

Basics of the Reformed Faith: The Lord's Supper

By Kim Riddlebarger

Pastor, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, California

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The Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper is grounded in an important distinction between the sign and seal (bread and wine), the thing signified (forgiveness through his blood, the "blood of the covenant"), and a sacramental union between the two (our Lord's words "this is my body"). This three-fold distinction arises directly from the words of institution spoken by Jesus himself. *"Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'"* (Matthew 26:26-29).

When Jesus speaks of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, we take him at his word without resorting to confusing the sign (bread and wine) with the thing signified (Christ's body and blood). Nor should we insert words such as "this represents my body," as in the case of those who believe that the Lord's Supper is essentially a memorial meal and that nothing is received through partaking of the bread and wine. As Paul calls "Christ the rock" (1 Corinthians 10:4), so too, the bread is Jesus' body, not because the sign is miraculously changed into the thing signified (as the Roman Catholic church erroneously contends in transubstantiation), but because Christ can speak of the bread (the sign) as though it were the thing signified (his body) using the language of sacraments. Because a true sacramental union exists between the sign and the thing signified, the bread can indeed be spoken of as Christ's body as Jesus does when instituting the sacrament (Matthew 26:26 ff).

Following Calvin, the Reformed have tried to keep in mind both the reality of Christ's ascension, wherein Christ's true human nature is now in heaven awaiting his return (Acts 1:9-11), and the real presence of Christ in the sacrament (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Though Christ's true human nature is in heaven, the believer receives all of his saving benefits, because, through faith, the Holy Spirit has united the believer here on earth to Christ in heaven. So too, Christ can be in heaven and the believer can receive his true body and blood, because the same Holy Spirit ensures that those already in union with Christ receive his true body and blood when they take bread and wine in faith (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-29).

Therefore, the manner of eating is spiritual, not physical. We truly receive Christ by faith and not by the mouth (John 6:63 may apply here). In the words of institution, the body of Christ is not brought down to us, i.e., localized on an altar "in, with, and under" as Lutherans argue. Rather, the believer is able to feed upon Christ who sits at God's right hand through the power of the Holy Spirit who ensures that we truly receive what is promised. The manner of reception is faith, since it is the soul, not the body, which receives the reality of what is promised, while the mouth

receives only the consecrated bread and wine. Nevertheless, when we eat the consecrated bread and drink the wine, through faith, the Holy Spirit ensures that we receive the true body and blood of Christ which is in heaven because we are in union with him. Augustine had it right when he said “believe, and thou hast eaten.”

That Christ is sacramentally present with his people through the Supper as they feed upon him in faith then is the heart of the biblical teaching and Reformed doctrine regarding the Lord’s Supper. But there is also an eschatological dimension here (Revelation 19:6-9), as the earthly celebration of the Supper anticipates the great marriage supper yet to come. There is a covenantal dimension here as well, as each time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, God himself re-affirms his covenant oath to save sinners by bearing the curse for them. Jesus Christ still enjoys table fellowship with sinners as was typologically set forth in Exodus 24, and then realized in those churches established throughout the apostolic era, as we see in a passage such as 1 Corinthians 11:23-32.

Given the biblical language of “real presence” in the words of institution, in addition to the biblical practice of connecting the Word and sacrament (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11; Acts 20:7), it is hard to make a purely human assessment of our own worthiness to partake as the basis for receiving the Supper. Certain questions haunt us. “Do I have enough faith?” “Have I sufficiently confessed my sins and purified my heart?” Inevitably, the nature of this introspective process depreciates the fact that the essence of the Supper is a spiritual feeding and a covenant meal, in which God re-affirms his covenant oath. It is the Holy Spirit working through the Word, and not a priest or minister that makes the sacrament efficacious for believers. God is the active party (not even the “rememberer”), and this is why we must see the Supper and the elements of bread and wine as gracious gifts from God—manna from heaven, as it were—given to us by God to communicate to us the realities of the blessings of the covenant of grace, through the signs instituted by God. The Supper is, therefore, not incidental to the Christian life, but must be seen as a vital part of our sanctification and growth in godliness.

In this meal, Jesus still invites repentant tax collectors and sinners to join him. At the table of the Lord, our gracious God confirms the promise of the gospel, and through partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, God will strengthen and nourish our faith, renew his covenant, and remind us that we are his. Jesus does this because he is our living bread, who came down from heaven.