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PRESBYTERIAN, EXAMINE THYSELF: RESTORING CHILDREN TO THE TABLE

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*The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we
all partake of one bread.
1 Corinthians 10:16b-17*

CONFESSIONAL PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGIANS and pastors traditionally cite 1 Corinthians 11:28 as *the* argument against those who want to restore our young covenant children to the Lord's Table: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (NIV). They suppose that this text demands a certain level of intellectual competence as well as a capacity to engage in mature, self-conscious introspection, both of which, we are told, small children, especially infants, do not possess. Therefore, since children are not able to "examine themselves" before partaking, they cannot be allowed access to the Lord's Table. If they are permitted to commune too soon, and they don't understand what is going on in the sacrament, they will "eat and drink judgment upon themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29). Although this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:28 seems to have attained the status of infallible tradition in Protestantism, there are good

reasons to question this understanding of 1 Corinthians 11 and the practice of excluding the weakest members of the body of Christ from partaking of the Lord's family Supper.

John Calvin's argument against communing young children stands or falls with this argument:

[The Lord] does not . . . hold forth the Supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, of examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord's death, and of considering its power. Do we wish anything plainer than the apostle's teaching when he exhorts each man to prove and search himself, then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup? A self-examination, therefore ought to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants . . . Why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children? (*Institutes*, 4.16.30)

This line of reasoning has been repeated over and over again in churches that are part of the Reformation tradition. Sometimes it appears to be taken for granted as "common sense" in modern conservative Presbyterian circles. But does 1 Corinthians 11:28 really require the kind of self-examination that Calvin and Presbyterians have traditionally thought? To whom does Paul address this admonition? What does the verb "examine" mean in the context of 1 Corinthians 11? Does it actually require "mature faith" and an ability to perform internal soul-searching and deep personal introspection before one can be judged worthy of participation at the Lord's Table? I am convinced that this text has been made to serve a function in traditional discussions about the admission requirements for Holy Communion that goes well beyond Paul's solution for the problem in the Corinthian church's practice of the Supper. More ominously, I am convinced that this text properly understood actually stands *against* the traditional Presbyterian practice of excluding young children from the Table. Those who fail to commune the youngest, weakest members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14–26) are themselves not "judging the body" (that is, *the church* as the communal body of Christ) and are therefore eating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. If this is true, then traditional Presbyterian theologians and pastors need to examine themselves if they are going to avoid eating and drinking judgment on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29).

EACH PERSON MUST PROVE HIMSELF

Let us begin with the command in 1 Corinthians 11:28. The Greek verb Paul uses here is *dokimazō*, which means "to prove, approve, or test." To bring out the meaning of this word in context, it may be best to translate

1 Corinthians 11:28 as follows: “Let a man prove himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” This is how *dokimazō* is normally used in Paul’s writings (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 13:5). It does not typically refer to a self-reflexive *internal* act of evaluation; rather, it has to do with “proving” or “approving” something or someone, often publicly or at least in relation to others. Consider, for example, Paul’s warning to ministers: “. . . each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will prove [*dokimazō*] what sort of work each one has done” (1 Corinthians 3:13; see also 1 Thessalonians 2:4; 1 Peter 1:7). And again, his instructions at the end of his epistle: “And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit [*dokimazō*] by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem” (1 Corinthians 16:3 [ESV]; see also 2 Corinthians 8:8, 22).

How then does a man “prove” himself? In the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 10–12 the “proof” that a Christian must display is his or her *behavior* at the Table with respect to the *unity* of the body of Christ and *not* the performance of introspective self-examination. A man “proves himself” by *how* he eats, not how much he understands or how thoroughly he searches his heart. Understanding and heart-searching may be involved, but the proof is in *the way one behaves* toward others in the body of Christ.

There are those in the Corinthian church whose *behavior* in the church and especially at the Lord’s Table manifests selfish pride and therefore divisiveness. They are *living* in relation to others in the body of Christ in a manner that destroys the unity of the church; and they are *doing* the Lord’s Supper in a way that visibly violates one of its defining purposes. The Table ought to symbolize and constitute the people of God as *one*. As Paul said earlier, one loaf equals one body (1 Cor. 10:17). A Christian “proves himself” when he behaves as a loving member of the body of Christ, avoiding divisive and schismatic behavior, especially at the communion [*koinōnia*] Table.

1 Corinthians 11:17–18, therefore, is a rebuke and warning to the Corinthian Christians for what they were *not* doing; they refused to wait for one another at the Lord’s Supper, even going so far as to eat their own private family or cliquish meals (1 Cor. 11:20–22, 33–34). This *way of eating* the Lord’s Supper had the effect of dividing the body, and since the rich were using the Table as an occasion for a feast with their rich friends, the weaker, poorer members of the body were being treated as second-class Christians. Paul’s rebuke is pointed and has little if anything to do with their intellectual capacity to understand some theory relating the presence of Christ in the bread and wine: “Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Cor. 11:22).

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT —
THEIR MISBEHAVIOR AT THE TABLE

That Paul admonishes each of them to prove, *by their behavior at the Table*, their unity with Christ and with one another, fits perfectly with the thrust of his entire letter, as we shall see. But it is particularly fitting in this smaller section of 1 Corinthians 10–14. The overarching context of Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 has to do with *the unity of the church, the body of Christ*. All Christians “participate in the body of Christ,” and “because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor. 10:16b–17). That unity or participation, even fellowship [*koinōnia*] in the body of Christ *must* be manifest at the Lord’s Table when the entire church eats *together* from the *one* loaf. The problem in the Corinthian church was that people were misbehaving in the church at large and especially at the Supper—they were both *acting* and *eating* in a manner that contradicted the reality of their corporate (*corpus* is Latin for “body”) unity in Christ. They were *divided* in their relations with one another, and, not surprisingly, their divisive spirit manifested itself at the Table. Paul, therefore, begins and ends his admonition concerning the Lord’s Supper with *this* problem:

In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, since [as you think] there must be divisions among you in order that the proven ones [*hoi dokimoi*] might be manifest. When you come together it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat; for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else—one goes hungry and another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses 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 commend you in this? No, I will not. (1 Cor. 11:17–22)

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. (1 Cor. 11:33–34b)

Between these bookend references to their discordant behavior at the Table we find Paul’s specific admonitions concerning how they ought to *act* during Communion—they need to “prove” themselves and “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11:28–29). Reading these exhortations in context yields something different than what is commonly thought. The idea is that the

delinquent Corinthian Christians need to “prove” their unity with one another and thereby show that they truly “discern” or “judge” the unity of the body of Christ. The proof that they discern or judge the body properly will be their eating the Supper in a manner worthy of that meal’s meaning and significance.

One ought not read the exhortations sandwiched between these two references to behavior that befits our unity as a body as if they are some sort of free-floating, context-less instructions about admission to the Lord’s Table. In other words, 1 Corinthians 11:23–32 must not be yanked out of the context of the specific troubles in the Corinthian church. Unfortunately, that is exactly how they have been read and used in our “church orders” and even in the liturgical reading of these texts during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. If anything from 1 Corinthians 11 is read before the administration of this sacrament, it is typically only verses 23–32. Verses 17–22 and 33–34 are simply overlooked. By so doing, we have lost the original context, and I will argue, therefore, the genuine significance of the words “prove oneself” and “discern the body.” They have been used to address foreign concerns. Christians who think that they are not “worthy” to come to the Table because they have not sufficiently plumbed the depths of their soul, searching for sinful attitudes and thoughts, have misunderstood Paul’s call to “examine/prove oneself.” Elders and pastors who refuse to admit children and adults to the Table until they can *understand* and *articulate* the Reformed understanding of the locus of the Lord’s glorified human nature over against rival Baptist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic theories have missed Paul’s point entirely. This sort of theological pin-the-tail-on-the-body-of-Christ contest has nothing to do with his exhortation to “judge the body.”

THE BIG PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

Throughout this letter to the Corinthians church, Paul is concerned with the divisive self-centeredness for which so many in the congregation have become so well known. His opening salvo in the previous chapter is aimed at this very problem:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Cloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you

baptized into the name of Paul? . . . Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. (1 Cor. 1:10–13, 31)

It appears that all of the problems in the church at Corinth, as numerous and notorious as they were, can be traced back to the lack of love and self-effacing service that are needed for the maintenance of genuine ecclesiastical fellowship and unity. Paul returns to this problem over and over again (1 Cor. 3:1, 3–4; 4:6–7; 6:1, 6–7; 8:1, 9–12; 9:19–22; 10:1–5, 14–18).

This list is only a sampling of the texts that deal with the problem of pride and disunity in the Corinthian church. It brings us up to chapter 11 and Paul's admonitions about the proper way to eat the Lord's Supper. Of course, we could go on with chapter 12 and following to show how the whole "spiritual gifts" fiasco in the Corinthian church centered on their prideful elevation of certain showy sign gifts. Not only does Paul explain at great length the Spirit's work in the whole body of Christ (12:1–31), but he finally offers them a better way: love. It should be emphasized that Paul is concerned, in these chapters that deal with "spiritual gifts," with elevating and honoring the members of the body that the Corinthians think are weak and insignificant.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—we were all drenched with one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member, but many. . . . Those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now we are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor. 12:12–14, 21–27)

Once again, Paul says that there should be "no division in the body" (12:25). When he insists that we are *all* "the body of Christ" because of our common baptism (12:12) this is the same language used to describe what is symbolized and enacted at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16–17). Surely it is not too difficult to see how we traditional Presbyterians have excluded the weakest baptized members of the body of Christ from the Lord's Table and so violate Paul's admonition here. Even though Paul says that our children are "holy" (1 Cor. 7:14) and that they are baptized members of the body of

Christ (1 Cor. 12:12), yet in our tradition they are not allowed to fellowship [*koinōnia*] with the rest of the body at the sacrament that is designed to signify and seal the unity of the entire body of Christ over against the world. The whole body of Christ is holy, that is, set apart from the world as being united to and belonging to him, not simply the mature and intelligent. If the "one loaf" and partaking of the "one loaf" symbolizes participation in the body of Christ, then surely our little ones, the weakest members of the fellowship, should not be excluded from the communal meal.

Paul's concern for *unity* in the church at Corinth dominates the letter as a whole. A great deal of this first epistle to the Corinthian church attempts to deal with just this problem. Even his salutation and initial prayer set the stage for the solution to the problem of their disunity:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those made holy [or "sanctified," *hagiazō*] in Christ Jesus, called to be holy ones [or "saints," *hoi hagioi*] in union with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. (1 Cor. 1:2)

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship [*koinōnia*] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:9)

Every baptized member of the church at Corinth is "holy" in Christ and for that reason they all share a common fellowship as the body of Christ. It should be noted here that Paul's introductory salutation and prayer embrace the children of believers since they are explicitly said to be "holy" in 1 Corinthians 7:14. Later in his epistle Paul will argue that even though they may be "weaker" members of the body they are to be given more honor by other "stronger" members of the body (1 Cor. 12:22–25). How then can a church faithfully eat the sacrament that symbolizes and seals the unity of the body of Christ while systematically excluding the weakest members of the body? Is the Table only for the strong and intelligent? Are our children not "holy"? Are not all the baptized of the church "members of the body"? (1 Cor. 12:12). If so, do we rightly "discern" or "judge" the body of Christ when we exclude certain baptized members of his body because they are smaller or weaker or less intelligent? If the meal is *Holy Communion*, and eating at this Table is one of the definitive ways in which God's holy people are set apart from the world, then all those that are holy ought to be included in the meal—including our children, those who are so precious to our Savior! (Mark 10:14).

Pastors in the post-Apostolic church often called out "holy food for the holy people of God" when they were distributing the bread and wine. The holiness of the family of God is ritually constituted by baptism and main-

tained by participation in the holy meal. If our children are part of the holy family by baptism, sanctified by the Spirit in Christ, then they ought to be at the Table. Unless, of course, we want to make the Table more restrictive than Paul, who insists that the oneness of the body of Christ is manifest by those who eat of the one loaf! (1 Cor. 10:17). All those who eat of the one loaf are part of the Body of Christ; those who do not are outside of the covenant and church. The early church understood this, as Augustine argues in one of his sermons:

Those who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are denying that Christ is Jesus for all believing infants. Those, I repeat, who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are saying nothing else than that for believing infants, infants that is who have been baptized in Christ, Christ the Lord is not Jesus. After all, what is Jesus? Jesus means Savior. Jesus is the Savior. Those whom he doesn't save, having nothing to save in them, well, for them, he isn't Jesus. Well now, if you can tolerate the idea that Christ is not Jesus for some persons who have been baptized, then I'm not sure your faith can be recognized as according with the sound rule. Yes, they're infants, but they are his members. *They're infants, but they receive his sacraments. They are infants, but they share in his table*, in order to have life in themselves.¹

Theologians and pastors in our churches that perpetuate traditions that exclude weaker members of the body of Christ from the Table ought to be ashamed of their arrogance. Not only are our youngest children excluded, but in my experience many Reformation churches also exclude the mentally handicapped members of the covenant as well. Baptized autistic children, for example, as well as others who are mentally incapacitated are not permitted to come to the Table because they cannot complete the class work and/or successfully articulate their faith to a room full of blue-suited elders. We may not say this out loud to them, but we have ordered our communion meals such that they communicate to the weak and handicapped: "You are not really a part of this body," and even, "We're not sure that you can ever be." For those younger and weaker members of the body of Christ that cannot, and may never be able to

1. Saint Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, 11 vols. Part 3—Sermons. (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1992), 5:261.

benefit from the highly intellectual and discursive forms of communication in our churches, barring them from the Table removes from them one of the only means of communication they might “understand.” Truly the head has said to the feet, “I have no need for you.”

The admonition “let a man prove himself” (1 Cor. 11:28) means: let a man *show* that he rightly judges the unity of the body of Christ as he comes to the Table. Let his actions *demonstrate* to all that he is one who lives in a manner that manifests his unity with the brethren. The evidence of this “self-demonstration” would be the *manner* in which he treats his brothers in Christ, especially when he partakes of the sacrament—eating in a manner that exhibits his unity with the body of Christ in the local church.

The Corinthian Christians were not “coming together” as a unified body of Christ when they “came together as the church” (1 Cor. 11:17–18). Some were even glorying and boasting in their divisions. Paul says that they should not call what they were doing at their separate tables the *Lord’s* Supper because they were all eating as factions, not as the body of Christ. Each group had their own meal. No one waited for anyone else. No one served the others.

Of course, they were probably not so crass about it; but their *actions* communicated just such an attitude. They were making a mockery of the unity that ought to be manifest at the Table of the Lord (1 Cor. 10:16–17). When Paul sarcastically asks, “What? Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?,” he is reminding the church that the Lord’s Supper is a *ritual* meal, not simply a common meal. In partaking of the Lord’s Meal, the church *ought* to be constituted as the body of Christ because they all eat from a common loaf. By using the Lord’s Supper as an opportunity to have their own private parties, the rich are “despising the church of God” and “humiliating those who have nothing” (11:22). Once again, Paul defends the cause of the poor and weaker members of the body of Christ. To divide the body of Christ—the rich at one table with their own sumptuous food and drink and the poor at another with little if anything—is despicable. Those who eat *in such a way* are not properly “discerning” or “judging the body.” They are eating in an unworthy manner (11:27).

Thus Paul indicts the church for eating and drinking “unworthily” (1 Cor. 11:27). “Unworthily” (*anaxiōs*) is an *adverb* that modifies the verb “eat.” Paul is not talking about checking to see if you are a worthy *person* before you come to the Table. He is talking about *how* you partake of the Supper. The ESV translates it like this: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” Eating “in an unworthy manner” refers to one’s *behavior* at the Table. The Corinthian church’s

conduct at the Table is in view here. They were conducting the meal in a *way* that did not evidence the unity of the body of Christ. Therefore, “let a man prove himself” refers to his *manner* of participation at the Table, or more broadly, to his relationship with the local body of Christ. There is nothing here about individuals deciding for themselves if they are worthy to come to the Table based on the performance of some introspective self-examination. This passage nowhere requires an inward act of contemplating and evaluating one’s sins as a prerequisite for admission to the Table. “Proving oneself” and “discerning the body” do not refer to internal, subjective acts of self-examination or theological accuracy.²

Christ’s Table should be approached with demonstration of faithfulness—ecclesiastical faithfulness. It is not so much that subjective contemplation and self-examination are bad; rather, they are simply not in view in this passage. Paul is not talking about how one gets invited to the Table, but how the members of the church ought to act at the Table. Paul highlights the need for an objective demonstration of one’s behavior with respect to the other members of the body when one partakes of the sacrament of unity. These commands ought not to be used to exclude our children, some of the weakest members of the body of Christ, from the Holy Communion Table. As we shall see, they actually cut the other way. Those that refuse to commune children are in danger of failing to judge the unity of the body of Christ.

DISCERNING THE BODY

So what does Paul mean in 11:29 when he says “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself”?

2. Ken Gentry’s insertion of the supposed difference between baptism and the Lord’s Supper here is a desperate effort to draw attention away from Paul’s precise critique of the Corinthians’ behavior at the Table (“Pauline Communion or Paedocommunion,” in Joseph Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn, *The Covenant* [Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005], 190). Traditional Presbyterians must import into this passage the questionable notion that baptism differs from participation at the Lord’s Table in that eating the Supper requires “active participation” while in baptism one is “altogether passive.” There is some truth in this distinction, but a moment’s reflection will reveal that we allow our children to eat in our homes at the family table even when they have not yet matured to “full knowledge of, attention to, and interaction with” the meaning of the ritual at the family supper table. We expect them to grow into a mature understanding and response to the grace and love they experience around our tables. Just as a child-like response to baptism is possible, even required of the smallest and weakest members of the body of Christ, so also Jesus invites his baptized children to eat with him regularly and thereby grow in their knowledge, attention, and interaction with respect to this sacrament.

What does “discerning” or “judging (*diakrinō*) the body” mean?

This answers the question, “How should one prove oneself?” The correct response is that one should “judge the body” rightly. Again, according to the context, this exhortation most naturally means “to take cognizance of the whole church that is seated as one body at this meal” (Gordon Fee). The point is that we dare not forget whose “body” the church is and who is included in that body! We dare not stretch out our hand to receive the sacramental body when we are the cause of schism and division in the corporate body! Remember, the Corinthian church came to the “common” Table in groups or parties (1 Cor. 11:21–22). The rich were over here with the best food and wine and the poor were over there with whatever they happened to be able to bring. They were eating the Lord’s Supper as a divided church! They failed to recognize the significance of the body of Christ.

I don’t see how (in context) this command “to discern the body” can possibly be understood as a either 1) a failure to discern the location or mode of the flesh of Christ in the sacrament, or 2) a failure to reflect adequately on his death during the meal. “Judging the body” is parallel to “judging ourselves” (1 Cor. 11:31). One fails to “judge the body” when one “despises the church of God” (1 Cor. 11:22). Paul’s call to “discern the body” is not a call to intellectually figure out how the Lord’s glorified flesh is somehow (if at all) connected to the elements of the sacrament.

Whenever the elements of the sacrament are referred to in this passage, Paul mentions both the body and blood, bread and cup. Verses 24 and 25 set out both elements. Then verse 26 says, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup.” Verse 27 says, “whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner.” Verse 28 says, “he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment.” It is clear, then, that if Paul were referring to discerning something about the sacrament, he would have written about “discerning the *body and blood* rightly.” He did not say this. He warns against not “discerning the body” (1 Cor. 11:29). By referencing the “body” only, he is signifying the body of Christ, that is, the church. Remember, too, that this chapter is sandwiched between chapters 10 and 12, both of which are about life in the ecclesiastical body of Christ.

Recall how Paul closes out the chapter with a summary exhortation: “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another . . . so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment” (1 Cor. 11:33–34). Paul does *not* summarize his warnings by reminding them to engage in rigorous, introspective self-examination before coming to the Table. He does *not* warn them against participating in the Supper if they don’t understand the correct interpretation of the “real presence” of

the human body of Christ. Is it in heaven or in the bread and wine? He does *not* warn them about eating and drinking without having sufficient devotional preparation: "I see some of you looking around when you ought to have your eyes closed and head bowed in meditation on the death of Jesus!" What he *does* tell them is to "wait for each other"! Act like a community. Once again, this entire passage is about the *manner* in which the church at Corinth eats the Lord's Supper—they partake as a *divided church*. It is not about 1) children coming to the Table, 2) intellectually challenged people coming to the Table, 3) people partaking who do not know the difference between the Reformed, Catholic, and Baptist theories of the presence of the humanity of Christ at (or in) the meal, or 4) people coming to the Table without adequately reflecting upon the death of Jesus. It is all about manifesting the unity of the church at the Lord's family Table. We see this theme in one of the earliest post-apostolic Christian documents we have. Called the *Didache* or "The Teaching (*Didache*) of the Apostles," what it says about the Lord's Supper is very brief, but the emphasis is on the oneness of the community. "On every Lord's Day—his special day—come together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone at variance with his brother must not join in, until they be reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled" (*Didache*, 14).

Discerning or judging the body is best understood, therefore, as a reference to recognizing the church as Christ's body and not as a reference to discerning any physical presence (or absence) of Christ's glorified human nature in the bread or wine. A man "proves himself" when he shows that he "discerns the body" rightly and accordingly participates in the sacramental meal in a manner worthy of the significance of the Lord's Supper. What Paul has said in 1 Corinthians 12:12 must be made manifest at the Lord's Table: "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." Paul's warning is not a threat that if you don't thoroughly dredge up and confess every little sin before or during the communion service, you will be judged. This is not meant to lay a heavy dose of self-introspection on every believer. The question is something very objective and concrete: How do you treat others in the church? Have you proven yourself to be one who promotes the unity of the body of Christ? Do your words and behavior in relation to others in the body of Christ show that you are one who judges the importance of the oneness of the body? Are you reconciled with your brothers and sisters in Christ when you come to the Table? If not, you will be judged (1 Cor. 11:29–32). Hadn't Jesus said the very same thing? Paul's

warnings simply unpack the significance of Jesus' teaching for the church and her new sacrament:

But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:22–24)

Paul's admonition includes the whole church. In principle it applies to children as well. They, too, as members of the holy community, must learn to eat in a manner that is fitting. But the specific focus of Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 11 is the adults, who should have known better. They were flagrantly disrupting the unity of the church and profaning the Lord's sacrament by their behavior. If they did not "prove themselves" through repentance and changed behavior, they were in danger of eating and drinking judgment on themselves for "profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27–28). Even Charles Hodge, the great Princeton theologian of the last century notes: "All that is necessary to observe is that the warning is directly against the careless and profane, and not against the timid and doubting."³

But if children are not guilty of the kind of misconduct described by Paul, then it follows that Paul's warnings ought not to be taken to exclude them from the Table. Of course, young children are capable of disobedience and even some form of the sin Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians 11. If they are found to be willfully divisive and unmindful of the unity of the body of Christ, then they should be warned. Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that Paul intended to bar covenant children from the Table, unless they too were manifesting a similar disrespect for the body of Christ. Glenn Davies' comments are to the point:

[I]f Paul had intended to prohibit children from the Lord's Table then it would have contradicted his inclusion of children in the Old Testament equivalent of communion with Christ (1 Cor. 10:1ff). Yet God's judgment upon Israel's unfaithfulness was that the adults perished in the wilderness; all those twenty years and upward (except Joshua and Caleb) perished (Num. 14:29–30). The adults who murmured against

3. Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (1857; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 231.

the Lord never saw the Promised Land. If then, the children of the old covenant were able to eat the same spiritual food, and drink the same spiritual drink without condemnation, how much more can the children of the new covenant eat and drink the body and blood of their Lord without condemnation.⁴

This is an important point. It was not the *immature* with whom the Lord was not pleased, but the *disobedient*. Yahweh's judgment came upon the disobedient adults, *not* the children.

CONCLUSION

Let me close by trying to bring all this to bear upon the paedocommunion question. Does this text give us any reason to forbid our youngest covenant children from eating at the Lord's Table? Are our baptized children members of the body of Christ, the church? Of course. Why, then, are they cut off from communion with Jesus? Are they holy? According to the standard arguments used by Reformed folk they are (1 Cor. 7:14). If our children are holy, why are they barred from Holy Communion? In other words, why do we eat as a *divided* body? In truth, many churches don't eat as one body at all; rather, some eat and others watch! The older, more knowledgeable Christians eat and drink while the weaker, intellectually poorer members of the body are forced to fast.

Far from being a proof text against admitting young baptized children, this passage judges traditional Presbyterianism churches for "not discerning the body"! When we come together as a church, there is a division at the Table—a noticeable, ugly division between adults and children, members of the church and *halfway* members of the church. We are divided between those who are in the covenant (adults) and those who are halfway in the covenant (baptized little children). When the family of God gathers around the Table to eat dinner with the Lord, why are the youngest children excluded? Do they not belong to him? Why must they be told and sometimes even forcibly hindered from eating and drinking with Jesus, the one with whom they are covenantally united? If they are in union with Christ (by baptism), why are they not allowed communion with him at his Table? Have they proven themselves to be schismatic or divisive? Do *they* fail to discern the unity of the body of Christ? If so, then by all means they should be excluded. If not, why are they denied access to the family Table? No, it is not the children who fail to discern the unity of the body of Christ. On

4. "The Lord's Supper for the Lord's Children," *The Reformed Theological Review* 50.1 (1991): 12–20.

the contrary, we, the adult leaders of the church, are those who fail to judge the body rightly. We traditional Presbyterians have for too long “despised the church of God and humiliated those who have nothing” (1 Cor. 11:22).

The analogy with the family table is valid and powerful. All of my children have always eaten dinner with the family, even when they were one and two years old! They belong to our family. Therefore, I want them to eat and learn their place at the family table. Furthermore, they are all required to “prove themselves” before and at the family table. They are all required to “judge the body” of the family, so to speak. In other words, they are all required to respect the unity of the family. Even the babies and toddlers in the family learn this responsibility at the table! So, for example, if any member of the family fails to discern the unity of the family and starts throwing food at a nearby sibling, then that member is disciplined. He or she will learn what it means to have the privilege of eating at the table. He must prove himself. He must “discern the body” before and at every meal. If he refuses, he may need to be disciplined.

Now, I have heard a Presbyterian minister say that he has “never encountered a three-year old who is able to examine himself.” I’m not sure what he means by “examine,” but even if he means something other than what we have argued *dokimazō* means (“prove oneself”), I say that one-, two-, and three-year olds evidence their ability to discern the importance of the family meal in countless Christian homes every night. We begin disciplining our children at very early ages because we believe that they are capable of self-examination, according to their age capacity! Because they are members of the family, they are graciously invited to our family table to eat. In the context of this gracious setting, as they grow up, they gradually and with increasing maturity learn what it means to behave in accordance with the privilege of family table fellowship. They grow in their ability to “prove themselves.” They begin to learn very early what is the meaning and significance of the family meal, and they learn how to behave in accordance with that significance. Surely, one can see the application to the Lord’s Table.

Now, who are those who are genuinely guilty of not “discerning the Lord’s body”? Are they the little baptized children of the church who have not yet attained intellectual maturity or are they those who bar such children from the Table? Who really is guilty of sinning against the “body of Christ”? Our covenant children or our theologians and pastors who deny them a place at their Lord’s Table? Who really ought to be fenced from the Table? Christ’s little ones or traditionalist Presbyterian theologians who continue to oppose the unity of the entire body of Christ, adults and children, around His Table? I am, of course, overstating the case

somewhat. But not much. If while he was on earth Jesus was “indignant” with his disciples when they tried to hinder little covenant children from being brought to him (Mark 10:14), why should we think that his attitude has changed toward the little ones that are members of his body today? If Paul's fundamental concern is the unity of the body of Christ around the Table, and if his admonition to “prove oneself” is directed at those who divide the body at the Table, then, in my humble opinion, traditional Presbyterian theologians have some serious self-examination to perform before they come to the Lord's Table.