

WCF 29: OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

The Lord’s Supper is recognised in all mainstream Christian denominations as the one of the most important ordinances of Christ, together with Baptism. And like baptism, it ought to be a symbol of unity in Christianity, “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” says the apostle Paul (1Cor 10:17). But sadly, sharply differing views of the Lord’s Supper have made it one of the most divisive issues in visible Christendom. And the difference is not only between Rome and Protestantism!

Sometime after the Reformation begun, Luther and the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli decided to meet to discuss their rediscovered evangelical truth. The meeting was convened at Marburg in 1529. When the two Reformed groups met, they soon discovered that they agreed on every point of doctrine except one—the Lord’s Supper. Luther insisted that the bread of the sacrament was the body of Christ, and kept repeating the phrase *Hoc est corpus meum*, which is Latin for “This is my body.” It is said that he wrote the words, using his gavel, so forcefully that it could be seen on the velvet cloth that covered the rostrum for a long time: *Hoc est corpus meum!* The result was that the Protestant movement failed to unite. Luther refused even to shake the hand of Zwingli, declaring him to be of a different spirit.

Today, most Lutherans continue to hold to Luther’s view, while most others (including many who are professedly Calvinistic) tend to adopt the view which was supposedly held by Zwingli.

Our Confession of Faith, however, presents what may be known as the *Calvinistic View*, also known as the *Spiritual Presence View*, or as the Reformed theologian Keith Mathison puts it, the *Suprasubstantiation View*.

While acknowledging the doctrine surrounding the Lord’s Supper is not easy to grasp or to prove from the Scripture, we would comment what is taught in this chapter of our Confession to be the most biblically accurate, balanced and heartwarming of all the credal statements on the Supper.

On the Design of the Lord’s Supper

29.1 Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord’s Supper, to be observed in His Church, unto the end of the world, for [1] the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death; [2] the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him; [3] and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.¹

¹ 1 Cor 11:23–26; 10:16–17, 21; 12:13.

- a. When was it instituted?
“The same night in which He was betrayed” (1Cor 11:23).
- b. How long should it be practised in the Church?
“Till He come” (1Cor 11:26).

c. Purpose of the Sacrament:

- i. “For the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death” I.e. as a *sign* pointing to the Lord’s death (“shew the Lord’s death”—1Cor 11:26). A sign is a visible representation that points to something we cannot see. The words of the institution “broken for you” (1Cor 11:24) and “shed for many” (Mt 26:28) point to the fact that the death of Christ was a sacrificial one. Christ died for and in place of His people. It also symbolises the believer’s participation in the crucified Christ.
- ii. For “the sealing of all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him.” A seal is something to attest, confirm or certify the genuineness of the benefits that believers receive from Christ. As a seal, the Lord’s Supper not only points to, but affirms the genuineness of the application of the benefits of redemption on the participants. This is partly the reason why a person eats and drinks judgement at the Lord’s Table if he does not believe. In such a case he uses an official seal when he has no right to use it. And conversely he who partakes of the Supper with faith, “eats the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood” (Jn 6:53); that is, he sacramentally appropriates the benefits secured by the sacrificial death of Christ.
- iii. “To be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.” A *bond* is the friendship shared by two or more parties. In sharing a meal at the Lord’s Table, believers signify their union with Christ and with one another. As members of the same mystical body of Jesus Christ, we eat of the same bread and drink of the same wine: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17; cf.12:13). Receiving the elements, the one from the other, we exercise intimate communion with one another.

A pledge is a token which points to a promise. As such it gives the believing partakers the personal assurance that all the promises of the covenant and all the riches of Christ are in their actual possession. Reciprocally, it serves as a badge of profession on the part of those who partake the sacrament. Whenever they eat the bread or drink the wine, they profess their faith in Christ as their Saviour and their allegiance to Him as their King, and they solemnly pledge a life of obedience to His divine commandments as well as participate in each others life in the communion of saints.

On What the Lord’s Supper is Not:

29.2 In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to His Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins of the quick or dead;¹ but only a commemoration of that one offering up of Himself, by Himself, upon the cross, once for all: and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God, for the same:² so that the popish sacrifice of the mass (as they call it) is most abominably injurious to Christ’s one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of His elect.³

¹ Heb 9:22, 25–26, 28; ² 1 Cor 11:24–26; Mt 26:26–27; ³ Heb 7:23–24, 27; 10:11–12, 14, 18.

This paragraph is designed to refute the Romish doctrine that the Lord Supper, which they call Mass involves a sacrifice of Christ again. According to them, each time the Mass is celebrated, Christ is sacrificed again. This cannot be true since that author of Hebrews is emphatic that “Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28); and that Christ “needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for His own sins, and then for the people’s: for this He did once, when He offered up Himself. . . For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” (Heb 7:27, 10:14). The Romish Mass, which is an imitation of the Old Covenant shadows, is therefore “most abominably injurious to Christ’s one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of His elect.”

On the Conduct of the Lord’s Supper:

29.3 The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed His ministers to declare His word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants;¹ but to none who are not then present in the congregation.²

¹ Mt 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Lk 22:19–20; 1 Cor 11:23–26; ² Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:20.

The Lord’s Supper must be conducted in an orderly manner (1Cor 14:40—”Let all things be done decently and in order”). This paragraph teaches us that it must have the following steps:

a. Word of institution, Prayer & Blessing.

In all four account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the Lord Jesus is recorded to have blessed (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22) or given thanks for (Lk 22:17, 19; 1Cor 11:24) the bread and wine before breaking the bread and handling out the wine.

We believe therefore that the minister administering the Lord’s Supper set apart the bread and wine from common use by the word of institution, thanksgiving and prayer (cf. *WLC* 169). The bread and wine in themselves, or as found in common use are not symbols of the body and blood of Christ until they are ‘blessed’ or set-aside.

b. Breaking of Bread.

“And when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me” (1 Cor 11:24; cf. Mk 13:22; Mt 26:26).

All the accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper makes mention of the breaking of the bread, and the Lord Jesus clearly indicated that this was intended to symbolise the breaking of His body for the redemption of sinners. Also, as the Lord broke the bread in the presence of His disciples it should be insisted that the bread be broken in the sight of the congregation. This is also in accordance with the the Lord’s command recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:24: “this *do* in remembrance of me.” This action of breaking the bread is so essential and integral to the sacrament that in Acts 2:42, the Lord’s Supper is known as “breaking of bread.” The Roman Catholic practice of using the wafer, which is placed unbroken in the mouth of the communicant is therefore unscriptural. The minister should, rather, break the bread before the congregation to symbolise that His body is broken for them.

c. Handing out of the Cup.

“And He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt 26:27-28).

None of the four accounts of the institution speaks about the Lord pouring out the wine. Therefore, we infer that pouring of the wine is not part of the ordinance.

Note that it is clear from the accounts that the Lord intended the both elements to be used in the sacrament: “For as often as ye eat this bread AND drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till He comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

29.4 Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone;¹ as likewise, the denial of the cup to the people,² worshipping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about, for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.³

¹ 1 Cor 10:16; ² Mark 14:23; 1 Cor 11:25–29; ³ Mt 15:9.

This paragraph is essentially targeted against the superstitions of the Roman Catholic Church.

- *Firstly*, since the Lord’s Supper is a corporate communion of the body and blood of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:16), private masses in which, for example, a minister goes to a hospital to dispense the element to a sick man privately is an act of superstition. This, nevertheless, does not rule out having worship which includes the Lord’s Supper in the home of a person who is indisposed to come for public worship. Such a service should only be conducted if at least a part of the congregation is present.
- *Secondly*, private receiving of the sacraments, such as by a priest in the Roman Catholic Church is meaningless and superstitious.
- *Thirdly*, the Roman Catholic practice of withholding the wine from the communicants is unscriptural.
- *Fourthly*, all adoration and worship of the elements is idolatrous since the Scripture allows no room for any degree of venerating the elements.
- *Fifthly*, the bread and wine that are left over from a Lord’s Supper do not retain any magical or spiritual properties.

On the Four Views Pertaining to the Lord’s Supper

29.5 The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to Him crucified, as that, truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ;¹ albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before.²

¹ Mt 26:26–28; ² 1 Cor 11:26–28; Mt 26:29.

29.6 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; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries.¹

¹ Acts 3:21; 1 Cor 11:24–26; Lk 24:6, 39.

When Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, He referred to the elements as His body and blood although by nature, they remained bread and wine. This is so because there is an intimate sacramental union between the signs and the things signified.

The Roman Catholic Church fails to see that this as the reason, and so invented the repugnant idea of transubstantiation in which bread is miraculously transformed into the real flesh of Christ, and the wine is miraculously transformed into His blood. It is repugnant to morality since the eating of the wafer in the mass would be cannibalism if the doctrine were true. It is contrary to reason since the physical body of Christ cannot be in heaven and on earth at the same time. It is repugnant to our senses because the bread and wine still look and taste like wine without any alteration at all after the blessing.

We note that in the Bible, there is actually a case of transubstantiation: when the Lord Jesus changed the water into wine (Jn 2:1-11). But in that case the wine tasted like wine. The guests who drank it even thought that it was the best wine they had tasted all evening. Not so in the alleged transubstantiation in the Roman Mass.

29.7 Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament,¹ 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.²

¹ 1 Cor 11:28; ² 1 Cor 10:16.

- This paragraph, while mainly speaking about the efficacy of the Lord's Supper, also speaks against the Lutheran view of consubstantiation. This is seen in the phrase: "the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, *in, with, or under the bread and wine.*" At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther rejected the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation, and taught that instead of replacing the bread and the wine, Christ's presence is *added* to the bread and wine. He maintained that the body and blood of Christ are somehow present in, under, and through the elements of bread and wine. This view may be known as *consubstantiation*. This view, while more logical than the Romish view, is nevertheless problematic. For one, how could the flesh and blood of Christ be in and under the elements when his human nature remains in heaven.
- On the opposite extreme, there is yet another view of the Lord's Supper, which appears to have been held by Zwingli and the Anabaptists. In this view, the Lord's Supper is seen to be purely *commemorative* and symbolic. Any benefits derived from partaking it arise only through outward moral suasion.
- The view taught in our Confession may be known as the *Spiritual Presence View* or John Calvin's View.

Calvin denied the “substantial” presence of Christ at the Lord’s Supper when he debated with Rome or the Lutherans. Yet when he debated with the Anabaptists, who, like Zwingli reduced the Lord’s Supper to a mere memorial, he insisted on the “substantial” presence of Christ.

On the surface it seems that Calvin was caught in a blatant contradiction. However, upon closer scrutiny we see that Calvin used the term *substantial* in two different ways. When he addressed Catholics and Lutherans, he used the term *substantial* to mean “physical.” He denied the physical presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. When he addressed the Anabaptists, however, he used the term *substantial* in the sense of “real.” Calvin thus argued that Christ was *really* or *truly* present in the Lord’s Supper, though not in a physical sense. The human nature of Jesus is presently localised in heaven. It remains in perfect union with His divine nature. Though the human nature is contained in one place, the *person* of Christ is not so contained because His divine nature (which is hypostatically united to His human nature) is omnipresence. This is why the Lord could say, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

Calvin taught that though Christ’s body and blood remain in heaven, they are spiritually “made present” to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Lord’s Supper is participated in faith, the Holy Spirit presents to us and feeds us with the flesh and blood of the ascended Christ. This is how we are to understand 1Corinthians 10:16. The Lord’s Supper is a mystical communion with Christ in which “from the substance of His flesh Christ breathes life into our souls—indeed, pours forth His very life unto us—even though Christ’s flesh itself does not enter into us” (*ICR* 4.17.32). Herein is the difference between the Calvinistic view of the Lord’s Supper which the Reformed Church has accepted and the Zwinglian memorial view. And it is in this way that the believer “spiritually receive and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being ... spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.”

It is difficult to find a good analogy for the Spiritual Presence View. But Mathison has suggested that certain elements of the View may be roughly illustrated using the concept of electricity. He says:

“Calvin himself speaks of the human nature of Christ and the Holy Spirit as “conduits” of divine life, so the analogy may not be too far afield.

If we approach Calvin’s thought using this analogy, we may say that the body of Christ, which is locally present in heaven, is analogous to the power plant or electrical generator. God is analogous to the source that powers the generator. The divine life of God is analogous to the electricity. The Holy Spirit is analogous to the power lines that transmit the electricity and connect the power plant to millions of individual homes, while the sacramental signs are analogous to the individual light switches in those homes. The individual communicants in the church are analogous to the millions of light bulbs that receive the electricity from the plant, the individual communicant’s faith (or lack thereof) is analogous to the filament in the light bulb (either broken or whole).

Obviously, the illustration is not perfect because all analogies breakdown, and it should not be pushed, but it does communicate a few of the main ideas of Calvin’s doctrine in a way that is more easily grasped. God is the ultimate

source of divine life. The Incarnation makes it possible for that divine life to be communicated to the human nature of Christ. Christ's human body is now in heaven and physically separated from us, but by the power of the Holy Spirit we have been united to Christ. By virtue of this union, we are able to partake of the divine life of Christ that is found in his body. We participate in ongoing union with Christ particularly in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. However, unless we partake of the sacrament in faith, we receive nothing but the visible sign and judgement from God. Our faith or lack thereof does not change or affect the objective nature of the sacrament in any way" (Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* [P&R, 2002], 285-6).

On the Fencing of the Table

29.8 Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament; yet, they receive not the thing signified thereby; but, by their unworthy coming thereunto, are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore, all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with Him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table; and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries,¹ or be admitted thereunto.²

¹ 1 Cor 11:27–29; 2 Cor 6:14–16; ² 1 Cor 5:6–7, 13; 2 Thes 3:6, 14–15; Mt 7:6.

- a. Because believers “receive and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death” (WCF 29.7) by faith, it is clear that “all ignorant and ungodly persons” receives no spiritual blessing when they partake of the elements of the Supper. And not only that, but the Scripture and our Confession teach us that such a person would be “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation” (cf. 1 Cor 11:29). Calvin explains that the Lord's Supper, which is spiritual food for those who partake it by faith, “[turns] into a deadly poison for all those whose faith it does not nourish and strengthen, and whom it does not arouse to thanksgiving and to love” (ICR 4.17.40).
- b. Albeit, doesn't 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 teach us that the responsibility of examination is only on the individual partakers themselves? Why does our Confession teach us that ignorant and ungodly persons must not be admitted to the Lord's Table?

The answer is multi-fold.

- *Firstly*, allowing such a person to partake of the Supper would be to allow him to incur great damnation on himself knowingly.
- *Secondly*, the apostle Paul teaches us a church, though having many members is, in the eyes of the Lord, one body (1 Cor 12:12). As such, the actions of an individual in a church has corporate implications for the church as a whole. This is particularly so in the Lord's Supper. Referring to the Lord's Supper, the Apostle Paul insists, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17). Clearly then,

the Lord's Supper is not to be understood as an individual exercise but a corporate exercise of the body of Christ.

- *Thirdly*, Paul teaches us that “if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat” (1 Cor 5:11). It is possible that Paul is saying that we must not even share a meal in private with such as person. But if that be the case, then, shouldn't this injunction be taken even more seriously with regards to participation in the Lord's Supper which is a corporate exercise.
- *Fourthly*, Christ preached the gospel to all without distinction, but He did not administer the sacraments to all. When he administered (instituted) the Lord Supper it was only to His disciples.
- *Fifthly*, as the Lord's Supper is same in substance with the Old Testament Passover, it would appear that the same restrictions that applied to the Passover would also apply to the Lord's Supper (see Ex 12:42-44 and Ezr 6:21). As the Passover were only to be eaten by those who have been circumcised, the Lord's Supper is only to be partaken by those who have been baptised. It is possible that a baptised person may not be true believer. Therefore, it becomes the solemn responsibility of the church to baptise only credible professors of faith (in the case of adults). It also becomes the church's responsibility to bar anyone who does not have a credible profession of faith (including covenant children) from the Lord's Table.

For these reasons, if someone from another church were to come for our Communion service, then the person ought to be examined to see if he gives evidence of walking in obedience to the Word of God as a credible professor of faith.

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