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Physical Weakness, Illness and Death in 1 Corinthians 11.30: Deprivation and Overconsumption in Pauline and Early Christianity*

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In 1 Cor 11.17–34, Paul attempts to correct the practice of a communal meal in Corinth. He notes that consumption of this meal without discernment of 'the body' has had disastrous consequences within the community of Christ-followers: 'For this reason, many among you are weak and sick, and quite a few are dying' (11.30). This essay offers a physical interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30, contending that Paul presents the bodies of both the 'have-nots' and those who shame them as suffering because of the practice of the Lord's Supper, the former from dietary deprivation and the latter from overconsumption.

Keywords: 1 Corinthians, Lord's Supper, Poverty, Shepherd of Hermas

1. Introduction

In 1 Cor 11.17–34, Paul attempts to correct the practice of a communal meal in Corinth called the Lord's Supper. As Paul frames the situation, eating and drinking at this meal without 'discerning the body' is causing participants to eat and drink judgement against themselves (11.29). Paul then notes that consumption of this meal without discernment has had disastrous consequences within the community of Corinthian Christ-followers: 'For this reason, many among you are weak and sick, and quite a few are dying' (11.30).

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Two recent studies have argued that the reference to weakness, sickness and death in 1 Cor 11.30 should be interpreted spiritually and not physically. According to this view, when Paul mentions weakness, sickness and death, he is referring to 'spiritual health and life' rather than to bodily afflictions.[1] The aim of this paper is to defend a physical interpretation of weakness, sickness and death in 1 Cor 11.30 by locating Paul's statement within a literary and socio-economic context in which both deprivation and overconsumption were believed to produce negative consequences for the body, including the possibility of death. In contrast to most physical interpretations of 1 Cor 11.30, however, which tend to focus on the adverse effects experienced by relatively well-off diners in Corinth or to generalise Paul's statement so that it applies indiscriminately to the entire Christ-following community in Corinth, I will contend that Paul imagines that the bodies of both the 'have-nots' and those who shame them suffer because of the practice of the Lord's Supper in Corinth, the former from dietary deprivation and the latter from overconsumption. Such a scenario is precisely the picture painted in the Shepherd of Hermas, which portrays the bodies of both rich and poor believers being harmed because of a lack of 'community spirit' (ἀσυγκρασία) with regard to the distribution of food at common meals among the Christian community at Rome (Herm. 17.4). Without positing any direct literary relationship between 1 Corinthians and Hermas, I suggest that the situation presented in Hermas offers a helpful analogue for understanding why Paul in 1 Cor 11.17–34 believes that both those who are not properly provisioned and those who consume too much at the Lord's Supper in Corinth are vulnerable to physical weakness, sickness and even death.[2]

2. Discerning the Body in Context

Whatever the nature of the weakness, illness and death mentioned in 1 Cor 11.30, the immediate literary context indicates that Paul believes these adverse effects to be a consequence of the fact that at least some Christ-followers in Corinth were eating and drinking the bread and the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner (v. 27), without proper self-examination (v. 28), and without discerning the body, thus eating and drinking judgement against themselves (v. 29).[3] Much ink has been spilled in the attempt to explicate the offense(s) of

1 I. S. Schneider, 'Glaubensmängel in Korinth', *FilNeo* 9 (1996) 3–20; Ramelli, 'Spiritual Weakness, Illness, and Death in 1 Corinthians 11:30', *JBL* 130 (2011) 145–63, at 163.

2 The verb κοιμάομαι is only used in the Pauline letters metaphorically as a reference to death (1 Cor 7.39; 11.30; 15.6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess 4.13, 14, 15; cf. Matt 27.52; John 11.11–12; Acts 7.60; 13.36; 2 Pet 3.4), although elsewhere in the NT κοιμάομαι does refer to sleep (Matt 28.13; Luke 22.45; Acts 12.6).

3 The prepositional phrase διὰ τοῦτο at the beginning of v. 30 links to and explicates the consequences of the situation described in vv. 27–9. Some scribes (א² C³ D F G) add του κυριου

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which Paul thinks the Corinthians are culpable in vv. 27–9, particularly what it means to 'eat and drink without discerning the body' (v. 29). The sheer variety of proposals reflects the fact that the phrase μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα in v. 29 evokes several different associations in this context.[4]

The command for self-examination before eating the bread and drinking the cup (δοκιμαζέτω ... ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτόν) in v. 28 appears to encourage each individual reader to discern his or her own body.[5] Such self-examination is clearly related to the possibility that one might eat the bread or drink the cup in an unworthy manner (ἀναξίως) and thus be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27). Without limiting what might be involved in consuming these elements in an undeserving manner, at least one manifestation would be a body unfit for such ingestion, as, for example, if the body is intoxicated (v. 21). Conversely, to the extent that eating the bread and drinking the cup is to be a proclamation of the Lord's death until he comes (v. 26), one wonders if Paul is concerned that the sacrality of the Lord's Supper would be disturbed by the ravenous consumption of the elements by hungry saints who have not been sufficiently provisioned in advance of the *ekklēsia*'s common meal.[6]

Yet Paul's discourse about 'the body' in 1 Corinthians reveals that the phrase 'discerning the body' in 1 Cor 11.29 involves far more than individual self-examination. Already in 10.16–17, with reference to Christ-followers sharing the cup and the bread of the Lord's Supper, Paul alludes to the corporate nature of

after τὸ σῶμα in v. 29. The shorter reading (𝔓^{46} א* A B C*) is to be preferred, however. Yet the manuscript tradition itself can be seen as a testimony to the multivalence of the phrase μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα.

4 For a full discussion, see A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 891–4. In short, 'the body' in v. 29 has been interpreted as (1) the eucharistic elements; (2) the body of Christ in the sense that the bread and wine must be recognised as part of the *Lord's* Supper; (3) the *ekklēsia* as the body of Christ; and (4) the individual bodies of believers.

5 So D. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 195–6, who points to the parallel between discerning the body and discerning oneself in vv. 29 and 31.

6 Although most commentators identify relatively well-off Christ-followers as the addressees of Paul's statements in 1 Cor 11.27–9, I am hesitant to deny agency to the poor among the Corinthian believers at this point. A similar concern is reflected in J. Belcher, '"Discerning the Body" at the Apocalyptic Standpoint: A Feminist Engagement with Martyn's Thought', *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and beyond J. Louis Martyn* (ed. J. Davis and D. Harink; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012) 236–63, at 259. The well-known comic figure of 'the parasite' was willing to subject himself to ridicule and shame in order to obtain a free meal that would satisfy his hunger; see C. Damon, *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). For example, Juvenal's *Satire* 5 – itself a reflection on the shameful treatment at meals of clients by their patrons – features an image of the hungry client wishing to grab a loaf from the bread-basket, only to be scolded for bad table manners (5.70–5).

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embodied fellowship by affirming that those who share in this common meal, though they are many, are 'one body' (ἓν σῶμα, 10.17). In an ensuing discussion, Paul will develop in more detail this image of Christ-followers as one body with many members (12.12–27). Thus, the surrounding literary context suggests that τὸ σῶμα in 11.29 should be taken both christologically as a reference to the body of the Lord Jesus (cf. v. 27) and ecclesiologically as a reference to the Christ-following community as the corporate body of the risen Christ (cf. 10.16–17; 12.12–27).[7]

The introductory section of this discussion (11.17–22) indicates Paul's belief that, when the Corinthians gather to observe what they ostensibly call 'the Lord's Supper' (11.20), the meal is marked by divisions (σχίσματα, v. 18) and factions (αἱρέσεις, v. 19).[8] Paul frames this disunion primarily in socio-economic terms, as a binary division at the meal between the hungry and those who overconsume:

> For in your eating each one goes ahead with his or her own meal, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What?! Do you not have houses for eating and drinking? Or do you show contempt for the church of God, and do you humiliate the have-nots?[9] What should I say to you? Should I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you! (11.21–2)

We need not resolve all details related to the particular practices of this meal in Corinth, nor list every possible cultural analogue among dining traditions in the Greco-Roman world, in order to make the basic observation that Paul is upset at what he perceives to be a common meal that fails to alleviate the hunger of some within the community while other Corinthian Christ-followers become intoxicated.[10]

7 See G. Lampe, 'Church Discipline and the Interpretation of the Epistles to the Corinthians', *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (ed. W. Farmer, C. Moule and R. Niebuhr; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 337–61.

8 For a recent restatement of the view that 1 Cor 11.19 represents an example of Paul's ironic or sarcastic speech, see T. Brookins, 'The Supposed Election of Officers in 1 Cor 11.19: A Response to Richard Last', *NTS* 60 (2014) 423–32.

9 I prefer to take the phrase τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας absolutely instead of supplying an implied object (e.g. τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ κυρίου); so G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (rev. edn; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 543–4.

10 Still helpful as an overview of the situation in Corinth is P. Lampe, 'Das korinthische Herrenmahl im Schnittpunkt hellenistisch-römischer Mahlpraxis und paulinischer Theologia Crucis [1 Kor 11,17–34]', *ZNW* 82 (1991) 183–213. It is also possible that Paul's comments in 11.33–4 shed additional light on the nature of the socio-economic division within the Corinthian *ekklēsia* at this common meal. In contrast to most interpretations, which have maintained that Paul's statements in 1 Cor 11.22 and 11.34 allow more economically advantaged members of the church the option of satisfying their hunger at home before the communal gathering, Suzanne Watts Henderson has proposed an integrated reading of 1 Cor

Paul's statements about consuming the bread and the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, about self-examination before consumption and about discernment of the body in vv. 27–9, therefore, should be considered in light of his appeal for Christ-followers in Corinth to feed the poor among them and for the communal meal to be a site of welcome for the 'have-nots' because the Lord's Supper is a celebration and an enactment of the self-giving love of the Lord Jesus (11.23–6). To 'discern the body' in this context means, among other things, to ensure that the hungry are fed. Conversely, failure to 'discern the body' while eating and drinking involves an inability or unwillingness to attend to the physical health of the members of Christ's body, including particularly the bodies the hungry whom Paul calls 'the have-nots' (11.21–2). And it is because of the community's failure to exercise this nourishing discernment that Paul believes many among his readers are 'weak and sick, and quite a few are dying' (11.30).

3. A Defence of a Material Interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30

Given the literary context in which Paul's comment about weakness, sickness and death in 1 Cor 11.30 is embedded, it is unlikely that Paul will have intended or his first readers will have heard the statement διὰ τοῦτο ἐν ὑμῖν πολλοὶ ἀσθενεῖς καὶ ἄρρωστοι καὶ κοιμῶνται ἱκανοί as a reference to spiritual and not physical suffering.[11] Tellingly, both Ramelli and Schneider, in defending a

11.17–34 by arguing that Paul's concern throughout the passage is to ensure that the Corinthians feed hungry members of the community ('"If Anyone Hungers …": An Integrated Reading of 1 Cor 11.17–34', *NTS* 48 (2002) 195–208). Key to Henderson's contention is her claim that the conditional sentence εἴ τις πεινᾷ, ἐν οἴκῳ ἐσθιέτω in v. 34 represents not a concession that allows the relatively well-off among the Corinthian congregation satisfy their own hunger at home before arriving at the common meal but instead serves as command to ensure that the hungry are provisioned at household gatherings of the *ekklēsia*. Henderson renders v. 34: 'If anyone hungers [when you gather], let that one eat in the house [church], lest you gather for judgment.' Similarly, she paraphrases Paul's first question 11.22: 'For do you not have houses [expressly] for eating and drinking [together]?' One challenge to Henderson's interpretation, however, is the apparent distinction between an οἶκος and an ἐκκλησία in 1 Cor 14.35 (so M. Rhodes, '"Forward unto Virtue": Formative Practices and 1 Corinthians 11:17–34', *JTI* 11 (2017) 119–38, at 135). I would allow for an οἶκος/ἐκκλησία distinction in 14.35 (a text that I do not dismiss on text-critical grounds). The οἶκος/οἰκία can be a site where practices of mercy (11.22, 34) and teaching (including husbands of wives, as is implied in 14.35) occur without the entire community present, even as the entire ἐκκλησία did regularly gather as one collective body to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

11 Both Ramelli and Schneider raise a grammatical objection to the physical interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30. Ramelli follows Schneider in suggesting that one significant difficulty for a physical interpretation of the verse is that, 'if κοιμῶνται referred to persons who are physically dead, this would contradict the notion conveyed by their being said to be "among you" (ἐν ὑμῖν), in

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spiritual interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30, only briefly acknowledge the literary context of the verse.[12] It is true, as Ramelli points out, that Paul does occasionally refer to spiritual death, as in Rom 7.6–8.13 (cf. 2 Cor 2.16; 3.7; 7.10; 1 Tim 5.6).[13] But the aggregation of ἀσθενής, ἄρρωστος and κοιμάομαι in 1 Cor 11.30, combined with the fact that this cluster of terms comes in the context of a discussion about

the community' ('Spiritual Weakness', 146; cf. Schneider, 'Glaubensmängel', 6–9). This contention is mitigated, however, by the observation that boundaries between the living and the dead were viewed as porous in the first century, as is seen in the Corinthian practice of baptism on behalf of the dead (15.29; cf. 1 Cor 6.2, where the phrase ἐν ὑμῖν refers to the eschatological judgement of the world by readers of the letter; elsewhere, Paul speaks of the 'dead in Christ' (1 Thess 4.16) and of Christ as 'Lord of both the dead and the living' (Rom 14.9); so P. Dijkhuizen, 'The Lord's Supper and Ritual Theory: Interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:30 in Terms of Risk, Failure, and Efficacy', *Neot* 50 (2016) 441–76.

12 Given the lack of attention to the literary context of 1 Cor 11.30 in both essays, I do not find at all compelling the parallels with 'spiritual sleep/death' in Philo discussed by Schneider ('Glaubensmängel', 10–12) and Ramelli ('Spiritual Weakness', 159–60). Moreover, Ramelli's appeal to the early history of interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30 is interesting, but strikes me as an example of some of the problems that can be associated with *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a hermeneutical approach. Ramelli demonstrates that a 'spiritual' interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30 is found in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Didymus and Cassian – and these authors are contrasted with the physical interpretations found in Basil and Ambrosiaster. Ramelli appears to believe that the frequency of the spiritual interpretation is important: 'the spiritual interpretation of illness and death in this passage is *far more common* than a physical interpretation' ('Spiritual Weakness', 163, emphasis added). But given Origen's knowledge of the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen's influence over both Didymus and Cassian, what Ramelli has really shown is one particular strand of Alexandrian spiritual exegesis, and such a non-literal reading of 1 Cor 11.30 is hardly surprising in light of the allegorical impulse that characterised much scriptural interpretation in the Alexandrian tradition.

13 Contrary to Ramelli's assertion, while Paul does use the language of 'death' to refer to a spiritual condition, he does not speak of 'sickness … of the soul' or 'spiritual illness' ('Spiritual Weakness', 149). That is, with the exception of terminology from the ασθεν- root, which can denote weakness as well as physical infirmity (Phil 2.25–6; 2 Tim 4.20), 'illness' or 'sickness' are not metaphors that Paul employs to refer to spiritual realities; when Paul uses terminology from the semantic domain of sickness/disease, it is with reference to literal illness or some kind of physical affliction: διαφθείρω (2 Cor 4.16) and ἄρρωστος (1 Cor 11.30). In the Pastoral Epistles, metaphors of sickness are twice employed to refer to spiritual illness (1 Tim 6.5; 2 Tim 2.17), but the metaphorical nature of the language is clear. Ramelli's claim ('Spiritual Weakness', 153) that the substantive participle ὁ ἀσθενῶν in 1 Cor 8.11 offers an example of Paul using the language of 'weakness' in a metaphorical sense without a modifier such as τῇ πίστει or τῇ συνειδήσει (cf. 8.9) is hardly compelling since a modifier is supplied several times in the surrounding context (i.e. 8.7, 10, 12). Nor is it 'obvious' that 'the weakness of which Paul is speaking [in 1 Cor 9.22] must be understood spiritually' ('Spiritual Weakness', 153), not least because of references to physical (or at least social) weakness earlier in 1 Corinthians (e.g. 1.26–7; 2.3; 4.10).

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overconsumption and deprivation, indicates that Paul is referring to physical weakness, illness and death.[14]

Yet it is not merely the literary context of 11.17–34 that supports a material interpretation of v. 30. Attention to the economic conditions of urban life in the first century can also inform our understanding of Paul's claim that failure to 'discern the body' has resulted in bodily harm to members of the Christ-following community in Corinth.

It has sometimes been suggested that the discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11.17–34 should be situated in relation to specific historical events, such as the possibility of a severe famine in Greece in 51 CE. This particular famine is occasionally alleged to be the referent for Paul's allusion to 'the present crisis' (τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην) in 1 Cor 7.26.[15] Unfortunately, available literary and inscriptional evidence related to food shortages and famines in the Roman Empire, and Greece in particular, in the middle decades of the first century CE does not support the conclusion that Paul addressed his readers in Corinth in the context of a particular local or regional food crisis.[16]

Yet the economic context of 1 Cor 11.17–34 need not be defined with such precision so as to tie the abuse of the Lord's Supper in Corinth to any specific food crisis. This is because, given what is known about income distribution and inequality in the Roman imperial period, it is sufficient to affirm that poverty was a way of life, and death, for the vast majority of the population in the Roman Empire in the first century, even in a relatively prosperous urban location such as Corinth.[17] At least since the publication of Steven Friesen's influential essay 'Poverty in Pauline Studies' in 2004, there has been a vigorous debate surrounding efforts to develop an economic profile of early Christ-followers,

14 For parallels from papyri that strengthen the claim that 1 Cor 11.30 refers to physical suffering, see the discussion of *P.Cair.Zen.* I.59018, *P.Cair.Zen.* I.59042, *P.Oxy.* XLV.3250 and *P.Tebt.* III/1.768 in P. Arzt-Grabner *et al.*, *1. Korinther* (PKNT 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006) 400–1.

15 B. Winter, 'Secular and Christian Responses to Corinthian Famines', *TynBul* 40 (1989) 86–109; B. Danylak, 'Tiberius Claudius Dinippus and the Food Shortages in Corinth', *TynBul* 59 (2008) 231–70. For a helpful treatment of 1 Cor 7.26 that argues that the phrase τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην in 1 Cor 7.26 should be translated 'the present constraint' and seen as a reference to 'the inevitable mortality and decay of all things in "this age"', see J. Barclay, 'Apocalyptic Allegiance and Disinvestment in the World: A Reading of 1 Corinthians 7:25–35', *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination* (ed. B. Blackwell, J. Goodrich and J. Matson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016) 257–74, at 263.

16 See the careful analysis of the evidence in M. Ibita, 'Food Crises in Corinth? Revisiting the Evidence and Its Possible Implications in Reading 1 Cor 11:17–34', *Stones, Bones, and the Sacred: Essays on Material Culture and Ancient Religion in Honor of Dennis E. Smith* (ed. A. Cadwallader; ECL 22; Atlanta: SBL, 2016) 33–53.

17 On the economic particularities of Corinth, see the essays in S. Friesen, S. James and D. Schowalter, eds., *Corinth in Contrast: Studies in Inequality* (NovTSup 155; Leiden: Brill, 2013).

including those associated with the Pauline churches.[18] A significant feature of this debate has been the attempt to develop an economic scale to model wealth distribution and inequality in the Roman Empire, and then to use that scale as a heuristic tool for understanding the economic resources available to those associated with the Pauline mission. When these models are used to explore wealth distribution among nascent Christ-following communities, different starting points and assumptions inevitably lead to different results.[19] The point here is not to settle the debate on the construction and usefulness of these models but to make the relatively simple observation that the interpretation of any Pauline letter must attend to the realities of structural poverty and income inequality that characterised the urban environment of Paul's churches. While these models are necessarily abstractions and cannot account for chronological and/or geographical variations, they do helpfully draw attention to the impoverished material conditions experienced by the vast majority of inhabitants of cities in the Roman world, that is, those who lived 'at or near subsistence level, whose primary concern it [was] to obtain the minimum food, shelter, and clothing necessary to sustain life, whose lives [were] dominated by the struggle for physical survival'.[20] Even according to one of the more optimistic assessments, around two thirds of the members of Paul's churches will have struggled to eke out a living in the fragile balance between subsistence existence and starvation.[21]

The challenges faced by the hungry and 'have-nots' mentioned in 1 Cor 11.21–2 can be considered in this light. Drawing on wage and price data for Roman Egypt from the mid-first to mid-second centuries CE, Scheidel and Friesen estimate 'the lowest-cost configuration of goods that ensures a base-level of calorie intake and the rudimentary provision of clothing, heating, and shelter for an adult man or, if multiplied by three, for a family of four' – what they call a 'bare bones basket' – to be 390 kg of wheat equivalent per capita per year.[22] In a 'pessimistic scenario' Scheidel and Friesen propose that 22 per cent of the population, a group with a mean per capita per year income of 245.5 kg wheat equivalent, fell below this

18 S. Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus', *JSNT* 26 (2004) 323–61. For a recent overview of the discussion, see T. Brookins, 'Economic Profiling of Early Christian Communities', *Paul and Economics: A Handbook* (ed. T. Blanton IV; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) 57–87.

19 Questions of epistemology in the application of economic models to early Christian texts are explored in Brookins, 'Economic Profiling'. For different perspectives, compare B. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) and W. Scheidel and S. Friesen, 'The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire', *JRS* 99 (2010) 61–91.

20 P. Garnsey and G. Woolf, 'Patronage of the Rural Poor in the Roman World', *Patronage in Ancient Society* (ed. A. Wallace-Hadrill; Routledge: London, 1990) 153–67, at 153.

21 Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 46.

22 Scheidel and Friesen, 'Size of the Economy', 69.

'bare bones' minimum.[23] In a more 'optimistic scenario', which assumes an overall per capita per year mean of 575 kg wheat equivalent, 10 per cent of the population would have fallen below the 'bare bones' threshold.[24] While it would be helpful to have more information about those whom Paul calls 'the have-nots' in 1 Cor 11.22, including knowledge of the precise reasons for their hunger, Friesen is right to declare that 'we are dealing here with at least some saints [who lived below subsistence level], and their continuing mistreatment in the congregation was enough of a problem for Paul to intervene'.[25] To put the matter bluntly, food provided (or not) at Corinthian house churches and/or at a common meal for the entire *ekklēsia* may well have been a matter of life and death for the poorest among the Christ-followers in Corinth.

4. (The Absence of) Material Deprivation in the Interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30

Assuming that Paul warns the Christ-followers in Corinth about the severe dangers of failing to discern the needs of other members of the body of Christ when they celebrate the Lord's Supper, and given the overwhelming presence of poverty in the cities of the Roman Empire, we might expect scholars to stress that the consequences of this inattention to 'the body' in 1 Cor 11.27–9 include the suffering of the bodies of the poor. Interestingly, however, recent scholarly reflection on 1 Cor 11.30 tends to overlook the poor at exactly this point.[26] That is, among the majority of scholars who hold that Paul's statement about weakness, illness and death in 1 Cor 11.30 refers to actual physical consequences for Christ-followers in Corinth, there is a strong tendency to focus those effects upon one of two groups, namely, (1) the relatively well-off who are themselves sufficiently fed yet are mistreating their poorer brothers and sisters, or (2) the Corinthian *ekklēsia* as a whole.[27]

On the one hand, several scholars explicitly state or imply that those said to have experienced physical weakness, illness and death in v. 30 are relatively

23 Scheidel and Friesen, 'Size of the Economy', 84.

24 Scheidel and Friesen, 'Size of the Economy', 84.

25 Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies', 350–1.

26 In 2004, Friesen observed regarding much commentary on 1 Cor 11.22: 'The phrase is somewhat ambiguous but most commentators take the phrase τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας in an absolute sense as "those who have nothing, the have-nots." After they recognize this reference [in 11.22] to very poor members of the congregation, however, they then normally pursue other themes in the text and ignore the reference to desperately poor people within the Corinthian assemblies' ('Poverty in Pauline Studies', 349).

27 D. Zeller is more circumspect than most: 'Es bleibt allerdings undeutlich, ob die Strafe eher kollektiv oder individuel geht' (*Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010) 387); cf. D. Smith, *'Hand This Man Over to Satan': Curse, Exclusion and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5* (LNTS 386; London: T&T Clark, 2008) 170.

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well-off Christ-followers guilty of not caring for the poor within the *ekklēsia*. In light of Paul's remark about drunkenness in 11.21, for example, Anthony Thiselton wonders whether 'a serious decline in health could result casually from excess in gluttony and drink which brought its own judgment, especially if a wealthy host saw an opportunity to masquerade sheer excess under the cloak of "doing the Lord's work" by hosting frequent "Suppers of the Lord".'[28] More often, however, the assumption is implicit: '[M]any have fallen asleep because *they* did not rightly evaluate the body (v. 29).'[29]

On the other hand, it is also common for interpreters to speak generally about suffering experienced by the entire Christ-following community in Corinth. Gordon Fee represents this perspective well: 'the whole community is affected by the actions of some'.[30] Ciampa and Rosner develop this idea in its larger biblical context by connecting 1 Cor 11.30 to 'plagues of divine judgment in the Old Testament [in which] the plague could fall indiscriminately on the community as a whole (e.g., Exod. 32:35; Num. 8:19; 11:33; Deut. 32:24; Josh. 22:17)'.[31] Thus, the many who are weak and ill and the smaller number who are dying might be any members of a community that is experiencing God's judgement based on the actions of some.

I do not want to suggest that either of these two focal points represent an incorrect reading of the text. In point of fact, I believe they are both accurate. As will be suggested below, it is quite possible that Paul believes that relatively well-off Christ-followers in Corinth do experience physical suffering because of their overconsumption at the meal called 'the Lord's Supper'. And in light of Paul's comments about judgement in 11.17–34, including the Lord's judgement of a corporate 'we' in vv. 31–2, it does appear to be the case that Paul imagines the entire community to be at risk of suffering the physical consequences of weakness, illness and death described in v. 30 for the failure of at least some to 'discern the body': 'But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastised so that we may not be condemned along with

28 Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 894.

29 T. Brookins and B. Longenecker, *I Corinthians 10–16: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (BHGNT; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 58 (emphasis added); so also R. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997) 201; R. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (ANTC; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998) 162.

30 Fee, *First Corinthians*, 565; W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: 3, 1Kor 11.17–14.40* (EKK 7/3; Zurich: Neukirchener, 1999) 53–4; M. Konradt, *Gericht und Gemeinde: Eine Studie zur Bedeutung und Funktion von Gerichtsaussagen im Rahmen der paulinische Ekklesiologie und Ethik im 1 Thess und 1 Kor* (BZNW 117; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003) 442; J. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 32; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 447.

31 R. Ciampa and B. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 556.

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the world' (vv. 31–2).[32] The point is not so much to dispute the majority of scholarly commentary on 1 Cor 11.30 as to observe what this commentary neglects to mention, namely, the possibility that the bodies of the poor in particular suffer physical afflictions, including even the prospect of death, because of the community's failure to 'discern the body'. This is an example of what Friesen has called the 'disappearance of the topic of poverty' in contemporary Pauline scholarship.[33]

David Garland is the only scholar known to me who reflects seriously, if briefly, on the poor within the Corinthian *ekklēsia* as specifically among those whom Paul believes to be experiencing the physical consequences described in 1 Cor 11.30. Garland writes:

> For [Paul's] argument to have force as a threat, one would assume that the readers could readily identify those who were sick or have died as guilty of despising and humiliating their brothers and sisters at the Lord's Supper. Another possibility, however, which is offered only tentatively is that some have become physically weak from lack of food. The Corinthians' lack of sharing has dire repercussions for the poor in their midst.[34]

The poor are at least present, even if tentatively, in Garland's reconstruction.

It has been objected that Garland's proposal 'goes against the whole argument of Paul that the guilty were being punished by God'.[35] Yet this challenge to Garland's suggestion fails to account for the fact that it is not merely the guilty whom Paul believes have experienced the physical suffering described in v. 30 but also those who suffer because of the *ekklēsia*'s failure to 'discern the body' (v. 29), in broad terms, that is, 'the entire community', but specifically the poor among them. Moreover, while Paul does refer to divine judgement in this passage (v. 32; cf. vv. 29, 34), it is entirely possible that here the apostle envisions the natural consequences for shameful or sinful human behaviour to be a manifestation of God's judgement upon the community. There is no doubt that Paul anticipates the future eschatological judgement of all people by God (Rom 2.1–10; 3.6; 14.10–12; 1 Cor 3.12–17; 4.1–5; 2 Cor 5.10; cf. 2 Tim 4.1, 8). But he is also capable of correlating human actions and the experience of divine judgement in the present. In Rom 13.1–2, for example, Paul insists that, because human authorities have been established by God, those who resist authority oppose what God has appointed, and 'those who resist will incur judgement'

32 The motif of communal judgement, warning and discipline is helpfully examined in Konradt, *Gericht und Gemeinde*, 439–51; cf. Schrage, *Der erste Brief*, 51–2.

33 Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies', 332.

34 D. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 553–4. Garland goes on to support this suggestion in light of the possibility that Corinth might have been 'undergoing a famine' (554).

35 L. Jamir, *Exclusion and Judgment in Fellowship Meals: The Socio-Historical Background of 1 Corinthians 11:17–34* (Cambridge: James Clark, 2017) 185.

(οἱ δὲ ἀνθεστηκότες ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα λήμψονται). As the ensuing verses indicate, 'judgement' in this context includes the power of the sword held by 'the authority' (ἡ ἐξουσία) as 'the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer' (Rom 13.3–4).[36] In 2 Thessalonians, Paul describes the persecutions and afflictions endured by his readers as 'evidence of the righteous judgement of God' (ἔνδειγμα τῆς δικαίας κρίσεως τοῦ θεου), even among those known for their steadfastness and faithfulness (1.4–5; cf. 1 Pet 2.11–17; 4.1, 12–19).[37] Perhaps most pertinently for 1 Cor 11.30 is Paul's prescription for how the congregation should discipline a sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5. After noting that he himself has already pronounced judgement on the situation, Paul instructs the Corinthians: 'When you are gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Cor 5.4–5).[38] Since it is Paul's conviction, therefore, that divine judgement can be exacted through human action, the affirmation that some members of the Christ-following community in Corinth suffer physical consequences because of the mistreatment of the poor at the Lord's Supper (and possibly because of gluttonous consumption), on one hand, and the avowal that some members of the *ekklēsia* have experienced God's chastising judgement for this shameful behaviour, on the other, are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the idea that innocent people, including the disadvantaged, might undergo physical suffering because of the actions of others (even other Christ-followers) is not foreign to Paul, as his own life-story testifies (Rom 8.35–9; 2 Cor 4.8–12; 11.22–9; Phil 1.7, 12–18; 4.10–13; 1 Thess 2.14–16; 3.1–5). Thus, while the prepositional phrase διὰ τοῦτο in 1 Cor 11.30 does explicate the consequences of the unworthy

36 On the theme of God's judgement and human power in Rom 13.1–7, see S. Krauter, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer theologischen Würdigung von Röm 13,1–7', *ZTK* 109 (2012) 287–306.

37 On this verse as an affirmation that 'the afflictions of the elect are themselves the sign of God's righteous judgment', see J. Bassler, 'The Enigmatic Sign: 2 Thessalonians 1:5', *CBQ* 46 (1984) 496–510, at 509.

38 For the argument that 1 Cor 5.5 envisions some form of physical affliction, including possibly death, for the sexually immoral man, see Smith, *'Hand This Man Over to Satan'*; cf. Konradt, *Gericht und Geminde*, 313–21. Implicitly, Paul's allusion to Numbers 14 in 1 Cor 10.5 fits this pattern as well: 'Nevertheless, God was not pleased with them, and they were struck down in the wilderness' (NRSV). In Num 14.26–30, in response to the complaints of the Israelites and their desire to return to Egypt, God promises, 'Your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and all of your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun' (vv. 28–30). According to the narrative of Numbers, it is not the direct action of God but an attack from the Amalekites and Canaanites that results in the first fulfilment of this promise (14.45). In 1 Cor 3.15–17 Paul also implies that human sin can lead to physical destruction (so Smith, *'Hand This Man Over to Satan'*, 164–7).

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consumption described in vv. 27–9, and while Paul does believe that those abusing the Lord's Supper are liable to God's judgement (vv. 29, 31–2), it is not only the agents of this unfitting behaviour who experience weakness, illness and death. As Paul says in this same letter in a different context, 'A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough' (5.6).

5. Deprivation *and* Overconsumption at the Lord's Supper in Corinth?

Based on what is known about poverty and inequality in the first century, a material interpretation of 1 Cor 11.30 must attend to the realities of deprivation and starvation that characterised the subsistence existence of the 'have-nots' in Corinth and elsewhere. The provision of even one additional substantive meal per week may have had the potential to keep them from sickness and death, whereas the denial of this nourishment will have had disastrous ramifications for their weakened bodies. Yet Paul also appears to be troubled by the *overconsumption* of some Christ-followers at the Lord's Supper in Corinth. Paul notes that when individuals in the community go ahead with their meal some become drunk (v. 21). Both drunkenness and gluttonous consumption are identified as vices in the Pauline letters (Rom 13.13; 1 Cor 5.11; 6.10; Gal 5.21; Eph 5.18; Phil 3.19; 1 Thess 5.7; 1 Tim 3.3; Tit 1.12) and were widely condemned in early Christian literature (Matt 24.49; Luke 12.45; 21.34; 1 Pet 4.3; Rev 17.1–6; *1 Clem* 30.1; Herm. 36.5; 65.5). Is it possible, then, that Paul envisions physical weakness, illness and death as outcomes not merely for the 'have-nots' in Corinth but also for those who stuff their bellies with food and wine?

A fascinating passage from the Shepherd of Hermas opens up this possibility.[39] The text comes immediately after Hermas has received from an elderly woman, who is the church, a vision of a tower being constructed and the interpretation of the vision (9.2–16.11). After the woman church has finished her interpretation of the tower, she gives additional words that Hermas is told to speak to the saints so that, by hearing and doing these words, the saints and Hermas might be cleansed from wickedness (16.11). The woman church says:

> [1] Listen to me, children: I reared you with much sincerity and innocence and probity through the mercy of the Lord, who instilled righteousness in you in order that you might be made righteous and sanctified from all wickedness and from all crookedness. Yet you do not want to cease from your wickedness. [2] Now, then, listen to me, and be at peace among yourselves, and look after one another, and come to the aid of one another, and do not in isolation from the creatures of God take from what has been poured out, but also share with the

39 Herm. 17 is cited by Garland (*1 Corinthians,* 554), although Garland does not discuss the consequences of this text for understanding overconsumption as an issue in 1 Cor 11.17–34.

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> needy.[40] 3 For those who [eat] a lot of food bring weakness to the flesh and harm their bodies, while the flesh of those who do not have food is harmed because they do not have sufficient nourishment, and their bodies are being destroyed. 4 Therefore, this lack of community spirit[41] is harmful to you who have, yet do not share with the needy. (17.1–4)

As in 1 Corinthians 11, those who have 'much food' (πολλῶν ἐδεσμάτων) are contrasted with 'the have-nots' (i.e. those who do not have food, μὴ ἐχόντων ἐδέσματα, 17.3).[42] Similarly, the woman church insists that the bodies of those who do not have food are being destroyed because of their lack of nourishment. But this passage in Hermas is even clearer than 1 Cor 11.17–34 that, within the binary construct of the 'haves/have-nots', both parties suffer physical damage because those who eat much food also 'bring weakness to the flesh and harm their bodies' (17.3). The solution, according to the woman church, is to anticipate the coming judgement and for the rich to care for the needy while the time remains: 'Look to the coming judgement. You who are better off, therefore, seek out the hungry until the tower is completed. For after the tower is completed, you may wish to do good, but you will not have an opportunity' (17.5).

There is no clear evidence of a direct literary relationship between Hermas and any of the Pauline epistles.[43] The thematic parallels are quite suggestive, however – not as an indication that Hermas is drawing upon 1 Corinthians 11, but rather as a witness to different authors writing in different contexts, both of whom are concerned about problems of deprivation and overconsumption at common meals celebrated by Christ-following communities.[44] This passage from Hermas 17, that is, strengthens

40 The translation of this phrase is adopted from M. Grundeken, *Community Building in the Shepherd of Hermas: A Critical Study of Some Key Aspects* (VCSup 131; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 143. At several points I am indebted to Grundeken's helpful translation and analysis of this passage.

41 On the translation of the rare word ἀσυγκρασία as 'lack of community spirit', see Grundeken, *Community Building*, 142.

42 In v. 5, 'you who are better off' (οἱ ὑπερέχοντες) are contrasted with 'the hungry' (τοὺς πεινῶντας), and in v. 6 'you who take pride in your wealth' (ὑμεῖς οἱ γαυρούμενοι ἐν τῷ πλούτῳ ὑμῶν) with 'the needy' (οἱ ὑστερούμενοι). This is characteristic of the rich/poor binary found throughout Hermas (cf. the parable of the elm and the vine in 51.1–10).

43 C. Jefford, however, has recently made a case for Hermas' awareness of the Pauline tradition: 'Missing Pauline Tradition in the Apostolic Fathers? *Didache*, *Shephard of Hermas*, Papias, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the *Epistle to Diognetus*', *The Apostolic Fathers and Paul* (ed. T. Still and D. Wilhite; PPSD 2; London: T&T Clark, 2017) 41–60, at 49–52.

44 Grundeken (*Community Building*, 145–7) lists six similarities between 1 Cor 11.17–34 and Herm. 17: (1) both authors are troubled by communal division (1 Cor 11.18–19; Hermas mentions ἀσυγκρασία and διχοστασίαι in 17.4, 9); (2) both critique the 'haves' for not sharing with the 'have-nots', even using similar terms (μὴ ἔχοντες in 1 Cor 11.22 and οἱ ἔχοντες, οἱ ὑπερέχοντες and μὴ ἔχοντες ἐδέσματα in Herm. 17.3–5); (3) both texts present illness (ἀσθενής in 1 Cor 11.30 and ἀσθένειαν in Herm. 17.3) and bodily harm as consequences of not sharing food; (4) judgement is a motif in both passages, although for Paul God's judgement upon those who participate in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner is manifested

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the claim that 1 Cor 11.30 should be read as a reference to the physical suffering of members of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* because of shameful dining practices: the 'have-nots' face weakness, illness and the possibility of death because they are not sufficiently nourished, whereas the 'haves' are threatened with these same physical consequences due to their overindulgence at the meal called 'the Lord's Supper'.

6. Conclusion

At the beginning of Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper in Corinth, he frames the discussion by making the observation that, when the Corinthians gather together, 'it is not for the better but for the worse' (11.17). To rephrase this strategic comment in contemporary English idiom, we might say that these gatherings, which ought to promote flourishing, are producing harm. Without doubt this harm is social and even spiritual: it involves divisions (vv. 18–19), feelings of superiority (v. 19), contempt and humiliation (v. 22), liability for the crucifixion of Jesus (v. 27) and divine judgement and chastisement (vv. 29, 31–2, 34). Yet this harm is also physical, for both the hungry who are not sufficiently cared for at community gatherings and the well-off who overindulge are experiencing weakness, illness and the potential loss of life. As the Shepherd of Hermas indicates in a different context, one manifestation of gathering for 'the better' in Corinth would be for those who have to share with the needy, for such generosity and restraint would work for the flourishing of both the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'.

Care for the poor was supposed to be an important social value among the Pauline churches, to judge from the frequency of comments on this matter elsewhere in the Pauline letters and from Paul's own commitment to providing material support to the needy (Rom 12.8, 13–16; 15.25–31; 1 Cor 16.1–4; 2 Cor 8.1–9.15; Gal 2.10; 6.9–10; Eph 4.28; 1 Thess 4.9–12; 5.14; 2 Thess 3.6–13; 1 Tim 5.3–16; 6.17–19; Titus 3.14).[45] In an insightful essay, M. Rhodes draws upon recent work in the field of virtue ethics to argue that 1 Cor 11.17–34 represents Paul's attempt to frame the common meal as a 'formative practice'. By the term 'formative practice', Rhodes means '*telos*-shaped, embodied, social actions that carry an embedded intention to shape the

in the present (11.29, 31–2, 34), whereas in Herm. 17 judgement is eschatological (17.5); (5) both texts contain the theme of 'chastisement' (1 Cor 11.32; Herm. 17.10); and (6) 'both authors use the same unusual combination of μὴ ἔχοντες and a form of πεινάω. Paul combines ὃς πεινᾷ (v. 21, cf. v. 34) with μὴ ἔχοντας (v. 22); Hermas μὴ ἔχοντες ἐδέσματα (v. 3) with οἱ πεινῶντες (v. 5). In (the Septuagint and) the New Testament the combination of μὴ ἔχοντες and πεινάω in the same context is found only in 1 Cor 11.21–22. In *Hermas* μὴ ἔχοντες (in the sense of "have-nots") and (a form of) πεινάω is used only in *Vis.* 3,9,5' (147).

45 On this topic, see D. Downs, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 143–73.

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character of the individual practitioner, the politics of the community, and the world "out there"'.[46] With regard to 1 Cor 11.17–34, Rhodes writes:

> Paul believed that the Lord's Supper practice ought to have been 'for the better.' This Eucharistic practice, which served as a compressed narrative of Christ's self-sacrificial death on behalf of his church, would orient the community toward a common *telos* and foster virtues of hospitality, care for others, and solidarity with the 'have nots.' But the Corinthians' performance of the practice rendered it 'for the worse,' instead. What made their performance for the worse was that at their meals they shamed the poor, probably by following typical Greco-Roman meal manners in discriminating between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in portion size, quality of fare, and seating of the meal.[47]

Rhodes's conclusion can be sharpened by the observation that the practice of the Lord's Supper at Corinth was not merely shaming the poor; it was harming their bodies and threatening to kill them. And it was having the same effect upon at least some of the 'haves' because of their overconsumption. In Paul's attempt to reshape Corinthian practices, he reminds his readers of their particular *telos*: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (11.26). While awaiting the return of the Lord, the Corinthians were to avoid God's judgement by 'discerning the body' (11.29). According to Paul's theological vision, therefore, a flourishing body reflects a rightly ordered practice of the Lord's Supper and a proper remembrance of the Lord's death.

It is possible, too, that there may have been an operative yet unstated ethical principle that shapes Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11.17–34, namely that of ἰσότης, 'equality' or 'equity'. In the context of his discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11.17–34, Paul does not invoke the concept of ἰσότης. Yet he does draw upon this concept in a later discussion of the distribution of material resources between those who possess an abundance and those in need. In his appeal for the Corinthians to contribute to the material collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem, Paul writes: 'It is not that others should have relief and you affliction, but it is a matter of equality. At the present time your abundance is for their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, so that there may be equality. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little"' (2 Cor 8.13–15).[48] For Paul in 2 Corinthians, an equitable distribution of material resources is defined and supported by his citation of LXX Exod 16.18: no one should have too much, and no one should have too little. If there is an implicit ethical principle that undergirds Paul's treatment of the sharing of food at meals celebrated by

46 Rhodes, '"Forward unto Virtue"', 120.

47 Rhodes, '"Forward unto Virtue"', 136.

48 See esp. L. Welborn, '"That There May Be Equality": The Contexts and Consequences of a Pauline Ideal', *NTS* 59 (2013) 73–90.

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Corinthian Christ-followers, including the common meal called 'the Lord's Supper', it may be similar to the principle articulated in this text from Israel's wilderness narrative: the one who consumes much should not consume too much, and the one who consumes little should not consume too little.

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