

# Eating and Drinking Damnation to Oneself: The Place of I Cor. 11:27-29 in the Lord's Supper

Nebraska Lutherans for Confessional Study - February 17, 2011

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The King James Version (KJV) of I Cor. 11:29 reads: “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” While verses 27-28 of the KJV are translated the same in modern versions of the Bible, verse 29 is not. The New King James Version (NKJV) reads: “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.”<sup>1</sup> While a translating difference is not unusual, the fact that the KJV is much maligned in regard to v29 is noteworthy. Even the implication of “damnation” seems to be universally ignored by modern theologians of all stripes.

Gregory Lockwood, who generally takes a traditional stance, calls it an “unfortunate translation in the KJV.” His position is that v29 refers only to “temporal” judgments.<sup>2</sup> What makes the KJV translation so offensive to modern ears and does this mark a shift in thinking about the Lord’s Supper?

It is the contention of this paper that I Cor 11:27-29 is of great importance to the Lutheran teaching of the Lord’s Supper—second only to the words of institution. Current Lutheran theologians do not refer to this passage as did the Lutheran reformers. Because this passage does not inform our thinking, the restrictive practice of closed communion has lost its major impetus.

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<sup>1</sup>All following passages are NKJV, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup>Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, (Concordia Commentary, St. Louis: CPH, 2000), 397.

## Interpretation

St. Paul criticized the Corinthians' communion practice in I Cor. 11. "Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you" (v20-22). In summary, they were treating the Lord's Supper as any other meal.

Some infer that v29 refers to unbelievers, but that is not the case. "For he who eats and drinks [in an unworthy manner] eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." Only later edits to the earliest manuscripts have ἀνάξιος (in an unworthy manner), though it is a correct interpretation. Those who deny the body and blood of Christ in the Supper say that σῶμα (body) refers to the mystical body of Christ, the Church, while the context clearly indicates the sacramental presence of Christ. "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (v27). Then the imperative which greatly influenced our practice of closed communion follows: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (v28).

Restrictive access and an overall caution in regard to Christ's body and blood is called for by v29-30: "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." Unlike other means of grace, the Supper is only for believers, those who can be taught and understand that it is not like other food. "Examining oneself" requires reflexive knowledge, therefore infants and the irrational are not communed.<sup>3</sup> "Discerning" necessitates both knowledge and rational discrimination of Jesus in the sacramental bread. Intellectual knowledge is not enough, though. For without faith in Christ, which repentance is part and parcel with, Christ is not received worthily. Hence our practice of closed communion.

The pivotal word in v29 is κρίμα, that is, judgment, condemnation, or in the KJV, damnation.

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<sup>3</sup>If one is coherent enough to ask for the supper and can examine oneself with the pastor's help, that is enough. C.F.W. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, trans. and abridged John M. Drickamer (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, 1995), 147.

Lockwood asserts that the KJV “fails to distinguish between this temporal κρίμα, ‘judgment,’ designed to chasten those Christians who abuse the Sacrament, and the final condemnation, or damnation, of the unbelieving world.”<sup>4</sup> Paul’s conclusion reads: “For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world. Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come” (31-34).

Κρίμα in v29 is decidedly negative. “Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” (v27). While v32 certainly does not allow the interpretation that everyone who eats and drinks without discerning Christ will be damned, the possibility is not ruled out: “But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.”

The idea that κρίμα only means temporal punishment is exegetically indefensible. Κρίμα is used in 1 Tim. 3:6 of the devil;<sup>5</sup> also of the criminals crucified with Jesus (Luke 23:40);<sup>6</sup> and with the “eternal” adjective in Heb. 6:2. Κρίμα means “the issue of a judicial process,” not always the execution of that judgment.<sup>7</sup> One may pass from condemnation, that is being under God’s wrath, to grace in Christ before death. “For the judgment [κρίμα] which came from one offense resulted in condemnation [κατάκριμα], but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification” (Rom. 5:16). “Paul views the wrath of God as a reality already revealed, Rom. 1:18ff,<sup>8</sup> for him God’s κατάκριμα [condemnation] rests on the race from the time of Adam’s sin.”<sup>9</sup>

The unbeliever is under God’s wrath, a state which leads to God’s damnation at death, if not brought into grace by Christ. It is not only believers whom God does not want condemned, but all people (I Tim. 2:4). Because God wants all to repent and not be damned, the Corinthians

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<sup>4</sup>Lockwood, 397.

<sup>5</sup>“not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.”

<sup>6</sup>“But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?”

<sup>7</sup>G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Aberdeen, Great Britain: The University Press, 1956), 257.

<sup>8</sup>“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

<sup>9</sup>Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 938.

being chastened or punished are not necessarily under grace just because He does not want them condemned with the world (v32). Faith, which brings one into Christ, is not safely insulated from mistreating the body and blood of Christ the Savior in the Supper. In other words, just because God does not want certain men condemned, does not mean they are under grace at that moment. Only a peculiar definition of faith would allow one to treat the most precious body and blood once offered on the cross as nothing special in the Supper with no consequences for faith.

In I Cor. 6:7 *κρίμα* is used for “lawsuit.” A judgment issued today is not always final.<sup>10</sup> Often judicial judgments are settled or dropped. But ordinarily they would lead to their being carried out—the execution or ‘the punishment.’ So, damnation is not the immediate result of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner, as most would agree. The theological divide is whether that is a real possibility and danger in the Supper. “Eating and drinking damnation to oneself” can be accepted if we separate the condemnation, or that state under God’s wrath which leads to damnation, from the execution of that condemnation (the act of being damned). It must be admitted that the older meaning of “damnation” [more precisely “condemnation”] in the KJV can lead to misunderstandings in v29, though it does helpfully highlight the major danger in treating Jesus in the Supper as only snack food.

It is also helpful to note that language is not static and English has developed in the 400 years since the KJV was printed. Damnation, perhaps due to its current status as a curse word, has a stronger meaning today, than it once did. In the Concise Oxford Dictionary of 1917, damnation means the act of receiving a theater play coldly or securing its withdrawal. Damnable is even defined as “hateful, confounded, annoying.”<sup>11</sup> Damnation in the KJV means much closer to our “condemnation,” rather than the act of sending to hell. Jesus asks the pharisees: “how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (Matt. 23:33) and speaks of their condemnation in Luke 20:47: “which devour widows’ houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation.” In the 11 uses of “damnation” in the KJV, most are definitely not eternal

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<sup>10</sup>“A declaratory judgment is legally binding, but it does not order any action by a party.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaratory\\_judgment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaratory_judgment) (accessed Dec 8, 2010).

<sup>11</sup>*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, eds. H.W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 206.

and do not rule out future repentance.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it is even used of the temporal punishment of governments in Rom. 13:2.<sup>13</sup> The age and audience of the KJV should be factored into any evaluation of it, if we are not to be short-sighted.

## Significance

Unworthy participation is commonly misunderstood. While an unbeliever is unworthy to receive Christ's most precious body and blood, that is not what Paul addresses. He assumes that all communing members of the Corinthian church are believers<sup>14</sup> and expects those manifesting their unbelief, as with the incestuous man, to be expelled from the church,<sup>15</sup> and therefore the Supper. Faith in Christ is presupposed in communicants for Paul. The issue is the manner in which the Supper is received.

The unworthy, scripturally speaking, are those who do not discern or recognize Christ's body in the bread and wine of the Supper. In other words, the presence of Christ is denied, or not recognized due to ignorance, the sin of the Corinthian church. The Roman Church's emphasis on personal worthiness, holiness, or preparation, should not be confused with Paul's teaching in I Cor. 11. That is a separate issue. As Luther states, the Supper should be received on the strength of Christ's institution. His words spoken on the night He was betrayed are an invitation. The invitation of the host, that is Christ, determines who is worthy.<sup>16</sup> Christ's body and blood are given to sinners, exactly for whom His body and blood were sacrificed. "The only ones who are unworthy are those who do not feel their burdens nor admit to being sinners."<sup>17</sup> The only ones unworthy are those who think they are worthy. Miserable sinners who are unworthy to receive their God, Christ calls worthy to receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. What a wonderful Gospel we have!

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<sup>12</sup>1 Tim. 5:12 reads: "Having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith."

<sup>13</sup>"Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation."

<sup>14</sup>"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people" (I Cor. 1:2).

<sup>15</sup>"What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked person from among you" (I Cor. 5:13-13).

<sup>16</sup>Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Worthy Reception of the Sacrament (1521)*, LW 42:175.

<sup>17</sup>Large Catechism (LC) 5, 74; Kolb and Wengert, 474.

The type of “judgment” or “condemnation” of the unworthy communicants is debated. Is it only physical or can actual damnation result? We must co-ordinate this passage with the rest of Scripture. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Those in Christ by faith are not condemned, but rest in the grace of the Father.<sup>18</sup> Only those without faith are under condemnation. But can physical acts drive out the Spirit who creates faith? Yes. “But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith” (1 Tim. 5:11). But this state of condemnation is not necessarily permanent, for God wants all men to come to repentance (Luke 24:47<sup>19</sup>).

While faith cannot be merited by what we do, men can grieve the Spirit and drive out faith by physical actions.<sup>20</sup> This state of condemnation is equivalent to being under God’s wrath, liable to being judged by the Law of God. In this sense “damnation” may be understood as a current state, even if it does not infallibly lead to its conclusion. “In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping” (2 Peter 2:3). To say the Supper can only temporally harm one, is to neuter the grave consequences of receiving Christ improperly and mislead consciences about the seriousness of the Supper.

## Witnesses

The reformers and the confessions of the Lutheran church do admit the danger of eating and drinking damnation to oneself. I Cor. 11:27-29 informs the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord’s Supper and practice of closed communion. St. Paul lists specific punishments as a result of their

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<sup>18</sup> “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

<sup>19</sup> “and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

<sup>20</sup> “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (I Cor. 6:9-11).

judgment: “For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.”<sup>21</sup> The key to interpreting the consequences of not discerning Christ in the bread and wine is v27: they are “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.”

Communion is truly Christ’s body and blood. To not discern the body of Christ is to take Christ’s own body frivolously as nothing more significant than regular bread. Despite much “real presence” talk today, the reformers understood Christ in the Supper in a more profound way. The unworthy eating, which blasphemes Christ in the Supper, highlights also the converse: the wondrous gift of His actual body and blood given for sinners. The teaching of the unworthy eating promotes the Supper, by reinforcing that is only to be used as Jesus intended.

Martin Chemnitz spoke quite strongly of the sin of misusing the supper.<sup>22</sup>

But just as injury was inflicted on the body of Christ through various means, so also a person can be guilty of the body and blood of Christ in various ways. Thus the soldiers inflicted injury by wounding and killing Him, Pilate by condemning Him, the Jews by accusing Him—all were guilty of the body and blood of Christ, as Christ Himself says: “He who betrayed Me to you has the greater guilt” [John 19:11]. And again “His blood be upon us and our children” [Matt 27:25]. So it is with those who either despise the Christ hidden in the Word and sacraments or reject Him by their carnal security, their unwillingness to suffer, their godless intention, or their unbelief and thus profane the blood of the covenant. (Heb. 10:29)

To be guilty of the body and blood of Christ is no minor sin. “For those who eat unworthily inflict upon the body of Christ injury and shame no less than those who beat and killed Him.”<sup>23</sup> Open communion, then, is a concession that Christ should be desecrated, or else that Christ did not mean it when He said: “take eat, this is my body.” Ignorance is no excuse for blasphemy, because the Corinthians ate and drank in ignorance to their condemnation and were punished for it. How long can faith exist if Christ is frequently mishandled and ignored in the Supper? While no mathematical answer is given, Scripture does warn of re-crucifying Christ by unbelief. “Of

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<sup>21</sup>Does consequence of sleep [κοιμάω] here mean death as it commonly does in referring to believers, or does it have a more negative connotation, which the context suggests? Sleep for the believer is a blessed promise—not a threat at all (Jn 11:13; I Cor. 15:51; 1 Th. 4:13). Here is a negative use of sleep, meaning unbelief: “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep [καθεύδω], as others do, but let us watch and be sober” (I Thes. 5:4-6; Cf. Mk 13:36).

<sup>22</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (CPH: 1979), 129-130.

<sup>23</sup>Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, 131.

how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Heb. 10:29)

Without incorporating I Cor. 11:27-29, Luther's teaching on the Supper is not reproducible. The threat in misusing it and the punishment and condemnation that follows, led to Luther's caution and care in treating the Supper. He would allow no compulsion or force in receiving the Supper. "There must be hunger and thirst for this food; otherwise harm is sure to follow."<sup>24</sup> The sin of the Corinthians was exactly the sin of the fanatics, and according the Luther, "this offense will not go unpunished."<sup>25</sup> The unrepentant were warned by St. Paul that they eat and drink to their own damnation: "But those who cling to open sins ... shall herewith be barred [from the Supper] and be warned faithfully not to come lest they incur judgment and damnation for their own soul, as St. Paul says."<sup>26</sup> To Luther, the Supper could harm one eternally, because the benefits are not temporal.<sup>27</sup> Then certainly the misuse of it would not only harm one temporally.<sup>28</sup>

That Christ is truly present in His Supper cannot be ignored without faith failing to recognize its object. Faith is not an abstract quality, it is trust and reliance on the fleshly Christ who died for sin. Taking Christ orally in the supper is no small matter, whether one believes or not, or receives it to one's benefit or not. Luther stated that to take the Supper in an unworthy manner is to "deny the Lord's death by not discerning" His body.<sup>29</sup>

## **I Cor 11:27-29 in Lutheran Theology**

The critical test for determining whether one has Luther's teaching on the Supper is the Formula of Concord. Calvin could wholeheartedly accept "real presence" talk and confess receiving Christ's body and blood in the Supper. The decisive test is I Cor 11:27-29, that is, what do

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<sup>24</sup>Luther, *Sermon on the Worthy Reception of the Sacrament (1521)*, LW 42:172.

<sup>25</sup>LW 37:347.

<sup>26</sup>LW 53:105.

<sup>27</sup>Speculations aside, our Lord has only promised one benefit in the Supper: the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>28</sup>"His Word and work were not intended to help us in a temporal way, but in a spiritual and eternal way." LW 42:175.

<sup>29</sup>LW 11:26.



unbelievers receive, who surely do not discern Christ's body? They receive the body and blood of Christ, though not to their benefit, since that does require faith. This eating of the *manducatio impiorum* [eating of unbelievers] distinguishes between eating Christ by faith (John 6)<sup>30</sup> and orally in bread and wine.<sup>31</sup> Unbelievers can eat bread and drink wine and therefore do receive Christ's body and blood in the Supper, but to their condemnation.

The opponents of the Lutherans "continue to curse and condemn as a horrible blasphemy the teaching that Christ's body in the Supper is essentially present here on earth, although in an invisible and incomprehensible way, and is orally received with the consecrated bread also by hypocrites and counterfeit Christians."<sup>32</sup> The harm mentioned in v29 became the test for ascertaining who accepts our Lord's words on the Supper. The glory of FC VII is that it left no wiggle room for a spiritualistic understanding of the supper.<sup>33</sup> Whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner, because they are guilty of His body and blood, "dishonors, misuses, and desecrates Christ, who is present there, just as those Jews did who in fact really seized the body of Christ and put him to death."<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The threat of damnation and condemnation in I Cor 11:29, is real because Jesus' body and blood is actually present in His Supper. "Of course, it is true that those who despise the sacrament and lead unchristian lives receive it to their harm and damnation."<sup>35</sup> Therefore pastors should exercise care in admitting to the supper. It is no trivial matter to receive Christ in a way that violates the very blood that delivered us from wrath (Rom. 5:9<sup>36</sup>). Yet, this is not meant to scare people away from the Supper, just from abusing it. Closed communion then becomes a loving

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<sup>30</sup>John 6 cannot be about the Sacrament without denying I Cor. 11:27-29. Not all who eat His body in communion have eternal life.

<sup>31</sup>Lowell C. Green, "Article VII. The Holy Supper," in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, eds. Robert D. Preus and Wilbert H. Rosin (St. Louis: 1978), 219.

<sup>32</sup>Formula of Concord (FC) SD VII, 8; Kolb and Wengert, 594.

<sup>33</sup>Hermann Sasse, *We Confess: The Sacraments*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: CPH, 1985), 108.

<sup>34</sup>FC SD VII, 60; Kolb and Wengert, 603.

<sup>35</sup>LC 5, 69; Kolb and Wengert, 474.

<sup>36</sup>"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"

and protective action, on behalf of those who do not know what they would receive.

Yet, our Lord has invited us to partake of His body and blood. Not any body and blood, but the very body crucified for sinners and the very blood shed for sins. There can be no other place sinners are as welcome. We have a personal invitation to let Christ be our own worthiness in the Supper. He supplies exactly what we lack. When I Cor 11:27-29 informs our understanding, we can appreciate closed communion as more than just a traditional practice, indeed, one that confesses Christ's almighty body and blood. We do not want Christ's body to be violated or be taken to anyone's damnation, but to be received in life, blessing, and salvation, as our Lord intended it.