

“Body Unity and the Centrality of Christ in the Local Assembly”
Proper Etiquette for Men and Women in Local Church Worship
 Issues of Ministry
 Understanding the Lord’s Table

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©
 Date: August 6, 2006 (1st Sunday of the Month)
 Title: Understanding the Lord’s Table – Part III – The Consequences of Dividing His Body (vv. 27-32) and the Counsel of Paul (vv. 33, 34).
 Text: 1 Corinthians 11:27-34
 Theme: The body of Christ is built for community and when people set themselves against it, there is an inherent demerit that will crush them.

Introduction:

Verse 27 provides a conclusion to the previous thought. As noted, if you are a divisive person or a factious person, you are partaking of the Lord’s Table in a manner that is not compatible with what the Table represents.

ILLUSTRATION:

What is incompatibility? Incompatibility is two or more objects that are not suitable to be used together.

A lion and lamb lying down together
 Mixing oil and water
 Sin and God
 Division in the body of Christ

It is important to note how division has been a consistent theme throughout the letter and among the people of God in the body of Christ at Corinth (1:10, 11:18, and 12:25).

¹⁰ “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there **be no divisions among you**, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹ For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that **there are quarrels among you**. ¹² Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’ ¹³ **Has Christ been divided?** Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:10-13).

¹⁸ “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, **I hear that divisions exist among you**; and in part I believe it” (1 Cor 1:18).

²⁴ “whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, ²⁵ **so that there may be no division in the body**, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:24-26).

ILLUSTRATION:

Division in the body is like a
 Torn garment
 Dislocated joint
 Broken bone

This divisive spirit had permeated the celebration of the meal preceding the Table and was undermining the Table's intent. A factious person is speaking against what Christ did. He is liable and in danger of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Because we fail to understand the true community inside of a local church we equally fail to understand the seriousness of gossip, slander, and division. This failure is due in large part to our failure to understand what was accomplished as a consequence of our Lord Jesus Christ's cross-work.

What is our current problem when we come to our passage in 11:27-34?

First Corinthians 11:27-32 is one of those difficult passages regardless as to what side of the theological fence you happen to be planted. Many within evangelical churches approach the Table with the idea that you have to examine your heart to confess your known sins before partaking of the Lord's Table in order to be worthy lest you are smitten by God for your personal rebellion. I do not agree with this thinking. I would like to look at the text and make several observations that will hopefully have as their outcome a clarification of this unfortunate misinterpretation.

Thus how do we "handle" the idea that is common within Evangelicalism of having to examine your heart to confess your known sins before partaking of the Lord's Table in order to be worthy lest you are smitten by God for your personal rebellion?

I will make several observations that will hopefully have as their outcome a clarification of this unfortunate misinterpretation.

First, let us examine the issue in its historical context.

I. The issue in its historical context

I am not convinced we are practicing the Lord's Table in the same way. The historical context has the Lord's Table being preceded by a meal taken in common. The abuse was in the meal preceding the celebration of the Lord's Table (vv.20-22, 33, 34). It was not in the partaking of the elements proper. By their partiality and personal selfishness, the people were disregarding the call to unity and in so doing were fracturing the body of Christ.

"The more affluent Christians in Corinth had fallen into the habit of reserving better food for themselves when they hosted the church's 'love feasts' in their homes. They ate their food without waiting for poorer members of the church to arrive. They overindulged in food and drink, while many of their poorer brothers and sisters had next to nothing to eat (11:21–22). Rather than contributing to the unity of the body of Christ, such actions would emphasize the differences between groups in the church. Such behavior was desecrating the observance of the Lord's Supper, which was a standard feature of these love feasts (1 Cor. 11:20–21). **The person who is out of harmony with other members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29) dishonors the Lord's Supper.**"
http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D157812%2526M%253D200272,00.html

It is for this reason the apostle Paul exhorts his audience to examine themselves. The sin issue is one of in-house fighting. The issue is not a specific sin. It is those sins that divide a fellowship.

Division is the sin that is being considered in our passage. If I am a part of the body, why would I be polarized against it? Why would I be seeking to harm my own body? This is the kind of examination that is needful and important.

The second issue needing to be considered is the idea of theological transition and the work of Christ in behalf of His people.

II. The issue of theological transition and the work of Christ in behalf of His people

I lean toward the idea of the circumstances being in a period of a dispensational transition. The idea that God is striking people dead for harboring sin in their hearts is a little strong for me. Not repugnant, but difficult to interpret. This does not make it wrong, but I see this as being unique to a dispensational change. We have examples of people whom God directly and immediately killed.

- God consumed the family of Korah by opening up the earth because they rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Num. 16:31-35).
- When the men of Bethshemesh looked into the ark of the LORD, God killed 50,070 men (1 Sam. 6:19).
- When the ark of God shook Uzzah put forth his hand to stay the ark and God killed him for touching the ark (2 Sam. 6:6, 7).
- When the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, offered up strange incense before the LORD fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them and they died (Lev. 10:1, 2).
- When Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit they were killed by God (Acts 5).

Some would argue that this pattern still exists but does this pattern still exist? Some people wish to take the idea just noted and lay it on top of the Lord's Table.

If God is striking people dead who partake of the table in an unworthy fashion, then why is “regarding iniquity in my heart” (Ps. 66:18) or 1 Peter 3:7 of “dwelling with your wives according to knowledge so that your prayers will not be hindered” not on the same level? What is the theological distinction in categorizing sins? What constitutes a “sin leading to death” (1 John 5:16-17)? In fact, if one does commit the sin that leads to death, we are told not to pray for them.

The question still begging to be answered is this, “Is God striking people dead for taking the Lord’s Table with sin in their heart”? If so, who are these people and is it even identifiable? I personally do not believe this is so.

There are several ideas in the text that we need to consider.

- A. What is meant by “eating and drinking in an unworthy manner (v. 27a)?”

This idea has been so misunderstood and has held the celebration of the Lord’s Table in bondage. Listen carefully to the observation by NT Scholar Gordon Fee as it relates to the word “unworthily.”

“Unfortunately, this adverb was translated ‘unworthily’ in the KJV. Since that particular English adverb seems more applicable to the person doing the eating than to the manner in which it is being done, this word became a dire threat for generations of English-speaking Christians. This is especially true in the more pietistic sectors of the Protestant tradition. People are ‘unworthy’ if they have any sin in their lives, or have committed sins during the past week. This in turn resulted in reading v. 28 personally and introspectively, so that the purpose of one’s self-examination was to become worthy of the Table, lest one come under judgment. The tragedy of such an interpretation for countless thousands, both in terms of a foreboding of the Table and guilt for perhaps having partaken unworthily, is incalculable.” (Gordon Fee, 1 Corinthians, NICNT, [Eerdmans, 1987], 560).

A.T. Robertson makes the following observation.

“Old adverb, only here in N.T., Paul defines his meaning in verse 1Co 11:29. He does not say or imply that we ourselves must be “worthy” to partake of the Lord’s Supper. No one would ever partake on those terms. Many pious souls have abstained from observing the ordinance through false exegesis here.”

We think that if we are harboring sin in our life or have sin in our heart that we are not worthy to partake of the Lord’s Table, but this would demand sinless perfection or the complete eradication of the old man, both of which are impossible at this time. The Table is for sinners such as you and me. The Table tells me that I am forgiven and now have full access before my heavenly Father. **We will never be worthy. Our worth is an imputed worth unmerited and grace given.** Such righteousness now makes me worthy to partake and to remember the atonement and grace.

By dividing the body and creating schism is to desecrate the work that His death secured. To divide the body is to treat the Table in an unworthy fashion. To divide the body is to celebrate the Lord's Table in a manner that is not reflecting the purpose of the Table.

The issue is not do I have sin in my life; the issue is how I view my Lord's death and the consequences of that death in the life of His people. This is the issue. Thus,

"This is probably not so much a threat as a call to truly Christian behavior at the Table." (Gordon Fee, 1 Corinthians, NICNI, [Eerdmans, 1987], 562).

If a person comes without respect to the Table's significance and partakes with a spirit of division, then he is undoing what God has done. And my Bible tells me that the Lord smote this person in that context. Body division has its own intrinsic, providential consequence.

A second idea needing to be clarified is the difference between positional justification and progressive sanctification.

B. What is the difference between positional justification versus progressive sanctification (vv. 28-32)?

In our justification we are perfect before the Father because He sees us in the righteousness of His Son. This perfection is being played out in and through our earthen vessels. This work is called progressive sanctification. Our sanctification is expressing what is true. It is not altering who we are before the Father. This displaying is imperfect in that our flesh obscures the true nature of things. Because this is true, when I come to the Table I am right with God. This idea does not mean I am sinless. The issue of "being right with God" is rooted in one's justification not one's sanctification. Scripture never blurs this idea.

Consider what the Table represents. It is a celebration of God's work on the cross in my behalf for my sin. The Table says, "You can't, but God can." The Table is a *celebration* of what God did for sinners! Not perfected saints. I come to the Table because *I am not worthy*. I come because *He alone is worthy*. Can you imagine if the table was only for those who somehow were meeting all of God's righteous demands? No one would be able to come.

This does not dismiss a spirit of animosity you might have toward another brother or sister in Christ. In fact, you must deal with it. Such an attitude is completely incompatible with the cross and its consequence for His people. If you have a spirit of gossip or animosity toward the local body, then you are a hypocrite as it relates to the Table/Cross of our Lord.

The third big idea is with the idea of self-examination.

C. What is meant by “A man must examine himself (vv. 28, 31)?”

Again I would like to note the observation of Gordon Fee,

“The problem lies with the imperative ‘let a person examine himself/herself,’ which along with v. 27 has been the cause of untold anxieties within the church.; this is not a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the Table.” (Gordon Fee, 1 Corinthians, NICNT, [Eerdmans, 1987], 561).

Part of our problem is that we have so individualized the idea that we think of the sin in our lives as opposed to our sin against the local assembly. It is not the sin I am struggling with but the sin I have against the local assembly. The issue is not my battle with lust, but my battle with resentment or hurt feelings against the local assembly. This is the examination being called for. This is the “body” being referred to in 11:29.

I have problems with how we think of this self-examination. First, the specific sin Paul is seeking to uncover is that of divisions and quarreling within the local church. Thus, the passage has nothing to do with the general idea of having sin in our life.

Second, Paul, in conjunction with his statement in 2 Corinthians 13:5-7, could be asking us as to whether or not we are believers. If this is dealing with the believer versus the unbeliever, then how many times is this idea violated? Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Table, do we not have unsaved people partaking? Does this not happen every time it is celebrated? If this is true, then why is God not striking dead all those who partake of the Table in a state of unbelief? What is worse, partaking of the Table with un-confessed sin or partaking of the Table as an unbeliever? Something in our understanding of this text is wrong.

Third, concerning self-examination as a whole, only the Holy Spirit can bring a true assessment of my sin resulting in biblical confession and a putting off of the sin. We make sin trite when our confession is routine and generic. Acrostics for prayer like P.R.A.Y. and A.C.T.S. *can make* confession and repentance a work of the flesh. We are no different than those who go into a booth once a week and confess their sins to another person through standardized prayers.

I often ask God to make me so satisfied in Him that sin loses its appeal. And to make me see and hate sin like He does (although this is an impossibility). I need a greater sensitivity to sin, but this will only happen when I have a greater sensitivity to the sufficiency and satisfaction of who Christ is, what He has done, and who I am in Him.

Verse 31 speaks of a true self-assessment. What is a correct assessment of who I am? An accurate assessment of who you are sees yourself as nothing apart from His work. An accurate assessment of who you are sees yourself as a part of one body. It is seeing yourself in light of 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. You are no better or worse than anyone else. This is an accurate assessment of who you are. Every time you hold a grudge against someone in the body of Christ you are believing that you deserved to be treated better than you received or that somehow your desires and wants should have been met and they were not.

Before we partake of the elements we must ask ourselves as to whether or not we are saved and thus part of His body. If I am saved, I am part of the body. If I am not saved, then I am not a part of the body. Again, it is important to remember that the violation was not taking place during the Lord's Table, but in the meal that preceded the Lord's Table. The attitude of some as expressed in the meal preceding was undermining the nature of the cross work.

The fourth idea is with God's judgment against the sin.

D. What is the judgment being referred to in verses 29-32?

If I am at odds with the body of Christ, then I will reap the consequences of my sin. To be judged by the Lord is to accept His evaluation of myself. He judges me a sinner in need of a Savior. To accept His evaluation of me causes me to see that I am no better or worse than anyone else inside the body of Christ. The Table communicates this message loud and clear. I judge myself as having embraced His evaluation of me. Not to accept this judgment is to be condemned with the world (v.32).

There are two thoughts needing to be addressed in verses 30 and 32.

1. The weak, sick, and sleeping (v. 30)

Verse 30 outlines for the body the inherent demerit to body division. If we understand what the Table represents, how can we carry a grudge, or bitterness, or have an unforgiving spirit? Such attitudes on our part are to be put off as works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5). When we refuse to lay aside our bitterness and anger toward the local body of Christ, then the inherent judgment against such sin is sickness and possible death. It is a tragic thing to see people perish because of an unforgiving spirit. They are consumed by their bitterness against the body and/or its leadership and their lives and relationships are falling apart. This is the natural consequence of their sin.

2. We are disciplined by the Lord (v. 32)

God's discipline against those who divide the body is providential and sure. A factious spirit has its own retribution. If a person comes without respect to the Table's significance and partakes with a spirit of division, then he is undoing what God has done. Body division has its own intrinsic, providential consequence and the Bible describes this providential consequence as the Lord smiting that person.

Consider what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17

Think of the larger context of 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17. Here Paul gives a warning to the Corinthian fellowship. Verse 16 turns the attention away from the leadership and to the people of Corinth. They are God's field (3:9), they are God's building (3:9), and they are God's temple (3:16). Again, we have individualized this text, but the context demands that we understand the field, building, and temple to be the local church and not the individual.

Some within the fellowship were divisive, disgruntled, and disagreeable (1:10, 11; 3:3). As such they were destroying the Church. As such God will destroy them when the judgment comes (3:13-15). They will not survive the "fire." Why will God destroy them, because they are endeavoring to destroy God's people and His people are holy.

There are many within the churches that are divisive, disgruntled, and disagreeable. This same idea is present in 1 Corinthians 11:19. Paul warns them of a judgment to come. **Such displays as these, these works of the flesh, could be an indicator of their lost condition.**

May we never be seen as a fellowship of unregenerate people who are destroying the true work of God in the midst of His people.

Immediate Application

I believe there is more to the text than I know. If we are capable of committing this "sin" today, then the Lord's Table is not necessarily a celebration, but a fearful self-examination. If what is stated is for today, then why are people not falling over dead? I will plead ignorance at this point, and you might wish to continue with the idea that if you have sin in your heart and eat of the Lord's Table the Lord will smite you. But I choose to believe there is more to it than that.

I heard of one church that would not celebrate the Lord's Supper for at least two years because the pastor felt there was sin in the church family.

Consider the upper room scene with Peter and the ten. Why did they not fall over dead? How many people honestly believe their heart is sinless in the partaking of the Lord's Supper? We have made the confession of our sin trite

as if “Lord forgive me for everything I have ever done between yesterday morning and now, Amen” will cover it. This is not biblical confession.

The Lord’s Table speaks of His finished work in behalf of His people. I believe the work accomplished by Him is sufficient for me. I come to the table celebrating this glorious truth. May we, in every occurrence of the Lord’s Table, reflect deeply on His cross work, may we see and feel our own unworthiness, may we see and feel the unity of His body, and then may we with grateful hearts partake of the elements that speak of His broken body and shed blood.

I would like to conclude with a final comment by Gordon Fee.

“As noted throughout, this paragraph has had an unfortunate history of understanding in the church. The very Table that is God’s reminder, and therefore his repeated gift, of grace, the Table where we affirm again who and whose we are, has been allowed to become a table of condemnation for the very people who most truly need the assurance of acceptance that this table affords – the sinful, the weak, the weary. One does not have to ‘get rid of the sin in one’s life’ in order to partake. Here by faith one may once again receive the assurance that ‘Christ receiveth sinners.’” (Gordon Fee, 1 Corinthians, NICNT, [Eerdmans, 1987], 566, 567).

Notice Paul’s final counsel in verses 33 and 34.

III. The counsel of Paul (vv. 33, 34)

Paul’s advice is stated in verses 33 and 34 concerning the meal preceding the Lord’s Table. Do not allow your physical appetites to make you factious. Come to the Table already full so that you will not be divisive. It would appear that the historical context is something different than what we are currently practicing or experiencing in the Church today.

As a fellowship, let us use the Table as a time to call His people to body unity. Let it be a time where we cast off bitterness, grudges, and unforgiving spirits. Let the Table be a time when grace reigns.

APPLICATION: (What does this look like?)

Our passage deals with body unity and body division. Such a study forces us to ask certain questions. The questions confronting us in this study are simple, “What part am I playing in the unifying of this fellowship around the person and work of Jesus Christ?” There is also a flip side to this application, “What part am I playing in the dividing of this fellowship?”

1. How have I applied (or can I apply) this passage to my life?

Do I have hatred and/or bitterness toward a member of this local church? Am I willing to let it go? If not, your sin will consume you.

2. Can I give them a “take-home” application – something they can do at home, work or at school?

The truth of the Table is a take home truth. The power of the cross and its consequences never changes.

3. Have I kept Christ in the application?

The Table is a visual of the Gospel of Grace.

The Gospel presented

For the truth of Scripture to change your life through renewing your mind you must be in a right relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ His Son. This relationship is impossible apart from the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This relationship is built around four key ideas. They can be summed up in four words: God, man, Christ, and response.

GOD

There is a real and personal God who is both Creator and Judge before whom you will stand and give an account as both creature and criminal.

MAN – RECOGNIZE

You have rebelled against God. We’ve all participated in this sinful rebellion. As a result, we have alienated ourselves from God and have exposed ourselves to His righteous wrath, which will banish us eternally to hell if we do not accept the work of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

CHRIST – REALIZE

But God sent Jesus *Christ*, fully God and fully man, to die the death that we deserved for our sins – the righteous for the unrighteous – so that God might both punish our sin in Christ and forgive it in us.

RESPONSE – RECEIVE

The only saving *response* to this Good News is to believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:12; Acts 16:30, 31).

Have you turned to Jesus Christ as your only hope of eternal life? Today this can happen to you.