

**Text:** Various

**Title:** The Presence of the Lord in the Table

**Truth:** The Lord's Table is an Ordinance with Deep Symbolic Significance

**Date/Location:** April 3, 2016 Sunday Evening at FBC

## Introduction

I recently received this question: How did you settle on no real presence of Christ in the communion elements? This doctrine seems to go way back without dispute until after the Reformation, and it seems like the memorial texts can be accepted without upsetting there also being a real presence. With all of the Biblical teaching against trusting our senses, I do not think “it does not seem like there is real presence” is a valid answer for me.

## How is the Lord Present in the Communion?

There are three or four major views on the presence of the Lord in the communion. Three take it that the Lord is present somehow in or around the elements. The fourth, the view I and we have held all along, is that the communion is a memorial, and the elements are symbolic.

- A. He was present at the inauguration/establishment of the practice when He tied elements of the Passover Seder to his upcoming crucifixion as He offered His body and blood to establish the basis of the New Covenant.
- B. He physically departed at the ascension into Heaven. Christ is absent now; He said that He would not partake of the fruit of the vine until He does so in the kingdom (Matthew 26:29). Acts 1:11 reminds us that this very same Jesus will come back to earth in the same manner that he left. (He will not come in parts and pieces over time in communion services! He will come in His whole body at the second coming, not before.
- C. He maintains a physical body in heaven, localized in Heaven. He sits at the right hand of God the Father (Psalm 110:1, Luke 22:69), and sometimes stands, perhaps for the purpose of receiving His children who enter heaven through death (Acts 7:56).
- D. Christ's physical, material body cannot extend throughout space and time in the same way that His divine nature exists metaphysically. Otherwise, it would not be a human body! This implies that His body cannot be present in any communion elements, much less all of them in our church or in all of them in every church at the same time as they are offered.

E. Christ's is present in the communion at least as much, if not more than, as He is omnipresent. As God, He is everywhere present. In order to make a statement about special presence in the communion, we would need to be able to show how He is present more than how He is through His omnipresence. Is He "present" in some way in the communion more than that?

F. We might argue that, at the Table He is present "more" or "differently" or "in addition to" His omnipresence in that He now resides in each and every believer in a saving, sanctifying way. He "works" or "ministers" in the believer.

I am thinking of a text like John 14:20, 15:4, Romans 8:9. Can I get more of the presence of Christ than I have already? I don't believe so. I have no more of the presence of Christ the moment I am taking the communion or the moment afterward than before; otherwise I should faithfully take as much of the communion as I can, as many times as I can, to become more "spiritual" or like Christ. But sanctification does not happen that way.

G. The various "presence" views would have to further distinguish themselves from how Christ is present in the church "when two or three are gathered" in His name (Matthew 18:20). Furthermore, they would have to distinguish themselves from how God is present in the church collectively as outlined in 1 Cor. 3:16 as a resident in His temple.

The sum of what I've been saying right now is that Christ is in Heaven in his humanity; and omnipresent in His deity. He is especially present by powerful working in the believers' lives all the time, and He is present in His church when a few are gathered together. God's temple on the earth is the church today.

H. The fact that He partook in the first instance distinguished Him from the elements. He did not partake of Himself!

I. Is Christ present in the ordinance of baptism? I have not heard of someone saying that Christ is present in baptism. Catholics will say something like, "Baptism not only gives supernatural life to the soul, it also gives the soul supernatural powers, instincts and joys which we commonly identify as the virtues, gifts, and fruits of the Holy Spirit...The baptismal seal confers a permanent relationship with Christ."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-sacraments-of-baptism-and-confirmation.html>

Communion is like baptism in that the presence of Christ is not “more” or “better.” We use the communion with a similar symbolic and memorial significance as baptism.

- J. The text of the gospels argues against a special presence view, because when the Lord was with the disciples, He said the bread “was” His body, and the cup “was” the new covenant in His blood.” I take those statements as obviously symbolic, given that His body and blood were right there in front of them to compare and contrast to the bread and wine that they had purchased or made for the dinner occasion. He was here, and the bread was there, and the two were different things—the disciples could see that.
- K. 1 Cor. 11 argues against the presence views of Christ. **First**, because as you read it, the important part is that the church is gathered together. Then Christ would be present in the church just as He is any other time the church is gathered. **Second**, because the “this is” statements were in the past, and Paul looks back on them to remind the believers what the Lord said, and that the command was “do this in remembrance.” With both the bread and juice, the command was “do in remembrance.” The point is to have a memorial service for what Christ did. Paul could easily have explained the special kind of additional spiritual presence of Christ as a supporting argument for why the Corinthians needed to straighten up, but he did not do so. **Third**, because Paul says that the service proclaims the Lord's death.

The important elements have all been outlined, and the presence of Christ is not mentioned at all. That is very strange indeed, if in fact the significance of the Table service is the very special presence of Jesus.

The Lord's table has significances of remembrance, proclamation, and purification (self-judgment), as well as church-wide fellowship. There is far more to it than a mystical presence of Christ that remains unmentioned in the text.

## What are the Other Views?

I used the term “ordinance” above, and that puts me in a cubbyhole already. I do not believe these ordinances are mystical sacraments.

In the question posed to me, “real” presence meant transubstantiation. There was no distinction made between the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinistic views. But distinctions should be observed to present those views most accurately.

- A. Transubstantiation. [www.catholiceducation.org](http://www.catholiceducation.org) says, "By faith we are empowered to believe...that Jesus Christ is now present, really and truly, actually and bodily on earth in the Holy Eucharist."<sup>1</sup> Bread and wine in substance, not in appearance, become body and blood of Christ.
- B. Consubstantiation: Christ is really present in, with, and under the elements. Luther.
- C. Spiritual presence. Calvin. No change in elements. The presence is not merely symbolic. "Union with Christ is initiated in baptism, but confirmed and sustained in the Lord's Supper."<sup>2</sup> Somehow the Lord's Supper elements reunite us with Christ. This is against the whole weight of the permanent and unchanging union with Christ that a believer has from the moment of salvation.
- D. We espouse the memorial view, the elements are just what they look like, and we memorialize/remember his sacrifice for us. It is true that no one would deny the memorial element to the Table. This could be thus called the lowest common denominator, and we share it with the other views.
- E. How would you respond to John 6? I answered with the Protestant and symbolic understanding of eating and drinking for salvation—not the Lord's Table at all! That passages reminds us that eternal life will not come about unless God grants the hearer of the gospel the gift of repentance and faith (2 Tim. 2:25, Acts 11:18, Philippians 1:29).
- F. Finally, I would add that church history is informative and interesting, but the holding of a belief for a long time in history doesn't move me unless Scripture backs it up. They could have been wrong holding to the real presence view, and I believe they definitely were wrong in that it is not only about the transubstantiation of elements, but it is also a sacramental view of the Eucharist and requires it to as a gateway into salvation. That is a work. Additionally, Eucharistic miracles mean nothing to me because they are observed and explained by Catholics who do not believe in salvation by faith alone; rather adding to the work of Christ their own works, and this is an accursed gospel according to Paul in Galatians 1:6-9. From an objective observer's perspective, we would have to admit that they could have seen a real miracle done by God, or that they were hallucinating and there was no miracle, or they saw a coincidence or other physical phenomenon that would naturalistically explain the "miracle," or that they saw a real miracle done by the devil or

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<sup>2</sup> Loose quotation of p. 206 Rose Book of Bible Charts volume 3.

a demon. I believe the last three are better explanations than the first, since the whole system out of which the Eucharist comes is not from God!

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