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Exegetical Analysis Paper: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

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An Examination of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

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The Issue at Hand

Around 55 A.D., Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, wrote a letter to the Corinthian church, which struggled to integrate the gospel into their everyday lives creating problems in their community and faith. Within this letter, Paul brings into light an issue concerning the practice of the Lord's Supper saying this:

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

1 Corinthians 11:27-29

After a quick glance, this passage may seem relatively clear. Paul is explaining to the Corinthians the severity of partaking in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. In order to tell whether one is guilty of this or not, Paul offers a set of three tests that will determine the manner in which an individual is partaking the Lord's Supper (Garland 551). The third test within this set is found in verse 29, when Paul says, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." A question arises from this final test which presents us modern-day readers with a problem – what does "discerning the body" mean?

What is at stake?

To some, this problem may seem only trivial; however, for any careful person, this problem should be examined thoroughly. Paul suggests that the consequences of committing such an act are quite high, as Paul says that one "will be guilty" (11:27) and will bring "judgment on himself" (11:29). This should be significant for any modern-day Christian, for the practice of partaking in the Lord's Supper is found in almost every church. John MacArthur describes the Lord's supper as "a testimony to the world that we are not ashamed of our Lord or of His blood,

that we belong to Him and are obedient to Him” and “a celebration of His present life and of His future return in glory” (MacArthur 273). This practice is one that should be taken very seriously as it is not only a way to remember our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, but is also a way for us to proclaim His awaited return. If believers partake in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner, they too are subject to the verdict given to them by the Judge. Just as these words had a purpose for the Corinthians, they also have the same purpose for modern-day Christians: to warn of partaking in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner and guide believers in how to approach it worthily. Therefore, with such high stakes, a thorough examination must be performed in order to determine what Paul is saying here to the Corinthians, but also to believers today. The following portions of this essay will examine multiple interpretations of what the phrase “discerning the body” means and attempt to identify what interpretation seems to make the most sense within the context of Pauline theology.

Interpretations of “Discerning the Body”

In attempt to get things right, many scholars have offered their opinion as to what Paul is really saying here in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. Unfortunately, with so many scholars putting forth their opinion, there are many different interpretations that vary from one another making it difficult to land on one. However, believers today have the opportunity to study and discern which interpretation seems to be the most plausible when considered in the context of Paul’s theology and the rest of Scripture. In this essay, three options of interpretation will be discussed.

The first interpretation that is offered comes primarily from Justin Martyr and Saint Augustine, and is shared by some modern interpreters like Godet, Weiss, Lietzmann, and Héring. This interpretation suggests that “discerning the body” is a reference to Paul “urging the elite to discern between normal bread at normal meals and the “sacramental” Lord’s body present in the

bread at the Supper” (Gardner 515). In other words, what this interpretation suggests is that Paul expects believers to have “proper respect at the Lord’s Table, in contrast to merely social gatherings of Christians” (Thiselton 892). According to what these two commentators say, Paul has in mind the sacramental value of the Lord’s Supper and reverence towards it. This interpretation, however, does not seem to fully grasp what Paul is truly concerned about in this passage. When considered in context, this passage follows a sharp rebuke from Paul to the Corinthians for having divisions among them even when partaking in the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:18-21). This interpretation seems to forgo a thorough study of the passage as a whole.

The second interpretation that is offered comes from writers such as Bornkamm, Käsemann, Kümmel, Schweizer, Robertson, and Plummer. These writers would suggest that “discerning the body” primarily refers to the believers considering one another as the body of Christ, as opposed to the physical elements of the Lord’s Supper (Thiselton 892). David Garland suggests that, with the omission of “blood” and Paul’s previous encouragement to the Corinthians as being the “body” (10:16-17), Paul “does not have in view the sacramental elements but the church as Christ’s body.” In context of 1 Corinthians 11, this makes a large amount of sense because Paul is in the process of rebuking the Corinthian church for having divisions even at the table. This not only fits in the context of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, but with the rest of Paul’s theology and ecclesiology. Alan Johnson quotes F.F. Bruce, saying, “This would mean Paul’s concern was that the Corinthians’ conduct was ‘without any consideration for the most elementary implications of their fellowship in Christ. Such conduct was as serious a profanation of the holy supper as was the table segregation between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Syrian Antioch’” (Johnson 210). The table segregation that is mentioned refers to

Galatians 2:11, when Paul describes an interaction with Peter where he rebukes him for separating himself from the Gentile Christians. Throughout Paul's ministry, he is clearly concerned with the inclusion of outsiders into the body of believers. Despite these convincing points within this argument, some still think that it is hard to "fit the basic meaning of the verb διακρινειν" which means "to judge" (Garland 552). Some feel that this view forces one to make a stretch back to 1 Corinthians 10:17 opposed to staying true to the immediate context.

The third interpretation that is offered stems from writers such as Barrett, Marshall, Hofius, Wolff, Schrage, and Thiselton. These writers believe that "discerning the body" refers to the elements, the bread being the body and the wine being the blood, as representations of Jesus Christ's work on the cross. Therefore, to discern the body means "recognizing this uniqueness [of the meal] and that the elements represent Christ's death for them" (Garland 552). So, this view holds the idea that the elements are not the literal body and blood of Jesus, but rather are meant to symbolize the work of Jesus and lead them into remembrance of what He done for them. Johnson suggests that this view can still include Paul's secondary concern, that being social transformation, for the Corinthians by saying, "The Lord's Supper, by underlining participation in and identification with the cruciform Christ, generates the social transformation that is Paul's second concern" (Johnson 211). When considering Paul's theology and gospel message, this makes sense. Throughout Paul's letters we see a primary focus on the gospel. No matter what the topic is, Paul is always connecting it back to the gospel. Secondarily, Paul constantly encourages believers to allow their lives to be transformed by the good news which often is displayed in the social arena. The issue within this interpretation is that Paul, despite just previously including both the body and blood in verse 27, omits "blood" from verse 29. This

leads some to believe that this must mean he is referring to the body of believers present at the table.

My Decision on Interpreting “Discerning the Body”

After thoroughly studying the popular interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:27-19 and the meaning of “discerning the body”, I have come to my own conclusion. My preferred interpretative conclusion is the third interpretation that was discussed. This interpretation suggests that “discerning the body” refers to the elements as being representations of Jesus Christ’s work on the cross. I felt that this was the strongest view as it includes both the remembrance of Jesus Christ’s death but also the social implications as well. As previously discussed, this view suggests that the primary concern of Paul was that he wanted the Corinthians to recognize the uniqueness of the meal and the representation of Christ’s death in it. However, this recognition was also meant to lead the Corinthians into social transformation. This means that Paul wanted them to look around the table and see their peers as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, despite their social status. I would say that I am 75% certain that this is what Paul was going for when saying “discerning the body.” This interpretation fits extremely well within the passage, since Paul says that the Lord’s Supper is a proclamation of His death and His expected return (11:26). Clearly, Paul seems to believe that the Lord’s Supper is all about remembering their Lord Jesus Christ. Also, this interpretation resonates well with the rest of Paul’s views on the church and gospel message, because he always leads with the gospel message with the expectation that social transformation will follow.

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