

Appendix 5

1 Corinthians 11:28

Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgement (1 Cor. 11:27-31).

The relevant extract is, of course: ‘A man ought to examine himself’; that is, a believer ought to examine himself. But, since it is vital, I have quoted the context. The context, as always, is king!

And what does that context tells us? The passage is entirely concerned, solely concerned, with a believer preparing himself for the Lord’s supper. It has nothing to do with making a Christian doubt his salvation, urging a believer to test himself as to the reality of his faith; *that* is utterly foreign to the context. In other words, the passage does not in any way support the view that believers must look to their sanctification for assurance. The apostle’s words are, from first to last, to do with the believer in his approach to the breaking of bread in remembrance of Christ, his Lord and Saviour.

By plucking the command out of context, by ignoring the context, of course, a legal preacher can have a field-day. He can misuse the passage to make a believer doubt whether or not he is in the faith. He can point to the gloomy portals of introspection, and bid the believer enter! Moreover, the individual believer can take the text, and do all this for himself. Thus by grabbing this command out of context, the believer can be driven – or drive himself – into a whirlpool of sadness and doubt. And I am sure the devil will not be slow in making him do it! And all the time, as I say, the apostle’s command is to do with preparation for the Lord’s supper.

Nor should we miss, even in the call for self-examination before taking the supper, the apostle’s positive and encouraging tone, as it is brought out in the NKJV: ‘But let a man examine himself, *and so*

let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup'. Yet again, we see that the notion that Paul was driving believers into introspection, making them anxious, is a million miles away from the context.

Calvin, commenting on the passage, rightly dismissed the papist nonsense of 'auricular confession', calling it 'torture': 'Those persons, after having tortured themselves with reflection for a few hours, and making the priest – such as he is – privy to their vileness, imagine that they have done their duty. It is an examination of another sort that Paul here requires'. And, of course, something similar (leaving aside the aspect of confession to a priest) could be said about any form of legal teaching which encourages doubt and introspection.

Paul's purpose – 'an examination of another sort that Paul here requires' – is all to do with the Lord's supper. Calvin again:

If you would wish to use aright the benefit afforded by Christ, bring faith and repentance. As to these two things, therefore, the trial must be made, if you would come duly prepared. Under repentance I include love; for the man who has learned to renounce himself, that he may give himself up wholly to Christ and his service, will also, without doubt, carefully maintain that unity which Christ has enjoined.

And even in saying this, being sensitive to the fears of believers, Calvin went on: 'It is not a perfect faith or repentance that is required, as some, by urging beyond due bounds, a perfection that can nowhere be found, would shut out for ever from the supper every individual of mankind'. The upshot? 'If, however, you aspire after the righteousness of God with the earnest desire of your mind, and, trembling under a view of your misery, do wholly lean upon Christ's grace', come to the table. In other words, the believer must examine himself, but even in this he must not expect perfection before he can go to the supper. 'Do you want to wholly lean on Christ and his grace?' Then come! I say again, the apostle does not command the believer to search himself as to whether or not he is a believer!

Good as his comments are, nevertheless Calvin did not get to the heart of what Paul was saying, but he did come close with his: 'Carefully maintain that unity which Christ has enjoined'. Let me explain. Let us think a little more about 'recognising the body' of Christ. This is generally assumed, I think, to be 'recognising the

body of Christ, Christ's own body, pictured in the elements'. This may be right. Even so, almost certainly, the apostle includes – if he does not concentrate on – the body of Christ in the sense of 'the church'.

Fee:

The bread does refer to Christ's physical body that was given in death on the cross. But the meaning of that 'body' at this table is that those who eat the one loaf are themselves that one body... The Lord's supper is not just any meal; it is *the* meal, in which at a common table, with one loaf and a common cup they proclaimed that through the death of Christ they were one body, the body of Christ; and therefore they are not just any group of sociologically diverse people who could keep those differences intact at this table. Here they must 'discern/recognise as distinct' the one body of Christ, of which they are all parts and in which they are all gifts to one another. To fail to discern the body in this way, by abusing those of lesser sociological status, is to incur God's judgement.¹

This is right. Take Paul's earlier words:

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? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Cor. 10:16-17; see also 1 Cor. 12:12-27).²

As a result, I do not discount 'regard for the body of Christ pictured in the elements', but I am sure that 'regard for, love for, the members of Christ with whom I am about the break bread' also figures prominently in 'recognising the Lord's body', especially bearing in mind how necessary this rebuke was at Corinth. At the supper itself, the believers were appallingly carnal in their division and disregard for each other (1 Cor. 11:17-21), and God had judged them with sickness and death because of it (1 Cor. 11:29-30). And it was not just at the supper. The church was riddled with division, party spirit, cliques, carnality, toleration of dreadful offences, going

¹ Fee: *1 Corinthians* p564, emphasis his. Fee cited Isa. 1:14-17.

² Calvin commented: 'The Corinthians [must] understand that we must, even by external profession, maintain that unity which subsists between us and Christ, inasmuch as we all assemble together to receive the symbol of that sacred unity'.

to law with each other, proud excesses in their assemblies, and so on. I can quite see why Paul tackled this by urging his readers to ‘discern the Lord’s body’.

In any case, whichever of the two meanings we attach to ‘the body’ – or both – *the apostle is not calling the Corinthians to harrowing self-doubt as to the reality of their faith.* Rather, he demands that the believer searches himself as to his love for Christ expressed in his love for fellow-believers – the very ones with whom he is about to break bread. This is all of a piece with Christ’s words (rightly understanding his allusion to ‘altar’, of course):

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5:23-24).

None of this is designed to make a believer doubt the reality of his experience.

Spurgeon spoke of the process known as ‘fencing the table’. He explained this ‘fencing’. It is, he said, ‘defending the table of the Lord against the approach of improper characters’. Acknowledging the rightness of the practice, even so he was clear that some had gone too far with it, and caused much hurt thereby:

This [fencing] is a very right and necessary thing to do, but some ministers have so guarded the table that very few have dared to come to it – and those who have come have often been persons who had more conceit than grace, while the better part – the truly humble and broken-hearted ones – have been frightened away! It would appear, from the exhortations of these ministers, as if Paul must have said: ‘Let a man examine himself, but never let him eat of this bread, nor drink of this cup. Let him so examine himself that he shall come to the conclusion that he has no right to sit at the table of the Lord and, therefore, shall go his way feeling that he is utterly unworthy of that high privilege’. Beloved friends, this is not my objective in preaching from this text, nor should it be yours in obeying it. Examine yourselves with the hope and the strong desire that you may be permitted to come to the Lord’s table. Do not let the examination take so morbid and melancholy a form that you almost look out for causes of self-suspicion, but the rather, especially as many of you have known the Lord for years, let your examination be made in order that you may come aright to the table, that you may come there in a right spirit, and

not that you may be compelled to stay away. ‘Let a man examine himself’, and then, in the spirit of self-examination, let him eat of this bread, and drink of this cup.

Spurgeon went on to reassure believers:

Distinctly remember that the qualification for a place at the Lord’s table is *not* perfect sanctification. If it were, I am afraid that there would not be a soul here so qualified. And if there should be one who declared that he had attained to such a state, I should expect that he would prove to be the biggest hypocrite in the place! Recollect, also, that the qualification for coming to the Lord’s table is not the full assurance of faith. There might be some genuine believers in Christ who would not be able to commune if that were the qualification, but, happily, it is not. The least grain of true faith in Christ qualifies you! You are not to examine to see whether it is full noontide with your soul – have you even a little twilight? Have you been quickened into new life so much as to have a holy hunger and thirst for more of the Christ who is already yours? If so, you may come to his table. Do not arrange the examination in such a way as to exclude yourselves unnecessarily. I will not, if I can help it, put it in such a style as to exclude one of you who ought to be admitted. On the contrary, my soul longs that the whole of you might truly feel and say: ‘Yes, we do love the Lord, and we are anxious to come and obey his command, and thus show his death in remembrance of him’. Well, that is the first great objective of this examination – not that you may be made to stay away, but that you may come, if you are really entitled to sit at the table of your Lord!

Let me continue with Spurgeon – even though he has said enough on this head to make the point. Note his warm and encouraging words from this passage, words to encourage doubting believers to come to assurance:

And, surely, it also means that every communicant must come most humbly, for the result of any true examination of ourselves must be deep humiliation of spirit. As for myself, I must confess that I am not what I want to be, and I am not what I ought to be. I can only come to the table declaring myself to be an unworthy one in whom the grace of God is indeed magnified. That he should ever have put me among his children and permitted me to call him, my Father, will be a wonder to me throughout eternity! See, then, the blessed result of this self-examination when it lays you low at the foot of the cross, and makes you come to the Lord’s table, not boasting: ‘I have a right to be here’, but humbly and gratefully saying: ‘I do indeed adore the grace of God

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which has made it possible that such an one as I am should be allowed to sit down with the family of God at his banqueting table of love’.

And yet more:

And, just once more, this examination is intended that we may come to the table with an appreciative joy. Let me explain that rather long word. You know if you come to the communion table saying: ‘I do not know whether I have a right to be here’, you cannot enjoy yourself. If I were sitting at a man’s table, and I said to myself: ‘I am afraid I have made a mistake. I do not believe he ever invited me’, I should feel very uncomfortable while I was there, and I should be wonderfully glad when the dinner was over. But if, as I sat at the table, I said: ‘I know the gentleman invited me. I have his invitation with me and he is smiling upon me, for he is glad that I am here’. That is how I like to feel at the Lord’s table – to know, after examination, that I am in my right place. Then I soon forget all about my right to be there and all I think of is that which is on the table, and about my Lord who has invited me, and how I can enjoy the sweetest communion with him, and partake of the dainties which he has put before me.

In short:

I want you, brothers and sisters, to examine yourselves till you come to this conclusion: ‘We are not perfect, but we believe in Jesus. We are not yet fully assured, but we have a humble hope in him. We are not the strongest of his warriors, but we have his life in us – we do know him, and trust him’. Then you will feel: ‘The good Shepherd feeds the lambs as well as the full-grown sheep of his flock, so we may come to him for all we need’. Then you will have nothing to think about as to yourself, but all you will have to do will be to say: ‘My Lord here gives me his flesh to eat, and his blood to drink, after a spiritual fashion. In these outward types, I will now feed upon him. The fact that God took our nature upon himself shall be as food to my soul. The equally blessed fact that being found in fashion as a man, he took my sins upon himself and suffered in my place shall be like generous wine to me. I will drink it down! I will feed upon it! I will live by it!’ Then you will have joy and gladness in your soul and this supper will be what it really is – no funeral feast, but a banquet of delight for all the friends of Christ! ‘Let a man examine himself’ with the view that he may so eat and so drink when he comes to the table of the Lord.³

³ Sermon 2699: ‘Examination Before Communion’ (spurgeongems.org).

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I feel sure that Spurgeon has caught the apostle's meaning here. In other words, 1 Corinthians 11:28 makes no contribution whatsoever to making any believer worry about whether or not he is a true believer, no contribution to making him go into introspection, and leading him to depression and lack of assurance.