

In connection with the question of discernment of the body, we must look at I Corinthians 11:17-34. In verse 20 Paul says that when the Corinthian believers came together as a church to eat the Lord's Supper, it was not a true Lord's Supper! This shows that it is possible to go through the motions and yet miss God's intended meaning in the Supper. In verses 21-22 we learn that a custom had developed of people bringing their own supper to the meeting of the church, and of eating it prior to the service in which they observed the Lord's Supper (is this evidence of the Agape or Love-Feast?) Some brought a large amount of food and drink; others brought little. Those who brought much ate much; those who brought little ate little. Those who brought much appear to have come early and to have begun to eat and drink early, without bothering to wait for those who had little, brought little, and came at the regular time. Of course, by the time those who had little came, those who had much had eaten and drunk much (note verses 21 and 33). Those who came early and brought much and ate much showed that they thought only of their own appetites, despised the other members of Christ's church, and shamed those who had little. Paul says that their actions were not praiseworthy, but rather blameworthy (note verse 22).

Under these conditions it simply was not possible to eat "the Lord's Supper" (verse 20). By the time the believers got to the observance of the Lord's Supper, some were drunk and some were still hungry (verse 21). Those who were drunk obviously could not partake of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner (verse 27); those who were hungry probably thought more of satisfying their hunger with the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper than of remembering the Lord's broken body and shed blood!

Therefore the exhortation to the Corinthians in verse 28 to examine themselves should, in context, be understood to be, not an exhortation to a general self-examination of sinfulness, but an exhortation to judge whether they were able to partake of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner. And the test of worthiness or unworthiness to partake depended on their ability to discern the spiritual meaning of the Lord's Supper, as opposed to viewing it as a common meal, to profaning it by using it simply to fill their belly, or by recognizing no spiritual symbolism beyond the elements themselves.

Partaking in a worthy manner is connected with "discerning the body" (verses 27 and 29). But what does "discerning the body" mean? It appears to have a twofold reference. On the one hand it means to recognize with the eyes of faith the true spiritual significance of the bread and cup, as emblems of the broken body and shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, instead of viewing them as mere bread and wine. On the other hand it has a horizontal reference, and means to recognize with the eyes of faith the true spiritual union which exists between all members of Christ's Body, the Church, and the true Christian love which draws all members of Christ's Body together in one holy bond, instead of viewing them as separate individuals with all of their natural dislikes and sinful attitudes. In the Supper believers are called upon to "discern the body" in both senses, the vertical and the horizontal.

In the Supper the elements of bread and wine are not transformed into the physical body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation), nor do we eat the physical body and blood of Christ when we eat the bread and wine (consubstantiation); nevertheless the physical elements truly signify,