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UNDERSTANDING THE LORD'S SUPPER

Because we observe the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day, it is profitable to periodically take time to look afresh at its doctrinal understanding. "This is my body" – This phrase, spoken by Jesus in the upper room, took place at the Passover meal and served as part of the institution known as the Lord's Supper. It also is one of the most debated statements in Scripture. Much of the disputation at the time of the Protestant Reformation centered around the Lord's Supper. The Reformers united in their opposition to the Roman Catholic dogma of the Mass. They were not, however, able to come to complete agreement among themselves on the issue. As a result, Protestants today hold to three positions on (or variations of) the meaning of Jesus' words. How has the Lord's Supper been understood down through Church history?

I. EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Early in the second century, communion was also called the EUCHARIST (lit. to make thanks). Justin Martyr (c.a. 150) tells us it was celebrated weekly. The concept of transubstantiation is entirely missing in his theology. The Eucharist is viewed as a consecration of the bread and wine. It is a mystery and represented Christ's saving work in some actual sense. Ambrose (c.a. 339-97) begins to speak of the elements becoming the actual body and blood of Christ. This is called realism. Augustine, the most famous Christian theologian of the early Church (and a contemporary of Ambrose) rejected this realistic position and spoke of the sacrament in a more symbolic way. However, medieval Catholicism adopted Ambrose's view and developed what is called transubstantiation, the Church's official position (affirmed as dogma at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215).

II. ROMAN CATHOLIC TRANSUBSTANTIATION

The Council of Trent (1545-63), in reaction to the Reformation, refined and polished the Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper as the Mass. The Mass is called a Eucharistic Sacrifice and is declared as follows:

- A. The same Christ is contained in the bloodless sacrifice as he who "on the altar of the cross once offered himself with the shedding of blood."
- B. On this ground the sacrifice is truly propitiatory.
- C. To profit from it, we must come with true hearts, right faith, fear and reverence.
- D. If we do, God, propitiated by it, will grant grace, penitence, and remission.
- E. The fruits of the primary oblation are perceived most fully through the bloodless oblation (the term is applied both to the bread and wine and to any other kind of gift presented at the Mass).
- F. It is offered for the sins, penances, satisfactions, and other necessities of both the faithful living, and also the faithful dead in purgatory, whose purification is not yet completed. All those who do not accept this teaching are anathema.¹

III. PROTESTANT POSITIONS

We will give attention to the three major positions (these are representative of most evangelical groups).

A. The Lutheran View

Although Luther rejected the concept of transubstantiation, he also rejected any figurative interpretations of this sacrament. His position is known as consubstantiation, a simultaneous coexistence of two substances (the word, however, does not appear in Luther's writings). In Luther's words, the actual body and blood of Christ exists "in, with, or under" the elements of bread and wine (thus affirming a real presence). The relationship of the Word to the sacrament is key. The transformation is effected by the Word, not by a priest.

B. The Reformed View

Under this category there are *two* positions that have gained support from Reformed churches. The *Calvinistic* and the *Zwinglian*. Shedd writes, "The difference between Zwingli and Calvin upon sacramentarian points has been exaggerated. Zwingli has been represented as denying that the sacrament of the supper is a means of grace and that Christ is present in it. The following positions in his Confession of Faith disprove this. He asserts that (1) the sacraments are things that are holy and should be venerated; (2) they present a testimony of the thing borne; (3) they stand in place of the things which they signify, since they represent what cannot in itself be directly perceived; (4) they signify lofty things: having value not for what they are materially, but for what they signify; as a bridal ring is not worth merely the gold of which it is made; (5) they enlighten and instruct through the analogy between the symbol and the thing symbolized; (6) they bring aid and comfort to faith; and (7) they take the place of (*vice*) an oath. These positions accord entirely with those in the First Helvetic Confession, which contains Calvin's view of the sacraments, and also with those presented in the Articles of Agreement between the churches of Zurich and Geneva. Hagenbach (§258) asserts that Zwingli taught that the sacrament is 'both a symbol (*signum*) and a means of strengthening faith.' Sigwart and Zeller, in their monographs upon Zwingli, take the same view. The writer of 'Lord's Supper' in Kitto's Encyclopedia represents Zwingli as holding that the Lord's Supper, by presenting under sensible emblems the sufferings and death of Christ and bringing them to vivid remembrance, deepens penitence, stimulates faith, calls out love, and in this way is a means of sanctification equally with hearing the word or any other means of grace employed by the Holy Spirit. Zwingli asserted as strongly as Calvin the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament, denying with him the carnal and corporeal presence, either in the form of transubstantiation or consubstantiation. 'Christ,' he says, 'is spiritually present in the consciousness of the believer (*fidei contemplatione*). In the recollection of his sufferings and death and by faith in these, his body is spiritually eaten. We trust in the dying flesh and blood of Christ, and this faith is called the eating of the body and blood of Christ' (cf Zwingli's Concerning the Eucharist; and his equally important Confession of Faith)."²

C. The Strict Memorialist View

This is often, as noted above, mistakenly linked to the Swiss Reformer Zwingli. This position sees the Lord's Supper as merely a religious memorial and nothing more. The Socinians first embraced this view and it has become popular with the vast majority of Arminians, dispensationalists, Pentecostal-Charismatic and most Evangelicals.

CONCLUSION: In every country in the world, there are monuments and memorials. They serve to commemorate the deeds and contributions of individuals who left their mark in time. Sometimes the individuals themselves do them in an attempt to keep some vestige of their meager greatness alive in the public eye long after they are gone. In some notable cases (Lenin and Stalin quickly come to mind), the people they ruled despised them, and when the opportunity presented itself, they demolished their statues and monuments. When we turn our attention to the Lord's Supper, we discover that one of the purposes for its institution was that it might serve as a *remembrance*. But, the Lord's Supper is more than simply a memorial. In the words of W.R. Godfrey, "It is not just a time when we sit and think good thoughts."³ John Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper differs at important points with both Luther and Zwingli. Ronald Wallace, in what is generally considered to be the best treatment on Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper, summarizes some of the main points of Calvin's doctrine of the sacramental union between the signs and the things signified. *First*, "the union formed between the divine and human activity in the event of God's action in the sacrament is so close as, practically speaking, to become one of identity." As Calvin expresses it, "The name of the thing, therefore, is transferred here to the sign – not as if it were strictly applicable, but figuratively on the ground of that connection which I have mentioned." *Second*, this sacramental union is "so transcendent and freely personal that the thing signified must be regarded as distinct from the sign." If the sign actually becomes the thing it signifies, it necessarily ceases to be a sign, and if this happens, it ceases to be a sacrament. *Third*, there is "no natural analogy for this union." It is a unique mystery with no parallel in the natural realm. The only possible analogy for the sacramental union is the mystery of the Incarnation. *Fourth*, observes Wallace, "There is no doubt that Calvin sees an analogy which at least serves to regulate his thinking on this mystery of sacramental union, in the mystery of the union between God and man in Jesus Christ."⁴ In Calvin's understanding, the Holy Spirit plays an essential role in the ministry of the sacraments. In order that "the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of the Lord." Apart from the Spirit's work, the sacraments profit nothing. When the Spirit does work, he "transmits those outward words and sacraments from our ears to our soul." Although the sacraments are used in this way by God, we are not to place our confidence directly in them. They are instruments, and so they have value only insofar as God uses them as his instruments. As Calvin puts it, "God uses means and instruments which he himself sees to be expedient, that all things may serve his glory, since he is Lord and Judge of all." And just as we are not to put our confidence in any of God's other creatures that have been designed for our use, "neither ought our confidence to inhere in the sacraments, nor the glory of God be transferred to them." In the use of the sacraments, as in the use of all things, God is to be given all the glory. Furthermore, the sacraments do not, in and of themselves, impart grace. Instead, like the word of God, they present Christ to us. Calvin strongly criticized the Roman Catholics for saying that "the sacraments of the new law (those now used in the Christian church) justify and confer grace, provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin." According to Calvin, any view such as this, which promises righteousness apart from faith, "hurls souls headlong to destruction." Citing Augustine again, he argues that "there can be invisible sanctification without a visible sign, and on the other hand, a visible sign without true sanctification." The Augustinian distinction between a sacrament and the matter of a sacrament is very important in Calvin's thought. He explains, "The distinction signifies not only that the figure and the truth are contained in the sacrament, but that they are not so linked that they cannot be separated; and that even in the union itself, the matter must always be distinguished from the sign, that we may not transfer to the one, what belongs to the other." He quotes Augustine, who wrote, "In the elect alone the sacrament effect what they represent." But, what is the matter or substance of the sacraments? Calvin answers, "Christ is the matter, or (if you

prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him." He explains further how the sacraments are effective: "The sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there." In response to those who might argue that this view implies that the wicked who receive the sacraments render them null and void, Calvin offers the following: "What I have said is not to be understood as if the force and truth of the sacrament depended upon the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary. For since it is one thing to offer, and another to receive, nothing prevents the symbol, consecrated by the Lord's Word, from being actually what it is called, and from keeping its own force. Yet this does not benefit a wicked or impious man. But, Augustine has well solved this question in a few words, 'If you receive carnally, it does not cease to be spiritual, but it (is) not so for you.'" We see this careful distinction between the sign and the thing signified emphasized repeatedly throughout Calvin's writings on the sacraments. As we will see, it is an especially crucial element of his eucharistic doctrine. We have already noted Calvin's assertion that apart from the work of the Spirit, the sacraments profit nothing. At this point in his discussion, he elaborates further on what this means. He says of the sacraments, "They do not bestow any grace of themselves, but announce and tell us, and (as they are guarantees and tokens) ratify among us, those things given us by divine bounty. The Holy Spirit...is he who brings the graces of God with him, gives a place for the sacraments among us, and makes them bear fruit."⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. G. Bromiley, Historical Theology: An Introduction (Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 284-85, for extended discussion, and James R. White, The Fatal Flaw (Crowne Pub., 1990), pp. 39-71, for a complete analysis of the mass as set forth at Trent and Vatican II.

² W. G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology (3rd edition) ed. A. Gomes (P & R, 2003) p. 814. Geoffrey W. Bromiley writes in Zwingli and Bullinger, vol. 24 in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953): Zwingli had no intention of denying a spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament [of the Lord's Supper].... This presence certainly means that the communion is more than a 'bare' sign, at any rate to the believing recipient.... For in the sacrament we have to do not merely with the elements but with the spiritual presence of Christ himself and the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit. (179) And again, Zwingli does not dispute that Christ is truly present in the Supper. What he disputes is that he is substantially present, present in the substance of his flesh and blood, present after his human nature...he had no wish to deny the presence of Christ altogether, and the reality of the spiritual presence of Christ involves something far more than a bare memorialism. The Supper cannot be merely a commemorative rite when the one commemorated is himself present and active amongst those who keep the feast. (183)

³ W. R. Godfrey, "Calvin on the Eucharist," Modern Reformation (May/June 1997), p. 49.

⁴ R.S. Wallace, Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament (Oliver and Boyd, 1953), p. 167.

⁵ Citations by Calvin are in Keith A. Mathison's book, Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), pp. 10-13. Over all this is a very helpful work, but suffers from time to time from over generalization, especially in presenting the views of Reformed theologians who did follow Calvin's formulation exactly. For example, Mathison's treatment of Herman Bavinck and the old Princeton theologians is most disappointing.