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1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Revisited

A. Andrew Das

Recent scholarship on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 has emphasized the social and relational problems that stand behind Corinth's celebration of the Lord's Supper. While most Lutheran treatments of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 have emphasized the sacramental aspects of the text, especially verses 17-22, Jeffrey Gibbs recognized the increasing focus in the scholarly literature on the "horizontal" dimension of the passage, the relationship between believers at the eucharistic gathering.¹ This passage is difficult because Paul is actually addressing two problems at the same time, the relationship between believers as well as their relationship to the Lord and His sacramental body.

Does the current emphasis on the "horizontal" aspect of the text jeopardize its "vertical" features? Because 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is crucial to a sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper, this paper explores the relationship between these two poles in the text. The first section investigates the available evidence to reconstruct the situation at the Corinthians' eucharistic gatherings. Gibbs had left unresolved the exact nature of the situation at Corinth. We will see that the very structure of the Corinthians' eucharistic proceedings demonstrates the importance of believers' relationships to one another. The second section examines afresh whether the text's horizontal emphasis compromises the sacramental understanding of the word "body" in verse 29. In other words, when we "discern the body" are we discerning a sacramental presence or are we discerning, perhaps, the presence of the church, our fellow believers in Christ? Do the horizontal relationships take precedence in the passage or is there a balance with the vertical aspects? The third section buttresses Gibbs' usage of 1 Corinthians 10:17, where Paul actually makes

¹Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "An Exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:17-34," *Concordia Journal* 21 (April 1995):148-163.

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the connection between the sacramental body and the churchly body, as a means of balancing the vertical and horizontal aspects in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. The final section emphasizes the seriousness of both these issues, even as Paul did. Lutherans tend to focus on the warning of judgment in verse 29 for not discerning the sacramental presence. However, verse 34 sounds the same note of "judgment" when we neglect our relationships with one another.

When a congregation comes together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, it is a serious matter into which they are entering, a situation fraught with spiritual peril and the potential of "judgment" if handled in a cavalier or improper manner. Lest we repeat the same mistakes in our own congregations, it would be well for us as pastors and teachers to review this passage and its problems.

The Situation in the Corinthian Celebration of the Lord's Supper

One cannot read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 without noticing right away that there was conflict in the congregation. The community was split on an economic basis. The rich humiliated and discriminated against the poor (verse 22). Further, this conflict was taking place during a community or fellowship meal. Today the average Christian is raised in a church where the sacramental bread and wine are distributed together. There is no longer a congregational meal as part of the worship service. The very idea of a congregational or fellowship meal in the midst of the service may seem novel to most. Yet to the Corinthian congregation, the idea of a Sacrament without a community meal might have seemed equally strange. If the Corinthian congregation practiced this meal between the bread and the wine, in the presence of the entire community, then the implications would be profound. It would mean that the early Christians, Corinth notwithstanding, had a much stronger appreciation in their liturgical practice of the horizontal aspects of worship, that coming together in the Lord's body and blood meant becoming united to one another.

Two issues, though, remain unresolved. First, were the rich congregational members eating in advance of the poor's arrival,

leaving only the remains for the “community” meal? Or were the poor members, who had less, being slighted during the community meal in the very presence of the rich who were feasting? Second, what is the relationship between the community meal and the Lord’s Supper? Did the community meal take place before the Lord’s Supper, that is, prior to the sacramental bread? Or did it take place in between the distribution of the sacramental bread and wine?

With regard to the first problem, the New International Version’s (NIV) translation clearly supports the position that the rich congregational members were already eating prior to the arrival of the poor. Note especially its translation of verses 21 and 33: “. . . for as you eat, each of you *goes ahead without waiting for anybody, else*. . . So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, *wait for each other*” (emphasis added).

What the NIV renders “goes ahead without waiting for anybody else” may also be translated: “eats beforehand his own meal.” Thus some of the Corinthians were eating without waiting for the rest. And it is exactly this that Paul confronts: they are to wait for the arrival of the whole congregation before beginning the festivities.

This translation and understanding ultimately rests upon two words in the Greek. In verse 21, the word for “eats beforehand” is προλαμβάνω. The word in verse 33 for “wait for each other” is ἐκδέχομαι. The NIV’s translation is a perfectly legitimate possibility. Mark 14:8 is a good example of προλαμβάνω carrying the sense of “beforehand”: “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial” (NIV). Acts 17:16 uses ἐκδέχομαι in the sense of “wait for”: “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (NIV).²

²ἐκδέχομαι occurs at least five times outside of 1 Corinthians 11:33 in the New Testament: Acts 17:16; 1 Corinthians 16:11; Hebrews 10:13; 11:13; James 5:7. Some ancient manuscripts include the word in John 5:3. All of the New Testament occurrences of ἐκδέχομαι apart from 1 Corinthians 11:33 mean “wait for, expect.”

The problem is that there are other possible meanings for these two words and, as we shall see, a different translation would lead to a very different understanding of the situation at Corinth. To begin with, προλαμβάνω is often used without any temporal sense at all. Thus Galatians 6:1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (NIV). The word προλαμβάνω may be used in the sense of simply "to eat" with no indication that the meal was "beforehand" relative to anything else. The word is used several times in this sense in a stele from the Asklepius Temple of Epidaurus: "After I had come to the Temple, he [the god] commanded me . . . to eat cheese and bread [τυρόν καὶ ἄρτον προλαβεῖν], . . . to eat lemon peels [κιτριῦ προλαμβάνειν τὰ ἄκρα], . . . to eat/consume milk with honey [γάλα μετὰ μέλιτος προλαβεῖν]."³ προλαμβάνω may mean "eat beforehand" or just simply "to eat." The word itself is inconclusive. The decision must rest on the context.

While ἐκδέχομαι may be translated "wait," it may also be translated "receive" or "welcome." In 3 Maccabees 5:26: "The rays of the sun were not yet widely dispersed and the king was receiving [ἐκδεχομένου] his friends when Hermon presented himself and invited him to go forth, explaining that his wishes were now ready to be granted."⁴ "Receiving his friends" refers to the king's morning reception of courtiers who came to pay their respects. Hermon and the king had already spoken earlier and the king had, at that time, issued Hermon a command to carry out. Hermon used the morning reception as an opportunity to catch the king to tell him about the plan to carry out the king's orders. When Hermon invites the king to go forth to talk, the king is taken completely by surprise by the invitation. He was certainly not "awaiting" or "expecting" this invitation. In fact, by divine intervention the king had

³Asklepius-Epidaurus 1170, 7.9-10.15 in Wilhelm Dittenberger, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*, four volumes (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1960), 3: 328-29.

⁴As translated by H. Anderson, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, two volumes, edited by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:424. For the original Greek text see *Maccabaeorum liber III*, edited by Robert Hanhart (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 58.

completely forgotten about his previous orders. In this context, ἐκδέχομαι means "receive" or "welcome."

Josephus often uses ἐκδέχομαι in the sense of "receive" or "welcome." In *Jewish Wars* III, 32, Josephus writes: ". . . and now they offered a cordial welcome [ἐκδεξάμενοι] to the commander-in-chief and promised him their active support against their countrymen."⁵ In this instance, there is absolutely no indication of any waiting or expecting. The same may be said of VI, 140: "But the Jews, constantly scattering and alike attacking and retreating at random, were frequently taken by each other for enemies: each man in the darkness receiving [ἐξεδέχετο] a returning comrade as if he were an advancing Roman."⁶ In VII, 74, the people of Rome receive general Vespasian with great excitement and enthusiasm: "And, indeed, the city of Rome, after this cordial reception [ἐκδεξαμένη] of Vespasian, rapidly advanced to great prosperity."⁷ Once again, there is no sense of "await" in the word here. Rather, it means to "welcome" or "receive."⁸

Nor is this usage limited to Josephus or 3 Maccabees. In Sirach 32:14: "The man who fears the Lord will accept [ἐκδέξεται] his discipline, and the diligent man will receive his approval" (New English Bible). In the Letter of Aristeas (205): "After a short pause the guest who received [ἐκδεχόμενος] the question said. . ."⁹

It is clear from these examples that προλαμβάνω may be translated as "eat" and ἐκδέχομαι may be translated as "receive" or "welcome."¹⁰ This results in an entirely different

⁵Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III (LCL), H, translated by St. J. Thackeray, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 2:585.

⁶Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books IV-VII (LCL), H, translated by St. John Thackeray, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3:416.

⁷Josephus, *Jewish War*, 3:526; see also VII, 70.

⁸One may also see Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* VII, 351; XI, 340; XII, 138.

⁹R. J. H. Shutt, translator, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, two volumes, edited by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:26. The original Greek text is in Andre Pelletier, *Lettre D'Aristee a Philocrate*, Sources Chretiennes 89 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1962).

¹⁰Paul prefers the prefixed ἀπεκδέχομαι for "await" or "wait for" (Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Galatians 5:5; Philippians 3:20).

translation of 1 Corinthians 11:21 and 33 than the NIV. The NIV had translated the verses: "... for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. . . . So, then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other." Given the semantic range of the two words, the following translation is equally possible: "... for as you eat, each one eats his own meal. . . . So, then, my brothers, when you come together, welcome [or, receive] one another." The latter translation would clearly support a different scenario, that the rich and the poor were eating the community meal together. The problem would have been as they were sitting alongside each other.

One must conclude that the linguistic data is totally indecisive in discerning between the two possibilities. Only context can decide the matter and there are, indeed, contextual indications. The very issue in 1 Corinthians 11 is that the poor were actually present at the meal while the rich were eating. 1 Corinthians 11:21 says: "One remains hungry, another gets drunk. . . . Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" The poor who had nothing were being humiliated right there on the spot. First, note the deliberate contrast in the text between the rich who have plenty even to drink while the poor do not even have enough to eat. Second, verse 20 is explicit that this is all happening not while the Corinthians were apart but when they "came together."¹¹ Third, the language of verse 20, ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, indicates one event and not two or more. Finally, Paul's corrective instructions to "eat at home beforehand" in verse 33 would make no sense if the rich were already eating in private prior to the congregational gathering. On the other hand, if Paul were urging the rich to "welcome" or "receive" the poor at the meal, the text would make perfect sense. The poor were being despised in the same community meal alongside the rich.¹²

¹¹"Gather together" [συνέρχομαι] is repeated five times in verses 17-20 and verses 33-34. The problem occurred once they gathered together.

¹²Otfried Hofius ("Herrenmahl und Herrenmahlsparadosis," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 85 [1988]: 385) points out that in each instance where Paul uses the word "each" [ἕκαστος] with the word "his own" [ἰδίου] as he does in verse 21, the words are being used inclusively. He cites Romans 14:5;

Peter Lampe has highlighted ancient architectural evidence that sheds light on the Corinthian situation. The Corinthian congregation was gathering in the homes of individual members who were the wealthiest in the congregation. These homes were built with two main rooms, the *triclinium*, a dining room which seated up to ten people, and the *atrium*, a courtyard which could seat up to forty. The host would seat the most important guests at the meal in the smaller room and the rest of the people in the larger *atrium*. This was the typical situation at cultic meals in general. It would also explain much of what is happening in 1 Corinthians 11. The poor, most probably seated in the *atrium* of the host's house, had less available to them to eat while the more important guests in the *triclinium* not only had enough to eat, but too much even to drink!¹³

This situation may strike our modern ears as more than a little demeaning. Surely Christians should not so treat their brothers and sisters. However, in the ancient world, class distinctions were simply assumed. That the poor should be received alongside the rich, as sensible and fair as it may be to our ears, would actually have been radical in Paul's own society. Yet for Paul, this sort of sociological division, as accepted as it may have been, was a division that was contrary to the nature of being "in Christ" (note the sociological categories that Paul uses in Galatians 3:28).

This leaves the second problem. Was the congregational meal celebrated between the bread and the wine, or prior to the sacramental bread and wine? Jeremias argues that the community meal was already being "taken less seriously." Paul's instruction to eat at home first prior to coming together

1 Corinthians 3:8; 7:2, 7; 12:11; 15:23, 28; Galatians 6:5.

¹³Peter Lampe, "The Corinthian Eucharistic Dinner Party: Exegesis of a Cultural Context (1 Cor. 11:17-34)," *Affirmation* 4 (1991): 1-16, especially 1-6. A much more detailed and comprehensive discussion of Greco-Roman meal settings may be found in Lampe's source: Dennis Edwin Smith, "Social Obligation in the Context of the Communal Meals: A Study of the Christian Meal in 1 Corinthians in Comparison with Graeco-Roman Communal Meals," unpublished Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1980.

for worship would make better sense if the meal were already preceding the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ In other words, it was no longer an essential part of the celebration of the Sacrament and so may be simply removed to the private domain prior to the congregational gathering. However, this argument is not very compelling. One could argue the same even if the Corinthians ate the community meal in between the sacramental bread and wine. Paul did not see it as essential to the Sacrament, and so, since it was causing problems, removed the practice entirely from the sacramental context.

There is another way of arguing that the bread and the wine were taken together. Jesus instituted the Sacrament in a Passover context (Luke 22:7-8, 15). Jesus' institution of the eucharistic bread was separated by the Passover meal from His institution of the sacramental wine. The Corinthian Christians, on the other hand, were not celebrating a Jewish Passover meal.¹⁵ Some have argued that if the early Christian Eucharist was no longer celebrated in connection with the Jewish Passover, then the bread and the wine would no longer be separated by a Passover meal. The bread and wine would have been celebrated together. It is to this original Passover meal setting that "the cup after the supper" refers, without any indication that such a meal was still being celebrated.

This line of reasoning is not decisive either. It only means that the Corinthians were not celebrating a Passover meal between the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine. On the other hand, the passage shows that they were indeed celebrating a meal and, as Jewish and Gentile Christians (1 Corinthians 7:8; 12:2), they would be accustomed to celebrating a community meal between two ritual acts. The Jews began their meals with the breaking of bread and closed with

¹⁴Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Word of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 121.

¹⁵Paul draws upon traditional language, language that centers upon the eating and drinking of the bread and wine. It is the bread and the wine that are the important elements. Perhaps Paul might have argued similarly with regard to the Corinthians' own community meal. Note, though, the reference to the cup "after the meal."

the partaking of wine. Likewise, pagan Gentiles, once assembled, would offer a sacrifice to the pagan god and then, after the meal, offer a toast to the good spirit of the house and sing. It is only natural that the Passover meal would give way to the Corinthian community dinner.¹⁶

Further, the Corinthian Christians might have been encouraged in this practice by the traditional language. As it stands, the beginning of verse 25 reads: ὡσαύτως καὶ [ἔλαβη] τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι. Is μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι (“after the supper”) in verse 25 attributive in usage, modifying ποτήριον (the cup), or adverbial, modifying the understood ἔλαβε (“he took”)? In other words, does the phrase “after the supper” answer “which cup?” (attributive) or does it answer “when did he take the cup?” (adverbial)? The attributive understanding would indicate a particular “cup,” the third of the four Passover cups at Jesus’ original institution of the Eucharist. However, the attributive usage of the prepositional phrase normally requires the article – that the phrase be in attributive position. The text would have to read τὸ ποτήριον τὸ μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι or τὸ μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι ποτήριον.¹⁷ Since this is not the case, the prepositional phrase must be adverbial answering “when”: Jesus took the cup right after the meal. In other words, the wording of verse 25 does not emphasize a Passover context but rather that the cup followed the meal.

Far from being a technical term for the Passover, the wording in verse 25 parallels Rabbinic language for an ordinary meal. Thus Berakoth 6:5: “If he said the Benediction over the wine before the meal he need not say it over *the wine after the meal*.”¹⁸ If one wanted to argue Jewish antecedents, “he took bread and after having given thanks broke it” corresponds much better with the typical Jewish table blessing before a meal.

¹⁶Lampe, 2.

¹⁷Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *1 Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary, second edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 246; Hofius, 377-78.

¹⁸*The Mishah*, edited by Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7.

The blessing of the cup “after the meal” corresponds to what would happen after an ordinary Jewish meal.¹⁹

Note also that in Berakoth 6.5 “after the meal” and “before the meal” are being used attributively. Hebrew indicates the attributive usage of the prepositional phrase with a relative particle even as Greek does by placing the phrase in attributive position. In Berakoth 6.5, the Hebrew relative particle is present. Unlike 1 Corinthians 11:25, Berakoth 6.5 is clearly attributive, indicating a particular cup. Berakoth 8.8, on the other hand, is an instance of the adverbial use of the preposition: “If wine is brought after the food . . .” Here the phrase is not specifying “which wine?” (as in Berakoth 6.5) but rather “when was the wine brought?” The Hebrew, as expected, lacks the relative particle. This adverbial usage corresponds to the Greek usage in 1 Corinthians 11:25.²⁰ Again, the adverbial usage in 1 Corinthians 11:25 emphasizes the timing of the cup after the meal and not the Passover context.

The “cup of blessing” was a Jewish term for the blessing pronounced with the wine after meals. That is how the phrase is used in Joseph and Asenath 8:9 and 19:5; so also Leviticus Rabbah 9.3 and the Palestinian Talmud (Berakoth 7.11b,73 and following; Berakoth 8:12a.52 and following). In a Passover meal that would happen to be the third cup. There is nothing technical about the phrase. The early Christians, in this respect, would simply be following the Jewish custom of placing the sacramental cup of blessing after their meal even as the breaking of sacramental bread opened the meal.

What about the words ὡσαύτως καὶ (“likewise also”)? Do these words modify the adverbial μετὰ τὸ δειπνήσαι (“after the meal”)? If so, the cup would be “likewise also after the supper.” It would be, like the bread, also after the supper. The bread and the wine would both be celebrated together after the meal. However, if that were the case, μετὰ τὸ δειπνήσαι and not τὸ ποτήριον would immediately follow ὡσαύτως καί.²¹ The text

¹⁹See Hofius’ examples from the Rabbinic literature, 379, notes 47, 48.

²⁰Hofius, 82-83.

²¹Hofius, 382-383.

would read: “ὡσαύτως καὶ μετὰ τὸ δειπῆσαι τὸ ποτήριον.” As it stands, the text is clear that the bread and wine were separated by a meal.²²

Peter Lampe points out that “supper” [δειπνον] in the Greek normally implies a full meal (including meat or fish). That indicates that the congregational dinner (with its meat or fish) preceded the cup.²³ Even more compelling is the fact that μετὰ τὸ δειπῆσαι could not refer to the sacramental bread. Biblical Greek does not phrase “to eat bread” as ἄρτον δειπνεῖν. Rather, the language used for eating bread is either ἄρτον ἐσθιεῖν or ἄρτον φαγεῖν. Again, this indicates that it was the meal and not the sacramental bread that immediately preceded the wine.

There is good reason, then, to place the Corinthians’ congregational meal between the sacramental bread and wine. The Corinthian practice would correspond to both the Jewish and Hellenistic practice of opening a meal with the breaking of bread or sacrifice and closing it with the cup of blessing or toast to the god. Thus the following picture emerges from the data: After the congregation had assembled a divisive situation ensued between the sacramental bread and wine during the community meal. Yet it is precisely the placement of the community meal between the bread and the wine that makes the problems at Corinth so heinous. The early church apparently viewed oneness within the body of believers equally or almost as important as oneness with the Lord. The community enjoyed their fellowship with each other in the midst of and in the context of their fellowship with their Lord.

“Body” in 1 Corinthians 11:29: The Church or the Sacrament?

Modern interpreters have gone so far as to argue that the horizontal aspects of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 actually

²²ὡσαύτως μετὰ τὸ δειπῆσαι καὶ τὸ ποτήριον or καὶ τὸ ποτήριον ὡσαύτως μετὰ τὸ δειπῆσαι would be more ambiguous. In these two formulations one could understand the language as referring to the bread and wine together or as separated by the meal. Verse 25, though, is not ambiguous.

²³Lampe, 7-8 and Hofius, 383.

predominate in the text. Given this emphasis in the context, when Paul speaks of "discerning the body," they argue that he must be referring to the ecclesiastical body, the body of believers.²⁴ Gibbs disagreed, arguing that the "body" of verse 29 is the sacramental body. What is at issue is the traditional, Lutheran understanding of the passage. Permit me, then, to make two additional observations in support of Gibbs' position. First, when debating the meaning of "body" in Corinthians 10:16, 17; 11:27, 29; 12:12-31, one has to let the context determine the meaning of the words. Paul can use "body" to refer to the sacramental body, as he clearly does in 1 Corinthians 11:27, as well as to the ecclesiastical body, as he does in 1 Corinthians 10:17 and in 12:12-31. So both usages are possible. However, whenever Paul uses "body" in the above texts, it is always clear from the immediate context which sense he has in mind. For example, note again the exact wording of 1 Corinthians 10:16: "Is not the *cup* of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the *blood of Christ*? And is not the *bread* that we break a participation in the *body of Christ*?" (emphasis added). In this verse, Paul understands the "body" in relation to the sacramental bread. This is confirmed in the context by the sacramental cup standing in relation to Christ's blood.

Now consider the wording of 1 Corinthians 10:17: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." The words "we, who are many" and "we all" clearly indicate that Paul is talking about the people who have come together in the Sacrament. He is shifting the discussion from the Sacrament, the one loaf, to its effects in the body, the church (the "we who are many"). The same contextual indicators are used also in 1 Corinthians 12 (for example, 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it").

The problem with identifying 1 Corinthians 11:29 as a reference to the body of believers, the church, is that the

²⁴One may see, for instance, Charles Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 125-126, and Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 79.

contextual indicators one finds in 1 Corinthians 10:17 and 12:12-31 are entirely lacking in the verse and its context. Yet it is precisely such indicators that allow the reader to determine whether Paul is talking about the ecclesiastical body or not. Otherwise, Paul's meaning would be unintelligible. What one finds, instead, are references to the sacramental body in verses 27- 28.

This leads to a second point. Not only are the contextual pointers for the churchly body lacking in 1 Corinthians 11:29, interpreters who see this as a reference to discerning the body of believers have failed to take into account the logic and rhetorical structure of the passage. With regard to the rhetorical structure of the text, Paul begins verse 29 with a γάρ demanding that this verse be understood in the light of what immediately preceded. So also, verse 28 is linked to verse 27 by the connective δε. When Paul uses "body" in this verse, he is building on an already developed argument, which he has introduced in the immediately preceding verses. The key is his consistent use of the term "body." Thus the meaning of the word must be the same, since it is all part of the same argument.

The following chart clarifies the logic and rhetoric of the text:

v. 27		eat/ drink	bread/ cup	unworthy/ guilty	body/blood
v. 28	examine	eat/ drink	bread/ cup		
v. 29	recognize	eat/ drink		judgment	body

Not only does Paul link verse 29 to verses 27-28 by the use of connectives, he carefully weaves the verses together through parallel language. Verses 27-29 are a tight unit of thought. Paul uses the same sort of language to advance his argument from one verse to the next. So, when Paul uses the word "recognizing" in verse 29, he means that the individual Christian must "examine himself" (verse 28) with respect to the sacramental bread and cup before eating and drinking.

Otherwise, the "judgment" upon the individual will be guilty (verse 29), that is, "guilty" and "unworthy" of Christ's sacramental body and blood (verse 27, where body and blood are held in relation to the bread and the wine). Throughout these verses, Paul remains riveted on the issue of the sacramental body. Interpreters who have argued for an ecclesiastical body in verse 29 have failed to take into account the rhetorical structure of these verses.

There is one area where the parallelism between verses 27-28 and verse 29 breaks down. Verse 29 uses "discerning the body" whereas verses 27 and 28 speak in terms of examining and not being guilty of the "the body and blood." Gibbs recognized this problem and suggested that Paul is alluding to 1 Corinthians 10:17: "Once again, this is a bit of a guess. But it is plausible, indeed likely, that Paul is content to refer to "the body," because of the logical connection he has already made between sin against the brother, and sin against the Sacrament."²⁵

I both agree and I disagree. First, Paul has clearly placed the "body" in verse 29 in a tight parallel with the sacramental body and blood of verses 27, 28, both by terminology and by the use of connectives. The reader should know what sort of body Paul is talking about in verse 29. There is nothing to indicate a change in meaning. The Apostle's failure to mention the blood in verse 29 is probably stylistic and nothing more. He had used "body and blood" already and did not want to bore his readers with wooden repetitions. Second, Paul has referred to the Sacrament in an abbreviated way before. In 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul speaks of the benefits of the "one loaf," even as he uses "body" here.²⁶

Gibbs' argument from 1 Corinthians 10:17 works much better as one struggles to understand the relation of these verses to

²⁵Gibbs, 159-160.

²⁶For example, many have argued that "breaking the bread" in Acts 2:42 is an abbreviated reference to the Sacrament, using the part for the whole, the bread for the bread and wine. Even if Acts 2:42 were not a sacramental reference, it would still refer to the celebration of an entire meal under the initial act of the breaking of bread (one may compare verse 46; 20:7, 11; 27:35-36).

their surrounding context, verses 17-22 and 33-34. The next section will show that there is good reason to see 1 Corinthians 10:17 standing behind the logic of the passage as a whole. If one wants to see a sort of subtle allusion to the horizontal aspect of the Sacrament in the abbreviated "body" of verse 29, one may do so provided that one has fully appreciated the primary meaning of the word in verse 29, as a reference to the Lord's sacramental body.²⁷

The Relationship Between 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 and 11:17-22, 33-34

The problem at Corinth was that the rich members of the congregation were humiliating those "who had not" by eating "their own" meal (verses 20-21). They were not sharing of their bounty with the less fortunate in their own midst. While they had too much even to drink, the rest did not have enough to eat. There was also a second issue in verses 17-22. The rich were busy with "their own meal" (verse 21) and were losing sight of the fact that they had come together to celebrate "the Lord's Supper" (verse 20). What makes this passage difficult is that Paul is dealing on two planes at once, the horizontal and the vertical, the relationship between believer and believer, as well as the relationship between the believer and the Lord in His Supper.

The first section developed the social situation at Corinth and stressed that the very order of the festivities highlighted the importance, at least theoretically, of their relationships with one another. Nevertheless, the social focus of verses 17-22 recedes in verses 23-32 where Paul's focus is fixed upon the sacramental body. So there was a problem in recognizing the sacramental presence in the midst of all the feasting, and there was a problem with ignoring the poorer brethren. What is the precise relation between these two issues? What is their connection? We need to explore that issue, as well as Gibbs' suggestion.

²⁷Such an allusion to the horizontal relationship between believers in a section riveted on the vertical fellowship between believers and their Lord in the Sacrament in verse 29 would parallel the brief reference to the Lord's Supper in verse 20, which appears in a section riveted on the horizontal issues.

Paul resolves the issue of the Lord's Supper in verses 23-32. He then returns to the social problems in verses 33-34. In the latter verses he urges the people to eat first at home before coming together. This would eliminate the social problems. It would also allow the focus of the congregation to remain on the Lord's Supper as opposed to everyone's own meal. After all, if the matter were strictly a social inequity, the proper advice would have been for the rich to share.

The Corinthians were losing sight of the fact that they had really come together to celebrate the Lord's meal (verse 20): "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat." By itself, this verse would indicate that there was no celebration of the Lord's Supper in Corinth at all. That is certainly how the NEB takes it: "When you come together as a congregation, it is impossible for you to eat the Lord's Supper." One gets the impression that the congregation's activities were somehow preventing any real celebration of the Sacrament from taking place. The NIV is simply categorical: "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat." However, verse 30 indicates that the Corinthian church is suffering weakness and sickness by "not recognizing" what they are in fact doing in their sacramental eating and drinking. They are not recognizing the sacramental body (verse 29). So did they or did they not celebrate the Lord's Supper when they came together? How are we to understand verse 20?

There are two clues to verse 20. First, the verse more literally reads: "when you come together ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό it is not in order to eat [φαγεῖν] the Lord's Supper." In other words, φαγεῖν is an infinitive of purpose, expressing the Corinthians' intent when they gather. The second clue is that verse 20 falls in the context of the verses on the community dinner. The people's "own meal" (verse 21) stands in contrast to the "Lord's meal" (verse 20). The Corinthians were so absorbed in coming together for "their own meal" that they were overlooking their real reason for coming together, the Lord's Supper. The repetition of "eating and drinking" is quite deliberate (verses 22, 27, 28, 29; one may also compare 15:32). One could thus translate verse 20: "When you come together ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό it is not with the

intended purpose of eating the Lord's Supper." They have come together more intent on their own festivities, "their own meal," rather than the Lord's Supper. Paul is concerned that the community meal has diverted the Corinthians' attention away from their real reason for coming together.

Nevertheless, despite the brief mention of the "Lord's Supper" in verse 20, the emphasis in verses 17-22 is on a social problem, the division between rich and poor at a community meal and not the Lord's Supper. So also in verses 33-34 the solution has more to do with resolving the social issue than it does the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the passage presents a certain problem in this respect. One could easily pass from verses 17-22 right to verse 33 omitting the intervening verses on the Lord's Supper. The main problem in verses 17-22 is resolved in verses 33-34. Why does Paul sandwich a discussion of the Lord's Supper in the middle of passages treating the social situation at Corinth? How do Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper relate to the congregation's social problems?

To begin with, the discussion of the Lord's Supper does at least address the problem in verse 20, that the people were too busy with their own festivities to recognize the sacramental bread and wine. For this reason, Paul somberly recites the traditional Lord's Supper language, language that he knows is familiar to his audience. Paul wants to remind the Corinthians of the real reason that they gathered, to celebrate the Lord's Supper and not their own feasting. They are endangering their souls and are liable to God's judgment when they do not recognize Jesus' body and blood in the Sacrament. There is a real spiritual danger here that goes beyond just spiting the poorer brethren.

While that is a partial explanation, verse 20 is the only reference to the Lord's Supper in verses 17-22, 33-34. The remainder of the verses deal with the problems between believers. It is at this point that Gibbs' solution begins to make sense. It is not just recognizing the sacramental presence at issue. It is also a matter of recognizing what that sacramental presence is intended to nurture, the unity of believers with one another.

Gibbs tentatively suggested that Paul had 1 Corinthians 10:17 in mind as he wrote 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Already in 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul was clear that the one loaf of Christ's sacramental body fosters and represents the unity of believers in the congregational "body." This need not be only a tentative suggestion. There is good reason to make the connection. First, it explains the relationship between the sacramental verses 23-32 and the relationship of believers to one another in verses 17-22, 33-34. The relationship is simply that recognizing the Lord's body and blood will also entail recognizing the reality that it is meant to nourish and represent the unity among believers. 1 Corinthians 10:17 makes that relationship between the vertical and horizontal planes explicit: the many are one body as they share of the one loaf.

There is another reason that warrants understanding verses 23-32 and 17-23, 33-34 in light of 1 Corinthians 10:17. Paul was already anticipating his argument in 1 Corinthians 11 in 1 Corinthians 10:17. In fact, he was getting ahead of himself. This verse could easily be omitted from 1 Corinthians 10 without affecting the structure of Paul's argument.²⁸ It is a *prolepsis*. In other words, it would be a mistake to read 1 Corinthians 11 apart from 1 Corinthians 10:17.

To appreciate how ill-fitted 10:17 is to its context, we need to back up and review Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 10. Paul mentions Israel's falling prey to idolatry in the wilderness (verse 7) as a sort of negative example for the Corinthians (verse 11). This is an important warning in the context since the Corinthian Christians were enjoying meat sacrificed to idols and even participating in pagan, idolatrous rituals. So Paul warns in verse 12 against spiritual overconfidence. Rather, when tempted one should take advantage of the opportunity the Lord provides to flee (verses 13-14).

²⁸That 1 Corinthians 10:17 is ill-fitted to its context has been noted by numerous scholars. See Johannes Weiss, *Der Erste Korintherbrief*, 9 Auflage (Göttingen, 1910), 258; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 469, 564. Fee, though, misinterprets 1 Corinthians 11:29 as the churchly body.

The Corinthians were going to the pagan sacrifices apparently thinking that, since they were Christians and that the idol is just a piece of dead wood or stone unlike the true and living God, they could do so without any harm to themselves (for example, verse 19). Paul, however, disputes this assumption, and he argues from a point that both he and the Corinthians would have agreed upon: There is an objective reality in the Lord's Supper. The Lord is present whether the believer realizes this or not. What may seem like mere bread and wine belie a hidden, but nevertheless objective, reality. So it is, Paul asserts, with the food sacrificed to the pagan idol. The objective reality in that case is the presence of demons. Whether the Corinthian Christians realize it or not, there is a hidden reality present with the food sacrificed to pagan idols. The believers need to flee this evil arena.

1 Corinthians 10:14-16, 18-22 revolved around two vertical realities, the objective reality of the union between the believer and the Lord in the Sacrament (verse 16) as opposed to the objective reality of a union with demons (verses 18-22). These spiritual realities exist whether the individual recognizes them or not. It is this focus on competing vertical realities that renders 1 Corinthians 10:17 ill-fitted to its context. The verse invokes an additional reality, a horizontal reality, the oneness between believers. In other words, Paul does not need verse 17 to make his argument. The relationship between believers was not at issue in 1 Corinthians 10. But it would be in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul seems to be anticipating the argument. He is outlining already the unity among believers that fellowship with Christ in the Sacrament is intended to create.

Having already made this point, Paul does not mention it again in 11:17-34. Rather he assumes the connection. Paul had already explained his rationale for positing a discussion of the Lord's Supper in the midst of the social divisions in the congregation. By mistreating the poor brethren in their midst, the Corinthians are, in effect, profaning what the Lord's Supper is intended to represent, the unity among believers.

While 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 deals with two different issues, the recognition of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper,

and the division between believers, these two issues are related. By enjoying "their own meal," the rich at Corinth had effectively failed to recognize the presence of Christ in the Sacrament (verses 20, 23-32), as well as what that Sacrament was intended to effect and symbolize, the church's unity (verses 17-22, 33-34).

The Somber Note of "Judgment" in Verse 34

Finally, Paul takes both the horizontal and the vertical problems at Corinth very seriously. When a Christian congregation fails to resolve its internal divisions prior to coming to the Sacrament, the congregation is placing itself in grave spiritual danger. Paul opens his discussion of the Corinthian eucharistic gathering by censuring the Corinthians for their practice (1 Corinthians 11:17). Verse 18 then begins to explain exactly what is displeasing Paul: The congregation is divided when they come together for the Lord's Supper.

Before Paul develops the matter further he parenthetically adds in verse 19 that "there must be divisions that those which are approved may become manifest among you." Paul does not elaborate on what these necessary divisions might be. In a passage stressing church unity in the Sacrament, this verse is a surprising qualification. Certainly, given the passage as a whole, the division between rich and poor was not what Paul had in mind as a "necessary" division. The only division that Paul ever identifies as necessary elsewhere involve departures from the apostolic teaching and gospel.²⁹ Given this broader Pauline context, as unnecessary sociological divisions disrupt the unity of the body (see especially Galatians 3:28), so also there can be a sinful and unhealthy unity, a unity created where it was "necessary" that there be division. As the one errs against the Sacrament, so also would the other. Indeed, if Paul could take a division that was so natural and customary in his day as contrary to the gospel (a division to be eliminated), how much

²⁹See Romans 16:17; Galatians 1:6-9; 4:30; 5:9 and as well as Paul's attitude toward errorists in 2 Corinthians (for example 11:13-15) and the Pastorals. Against Gibbs (157, note 22), there is reason to see the issue of church fellowship lurking behind this passage. The allusion would stand in verse 19 and not verse 26.

more seriously would Paul view departures from that gospel itself (a division worth maintaining)?

The seriousness of maintaining certain "necessary divisions" is underscored by how carefully verse 19 ties in to its context. What follows in verses 29, 31, and 34 is a warning that God's eschatological "judgment" has already begun within the confines of the church's own assembly. For that reason, Christians must judge already among themselves that they not be judged at the Last Day. Part of this is certainly the eschatological manifestation in the present of "those which are approved." When Christians judge in their own midst and recognize not only the divisions which must be resolved but also, when divisions are "necessary," they avert the spiritual danger and condemnation of which this text warns.

Paul thus demands that the divisions in the Corinthian church body be resolved prior to their coming together in the Sacrament. He takes this horizontal relationship very seriously. It is important that Paul uses the word "judgment" both in verses 29 and 31 as well as in the concluding section (verse 34). As the "judgment" in verses 29 and 31 consists of not recognizing Christ's sacramental presence with the bread and the wine, the "judgment" in verse 34 arises when the intended result of the Sacrament is neglected, the unity of believers. The same word is used in both cases. That means that one must take the issues that unite or divide as seriously as we do the Lord's Supper itself. When Christians do not resolve their divisions prior to coming together for eucharistic worship, they are effectively profaning the Sacrament in the same way as if they had not recognized the sacramental body and blood to begin with. One must take both the horizontal and the vertical issues seriously. Divisions are to be resolved.

Paul's advice, therefore, is to discern the Lord's body and blood. First, this means recognizing the objective reality, that Christ's body and blood are truly present. This should create a sense of reverence instead of a party spirit when the church comes together for worship. Second, Christians must equally recognize what the Sacrament is intended to nurture and represent, the oneness of believers in unity (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Divisions among believers hinder their reception of the Sacrament and bring about the Lord's judgment.

Lutherans emphasize the danger of the "judgment" mentioned in verses 29, 31. But there is also the second warning of "judgment" in verse 34. As a Christian people, we must take our relationships with one another as seriously as recognizing the body and the blood in the Sacrament. That means resolving sinful divisions that undermine our oneness in Christ (while at the same time recognizing when divisions are "necessary"). When a Christian people fail to take seriously their relationships with one another, they fail to honor what the sacramental body was meant to foster and nourish. In the words of our Lord, we need to leave our gift behind at the altar and go be reconciled with our brother (Matthew 5:23-25).