

Feature Article: JAF4352

## THE SACRAMENT OF THE SUPPER

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This article first appeared in CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 35, number 02 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

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The sacred supper introduced by Jesus Christ for His church's nourishment in faith remains one of the twin pillars on which Christian worship rests. These two pillars are summarized as Word and sacrament. They are vital elements of public worship and personal piety for all Christians: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. Every branch of Christendom devoutly observes "Holy Communion" in its own way; but it is historical fact that the sacraments, given by Christ to bind the church together, have become issues over which the church has divided.

Baptism, intended to initiate us into our covenant relationship with Christ and His church, has been shredded over issues of mode of baptism (how it is done), subject of baptism (who is baptized), as well as the meaning of baptism (what it accomplishes). Likewise, the church's use of the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion, or the Eucharist) has been marred primarily by the issue of substance: what is being given and received in the Communion elements?

### FOUR VIEWS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

In fairness, every Christian church takes the ordinance of the Lord's Supper seriously. The disagreement comes with exactly how the significance of the Supper is understood. A brief review of the four views of the Lord's Supper can be summarized as follows:

**Transubstantiation** (Roman Catholic and Orthodox views): In the sacrifice of the Mass, the bread and wine are mystically changed into the body and blood of Christ. Though they look, taste, and feel like bread and wine, they are indeed the very body and blood of Christ: hence, *trans* (change) *substantiation* (of substance), from the Latin word *trans-substantiatio*. The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called

transubstantiation.”<sup>1</sup> In the Eastern Orthodox churches, there is no moment when the elements are consecrated and transubstantiated (Greek: *metousiosis*), but this does happen in the holy liturgy of the Greek church, and transubstantiation is the result. Hence, Christ is “truly, really, and substantially” present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. “How are we to understand the word transubstantiation? In the exposition of the faith by the Eastern Patriarchs, it is said that the word transubstantiation is not to be taken to define the manner in which the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord; for this none can understand but God; but only thus much is signified, that the bread truly, really, and substantially becomes the very true Body of the Lord, and the wine the very Blood of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

**Consubstantiation** (Lutheran view): The bread and wine remain just that, but through the liturgy (Word) and the Spirit they become vehicles to communicate to believers the body and blood of Christ. Christ is received “in, with and around” the Communion elements. Hence, *con* (with) *substantiation* (substance). “It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected.”<sup>3</sup>

**Memorial View** (view of Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Reformed Church): The Lord’s Supper simply reminds us of the gospel. The supper is a “picture” of the gospel Word, serving to bring to our mind the sacrifice of Christ for sin. The Lord’s Supper does not convey anything to the believer except a remembrance of what Christ has done to save us. “To eat the body of Christ spiritually is nothing else than to trust in spirit and heart upon the mercy and goodness of God through Christ, that is, to be sure with unshaken faith that God is going to give us pardon for our sins and the joy of everlasting blessedness on account of His Son, who was made wholly ours, was offered for us, and reconciled the divine righteousness to us.”<sup>4</sup>

**Reformed View** (view of John Calvin and the Reformed churches—Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Anglican): The Lord Jesus Christ is “really but spiritually” present at the Lord’s Supper, yet not in the elements of bread and wine. Through living (saving) faith, Christ communicates and conveys Himself to those believers who come to the table in a worthy manner. The elements of bread and wine do not convey Christ to anyone. The Lord’s Supper is a means, channel, or instrument of grace to genuine Christians, designed to nurture them in the faith. Word and sacrament work together in conveying grace to believers. “Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.”<sup>5</sup>

I remind the reader that all five groups of Christians take seriously the Lord's Supper. All four views are to be handled with due respect. However, not all these views can be correct. The significant differences exclude a mutual acceptance of all four views. This article will now focus on the contrast of two views, the Roman Catholic and the Reformed, with the understanding that the Reformed critique of the Roman Catholic view can also be applied largely to the Eastern Orthodox and somewhat to the Lutheran views, and, furthermore, that adherents of the memorial view would almost entirely agree with the Reformed critique of Roman Catholic sacramentalism.

### ROMAN OR REFORMED

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) clearly sets forth the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist (a word that means "thanksgiving," from the Greek word *eucharisteo*). In Article 3, concerning the "Seven Sacraments of the Church," paragraphs 1322 to 1421, the Catholic catechism explicitly sets forth four erroneous doctrines:

1. The Eucharist is "the source and summit" of the Christian life (para. 1321).
2. The Eucharist is "the sum and summary" of the Christian faith (para. 1327).
3. The Sacrifice of the Mass is the "unbloody" sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist (para. 1367, 1410, 1414).
4. The bread and wine, when consecrated by a priest, are changed "in substance" into the body and blood of Christ and should therefore be worshipped (para. 1373-1381, 1413).<sup>6</sup>

A careful review of Scripture yields correction and balance to the Catholic errors. First, Scripture proclaims that it is the preaching of the Word and the proclamation of the gospel that should be "source and summit" of the Christian life (Rom. 1:16–17; Acts 2:42–47; 1 Cor. 15:1–11; 2 Tim. 3:16–4:5). Through the power of the Spirit speaking in the preached Word, the church is both brought into being and sustained in its holy life (1 Tim. 3:14–16). The sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are supplemental to, and supportive of, the preached Word but never superior to it. The sacraments derive both their meaning and their efficacy from the gospel—the Word of salvation. The sacraments are visible signs and sensory reminders of the gospel message proclaimed in God's Word.

John Calvin correctly expressed the view that a gracious God reveals His gospel message to mankind in two manners. First, and primarily, the good news is set forth in the preached Word. Second, and attendant to the first, the gospel is depicted in pictorial form by means of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ knew that our understanding of salvation would be augmented by symbols that would appeal to our full senses: sight, touch, taste, smell, as well as the hearing of God's Word. Calvin explains this in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

*We have in the sacraments another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the Gospel. It is very important that some definite doctrine concerning them be taught, that we may learn from it*

*both the purpose for which they were instituted and their present use. By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness. Yet, properly speaking, it is not so much needed to confirm his Sacred Word as to establish us in faith in it. For God's truth is of itself firm and sure enough, and it cannot receive better confirmation from any other source than from itself. But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.<sup>7</sup>*

Therefore, the Christian church should view the sacraments as attendant to the Word and never to be celebrated apart from the preached Word. It is the good news of the gospel that gives substance and meaning to the sacraments. Any practice that elevates liturgy and sacrament over preaching and the Word is guaranteed to err. The sermon always trumps the sacrament. Building faith and community life around the Eucharist is putting the cart before the horse. This truth necessitates the correction of a second error.

The “sum and summary” of the Christian faith is neither the Lord’s Supper nor the church’s liturgy, but found, again, in the Holy Scriptures: the Word of God. It is the apostolic *kerugma* (proclamation) that forms the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). It is most interesting that the New Testament always presents the preaching (message) of Christ and His apostles as the essence of “the faith,” and never the sacraments. In fact, the “breaking of bread” (Lord’s Supper) is explicitly mentioned only six times in the entire New Testament (Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; Acts 2 and 20; and 1 Cor. 10–11) while the preaching and teaching of the Word of God is explicitly referenced more than one hundred times in the New Testament. In summary: the Christian faith and Christian church are fundamentally Word-centered with the sacraments as supplements to this Scripture focus. This is the primary difference between Catholic and Protestant life, faith, and worship. The Roman Catholic Church is sacerdotal—relying on a system of priestly rites for salvation and sanctification. The Protestant church is evangelical—dependent on the gospel and the preaching of God’s Word. The sacraments augment the preached message, but they never replace it as the “sum and summary” of the Christian faith.

Third, Christ is sacrificed “once for all” on the cross of Calvary and never again in any other form or on any other occasion (1 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 10). The author of Hebrews writes, “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God...for by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb. 10:11–12). The Eucharist is neither a sacrifice nor a salvific ordinance. People are saved by believing in Christ as set forth in the gospel (Rom. 10:8–17). The sacraments do not convey saving faith but rather sanctifying grace to those who are already saved.

Herein lies the danger of transubstantiation and the sacramental system of Rome. It creates the expectation that salvation is found in a continual resacrificing of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. In propagating this serious error, Christ is replaced by the church, the gospel is replaced by the Eucharist, and the Holy Spirit is replaced by a sacerdotal (priestly) system. God atones for sin in Jesus Christ and His once-for-all sacrifice on Calvary. People are saved when the Holy Spirit brings them to repentance and faith, and applies Christ's finished work to their souls. No one ever has been nor can ever be saved by taking the Lord's Supper. It is the gospel of God (not the sacrament) that is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16–17).

Finally, Jesus spoke of the bread as His body and the cup of wine as His blood in a metaphorical manner. The plain and common understanding of language demands this interpretation. Jesus often used metaphors to point to both His person and His work: He is the bread of life, the light of the world, the true vine, and so forth. In none of these metaphors was Jesus claiming a change of His human substance (nature) into food, energy, or vegetable life. To interpret the words of institution in the Lord's Supper in any other manner than metaphorical is nonsensical and unbiblical. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* clearly, and rather bluntly, but correctly states: "That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense and reason" (WCF, 29–6). Christ is "present" in the Lord's Supper in a real but spiritual manner and communicates Himself to those who possess saving faith. But He is not present in the elements of bread and wine. The elements of the Lord's Supper do not become different substances any more than the water in baptism. Christ's presence is in the event (sacramental observance) but not in the things (bread and wine) of that holy supper.

Any mechanical view (transubstantiation or consubstantiation) is fraught with misconceptions and malpractice. The Roman view of transubstantiation leads to idolatry—the worship of the Communion elements. Growing up as a Catholic child, serving as an altar boy, and studying for four years in preparation for the Catholic priesthood led me into many superstitious stories and mystical practices surrounding the Eucharist. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* is correct when it states that transubstantiation "overthroweth the nature of the Sacrament, and both has been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatry."<sup>8</sup>

### A CALL FOR REFORMATION

In his tract *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, John Calvin wrote to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V of Spain, outlining the reasons for the Protestant Reformation. He gave four: the need to reform public worship, the doctrine of salvation, the Sacraments, and the government of the church. Calvin wrote:

*If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only<sup>[OBJ]</sup> occupy*

*the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain. After these come the Sacraments and the Government of the Church, which, as they were instituted for the preservation of these branches of doctrine, ought not to be employed for any other purpose; and, indeed, the only means of ascertaining whether they are administered purely and in due form, or otherwise, is to bring them to this test.<sup>9</sup>*

Those four issues—worship, justification by faith, sacraments, and polity—remain four aspects of Christian life and faith that necessitate diligent oversight and periodic renewal. The continual diligence and reforming efforts of pastors and church officers to guard, guide, and govern the people of God include the preservation and renewal of biblical practices surrounding the administration of the Lord’s Supper. Many of the practical questions surrounding the Lord’s Supper do indeed have scriptural guidelines that should shape our practices at the sacred table. Four such questions can be answered by these biblical guidelines.

First, how often should Holy Communion be celebrated? Weekly, monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually? Church traditions point to all four practices. The Scripture, however, is vague: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup” (1 Cor. 11:25). Jesus simply said, “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19), but gave no instruction about the frequency of this remembrance meal. The general rule is simply this: the Lord’s Supper is an important means of grace to be administered along with the preaching of the Word on a schedule determined best by the officers of the church. No schedule can be defended dogmatically.

Second, who is welcome to the Lord’s Table? First Corinthians 11 sets forth the concept of a “worthy manner” in which to receive Communion. A survey of the New Testament would lead to four preconditions for the taking of the Lord’s Supper:

1. Only by baptized church members.
2. Only by those deemed old enough or able to discern the significance of both church membership and the sacraments.
3. Only those in good standing with the church (i.e., not under discipline that bars them from the table).
4. Only by those Christians in right relationship with one another: an expression of loving communion of the saints.

Third, can Communion be taken to shut-ins, prisoners, or the sick? Yes; the Lord’s Supper is a celebration of both our union with Christ and our communion with other saints. Members of the church body may, and should, share in the Word and sacrament, even though they are unable to attend the church’s corporate worship services. All branches of Christianity take the sacrament to members unable to attend the church services.

Fourth, what about “private Communion” at weddings or “Internet Communion” for the cyber-church? The Lord’s Supper belongs to the church body but not to an individual or small group. Corporate worship, body life, and physical togetherness are the context of Holy Communion. The very idea of Internet Communion violates the parameters set forth by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. Communion in small groups—bible studies, retreats, mission trips—should be under the auspices of church officers with explicit approval. The Lord’s Supper can never be administered by unauthorized individuals. Whenever the supper is celebrated, it must be open to any church members who might desire to partake of it, because the supper belongs to the church and not to private parties. The nature of the sacrament is its communion—its common union among the members of the church.

### SIGN AND SEAL

The Lord’s Supper is one of God’s means of grace whereby the benefits of Christ’s atonement for sanctifying the saints is symbolized, set forth in visible form, and guaranteed to people of saving faith. It is a sign (symbol) and seal (guarantee) of the covenant of grace (gospel), instituted by Christ, belonging to the church, and perpetually afforded to Christians to help them “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). The nature of the sacrament calls for mutual respect on the part of those who hold differing views. But it also calls for diligent efforts to keep pure, simple, and biblical this precious ordinance (sacrament) given by Christ to His church. A healthy church and a well-nourished Christian depend on a balanced diet of Word and sacrament— the Scripture and the supper.

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### NOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1994), 334–74.
- 2 *The Longer Catechism of the Orthodox Catholic Eastern Church*. Available at: [www.pravoslavieto.com/docs/eng/orthodox\\_catechism\\_of\\_Philaret.htm](http://www.pravoslavieto.com/docs/eng/orthodox_catechism_of_Philaret.htm); q. 340.
- 3 *The Augsburg Confession of Faith: Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 34.
- 4 Huldreich (Ulrich) Zwingli, *The Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1922), 252.
- 5 *Westminster Confession of Faith: “Of the Lord’s Supper”* (29-7) (Decatur, GA: Christian Education and Publications, 1990), 93.
- 6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 347.
- 7 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, Book 4, chap. 14, “The Sacraments” (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1276, 1278.
- 8 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29-7.
- 9 John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*; vol. 1., ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 126.