

1 CORINTHIANS 11:29 - "DISCERNING THE BODY" AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CLOSE(D) COMMUNION

"For anyone who eats of the bread and drinks of the cup without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself" (NIV).[i]

I. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with Martin Luther, the Lutheran Church has consistently understood 1 Corinthians 11:29 as referring to the Real Presence of the body of Jesus Christ in His supper. Luther makes this abundantly clear in such writing as **Against the Heavenly Prophets**^[ii] and **Confession Concerning Christ's Supper**.^[iii] The "Second Martin", Martin Chemnitz, also made this clear in his writings.^[iv] And this understanding of 1 Corinthians 11: 29 is the teaching of **The Book of Concord**^[v].

Such an understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:29 has implications for the teaching of close(d) communion. A communicant who partakes of the Lord's body without "discerning" or "recognizing" its presence with the bread eats judgement to himself. Thus, one of the reasons for close(d) communion is the pastoral concern to prevent such unworthy eating (1 Cor. 11: 27). The Lutheran Church has consistently associated unworthy eating with "not discerning the body".

However, some have understood "not discerning the body" as referring to the Church and not to the Real Presence: "In the centre stand not the elements or substance of bread and wine but the action of the fellowship as the body of Christ in the knowledge that it is dependent upon his blessing and subject to his Lordship. To be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27) signifies an act of one brother against another."^[vi] Such an interpretation of "discerning the body" weakens the rationale for close(d) communion and takes less seriously the possibility of Christians communing at Lutheran altars not for a blessing but for judgement.

During the course of my 15 year ministry I have come into contact with Lutheran pastors who have understood "discerning the body" as a reference not to the Real Presence but to the Church. Regrettably, this understanding was associated with an indifferent attitude towards the historic difference between the Lutheran and the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper and resulted in the practice of open communion, defined as all Christians being welcome at the Sacrament with little or no concern for the necessity to believe in the Real Presence as taught in **The Book of Concord**.

I believe that my own personal experiences are simply a microcosm of a larger problem in the Church involving the teachings on the Real Presence, open vs. close(d) communion, fellowship practices, and even Lutheran identify itself. This problem is becoming more evident as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America moves toward altar fellowship with Reformed Churches as articulated in the document "A Common Calling". "Forum Letter" observes that "The document treats the dogmatic differences between the two traditions in the critical areas of christology and sacramentology as nuances of theology and differing emphases.... It is our opinion that Lutheranism has traditionally regarded its differences with the Reformed tradition as rather more fundamental...." In **Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue-a Reappraisal** the observation is made that "After having carefully examined the materials produced by three series of dialogues with the Reformed, questions arise concerning the absence of in-depth theological treatment of all the issues which have traditionally separated Lutheran

and Reformed churches." There is, then, a perception among many Lutherans that the Lutheran Church in North America is experiencing a crisis of identity not unlike the one experienced in the 19th century. Dr. Samuel S. Schmucker advocated what was known in his day as "American Lutheranism" which threatened the distinctive characteristics of Lutheranism with the result that Lutheranism was hardly distinguishable from other Christians from the Reformed tradition.

I introduce our study of 1 Corinthians 11:29 in this manner in order to illustrate some of the basic issues that are at stake. Let us now turn our attention to the text itself.

II. THE CONTEXT

Clearly Paul is talking about two closely related problems in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. There were divisions in the congregation: verse 18: "In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it." ; Verse 22, "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!"; Verse 33, "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other."

On the other hand there were at least some who did not understand the Lord's Supper and its purpose or, while knowing the purpose, abused the Supper. This is brought out by several verses: 1 Corinthians 11:19-21 "No doubt there have to be differences (heresies) among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk."

Because they were coming together to simply satisfy their hunger and thirst Paul repeats the Words of Institution and the purpose of the Supper. He reminds them that the Supper is a means of grace giving the benefits of his suffering and death on the cross, forgiveness. This is communicated in such words as in verses 24-26: "And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood ; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me. For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'".

The Corinthians' bad treatment of their poorer members was the result of a misuse of the Supper itself. In other words, had the Corinthians used the Supper for a means of grace, and took seriously the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ they would have never treated their fellow members in such a shameful manner. They can satisfy their hunger and thirst at home (v.33). Such activities have no place in the Lord's Supper which has other purposes. If the Corinthians start using the Supper for its intended purpose and receive it with reverence by remembering and believing in the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood they would, as a result, stop shaming those who were less fortunate. Such disunity and favoritism would never have shown itself had the Corinthians had the right understanding of the Supper and treated the Supper accordingly.

III. THE MEANING OF "SOMA"

According to the lexicons "SOMA" has four basic meanings: 1. The body of man or animal. 2. The bodies of plants and heavenly bodies. 3. The Christian community. 4. The body of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper.

When we examine the use of "SOMA" in 1 Corinthians we find the following uses: 1. The human body: 5:3; 6:13,15,16,18,19,20; 7:4; 9:27; 13:3. 2. Plants, heavenly bodies, spiritual bodies: 15:35,37,38,40,44. 3. The Church: 10:17; 12:13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20, 22,23,24,25,27. 4. The Lord's Supper: 10:16;11:24,27.

The frequent use of "SOMA" as "CHURCH" in chapter 12 should not determine the use of "SOMA" in chapter 11 because the immediate context (vv. 23-28) has more influence on the meaning of "SOMA" than the more remote context. Chapter 12 is dealing with a new subject as indicated by "PERI" in verse 1 (The NIV translation "Now"). Paul uses this format frequently in his first letter to the Corinthians to introduce new subjects: 7:1,25; 8:1,4; 12:1; 16:1,12. In addition the subject matter of chapter 12 is not the Church per se, but spiritual gifts. The subject of Church as the body of Christ and the illustration of the human body is a sub-theme made necessary to discuss the subject of spiritual gifts. In chapter 12 the Lord's Supper is not referred to as the basis of unity in the Church, but the unity comes from having the same Spirit (12:4), the same Lord (12:5), and the same God (12:6).

In contrast, chapter ten has more bearing on the use of "SOMA" in chapter eleven than does chapter twelve because of the subject matter. Chapters ten and eleven are clearly related to each other in the discussion of the Lord's Supper as chapter ten speaks about the Lord's Supper in relation to idol worship and the meals associated with the worship of idols, while chapter 11 speaks about the relation of the Lord's Supper in the worshipping congregation.

The word "SOMA" is used five times (including the disputed time in v. 29) in chapters ten and eleven. If we do not count verse 29, three of the four references refer not to the Church, but to the Lord's Supper (10:17-Church; 10:16; 11:24,27-The Lord's Supper). This means that in the immediate context of verse 29 the only body that is referred to is the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper, vv. 24,27. The immediate context then favors "SOMA" as referring to the Lord's Supper, not the Church.

Had Paul written, "not discerning the body and the blood" exegetes would not have thought his words strange at all, because the context of the verses immediately preceding verse 29 speak of the Words of Institution and about being guilty of the body and blood of Jesus and so the need of self-examination (v.28). Had Paul written, "not discerning the body and the blood" no one would say, "Isn't strange that Paul would talk about the Real Presence at this point in his letter?" Such a reference clearly fits the immediate context. What has been perplexing and has caused confusion is why Paul only mentions the body and not the blood of Christ. Here are some considerations:

1. Paul is using synecdoche, a figure of speech where a part is put for the whole e.g., "The ranch is run by 50 hands", or as in Acts 27:37 where "soul" is used for the whole person. In **The Expositor's Greek Testament** G.G. Findlay calls it an aposiopesis--the leaving of a thought incomplete.

2. In chapter 11 Paul uses "to eat" to include drinking as well as eating: "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.... So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other" (Vv. 20,21,33).

3. This usage of "to eat", including the drinking, is seen in Matthew 26:17: "On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?'"

In chapter 11 Paul never uses "SOMA" in reference to the Church (not counting the disputed use in v.29). But "EKKLESIA" occurs three times: Verse 16, "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice--nor do the churches of God"; verse 18, "In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it" and verse 22, "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall

I praise you for this? Certainly not!" In these and the preceding verses Paul deals with the sectarianism and uncaring behavior of some of the Corinthians. It is not necessary for him to repeat it in v. 29. Beginning with verse 23 Paul is concerned with the Lord's Supper itself and how it is being misused and abused and the consequences of judgment. In verses 23-26 he repeats the Words of Institution about the essence and purpose of the Lord's Supper. In verses 27-29 he talks about the consequences and implications of the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian congregation. Being reminded of the purpose and blessings of the Lord's Supper, Paul expected the problem of disunity at the Lord's Table to be corrected.

IV. THE MEANING OF "DIAKRINO" - "DISCERNING"

The basic meaning of this word include: "to part", "to sift", "to make a distinction", "to differentiate", "to judge", "to doubt", "to separate", "to make a distinction", "to discriminate a person/thing from the rest".

As we study the use of this word in the New Testament we learn what we are to discern and what we are not to discern according to the use of "DIAKRINO" in the New Testament.

It is proper to diakrino (discern) ourselves: 1 Corinthians 11:31 "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment." It is permitted to also discern legal disputes (controversies): 1 Corinthians 6:5 "I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?" It is also proper to do this with the devil: Jude 1:9 "But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" People also discern the signs of the sky: Matthew 16:2, "He replied, 'When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." This last reference is a good parallel to 1 Corinthians 11:29 as "DIAKRINO" is used in a sense to see something that is not obvious to the uninformed person. To the uninformed person all they see is a red sky, but to the informed they see more, what kind of day it will be. Likewise in the Supper there is more than meets the eye. There is more than simply bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ are present as we have been told in the Words of Institution.

This understanding is reinforced in 1 Corinthians 10:15,16 where Paul uses the verb "KRINO" in connection with the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:15 Paul says, "I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 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?" Paul is asking people to judge, to discern, that there is more than bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Though this is not evident to the eyes, it is evident by the Words of Institution which are accepted in faith.

Furthermore, "DIAKRINO" does not appear to be the appropriate verb to use if "SOMA" refers to the Church. If by "CHURCH", "PEOPLE" are meant, a word study on "DIAKRINO" shows that this is something that we are not to do in the Church i.e., to fellow believers. Some examples: Acts 15:9 "He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith."; 1 Corinthians 4:7 "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" James 2:4 "Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" The point is that we are not to discern, the body of Christ i.e., the

Church. We are not to make distinctions and show discrimination among fellow believers. But this is precisely what Paul speaks against in verses 17-22 as Paul mentions the sin of despising and humiliating the Church. However, in v. 29 Paul says the opposite of this: He criticizes the Corinthians because they should be discerning the body, and they are not. This leads us to conclude, then, that Paul is not using the word "SOMA" refer to the Church, fellow believers.

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, the phrase "Not discerning the body" refers to the Real Presence of the body of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper and not to the Church. We have based this conclusion on: 1. The immediate context of the verse (verses 17-34, and especially the verses containing the Words of Institution, and Chapter 10, esp. vv.16,17). 2. The Meaning of "SOMA" in the immediate context. 3. The meaning of the word "DIAKRINO" and its appropriate use in reference to the Real Presence, and its inappropriate use in reference to the Church. 4. That the frequent use of "SOMA" in chapter 12 should not influence the interpretation of "discerning the body". 5. If Paul had the Church in mind he had precedent in chapter 11 to use the word "EKKLESIA" (vv. 16,18,22) again in v. 29 but did not. 6. The lexicons understand verse 29 as referring to the Lord's body in the Supper and not to the Church.

There were two closely related problems addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. The presenting problem was the division and discrimination manifested when the Corinthians came together. However, the root problem was a false view of the Lord's Supper with reference to the Real Presence of His body and blood. In verse 29 Paul is addressing this root problem and warns all who come to the Supper of the Lord that belief in the Real Presence of His body and blood with the bread and wine is required of all who want to partake in a worthy manner and not receive a judgment. As such, Paul's words still apply today and have implications for the issue of open versus close(d) communion.

END NOTES

[i].Unless otherwise stated all Biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

Luther's Works: American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press) volume 40, pp. 185,186. Further references will be indicated by LW with volume and page number.

LW, 37, pp. 347,348.

Chemnitz writes in **Ministry, Word, and Sacraments-an Enchiridion** [Translated by Luther Poellot, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p. 130]: "But the following are they that eat unworthily, as one can very clearly gather from Paul, 1 co 11: II. They that do not discern the body of the Lord, that is they that do not hold that the very sacred food of this supper is the body

and blood of Christ, but handle and use it with no greater reverence and devotion than other common foods."

The Book of Concord has two references to 1 Corinthians 11:29: "The Apology", Article XI (Tappert: 181:5) and "The Formula of Concord", Epitome, Article VII (Tappert 484:18).

Colin Brown, ed., **The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology**, vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 237.

"[Forum Letter](#)", ed. Paul Hinlicky. The American Publicity Bureau. Volume 21, Number 5, p. 6.

[Joseph A. Burgess](#), ed., **Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue-a reappraisal** (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), p. 44.

[This crisis has been noted by a number of individuals. Volume 22, Number 8](#), p. 6 of "Forum Letter" calls the readers' attention to a monograph by Luther A. Gotwald Jr.'s "The Trial of Luther A. Gotwald- A Lutheran Identify Crisis" delivered in April of 1993 to the annual meeting of the Lutheran Historical Society. In addition, reference is made to David A. Gustafson's **Lutherans In Crisis: the Question of Identify in the American Republic**.

[See Vergilius Ferm](#), [The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology](#), (St. Louis: [Concordia Publishing House](#), 1987), pp. 117-235; and [E. Clifford Nelson](#), [The Lutherans in North America](#), ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 120-124, 127, 217-227, 233.

[Grimm and Wilke](#). **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament**. Translated and revised by Joseph H. Thayer, (Wheaton, Ill.: Evangel Publishing Co., 1974), p. 611; W. Bauer. **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament**, translated and edited by W. Arndt, F. Gingrich, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 806-807; G. Kittle and G. Friedrich, eds., [Theological Dictionary of The New Testament](#). Translated by G. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964) pp. 1024-1094. Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich and Kittle understand "SOMA" in 1 Cor. 11:29 as a reference to the body of the Lord in the Supper. Thayer makes no reference to 1 Cor. 11:29.

[W. R. Nicoll](#), ed., **The Expositor's Greek Testament**, vol. ii. (New York: George H. Doran Company), p. 833.

[Bauer](#), **Lexicon**, p. 184; Kittle, **Dictionary**, vol. iii, p. 922; Thayer, **Lexicon**, p. 138.