

Four Views on the Lord's Supper

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Dr. Grover Gunn, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Winona, MS, discusses the four differing views of the Lord's Supper in his sermon "Four Views of the Lord's Supper," based on Matthew 26:26-28. He first compares the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, starting with Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "*Unless one is born again (from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (John 3:3).

Baptism with water sacramentally symbolizes this spiritual birth... This baptism with water symbolizes Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit... symbolized by water because water cleanses and water gives life... He brings us to spiritual life, and he washes away our sins... When we are saved, the Holy Spirit comes down upon us, creates faith in our hearts, and thus unites us to Christ... puts us into a permanent mystical union with Christ. The human experience of this mystical union is saving faith.

Two things therefore follow from this doctrine of baptism. First, believers are born again only once, therefore, the sign of baptism must be applied to a person only once. It is toying with this sacrament when a person asks to be baptized every time he "re-commits" himself to Christ, or every time he moves to a new church that requires baptism for membership regardless how many times he has been baptized. Second, since baptism is a sign of the washing away of sins because of Christ's atoning death, it can never be a testimony of our "decision" for Christ. Rather, it is God's testimony to us and to the congregation of his work of saving us from sin. As passive recipients of the washing of regeneration, we contributed nothing to our rebirth.

Spiritual Eating and Drinking

In contrast to water baptism,

the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of spiritual nurture. How many times do you eat? Many times. How often do you eat? You eat frequently and regularly. In like manner, you partake of the Lord's Supper frequently and regularly. When you eat, do you have an active role? Yes, you do. You feed yourself. In like manner, the Lord's Supper is an active sacrament. You take, you eat, you drink, you do this in remembrance, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

This spiritual eating and drinking is seen in Jesus' words in John 6:53-54, "*Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.*" Rev. Gunn says,

Jesus is not talking directly about the Lord's Supper in John 6 but rather about that spiritual truth which the Lord's Supper illustrates and points to... Jesus is using eating and drinking as a metaphor for depending upon Jesus for spiritual life and nourishment.

Bread nourishes, sustains and maintains the life of the body. Wine nourishes, refreshes, strengthens and gladdens. That is what the sacrificial work of Jesus does for us spiritually.

We must constantly commune with Christ, or we will spiritually weaken and die. When we abide in Christ as a branch abides in a vine, we spiritually thrive and bear much fruit. When we neglect communion with Christ, we are like a branch severed from the vine. The branch is deprived of the life sustaining sap, and it withers and dies.

So the Lord's Supper is the active sacrament of spiritual nourishment, the repeated sacrament that we should partake of regularly and frequently.

The symbolism of the Lord's Supper is that of eating and drinking. Jesus said that the sacramental bread which we break is His body, and the sacramental drink which we bless is His blood. In what sense is that true? In what way does the Lord's Supper involve the literal body and blood of Christ?

Over the centuries, four different views have been taught regarding these questions, with the presence (or absence) of Christ as the focus. Rev. Gunn discusses them, beginning with the furthest from the Reformed view.

Roman Catholic Transubstantiation

The first view – the furthest – is the Roman Catholic's *transubstantiation*. He says,

The view of Rome is that the bread retains the outer form of bread, but the invisible substance of the bread becomes the literal body of Jesus. The bread still looks, feels, smells and tastes like bread, but it is really the flesh of Jesus. Everyone who eats the bread eats the flesh of Jesus whether he eats in faith or eats in unbelief. According to this view, when Jesus held up the bread and said, "This is My body," what He meant was, "This bread still has the outer form of bread, but its imperceptible inner substance has become My flesh. This bread has become an amalgam, a mixture, a compound of bread and flesh with the attributes of the bread (or the accidents of bread, to use the philosophical term) and the substance of human flesh."

How is this view problematic and unscriptural? In addition to the impossibility of Jesus' human nature to be ubiquitous (ability to be physically present in many places at once),

The problem with this view is that it says that Jesus' body and blood are here on earth every time someone celebrates the Lord's Supper. That simply is not true. Jesus is still with us on earth in terms of His divinity and through His Holy Spirit, and that is why Jesus could promise that He will be with us always, even to the end of the age. Jesus' humanity, however, is not on earth but in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus' in His humanity will not return to earth until that event we call the Second Coming (John 16:7; Acts 3:20-21; Phil 3:20-21; 1 Cor 11:26). If Jesus' body and blood are already here on earth every time we partake of the Lord's Supper, then the Second Coming makes no sense.

Lutheran Consubstantiation

The second view is the Lutheran's *consubstantiation*:

This view says that when Jesus' was glorified, His physical body became omnipresent. His physical body is now everywhere, but it is especially present in the communion bread like magnetism is present in a magnet. According to this view, when Jesus held up the bread

and said, "This is My body," what He meant was, "This bread is still bread, but My body is now in and with and under it."

The problem with this view is that Jesus' glorified body is not omnipresent. It is still a localized human body. When Stephen was martyred and looked into heaven, He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God with a localized body. Other verses tell us that Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1; Heb 10:12-13).

Luther took Jesus' words, "This is my body," quite literally instead of spiritually. In order to avoid the Roman Catholic error of transforming the elements into the human nature of Christ, Luther appealed to the concept of the communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*). With this idea, the divine attribute of omnipresence (ubiquity) could be predicated of, or transferred to, the human nature of Christ. Hence, Christ could be at God's right hand in heaven, and still be present everywhere where the Lord's Supper is being administered. He is present, "in, with and under" the elements.

Evangelical Memorialism

The third view, often called *memorialism*, avoids the problems of trans- and con- substantiation. Christ is not present when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. This third view is also called the Zwinglian view, because it was Huldrych Zwingli who developed the doctrine.

According to this view, the bread and wine are bare symbols... when Jesus held up the bread and said, "This is my body," what He meant was, "This bread represents My body." This view is getting close to the truth because the bread and wine do only symbolize the body and blood of Jesus. The problem with it is that the New Testament teaches that we can have a real communion or fellowship with the real body and blood of Jesus through the communion service, "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*" (1 Cor 10:16).

The Zwinglian view is the most popular among evangelicals because of their over-reaction against the Roman Catholic transubstantiation (and many other things that seem "Catholic"). The Lord's Supper is nothing more than a memorial service to Christ, who himself said, "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (Luke 22:19). This is why this view is often ridiculed as the "real absence" view in contrast to the other three views that teach the "real presence" of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

The problem with this memorial view is that it does not take 1 Corinthians 10:16 seriously when it says that the Lord's Supper is a real "participation" or communion (*koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ through the Spirit, by faith. "There is more at work here than our imagination," Rev. Gunn says.

Since the Lord's Supper has become a mere memorial, it is mostly forgotten in most evangelical worship services, so that it is not regularly or frequently administered. As well, because the reading of the Law, the confession of sin, and the declaration of pardon have all but disappeared from the service, the sense of sin and the true gospel have also fallen into disfavor. W.

Robert Godfrey, in his article, "Calvin and the Eucharist," therefore explains how the altar call has replaced the Lord's Supper:

Is it possible that to some extent the development of the altar call in evangelicalism is a response to the felt inadequacy of our services when they do not end in the heart of the gospel? Is it perhaps an unspoken desire to have that central message made in the Sacrament that God has instituted?

Church history illuminates the development of these four views. The early church fathers clearly used symbolic vocabulary plus the spiritual eating and drinking of Christ. Eusebius in the 4th century said, "We are continually fed with the Savior's body, we continually participate in the Lamb's blood." Other early church fathers who combined real presence and symbolic vocabulary include Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius, and Augustine.

After Augustine, there was a trend towards literal real presence language, and by the 9th century, the monk Paschasius Radbertus first developed the transubstantiation view. By the mid-11th century, it was a dogma of the church, and was officially accepted in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). So it could be truly said that transubstantiation was a Roman innovation.

The 16th century Protestant Reformers rejected Rome's transubstantiation, but soon, Luther and Zwingli had differing views. In 1529, the difference between Luther and Zwingli came to a head. To reconcile their differences, Philip of Hesse, leader of the German princes, invited Zwingli and Luther to meet at his castle in Marburg. The dispute was often heated, and ended in the final split between the Lutheran and Reformed movements.

Reformed Real Presence

During this time, John Calvin formulated the view that was accepted by all Reformed churches. Rev. Gunn explains the *Reformed view*:

According to this view, the bread and wine represent the body and blood of Jesus. They do not in any way become the literal body and blood themselves. We do not literally chew on Jesus' flesh with our teeth or literally drink Jesus' blood with our mouths. But when we partake of the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit uses the symbolic message that Jesus is our spiritual nourishment, to strengthen our faith in Jesus... The Holy Spirit accomplishes this in a way beyond our understanding, not through Jesus' coming down to earth at this time, but through our mystically ascending to heaven.

Again, the Reformed view is not transubstantiation, not consubstantiation, but at the same time, it is much more than memorialism. Much more, because it is not merely a memorial to Christ, or a testimony of our faith in Christ. Rather, it is both real communion with Christ in heaven and nourishment of our faith:

The Christian's identification with the risen Christ is so real and significant that there is a genuine sense in which the Christian is now where Christ is. The Christian is seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph 2:4-6). The Christian has come to the heavenly Jerusalem and to Jesus and His blood (Heb 12:22-24). We are where Jesus is through the mystical union effected by the Holy Spirit. Our subjective experience of the mystical union grows as our

faith grows. The Holy Spirit uses the communion service to increase our faith, to strengthen our faith, to confirm our faith. Thus through the communion service, we can have communion with the total person of Christ, including His body which was broken and His blood which was shed for our salvation.

Christian, do you believe this? If you do, you are invited to the Lord's communion table: *"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"* (Psa 34:8). *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food"* (Isa 55:1, 2).