

# Children at the Lord's Supper and the Key Text of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

When John Calvin considered the question of children participating in the Lord's Supper, the answer was for him obvious: "Do we wish anything plainer than the apostle's teaching when he exhorts each man to prove and search himself, then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup [1 Cor. 11:28]? A self-examination ought, therefore, to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants" (*Institutes*, 4.16.30). Paul's meaning, however, may be less plain than Calvin assumes.

It is true that the apostle in 1 Corinthians 11:28 clearly commands the church in Corinth to engage in self-examination. Less clear, however, is what this self-examination involves. The key lies in the following explanatory verse (note how v. 29 begins with the important word "for"): "For anyone who eats and drinks *without recognizing the body* eats and drinks judgment on himself" (NIV; or, "For all who eat and drink *without discerning the body*, eat and drink judgment against themselves," NRSV). The specific exegetical question facing us, then, is this: What does it mean to "recognize the body" and so avoid participating in the Lord's Supper in a way that believers eat and drink judgment on themselves?

Most assume that the word "body" in this key phrase refers to the body or flesh of Christ crucified on the cross and now remembered in the sacrament. To "recognize the body," therefore, means to engage in a self-examination that is primarily *vertical* in dimension—to examine one's relationship with Jesus Christ—rather than *horizontal*—to examine one's relationship to fellow Christians. If believers confess that Jesus is their Lord and that Christ's death pays for their sins, they are "recognizing the body" in a way that allows them

to participate in the sacrament in a worthy manner.

This emphasis on the vertical dimension of self-examination is reflected in the CRC's "Form for Celebration of the Lord's Supper," which calls upon believers to examine three things: their lives ("considering our own sin and the wrath of God on it"), their hearts ("to be sure that we trust in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation and believe our sins are forgiven wholly by grace"), and their consciences ("to be sure that we resolve to live in faith and obedience before our Lord and in love and peace with our neighbors"). It is only at the very end of the form that believers are challenged to reflect on their conduct toward other people.

This heavy emphasis on the vertical aspect of self-examination has an important consequence for the debate over children's participation in the Lord's Supper. Since it is assumed that infants and young

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children are not capable of "recognizing the body" in the sense outlined above, they should be excluded from the table of the Lord. However, if we examine the historical context of the Corinthians passage—namely, the specific problem that was taking place in the Corinthian church—we will have a different understanding of the key phrase "recognizing the body."

## **The Historical Context: Rich Believers Humiliating the Poor**

The church in Corinth, like other congregations well into the second century, celebrated the Lord's Supper as part of a dinner or full meal. The whole church would first break bread at the beginning of the meal to remember Christ's death, then they would eat their main course, and finally at the end of the meal they would drink wine also to remember Christ's death (note 1 Cor. 11:25, "In the same way, *after supper*, he took the cup, saying ..."). The problem was the main course that took place between these two acts of remembrance: the Corinthians were celebrating the Supper in a way that created divisions (v. 18). The guilty were the wealthy ("those who have homes"), whose conduct at these meals involved "despising the church of God and humiliating those who have nothing" (v. 22). In fact, things got so out of hand that poor church members left the worship services hungry while the rich members staggered home drunk (v. 21)!

Paul does not specifically identify what the wealthy believers were doing at their Lord's Supper celebrations to shame their poorer fellow church members. Nevertheless, there are three plausible scenarios. First, the free-

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dom of scheduling enjoyed by the wealthy may have allowed them to arrive early and “pig out” on the food and wine, thereby leaving little for the poor members who could not come to the church’s gathering until later. Second, it is possible that there were different amounts and/or quality of food: the rich feasted on “steak and caviar” while the poor barely filled their stomachs with “Kraft macaroni and cheese.” Finally, it is also possible that when the Corinthian believers met together for worship, not in a church building but in a wealthy member’s home, as all the early Christians did, the rich enjoyed their meal in the privileged position of the dining room while the poor ate in the less comfortable and less prestigious parts of the home.

Although we cannot know with certainty what led to divisions over the Lord’s Supper at Corinth, it is clear that the problem involved social discrimination: the wealthy Christians celebrated the Lord’s Supper in a way that “despised and humiliated” their poorer fellow believers.

**The Meaning of “Body” in 1 Corinthians 11:29**

There are three reasons the word “body” in the key phrase of 1 Corinthians 11:29 likely refers not to the fleshly body of Christ nailed to cross and remembered in the bread and wine, but to the body of believers—the church. First and foremost, this meaning fits the historical context. To a congregation where the rich are celebrating the sacrament in a way that marginalizes the poor, Paul issues the challenge to “recognize the body”—that is, to pay attention to the welfare of their fellow brothers and sisters.

Second, there are important differences between Paul’s use of the word “body” here in verse 29 and earlier in verse 27. In verse 27 where the apostle is, in fact, referring to the fleshly body of Christ, he adds the fuller descriptions “and the blood” and “of the Lord.” Since neither of these additions occurs in verse 29, Paul may well be using “body” here with a different meaning.

Third, “body” as a reference to the church occurs both in the immediately preceding chapter (10:17, “Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf”)

and in the immediately following chapter (12:12-26, Paul’s famous metaphor of “many parts, one body”).

**Implications of 1 Corinthians 11:29 for Children at the Lord’s Supper**

This alternate interpretation clarifies the criterion for proper participation in the sacrament of communion. When Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “recognize the body,” he is calling them to examine their relationship to their fellow believers and to celebrate the sacrament in a manner that does not humiliate other congregational members. In other words, the apostle is first and foremost calling for a *horizontal* self-examination. Of course, the apostle would be uncomfortable with the distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal,” since he knows that our love for others is rooted in our love for Christ. Nevertheless, his reference to “recognizing the body” stresses the need for the Corinthian Christians to examine carefully their relationship to the rest of the church, the body of Christ.

When children today are excluded from the Lord’s Supper, there is the very real danger of committing the same sin for which Paul criticized the Corinthians: humiliating fellow believers. When our covenant youth watch the platters of bread and juice literally pass over them to nearby

adults, is it not natural for them to feel excluded, like unequal members of the body of Christ?

Should the church, therefore, avoid this danger by including children at the Lord’s Supper? The answer depends on how one views the *application* of Paul’s historically specific command to the church today. Some argue that the principle laid down in 1 Corinthians 11:29—that a person must “recognize the body” in order to participate worthily in the sacrament—is applicable only to those who have appropriate mental and spiritual capacity. Thus, there is no warrant for excluding the mentally handicapped as well as infants and young children during the Lord’s Supper celebration.

Others argue that the principle is a general one that goes beyond the Corinthian situation to a variety of other possible situations. The general principle, they say, involves the necessity of self-examination. Although some argue that it is impossible for a proper self-examination to be carried out by young children, others believe that with the help and direction of parents this can, in fact, be done. After all, it does not take a high I.Q. or S.A.T. score to recognize that the bread and drink are not merely a common everyday snack but stand for the body and blood of Jesus, and that we eat and drink these things not as individuals but communally as members of the family of God.

**Conclusion**

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 continues to be a key text in the debate over children’s participation in the Lord’s Supper. The interpretation of “recognizing the body” explained in this article removes one of the traditional grounds for exclusion and also warns the church today to celebrate the sacrament in a way that does not marginalize or humiliate these youngest members. This interpretation does not automatically mean, however, that children ought to take part fully at the communion table, nor does it remove the need for some form of self-examination. Nevertheless, it does provide biblical justification for the possibility of children’s participation at the Lord’s Supper—a possibility that may well be clarified by insights from Reformed theology (see article on page 3).

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