

Discerning the Lord's Body

Text: I Corinthians 11:17-34; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 29

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The church at Corinth was not profiting from her assemblies. Instead, these gatherings were spiritually detrimental. The body of believers was weaker after worship than before. One major reason was the presence of divisions, which Paul had heard of even from afar: "I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it" (I Cor. 11:18). Such schism is sin against Christ and the church's unity, and it violates the communion of saints. The spiritual regression of the church was made worse by the frequency of their meetings. Every time they gathered, instead of growing in grace, they fell further into error, confusion, and spiritual decay.

Another serious issue was the profaning of the Lord's Supper. The passage suggests that a Love Feast had begun to merge with the sacrament, blurring the lines between common eating and holy partaking. "For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken" (v. 21). This selfish behaviour dishonoured Christ and the sacrament. The richer members ate to excess while the poor went hungry. The apostle, in verses 23–25, brings the church back to the institution of the Lord's Supper: "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread..." Paul's correction is urgent and Spirit-inspired. He reminds them of the holy purpose for which this sacrament was instituted.

The True Meaning

To discern the Lord's body is central. Lord's Day 29 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* addresses this: "Do then the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ? Not at all: but as the water in baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ... so the bread of the Lord's Supper is not changed into the very body of Christ; though agreeably to the nature and properties of sacraments, it is called the body of Christ Jesus."

Rome teaches that discerning the Lord's body means recognizing the miracle of transubstantiation—that under the accidents of bread and wine lie the true body, blood, and divinity of Christ. This, they say, is what it means to partake worthily. One must believe, adore, and worship the physical Christ in the host.

Failure to do so is, in their view, not discerning the Lord's body and brings guilt. It is, to them, the highest act of worship, the heart of their liturgy and system.

But the New Testament institution contradicts this. Jesus, while physically present with His disciples, said, "This is my body" (v. 24). But He was seated next to them, physically whole. If His body was in the bread, then He had *two bodies*. If the cup is literally the new testament in His blood, then the *cup itself* would be the covenant. These absurdities show that the language is *symbolic*. Just as Joseph said, "The seven good kine are seven years" (Gen. 41:26), and Jesus taught that "the field is the world," "the reapers are the angels," and so forth (Matt. 13:38-39), so "this is my body" means "this *represents* my body."

The true presence of Christ in the Supper is *spiritual* – not bodily, for as to His body, He is in heaven until His return: "If they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth... believe it not" (Matt. 24:26). His presence in the Supper is by the Holy Spirit through faith, not by a miracle of transformation. "The bread which we break, is it not the *communion* of the body of Christ?" (I Cor. 10:16). The believer eats and drinks by *faith*, not by the teeth. We must lift our hearts on high to Christ, not grovel before the elements.

Rome's error leads to idolatry. They worship what they claim is Christ in the wafer, attributing divine honour to what remains bread. It demands belief in an invisible, ongoing miracle at every mass. But Scripture teaches that Jesus' human nature is local and finite. "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9), but that same body is now in heaven. The Supper is a memorial, a communion by faith in the crucified and risen Lord. The doctrine of transubstantiation undermines Christ's true humanity.

The Unworthy Eating/Partaking

Paul speaks of eating and drinking "unworthily" (v. 29). Not with true faith, but carelessly. The church at Corinth had blurred the distinction between the Love Feast and the Lord's Supper. They treated the bread and wine as ordinary, common food. This view is still found in Anabaptist house churchism, where the Supper becomes no more than a meal. But the sacrament is not a mere meal, nor a miracle. It is a *consecrated means of grace*, set apart from common use.

The two errors are opposite extremes: Rome errs by excess: the bread becomes Christ's literal body. Corinth erred by defect: it was just bread and wine. The Reformed view is that Christ is truly present – not bodily, but spiritually. This

is what we discern when we rightly understand the Lord's body: signs and seals of Christ's broken body and shed blood, spiritually received through faith.

This understanding affects how we partake. The Supper shows the Lord's death: "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (v. 26). It continues until Christ returns. "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me" (v. 25). *Remembrance presupposes absence*. If Christ were bodily present, remembrance would be senseless.

Christ instituted the Supper to confirm the promises of the gospel. It adds nothing new, but seals what the Word proclaims. Lord's Day 29 continues: "Are then Christ's body and blood... present in the bread and wine? Not at all: but in heaven... whence he will come to judge the quick and the dead." This is a serious call to *faith*, not superstition. The Lord's Supper is not a ritual to be performed mindlessly, but a holy encounter with the gospel itself.

Some in Corinth were judged severely. "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (v. 30). The word "sleep" refers to death among believers. Verse 32 clarifies: "When we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." This is not condemnation but fatherly chastisement. Therefore, Paul's warnings were aimed not primarily at unbelievers but at careless believers.

Does God still chastise in this way? He may or may not. But the seriousness of the warning stands. The inspired text tells us that the Lord has chastised with illness and even death those who profaned the Supper. We must take heed. If such chastisement happened then, the church today must treat the Lord's Supper with reverence. It is not an empty ceremony. It has spiritual power, and the Lord is active in its proper and improper use. Let us take this to heart.

The Believer's Calling

The calling is sober self-examination. "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup" (v. 28). Not a morbid scrutiny that keeps one from coming, but a spiritual preparation to come worthily. Answer 79 of the *Catechism* says: "...by these visible signs and pledges, God assures us that we are as really partakers of His true body and blood (by the operation of the Holy Ghost) as we receive by the mouths of our bodies these holy signs in remembrance of Him."

We are to come with reverence, not levity. The elements are consecrated signs of the holy. We must approach with sorrow for sin. The sacrament speaks of forgiveness, which means we are sinners who need cleansing. Disobedience, rebellion, and guilt—all are taken seriously by those who hunger for the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This holy meal is no light matter.

This hunger and thirst after Christ is also central. “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). We come desiring more of Christ, more union, more communion with our Saviour. We come not because others do, but because we long for Christ and trust Him. “[All] His sufferings and obedience are as certainly [mine], as if [I]... had suffered and made satisfaction for [my own] sins to God.” This is the language of faith. *As surely as I eat and drink, so surely do I partake of Christ.*

The Lord uses this means of grace to deepen faith, stir love, increase unity, and strengthen hope. It is not a toss-away meal, nor an elaborate miracle. It is the spiritual feast of Christ crucified. That’s why the children of the church, catechumens especially, must grow toward professing faith. They are already members by baptism. But to partake of the Supper worthily, they must discern the Lord’s body. Not as transubstantiation, not as a common meal, but as Christ spiritually present, offered to faith through signs and seals.

The Reformed faith teaches us to examine ourselves, discern the Lord’s body rightly, and come by faith. This leads to spiritual benefit, not judgment. That is the way of spiritual growth, not chastisement. The Supper, then, is a holy meal where God communes with His people in Christ. It is a taste of heaven. It is nourishment for the journey. And it is an act of corporate unity and worship in the fellowship of believers. Amen.

Our Father in Heaven, we pray that even as we meditate upon Thy word here, that the benefits of the Lord’s Supper would accrue more to us, and that Thou, Lord, would humble us and make us better partakers in the right and proved state of mind spiritually, so that we use the sacrament aright and bring honour to Thy great name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.