

What things do you note in 1 Corinthians 11v17-22 that worry you?

Divisions in the church

Meetings that cause harm to some of those attending.

Getting drunk at communion. Humiliating those who have nothing.

What is Paul's tone here?

This is very hard for us to understand. It seems to make no sense – could you really drink enough communion wine to get drunk?

Firstly when the early church took communion they did not do it in a service the way that we do, instead it was part of a shared meal called an 'agape' or love feast.. Jude v12. This is hardly surprising as Jesus instituted communion as part of a larger passover meal. There are lots of good precedents for this in the First Testament. This explains how some people can eat too much and others get drunk.

The real hint to what is going on here is Paul's use of the word ahead v21. In verse 33 Paul tells them to eat together or to eat at home. To understand this you have to understand the nature of Roman/Greek society. When Gentiles start to get saved they get saved from across the spectrum of society. Roman society was a class based society. It had several tiers. At the top were the benefactors of patrons. Below them were citizens and free men. At the bottom were slaves. There is reason to believe from the content of Corinthians that this church had a high number of of higher class people. Their time is their own, so they arrived for the agape early they eat and they drank. A slave on the other hand would not be free to attend church until late in the evening. By this time the food has gone. Those who have nothing end up being humiliated.

What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter! 1 Corinthians 11v22

So the divisions of verse 18 are not theological they are social and economic. The people have brought the ways the world does things and the values of the world into the church.

Jesus death not only forgives sin it also makes us one, 1 Corinthians 10v17 and it makes us equal. Rich and poor, weak and powerful all kneel equally at the foot of the cross. All are sinners, none can save themselves all need God grace. Status counts for nothing. The Corinthians here are living by the old order instead of being the prophetic, eschatology kingdom of God. They have failed to understand who they are. They have failed to understand the nature of the cross. Paul is furious with them.

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matt 20:28

So how have they taken Communion in a wrong way?

What kind of sins are they guilty of?

Why is this against the body of Christ?

In what way is this a sin against Jesus (against his blood)?

Why was this so serious?

The church is called to be an example. This is what it means to be a prophetic people.

In what way might the church still be guilty of this?

How should it effect the way we take communion?

We have seen two ways of interpreting this passage. The second is the one that fits the passage but the first is the one we tend to hear taught in church.

Is it safe to ignore the traditional interpretation?

At the end of the day both interpretations want us to examine ourselves, if for different reasons. In the end we want our lives to reflect what communion and the cross are all about.

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An Uncomfortable passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 11v27-32.

This is an uncomfortable passage. Why?

This passage takes something that is important to us and a source of comfort and strength and introduces to it an element of danger and judgement. It states that there is a danger that when we take communion we will be found guilty of sinning against Christ, that we will in fact bring judgement upon ourselves – judgement that may result in death. This is also a hard passage. One that has been interpreted many ways and has caused quite a few believers real heart ache. We need to study it to find out what it does and doesn't say.

Have these verses ever been a problem for you? Or have you ever met anyone for whom these verses were a problem?

What was the result?

How did these verses make you feel?

First some context.

Read 1 Corinthians 11v23-26

These words parallel those found in Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22. The words that Jesus spoke over the bread and wine are called the words of institution. There is a slight variation in them. In Matthew and Mark Jesus quotes Exodus 24v8 the passage where the Sinai Covenant come into effect. But in Luke and Corinthians the quote is from Jeremiah 31v31 where Jeremiah promises a new covenant will come that will replace the one made with Moses.

Is it significant that Paul reminds us that this occurred on the night that Jesus was betrayed? This may not be incidental, it is possible that Paul fears that somehow we will again 'betray' the Lord by our wrong use of Communion.

What does 'whenever you drink' imply about how often we should take communion?

What does it mean 'in remembrance of me?' What do we remember?

What does it mean to 'proclaim the Lord's death'?

Communion was instituted at the last supper, which was a passover meal. This was done on a yearly basis – but every Friday Night bread and Wine are eaten and the same blessing that Jesus used at the last supper are spoken. We normally think that remembering Jesus means remembering his death, but it means remembering who Jesus is, what He did. What He has done for us and our relationship with Him. To proclaim the Lord's death could mean to proclaim its results or to apply its results to our lives. It could even mean to preach the gospel. Perhaps mostly it means to recognise the significance of Jesus death.

What is the significance of Jesus death?

We will come back to this later – it is more complex than it might at first appear.

The significance of Jesus death is that we are all forgiven

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The traditional view.

What does it mean to 'eat in an unworthy manner?'

What does it mean to 'examine yourself?'

Traditionally the church has interpreted this to be an individual thing. We are to examine ourselves for sin. We are to look at our lives and to identify any areas that are offensive to God. Consequently it becomes a time to ask God for forgiveness.

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:24

The danger here then is that we would take communion while we have unconfessed and unforgiven sin in our lives.



Do you think is this a good idea? Why?

Are there any dangers here?

Is it wrong to take communion with unconfessed sin?

Yes it is wrong to take communion while we hold on to sin. Anytime we examine ourselves for sin and ask for forgiveness is a good time. The danger is that we wait until Sunday to deal with sin that should be dealt with straight away. It helps to be reminded and sometimes we need special times, but it is a shame to put off what we can do straight away.



But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. 1 John 1v7-10

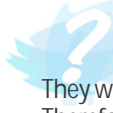
What does it mean to be unworthy?

Am I unworthy?

Yes and No. I am unworthy, I can never be worthy, I can never be good enough as far as God's standards are concerned. The good news is I don't need to be worthy.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. 1 Peter 3v18

Christ died so that I might be worthy and His death says I am worthy. Completely worthy. This is the power of forgiveness. Whether I feel worthy is irrelevant. I am worthy. It is not my worthiness it is Jesus worthiness and it is given to me as a free gift. The power of God's forgiveness it total.



Why do you think so many Christians struggle with this?

What would you say to a christian who felt unworthy?

They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. Revelations 3v4

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, Romans 8v1

According to this passage the danger of taking communion in an unworthy way is dire.

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 1 Corinthians 11v30



What kind of weakness?

What kind of sickness?

What does 'fallen asleep' mean?

It is physical sickness that Paul has in mind but he probably means spiritual weakness too. To fall asleep is a euphemism for death. eg 1 Cor 15v6,18,20, 1 Thes 4v14-5, 5v6,10. We are warned in verses 31-32 that if we eat in a wrong way we will come under God's judgment. But it is also made clear that this is discipline not condemnation or destruction.

According to verse 32 what is the goal of this judgment?

There is an irony here, the death of Jesus communion which represents this death are about forgiveness, not condemnation.



If you come to the communion service and you know there is something wrong in your life. What attitude should you take?

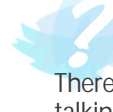
Is sin a good reason not to take communion?

The problem comes when there are sins that we know we will commit again, the key here is to be honest with God. He knows our weakness and want to help us through them. Communion is a 'means of grace' Real strength comes to us as we partake in it.



What would you say to someone who does not want to take communion because they feel unworthy?

This is the traditional way that this passage has been interpreted. It has strengths and weaknesses.



What is good about this way of interpreting it?

What might be bad about this way of understanding the passage?

There are some big technical problems with interpreting the passage this way. Firstly Paul is talking here about the way the church takes communion not about how the individual takes it. Secondly it ignores the context in which Paul is writing. The passage itself tells us that there is a very clear way in which the church was taking communion wrongly and it had nothing to do with individual sin. This is clear from v33-34 where we are told, rather alarmingly, that the solution to this judgment us that hungry Christians should eat at home and not that individuals should not eat communion while they have sin in their life.



Another view

Twice in this passage, reference is made to the body of Christ.

So then, 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. 1 Corinthians 11v27



For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 1 Corinthians 11v29

What does it mean 'to discern the body of Christ?'

It could mean several things. At its simplest it could just mean what the previous section was all about. To remember Jesus and to proclaim His death. Ie to understand what communion means and why it is important. It could be more complex. One of the early heresies that the church struggled with was Docetism (and latter gnosticism). Both taught that Jesus was a spirit and did not have a physical body. (Matter is evil so God cannot be associated with matter.) This is why John says Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. 1 John 4v2. It could remind us that Jesus is really present when we take communion. Catholics would go further and say that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. This however is not taught in the bible.

When Paul talks about the body of Jesus there is one outstanding meaning.



What is the body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 12v12, 12v27, Romans 12v5, Ephesians 4v12, 5v23, Colossians 3v15.

Paul's use of Body is constant and overwhelming it means the church. Only ones in Romans 7v4 does he use this phrase to mean Christ's physical body.



So what where the Corinthians doing wrong?

Read 1 Corinthians 11v17-22.

Read 1 Corinthians 11v33-34

It is clear that the wrong way to take communion has to be read in context with what Paul says before hand and then returns to afterwards. This passage is not separate.