

## THE LORD'S SUPPER (Week 2): PRESENT AND FUTURE

### 1. The presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper: "This is my body, this is my blood"

#### 1.1 Historical Views

##### (1) Early Church

- The bread and wine are changed/converted into Christ's body and blood in the sense that, in the sacramental actions, they become means that bear Christ's life to us. They do not cease to be bread and wine but are joined with Christ in some unexplained mystical way to become the means by which we receive Christ's body and blood for the nourishment of our souls.
- Signs/symbols embody and convey what they signify. (Illustration: Metal in a flame)

##### (2) Medieval Church

- Theologians begin to conceive of sacramental signs/symbols in opposition to the reality they signify: if something is a sign or symbol, then it is not real and does not embody and convey the reality it signifies.
- Thus, in order to affirm Christ's presence in the sacrament, the church came to believe that the signs (bread and wine) had to be transformed into the reality they signify (Christ) in order for Christ to be truly or really present.
- The Council of Trent: "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."

(Note: "substance" is not a material/physical lump of stuff, i.e. the molecules of Jesus' body. According to Thomas Aquinas, Christ's body is only apparent to the intellect, not to the physical senses. Christ's physical body and blood are not contained locally in the bread and wine. The physical properties accessible to the senses remain (appearance, touch, taste, smell, etc.).

##### (3) Reformation

- Zwingli: The bread and wine are only signs/symbols by which we remember Christ's past work (like pictures that remind us). We do not receive Christ's life in us through the signs/symbols.
- Luther: "In, with, and under" the signs/symbols of bread and wine, we receive Christ's physical body and blood. Christ's body can be everywhere because his human body shares in the properties of his divine nature (including his omnipresence). This must be true because Jesus says of the bread and wine "This is my body/blood." No philosophical explanation is needed or desired.
- Calvin: Through the signs/symbols, we receive Christ's divine-human life in us as we "ascend" in the Spirit to have communion with the ascended Christ.

## 1.2 Biblical Data

- Last Supper: Jesus says of the bread and wine: “This is my body...This is my blood.”
- 1 Cor 10:16: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in (Gr. *koinonia*: sharing in, participation in) the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”
- John 6:51–58

“The passage before us has no direct reference to this ordinance, as it was afterwards to be instituted. It refers to the Christian life in general. But very plainly the idea here exhibited is the same that is presented to us in the institution of the Lord’s Supper under a different form. If such a view as we have now taken of the extra-sacramental life of the believer, on the ground of the representation here made by Christ himself, be admitted with any clear and full conviction, it will not be possible to resist the impression, that the sacrament itself can involve, to say the least, nothing less.” (John Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*)

## 1.3 Theological Synthesis

1. Christ is a human being who is like us in every way except for sin (Heb 2:17). Even after the resurrection, Jesus’ body was a truly human, physical body. A truly human body is limited in extent, and thus it cannot be multiple places at once.
2. Christ has ascended to heaven to the right hand of the Father (Acts 1:6–11; 2:32–36; Heb 1:3). Christ is not accessible or present with us in the body at the present time. His ascension creates a kind of real absence.
3. Christ is present with us in this current era between his first and second coming in the person of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–20, 25–29; 16:4–15; Acts 1:4–8; 2:1–36; Rom 8:9). The Spirit unites us to Christ himself. Our living connection with Christ by the Spirit is so deep that it is nothing less than Christ himself living in us and enabling us to be partakers of the divine nature (John 14:20; Gal 2:20; Rom 8:9–11; 2 Pet 2:4).
4. In Christ, we have access to the life and worship of heaven in the Spirit (Eph 1:18–21; 2:4–7; Col 3:1–4). In the liturgy, we have a special audience and meeting with God together with all the angels and the whole company of heaven (Heb 9:24; 10:12–14, 19–25; 12:18–29; cf. Rev 1, 4–5). The liturgy is thus a tangible event in the life of heaven that is embodied most clearly and powerfully on earth.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.18: “But if we are lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds, to seek Christ there in the glory of his Kingdom, ‘as the symbols invite us to him in his wholeness, so under the symbol of bread we shall be fed by his body, under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink his blood, to enjoy him at last in his wholeness. For though he has taken his flesh away from us, and in the body has ascended into heaven, yet he sits at the right hand of the Father — that is, he reigns in the Father’s power and majesty and glory. This Kingdom is neither bounded by location in space nor circumscribed by any limits. Thus Christ is not prevented from exerting his power wherever he pleases, in heaven and on earth. He shows his presence in power and strength, is always among his own people, and breathes his life upon them, and lives in them, sustaining them, strengthening, quickening, keeping them unharmed, as if he were present in the body. In short, he feeds his people with his own body, the communion of which he bestows upon them by the power of his Spirit. In this manner, the body and blood of Christ are shown to us in the Sacrament.”

Conclusion: The Lord's Supper is a unique act of covenant renewal in and through which we receive by faith Christ's body and blood (i.e., the very life of the resurrected Christ himself) and thus all of the redemptive benefits he experienced and achieved for us in his death, resurrection, and ascension. This is not a mere remembering of some event(s) in the past but rather a real-time act of communion with the risen, ascended Christ in the present that strengthens our faith and nourishes our union with Christ and the Church.

## 1.4 The Final Word: Mystery to Experience, Not Explain with Precision

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

- 4.17.7: "For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, *nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.*"
- 4.17.32: "Now, if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, *I rather experience than understand it.* Therefore, I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them."

## 2. The Lord's Supper and the future: "...until he comes again"

### 2.1 Eating, Drinking, and the Future

Eating a meal with God is not only a memorial of the past and communion with Christ in the present but also a preview of the future. In the Bible, eating and drinking in abundance regularly appear in visions of the future fullness of God's salvation and kingdom:

Isaiah 25:6–9 (wine); Isaiah 49:8–13; Isaiah 55:1–2 (wine); Isaiah 65:13, 21 (fruit of the vineyards)  
Jeremiah 31:1–34 (new covenant → feasting [12–14; grain & wine], fruit of the vineyard [5])  
Ezekiel 34:13–14, 23, 27, 29 (cf. Ps 23:5–6); Joel 2:19, 22–24; 3:13, 18 (note: grain & wine)  
Zechariah 9:16–17 (grain & wine); Matthew 8:11/Luke 13:29;  
Matthew 22:1–14/Luke 14:16–24 (wedding feast); Luke 22:29–30  
Revelation 19:6–8 (wedding feast)

### 2.2 Lord's Supper and the future

How are these biblical visions of future feasting related to the Lord's Supper? Several features in the biblical texts describing the Lord's Supper reveal a future orientation to its meaning:

- Meals with Jesus are a sign that the promised new covenant and kingdom of God are present (Matt 9:14–15/Mark 2:18–20/Luke 5:33–35; Matt 9:9–17/Mark 2:13–17/Luke 5:29–32; Matt 11:19; Matt 12:1–8/Mark 2:23–28/Luke 6:1–5; Matt 14:13–21/Mark 6:30–44/Luke 9:10–17/John 6:1–59; Matt 15:2–39/Mark 8:1–10; Luke 7:36–50; John 2:1–11 [wedding feast with much good wine!])

- 1 Cor 11:26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes again.*”
- Luke 22:20/1 Cor 11:25: “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood.” The new covenant (from Jer 31:31) denotes the future era in which God fulfills all of his covenant promises given through the prophets and establishes the fullness of his kingdom throughout the whole world. Several aspects of the new covenant and kingdom found explicitly in biblical descriptions and explanations of the Lord’s Supper are:
  - Judgment: Note judgment terms in 1 Cor 11:27–34.
  - Forgiveness: “...for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28), which is a present revelation and assurance of acquittal in God’s final judgment for those who trust in Christ.
  - Resurrection and ascension: If the Lord’s Supper is communion with the risen and ascended Christ (Luke 24:13–35) and a participation in him and his victory over sin and death (1 Cor 10:16), then it is a foretaste of the resurrection coming for the whole creation (1 Cor 15; Rom 8; Rev 21–22).
  - A corporate union of the worldwide people of God: The Lord’s Supper unites the whole church in Christ (1 Cor 10:17), and thus embodies and creates the one, worldwide, multi-ethnic body of Christ that prefigures the universal scope of God’s kingdom (Rev. 4:9–10; 7:9; 15:3–4; 21:24, 26).

Conclusion: As the sacrament of the new covenant and kingdom of God, the Lord’s Supper is a sign or symbol that

- (1) prefigures the new creation to come in the future at Jesus’ second coming and
- (2) provides a tangible foretaste and participation in that new creation that has already begun in history at Jesus’ first coming.

### **2.3 Application to the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper**

How should this future orientation and meaning of the sacrament shape the manner in which we celebrate the Lord’s Supper?

- Partake with faith: It is the beginning of our final judgment and vindication before God.
- Partake with joy: This is the feast of the victory of our God over sin and Satan. It is God’s pledge that he will make all things new so that there will be no more mourning, crying, pain, or death.
- Look around: Enjoy seeing those around you as the new humanity of God’s new creation.
- Look forward: Imagine receiving this from the hand of Jesus himself in the flesh when he comes again. Imagine the new world of the prophets.
- Sing and/or talk about the future fulfillment of God’s kingdom

What aspects of the Lord’s Supper is only partial and leaves us longing for more to come in the future?

- Only bread and wine, not the full abundance of the new creation.
- Only a small portion, not a real feast that satisfies.
- Only a limited time, not a continual celebration before the Lord.
- Only a limited group of people, not the whole church in a fully renewed creation
- We do not yet see Jesus in the flesh.