

Discerning the Body

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Corinthians 11:17-34

I want to talk with you tonight about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. To do that, I want to look at one of the most important Lord Supper passages, 1 Corinthians 11. This passage shapes the way we think about communion and the way we do communion. Tonight, through a close and careful reading of this crucial passage, I want us to see together what Paul is saying about this supper that we love so much. And if you are my age or older, and you grew up in the Christian Reformed Church or any of the other reformed churches in this area, you might be surprised to hear what Paul is actually saying. It might be a little different than what you thought. If you grew up CRC, this passage strongly influenced your understanding of communion because we used to read part of this passage every time we celebrated this supper. We didn't read the whole thing; we would just read verses 23-29, the part where we are warned not to eat the body and blood in an unworthy manner, where we are called to examine ourselves and discern the body. We would read those verses either on the day of the Supper or the week before, as a way to prepare ourselves for coming to the table; the so-called Preparatory Exhortation. Verses 23-29 were given a very specific interpretation in our Lord's Supper forms. We were told exactly what it meant to examine ourselves. According to form 1 in the 1959 Psalter Hymnal, examination meant three things:

1. "Let everyone consider by himself his sins and accursedness that he may abhor himself and humble himself before God."
2. "Let everyone examine his heart whether he also believes this sure promise of God, that all his sins are forgiven."
3. "Let everyone examine his conscience whether he is minded henceforth to show true thankfulness to God in his whole life."

So self-examination was the examination of the individual and his or her conscience before the face of God. The forms ended up becoming our context for interpreting verses 23-29, rather than the pastoral issue in the biblical text itself.

Now, if all you read in 1 Corinthians 11 is verses 23 to 29, this would seem like a completely reasonable interpretation of Paul's words. Paul asks us to examine ourselves and he asks us to discern the body. Someone says self-examination and we think: "I've got to confess my personal sins before I come to this table." Someone says discern the body and we think: "I've got to understand the symbolism and the theology of the Lord's Supper before I eat the bread and wine." If I don't examine and if I don't discern, I will eat and drink judgment unto myself. If all you read are verses 23-29, it seems like that's what Paul is saying. This understanding of discernment and self-examination ended up dominating the way we conducted the sacrament. Examination: In the past, our Lord's Supper forms were full of penitential self-examination. "Let everyone consider his sins and accursedness! Discernment: Our Lord's Supper celebrations went to great lengths to make sure we discerned the meaning of the sacrament. The forms were like a long theology lesson to make sure everyone intellectually understood what they were doing. When we prepared our children to come to the table, we focused on making sure they had an intellectual understanding of the proceedings. You children need to discern the body. You need to know what the sacrament means. You need to know what the bread stands for and what the

wine stands for. Because if you eat this meal without intellectual understanding of the symbols, you are eating and drinking judgment on yourself.

Now, I am all for self-examination and confession. Confession is a root Christian practice. I hope we are all examining ourselves all the time. I am also for discerning the meaning of the bread and the wine. Yes to theological education. Yes to catechism instruction. Yes to educated Christians. But let me ask you this: when you read verses 23 – 29 in the full context of this passage, when Paul calls the Corinthian church to examine themselves, is he asking them to examine their individual conscience before God? And when Paul asks them to discern the body, does he want them to sharpen their intellectual understanding of the meaning of the bread and wine? The answer - and I think this answer is actually pretty clear and indisputable - is no. Paul has a beef with the Corinthians Lord Supper celebrations in this passage, but it's not with their lack of personal self-examination and it's not because they don't understand that the bread stands for Christ's body.

Let's look at the context. Verses 17-22 show us the pastoral problem in the Corinthian church that leads to that theological instruction in verses 23-29, those words that appeared in our church's old Lord's Supper forms. So what is the pastoral problem? Whatever it is, Paul's pretty angry about it. I have no praise for you! You've done more harm than good! Paul's angry because there are divisions among them when they get together for communion. They don't eat the supper all together. They're divided. Some people sit at a head table and get the best of everything; others sit in a lower place and get the crumbs. They are not eating the supper as family members and equals and that makes Paul really angry. They are violating the central meaning of this sacrament! They are not discerning the true purpose of the body and blood! "When you come together as a church, there are divisions among you. When you come together it is not the Lord's Supper you eat! For when you are eating some of you go ahead and start with your own private suppers. As a result one person goes hungry and another person gets drunk! Do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?" They are not eating the supper together as one body. People are being excluded.

We even have some idea of what that dividing status marker was: They were divided by class. It's money that separates them. That's why Paul says "*Are you trying to humiliate those who have nothing!?*" This was a divide between the haves and the have-nots. Here's what was probably happening: the wealthy and those from the upper classes are having their own private Lord's Supper in the best room of the house where the church was meeting. In those days, along with the bread and the wine, communion celebrations included a full meal. The wealthy would arrive at the house first. They'd have the best food catered to their dining room where they feasted, sometimes in excess. The poorer classes arrived later. They were relegated to a different room, a less fancy room. And by the time they arrived the best food was gone, or all the food was gone. All the wine was gone and the rich ones were drunk! The poorest and weakest members got left out. It was an upstairs, downstairs version of the Lord's Supper. It was like the church had made two kinds of communion: first class communion and coach. Paul is furious. "Are you trying to humiliate those who have nothing?"

In verses 23-29 Paul restates this problem in theological terms. When they divided, the Corinthian church was celebrating the Lord's Supper without properly discerning the Body. When they left people out they were violating the communal nature of the church; they were not properly understanding the nature of the body of Christ. When you exclude people from God's table because of their financial status, you are not discerning the body and you are sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Put this all together and discerning the body and self-

examination start to look like very different things. When Paul calls us to discern the body in our Lord's Supper celebrations, he's not asking us to get the symbolism right; he's calling us to make sure everyone is included so that we eat this supper as brothers and sisters in Christ. Discerning the body is not figuring out what the bread and the wine stand for. Discerning the body means coming to the table together as the community of Christ. Paul doesn't want any member of the family to be excluded, especially the weak and voiceless ones. And examining yourselves to make sure you eat in a worthy manner is not examining your individual conscience before God; it's an examination of the community as a whole, making sure everyone is included. When Paul calls us to examine ourselves before we come to the table, he wants us to look around and make sure we aren't leaving people out. Paul's vision is that a person should be able to come to Christ's table and stand with the people eating there and she should be able to look around and see rich and poor, young and old, slave and free, men and women; she ought to be able to see all the divisions of class and gender and race and taste overcome, she should be able to see slaves and masters standing next to each other's as brothers and sisters in Christ, the status markers forgotten. As she raises the bread to her lips, her heart should swell with praise as she discerns all around her the miracle of the body of Christ.

So, to sum up: discerning the body is not an intellectual knowledge of the bread's meaning; it's including the whole community. Examining yourselves is not an examination of the individual conscience before God, it's making sure the whole family is at the table. If what I've said so far isn't enough to convince you, consider these other textual clues. Not only does Paul start this passage with a concern for church togetherness, he finishes it that way too! In verse 33 he says, "So then my brothers and sisters when you gather to eat, you should all eat together." If intellectual understanding were Paul's chief concern, would he really finish his the section off with a plea for unity? It hardly seems likely. You'd expect something more like, "Keep studying everyone." But instead you get Paul saying, "Make sure the whole family is there!!" Paul's concern is unity.

And then there's larger context. Right after our passage, in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul goes on to one of the most famous discussions of unity in the whole Bible. What's the metaphor Paul uses throughout 1 Corinthians 12? The body. The whole passage is about how the church is the body of Christ. The whole of Chapter 12 is like an exercise in discerning the body. In that chapter Paul says none of the parts of the body should be left out! The eye can't say to the hand I don't need you. The ear can't say to the foot I don't need you. Every part of the body must be included. And the weaker members? "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." (12:22) The first rule of biblical interpretation is: read the passage in context. The context of our passage could not be more clear. When Paul talks about the body of Christ, he means the church.

What are the implications of this this interpretation. There are many. Let me close with just 2. The proper interpretation of this passage has caused changed our mind about the age when children can come to this table. In my day you wouldn't dream of taking profession of faith before you were 16 or 17 years old. But lately we've been letting younger and younger children to the table. Just two weeks ago six children stood up here in front of church and said I want to be a bigger part of this family! I want to come to this table. I loved seeing them standing there between their parents, their faces up-turned and their eyes excited. Their voices piping. "I do God helping me!" It made my heart glad. In the old interpretation of this text, the church would say: "No! They can't do this! They are too young! They can't discern the body! They don't understand all the theology of the table! They don't know the difference between con-

substantiation and trans-substantiation!” But when you see that Paul’s concern here is making sure that the small and the weaker ones are included, the tables turn completely. If the little children want to come to Jesus, why shouldn’t they come?

The second implication has to do with the way we celebrate. Part of every Lord’s Supper service should be some kind of confession. Part of every Lord’s Supper service should involve our coming before the Lord and admitting that we are sinners completely dependent on the sacrifice of Jesus. But the Lord’s Supper should not be one long dour meditation on our accursedness and unworthiness. It is a community celebration of new life in Christ. It is the family coming together to celebrate the fact that if anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation, and we are new creations together!

We remember his sacrificial death at this table. It is certainly a time to think about what Jesus did for us on the cross. But it’s not just the crucified Jesus we think of. Remember Luke 24! Remember the story of the Emmaus road. At the end of their walk with Jesus, they have a meal with Jesus and it is the risen Jesus who is made known to them in the breaking of the bread! Communion isn’t just a time to sing “O Sacred Head Now Wounded”; it’s also a time where we might sing “Joy to the World” or “Now Thank We All Our God”. Communion isn’t just a time to take the bread out of the communion plate and put your head down and meditate privately in a penitential mode while the choir sings a contrite song; communion is a time to look around you at your brothers and sisters, to sing the joy you share and thank God for all his good gifts.

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