster Pacian Augustine^{1/2} // αἶμα τοῦ κυρίου 1241

^{vi} Charles Hodge, *Exposition of First Corinthians*, page 233.

^{vii} R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*, page 483.

^{viii} Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 37*, page 65.

^{ix} Luther, *Luther's Works - Volume 37*, page 86.

^x Luther, *Luther's Works - Volume 40*, page 296.

^{xi} Luther, *Luther's Works* – Volume 40, page 292.

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