

“Judgment From Unworthy Communion Participation”

“Nick” never participated in the Lord’s Supper. His reasoning was this, “I may have sinned in some way I don’t know about and I don’t want to partake of communion unworthily and bring on judgment.”

“Nick” was referring to teaching from Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. My experience is that “Nick” is not alone in his hesitancy. In light of this common struggle, I would like to set forth six truths from 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 that help us grasp what this passage is truly saying.

(1) It is a good thing to take seriously Paul’s warning that reads: “Whoever...[participates] in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself.... For anyone who [participates] without [understanding] the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

(2) There is a problem if our fear of judgment prohibits participation entirely. After all, Jesus commands believers, “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24). To refrain totally from the Lord’s Supper is disobedience.

(3) Paul’s warning about unworthy participation leading to judgment must be understood in context. According to verses 20-22 the Corinthians were holding agape meals (or love feasts, Jude 12) at the end of which they would celebrate communion. The problem was that during these feasts those who had more ate and drank in abundance while the poorer believers went without (11:20-22), which caused divisions (11:18). Paul’s discussion about the Lord’s Supper not only starts with this focus, but also ends with it (11:33-34). This means that what the entire passage is about is glaring division present among the saints while they were coming to the Lord’s Table.

(4) Therefore, we must see that the meaning behind the clause “For anyone who [participates] without [understanding] the *body*” in 1 Cor. 11:29 has to do with not seeing “we who are many are one *body*, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). (Emphasis added)

(5) What stands behind verse 29, then, is an understanding that Jesus Christ died and was raised to forgive the sins of sinners and to ratify a new covenant between them and God, namely that God changes us more fully and deeply by his Spirit than what took place under the Old Covenant (11:23-26). This forgiveness and change should lead to all being new (2 Cor. 5:17), including relationships among the body of Christ. This

is why Paul told the divided Corinthians they were eating in an unworthy manner.

(6) Given what we have seen to this point, Paul’s warning is meant for those who come to the table as an unbeliever, not grasping the true significance of the death of Christ. It is also meant for believers who are knowingly and rebelliously holding on to sin. If such sin (e.g. division) is present, you should confess it, repent, and only then participate. If reconciliation with another needs to take place first, you can participate the next time.

May this right understanding of this text and the Lord's Supper free all true Christians to participate on a regular basis.