

UNITED TO HIS SACRED BODY: A REFORMED THEOLOGY OF THE LORD'S  
SUPPER

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of the Ecclesiology and the Sacraments

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## Introduction

The Lord's Supper has, throughout the history of the church, been a controversy not simply to the watching world, but also within the church. This seems strange, especially because the Supper is meant to be, among other things, a unifying sacrament. What could cause such controversy over something so small as bread and wine? The controversy has centered mostly on the question of what the Lord's Supper accomplishes, and in what manner Christ is present. This debate came to the fore during the time of the Reformation, in which there was disagreement over the Lord's Supper between Reformational thinkers, especially Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Luther. This debate became almost as important as the content of the Reformation itself. The Reformers considered the subject Lord's Supper important because at the heart of the Reformation was the question of salvation and how it is procured; and the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church then and now is that one *must* partake of the sacraments in order to be saved. The controversy in the contemporary church has not been rectified. Sadly, in many lower church traditions, theology of the Lord's Supper has almost become apophatic in nature: "nothing is happening here!" This is certainly a reaction against the Roman Catholic Church in connection to the history of the Reformation, and is ultimately unhelpful. If history repeats itself, this controversy is bound to remain for quite some time. Francis Turretin, in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, mourns the controversy over this great sacrament. He says rightly that "Satan always endeavored to obscure and corrupt [The Lord's Supper] in order to deprive the church of this inestimable treasure".<sup>1</sup> This is most certainly correct. While it is not the intent of this paper to end the controversies per se, it

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Turretin, George Musgrave Giger, and James T. Dennison, Jr. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Vol. 3. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997., 421

is the intent of this paper to assert that the Reformed Calvinistic position on the Lord's Supper—namely that Christ is present by faith and in the power of the Spirit—is a healthy “middle ground” between the controversies that have done violence to this sacrament. This paper will thus survey each major position on what the Lord's Supper accomplishes and in what way Christ is present, and then argue for the historic Reformed view of the sacrament.

### **Agreement on the Lord's Supper**

Before embarking on differing interpretations of *how* Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, it is important to note that there is *general* agreement on the purpose of the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup> Calvin, in his introduction to this sacrament, explains that its purpose is communion with and spiritual nourishment by Christ. He explains that through the supper, “our heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality”.<sup>3</sup> Calvin says that in the supper one “partakes” of Christ and is thereby spiritually nourished. His body and blood are food on which to feast and thereby reach “heavenly immortality”. Baptist Russell Moore says, “there is no question that in the Supper we commune with one another and with Christ”.<sup>4</sup> Lutheran David Scaer explains, “what is

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<sup>2</sup> “General agreement” here is obviously used generously. Even when differing traditions can agree on terms such as “communion” or “nourishment” or “union”, these terms are used differently and with differing theological foundations or assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, and John T. MacNeill. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 2. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1997., 1360-61

<sup>4</sup> Russell D. Moore, I. John Hesselink, David P. Scaer, Thomas A. Baima, Paul E. Engle, and John H. Armstrong. *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007, Kindle Loc 540

born in baptism is nourished by the Lord's Supper"<sup>5</sup>; meaning, spiritual life is nourished in and through the supper. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that the fruit of the Lord's Supper is "an intimate union with Christ Jesus... What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life".<sup>6</sup>

In the Lord's Supper then, the church comes to eat with Christ, to commune with him, and to be spiritually nourished by him. This is why the Lord's Supper is commonly called Holy Communion or Communion in many church traditions: the church communes with Christ in this sacrament. Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 10:16, "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?" (KJV). The English Standard Version renders the word "communion" as "participation". The point here becomes clear: the Supper is for participation and communion with the living Christ; it is to be spiritually nourished by him through the sacramental elements of bread and wine. Of course, as one gets into more detail, agreement turns into sharp disagreement. If in the Lord's Supper, the church communes with Christ, numerous questions come to the fore: What does it mean to commune with Christ? What does it mean that he feeds, nourishes, and is present with his people? How do the elements of bread and wine relate to Christ's presence? Taken a level deeper—and this is something with which the Reformers wrestled—can Christ's humanity be present in numerous places all at once? Is it even realistic to say that Christ is physically present on every table of the Lord's Supper across the world? All these questions and more are what lead to disagreement.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Kindle 1389

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1995, 389

## **Theological Interpretations of Christ's Presence in the Lord's Supper**

At this point, this paper will consider the major theological views on the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, and its purpose as it relates to salvation. From the outset, it is important to note that this will primarily be a theological survey rather than a biblical survey.

### *The Roman Catholic View*

As was cited above, the Roman Catholic Church understands the Lord's Supper to create an intimate union with Christ. This union accomplished in and through the Lord's Supper "preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received in baptism".<sup>7</sup> In baptism, the believer is united to the death and resurrection of Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is made a partaker of Christ's new life.<sup>8</sup> The Lord's Supper—or as is more commonly called Eucharist within the Roman Catholic tradition—is meant to cause an increase in the resurrection life by deeper participation in Christ.

How is this accomplished? The Roman Catholic Church understands this deepened union accomplished in the Lord's Supper to be effected by a "re-presenting" of the sacrifice of Christ under the modes or appearances of bread and wine. This is not properly a new sacrifice as some critics of Roman Catholicism have asserted. Rather, it mysteriously causes the once for all sacrifice of Christ to come to the present, and initiates or maps participants onto that same sacrifice. "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*";<sup>9</sup> meaning, the Eucharist makes Christ and the cross present in the "now". But how does the Lord's Supper make Christ present

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 389

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, see paragraph 1226-1228

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 381, emphasis original

in this manner? The Catechism, largely borrowing from the Council of Trent, explains that by the words of institution, the substances of the bread and wine are changed into the substances of Christ's body and blood. The Catechism explains that the "whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially present...under the Eucharistic species".<sup>10</sup> But this wording is confusing. What is meant by species? And how is the entire Christ available under these species? The Council of Trent gives this reality a name called "transubstantiation":

By the consecration of the bread and wine a change is brought about of the whole substance of the bread in 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 properly and appropriately calls transubstantiation.<sup>11</sup>

Transubstantiation is a term which is meant to communicate that while the outward appearances of bread and wine remain, the essential substance, what the thing really is, is changed. "In the Eucharist,...the reality is changed, but the form remains the same",<sup>12</sup> explains Thomas Baima. Alister McGrath explains that the doctrine of transubstantiation

rests on Aristotle's distinction between "substance" and "accident." The substance of something is its essential nature, whereas its accidents are its outward appearances (for example, its color, shape, smell, and so forth). The doctrine of transubstantiation affirms that the accidents of the bread and wine (their outward appearance, taste, smell, and so forth) remain unchanged at the moment of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 383

<sup>11</sup> Henry Joseph Schroeder. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978., 75

<sup>12</sup> Russell D. Moore, I. John Hesselink, David P. Scaer, Thomas A. Baima, Paul E. Engle, and John H. Armstrong. *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*. Kindle loc 2121-22

consecration, while their substance changes from that of bread and wine to that of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

By adopting Aristotle's ontology, the Roman Catholic Church understands the appearances of bread and wine to remain, but its substance to be totally transformed into the glorified body and blood of Christ. By eating the changed elements, one is thereby transformed by the resurrected body and blood of Christ into his image. The goal is transformation by participation in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Lutheran View*

The Lutheran church agrees with the Roman Catholic church that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to commune and partake of Christ's resurrected body and blood.

Jordan Cooper says this about the Lord's Supper:

[The Lord's Supper] brings about sanctification. Through participating in Christ's body and blood, the Trinity's presence within the believer's heart is strengthened. The resurrected Christ is given to the believer, causing the recipient to grow in his or her own resurrection life through participation in him. It is a medicine strengthening one against death, sin, the devil, and the world.<sup>15</sup>

The Lord's Supper communicates Christ's resurrected flesh and blood, thereby enabling the believer to participate in that same life. The Augsburg Confession states that "the body and blood of Christ are truly present under the form of bread and wine and are

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<sup>13</sup> Alister E McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*. 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Kindle Locations 3845-3848

<sup>14</sup> While it is true that the Eastern Orthodox church disagrees with the term "transubstantiation", their view of the Lord's Supper is very similar: that the bread and wine "change". For this reason, this paper will not cover that tradition.

<sup>15</sup> Jordan Cooper. *The Great Divide: A Lutheran Evaluation of Reformed Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015. Kindle Locations 3578-3581



communicated to those that eat in the Lord's Supper.”<sup>16</sup> This presence is objective and comes through the words of institution.

While this position sounds very similar to the Roman Catholic teaching, there is one very important difference: the Roman Catholic concept of transubstantiation. Luther took special issue with the doctrine of transubstantiation because he could not conceive of the bread and wine being *replaced* with the body and blood of Christ. For Luther, this was a philosophical concoction nowhere found in the scriptures. In his mind, there was no need for the substances of bread and wine to be replaced by Christ's body and blood. “It is an absurd and unheard of juggling with words to understand ‘bread’ to mean ‘the form or accidents of bread’, and wine to mean ‘the form or accident of wine’”.<sup>17</sup> Rather than replacing or changing the substance of the elements, Luther maintained that Christ's body and blood remained alongside, in, and under the elements. Luther explains, “it is not necessary in the sacrament that the bread and wine be transubstantiated and that Christ be contained under their accidents in order that the real body and real blood may be present”.<sup>18</sup> For Luther, there are two substances involved in the Lord's Supper: the earthly elements of bread and wine, and the heavenly elements of Christ's body and blood. Luther was fond of comparing this dual nature of the Lord's Supper to the incarnation. Christ is both man and God, and the natures are neither confused nor mingled; “both natures are simply there in their entirety”.<sup>19</sup> As such, both the bread and

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<sup>16</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article 10

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther. *Three Treatises*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990, 147

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 151

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 151

wine and the body and blood are there “in their entirety”. G.H. Gerberding explains it this way:

We are satisfied, from our examination of the passages that have to do with our subject, that there must be earthly elements present in this sacrament. They are bread and wine. They remain so, without physical change or admixture. We also find from these passages that there is a real presence of heavenly elements. These are the body and blood of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to this, the Lutheran church understands Christ’s human nature to have the capacity to be everywhere present. Christ’s humanity, while not being “divine”, is by nature of the incarnation, infused with the divine life such that it can share in certain attributes that belong properly to God. Gerberding explains that Christ’s “glorified, spiritual, resurrection body, in its state of exaltation, [is] inseparably joined with the Godhead, and by it rendered everywhere present”.<sup>21</sup> Christ’s humanity participates in the Godhead in such a way so as to render it “everywhere present”. As such, Christ can be present in any and every celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and thus able to communicate his resurrection life to the participants.

#### *The Memorial View*

The memorial view is a position commonly held to lower church traditions, such as Baptist or Pentecostal. While still maintaining that in some sense, believers commune with Christ, the memorial view maintains that Christ’s presence is not physical or actual. Instead, Christ is present in memory, or spiritually. The elements are meant to symbolize

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<sup>20</sup> G. H. Gerberding, *The Way of Salvation in the Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia, PA: Lutheran Publication Society, 1887, 53

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 53

certain important theological truths to the mind and heart of the believer, thus nourishing them in their faith. This view is historically attributed to Ulrich Zwingli.

Herman Bavinck explains:

Zwingli interpreted the word of institution figuratively and explained the vocable “is” by the word “means”... The bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper, therefore, are the signs and reminders of Christ’s death, and believers, trusting in that reality, partake of the body and blood of Christ in these signs.<sup>22</sup>

Zwingli and Luther famously argued over the meaning of “this is my body” in the words of institution: “Luther emphasized the word ‘is’ in: ‘This is my body. It says so!’ [To Luther], any explanation that turns into a sign or symbol fails to do justice to the words of the Bible”.<sup>23</sup> Zwingli, in contrast, emphasized the nature of faith in receiving Christ. He once said: “To eat the body of Christ spiritually is nothing other than to rest, in one’s spirit and mind, in the compassion and goodness of God through Christ”.<sup>24</sup> Luther in contrast, understood Christ’s presence to be objective, real and substantial, regardless of personal faith. Faith was of course important to Luther (faith alone!), but not in terms of Christ’s presence in the Supper. Christ is there whether one believes or not. Another important disagreement between Luther and Zwingli was over Christ’s human omnipresence. Luther believed that Christ’s humanity could be, by power of the divine indwelling, omnipresent and therefore present within the elements. Zwingli could not accept this doctrine. Christ is at the right hand of God the Father; if he is there, then he is by definition not in the elements of the bread and wine. For this reason, Zwingli’s

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<sup>22</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003, 557

<sup>23</sup> J. Van Genderen, W. H. Velema, Gerrit Bilkes, and Van Der Maas Ed M. *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2008, 810

<sup>24</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 4., 557

position may be seen as a theo-logic of the reality of Christ's true humanity. If Christ is truly human, then he is not omnipresent; He is not in the bread and wine. The Supper is therefore for the purpose of remembrance, of stirring faith, or showing the gospel in a tangible manner, not for the purpose of communicating Christ's actual flesh and blood.

Baptist Russell Moore, in his exposition of the memorial view, contends that the Lord's Supper is less of a "memorial" and more of a "sign":

The historic Baptist concept of the Lord's Supper serves less as a "memorial" than as a sign — a sign pointing both backward and forward. In the Old Testament, this function of the sign serves as a "reminder" and a proclamation to both covenant parties —Yahweh and his people — of the promises of God....<sup>25</sup>

The Lord's Supper is a sign to his people and to God; but what is it a sign of? Moore explains:

In the redemption of Israel from among the nations, God gave various signs that he was for them, centering on the act of eating and feeding. The Passover meal indicated God's presence on behalf of the Israelites. Manna in the wilderness, along with the provision of water and of quail, demonstrated that God cared for his covenant people. Moreover, God promised a future restoration that included eating and drinking of bread and of wine. In his prophecy of God's overturning of the reign of death, Isaiah mentions that God will lay out a banquet for all peoples on the holy mountain, a feast that includes "the finest of wines" (Isa. 25:6)... The coming of Jesus promises the onset of this...reality.<sup>26</sup>

The point here is that the Supper, like every other meal in the Bible, is a sign that God is with and for his people, Jesus being the fullest revelation of that reality. The Supper then is a sign of his abiding presence with and for his people in and through Christ. Moore

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<sup>25</sup> Moore, Russell D., I. John Hesselink, David P. Scaer, Thomas A. Baima, Paul E. Engle, and John H. Armstrong. *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*. Kindle Locations 386-393

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, Kindle 394-407

also agrees that the meal is a communion with Christ: “There is no question that in the Supper we commune with one another and with Christ. The question is how”.<sup>27</sup> Moore explains that Christ is not present in the bread and wine; rather, he is always present with his people by faith, even during the celebration of the supper. The Supper makes Christ present because it is a sign and proclamation of the gospel and thus stirs faith:

[I]t seems that the New Testament assumes that Christ is always present with his people (Matt. 28:20), organically and mystically united to his church as a head is united to a body (Eph. 5:23). In the Supper, we experience the presence of Christ through the proclamation that Christ is united with his people, the church. We, through faith, confess the identity of the people of God and our union with the crucified Messiah.<sup>28</sup>

This is, of course, a more detailed restatement of the early Zwinglian view: Christ is present always by faith and only by faith. The Lord’s Supper therefore makes Christ present in as much as it signifies the gospel and stirs faith in Christ.

### *The Reformed View*

It is the contention of this paper that among the views presented, the Reformed view is the most balanced in its presentation. Many theologians have understood the Reformed view as an “in media res”, containing the best of all the options. This view comes principally from Calvin, who appreciated both of the emphases of Zwingli and Luther. Though Calvin never could quite agree with Luther that Christ is objectively and substantially present in the elements, he did agree that Christ’s true and physical presence is important. Christ’s body is the source of all life for the Christian, and union with that body is necessary for reception of that life. John Calvin says this about the purpose of the supper:

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, Kindle 540

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, Kindle 542-546

Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality... The Lord's body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice... We are therefore bidden to take and eat the body which was once for all offered for our salvation, in order that when we see ourselves made partakers in it, we may assuredly conclude that the power of his life giving death will be efficacious to us.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin makes it perfectly clear that by partaking of Christ's glorified body and blood, believers are thereby transformed. This process is begun at baptism and continues in the supper:

In baptism, God, regenerating us, engrafts us into the society of his church and makes us his own... [and continually supplies] the food to sustain and preserve us in that life into which he has begotten us by his Word.<sup>30</sup>

It is clear then, that Calvin agrees with much of Luther's teaching on the subject. Christ's body and blood is true food and drink. However, Calvin also agreed with Zwingli in one important area: that Christ's body cannot be omnipresent and is always seated at the right hand of the Father: "we must not dream of such a presence of Christ in the Sacrament...as if the body of Christ, by local presence, were put there to be touched by the hands, to be chewed by the teeth".<sup>31</sup> Christ cannot be in the bread, because he is limited "by the general characteristics common to all human bodies, and is contained in heaven".<sup>32</sup> Instead, Christ is made present "through his Spirit... The bond of this connection is

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<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, and John T. MacNeill. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 2, 1361

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 1360

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 1372

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 1373

therefore the Spirit of Christ, with whom we are joined in unity”.<sup>33</sup> Calvin therefore argues for a “spiritual” presence of Christ. This is not to say however that one partakes only of Christ’s soul or spirit or that Christ is only present in memory (as Zwingli did); rather, Christ is made wholly or physically present by the power of the Holy Spirit in a mysterious manner. He is not “in” the bread, so to speak; instead, the Spirit miraculously binds the believer to Christ in heaven through participation in the Supper. Calvin also agrees with Zwingli, that Christ is made available only subjectively by faith. Christ’s presence is not objectively present regardless of personal faith as Roman Catholics and Lutherans argue. Rather, Christ “offers himself with all his benefits to us, and we receive him by faith”.<sup>34</sup> For Calvin, this is important, because the mechanism of union with Christ is faith alone. Without faith, Christ and all his benefits remain outside of the believer. This is no less true in the Lord’s Supper. Christ is truly and substantially offered under the elements of bread and wine, but this reception comes only by faith through the power of the Spirit; hence this position has been commonly called receptionism.

It is important to note the role of the Holy Spirit in Calvin’s theology. Now that Christ has ascended, it is the Spirit’s role to make Christ present in the believer. This is true in salvation: the Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ by faith, and all of his benefits are thereby made available. For Calvin, this is true of the sacraments as well. John Hesselink explains Calvin’s emphasis:

[I]n the Institutes, the motif of the Holy Spirit becomes prominent. Here Calvin repeats that the sacraments were given by God to establish and increase our faith, but, he adds, they only properly fulfill their office “when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 1373

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 1364

them”... Or, as Calvin puts it in his Geneva Catechism, “The power and efficacy of a sacrament does not lie in the external elements, but wholly emanates from the Spirit of God”.<sup>35</sup>

So then, it is in the power of the Spirit that Christ is made really and truly present. Christ is present in heaven, and yet in a mysterious manner, believers are taken up in the Spirit to eat and drink of his flesh and blood. Believers are made to be partakers even though he is at the right hand of God. This is precisely a Calvinist position on the Lord’s Supper. It is clear then that Calvin’s position was a collaboration of both Luther and Zwingli’s views on the Lord’s Supper. Christ is made truly available in the Lord’s Supper. However, Christ is not locally or objectively present. Instead, the Spirit makes Christ available by faith through the sacramental elements.

With the survey on the theological interpretations of the Lord’s Supper complete, this paper will move on to a critique of the memorialism and local presence views in favor of the Reformed view.

### **A Reformed Critique of Local Presence**

The Roman Catholic and Lutheran position both agree that Christ is made objectively present in the Lord’s Supper. The Reformed and Zwinlian positions disagree with local presence for a number of reasons. In his *Elenctic Theology*, Francis Turretin has a rather detailed rebuttal of the local presence position. Two of those rebuttals are important to note. First, Turretin argues that a local presence is denied by the narrative of scripture: namely, that Christ’s life, death and resurrection end in his physical departure

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<sup>35</sup> Russell D. Moore, I. John Hesselink, David P. Scaer, Thomas A. Baima, Paul E. Engle, and John H. Armstrong. *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*. Kindle Locations 874-875



from the earth to the right hand of God. This departure is proceeded by the sending of the Holy Spirit who is in himself the presence of Christ in the believer. Christ's absence is to be felt until "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). Turretin says,

He who departed in body from the earth and left the world that he might betake himself to heaven where he is to remain until the restitution of all things; who is sought in vain on the earth where he no longer is; and must be sought in heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God, cannot be said to be carnally present in the sacrament.<sup>36</sup>

The entire narrative of the New Testament is of the Father sending the Son, and of the Son dispatching the Spirit. In the local presence position, the thrust of this narrative is lost, and the prominence of the Spirit is left wanting. Thus the Trinitarian shape of salvation is stunted. It is the Spirit who unites the believer to the body and blood of Christ, and who permeates the body of the believer with resurrection life. This was clearly Calvin's soteriological emphasis: that it is the Spirit who makes Christ available to the believer. He is the one who makes what Christ did "out there" real "in here".

Turretin's second argument is a simpler one: Christ cannot be locally present in the sacrament for the very reason that he is truly human. "Such a presence overthrows the nature and properties of a true body".<sup>37</sup> Nicene Christology hinges on the truth that Christ is truly and really consubstantial with humanity. "A true [human] body ought to be visible and palpable, located, impenetrable and circumscribed; which is so in one place that it cannot be in another".<sup>38</sup> The point here is that if Christ is consubstantial with humanity in every way, then he cannot be omnipresent. Should Christ be omnipresent in

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<sup>36</sup> Francis Turretin, George Musgrave Giger, and James T. Dennison, Jr. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Vol. 3, 508-509

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 509

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 509

his human nature, it would spell the end of his humanity. Turretin explains that at every point of Christ's existence, including his resurrection, ascension, and enthronement, Christ remains fully human.<sup>39</sup> This is essentially important, because if Christ is not like mankind in every way possible, then atonement is incomplete. Hebrews 2:14-15 explains that Christ had to be made like his brothers "in every way" to free them from bondage of sin and death. Christ's true participation in humanity necessitates that he be bound by the same limitations of all mankind.

At this point, it is important to bring in one last critique of a local presence position from Calvin. This critique extends only to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation; Lutheranism does not make this mistake. In his critique of transubstantiation, Calvin makes the observation that under this doctrine Christ, "to hide himself under the figure, annihilates its substance" of the bread and the wine.<sup>40</sup> What Calvin rightly points out is that within the transubstantiation doctrine, the bread and wine cease to exist and are replaced completely by Christ. Calvin points out that historically, for a sacrament to remain a sacrament, it must have "two parts,...earthly and the heavenly".<sup>41</sup> This is the nature of a sacrament: it is an outward earthly sign or symbol that communicates a spiritual or heavenly reality. Transubstantiation thus confuses or collapses the sign of bread and wine into the spiritual reality of Christ's body and blood. In Calvin's estimation, if the doctrine of transubstantiation is true, "the nature of the sacrament is therefore cancelled".<sup>42</sup> This is why Luther (among other reasons), although

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 510

<sup>40</sup> John Calvin, and John T. MacNeill. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 2, 1374

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 1374

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 1376

maintaining a local presence of Christ, instead asserted that Christ was omnipresent in, with, and under the bread and the wine. There must actually be an outward sign—and not a mere appearance of a sign—if it is to be a true sacrament.

### **A Reformed Critique of Memorialism**

While Calvin agreed with Zwingli, that Christ was not locally present in the Lord's Supper, he also maintained that the Lord's Supper was more than a mere sign to stir faith. No, in the Lord's Supper, by faith and the power of the Spirit, believers feast on Christ really and truly. It is of course true that in the *Institutes*, Calvin refers to the supper as a sign or representation or a witness of the spiritual reality of Christ's death and resurrection. However, Calvin did not limit the Lord's Supper to a sign. For Calvin, it also did what it symbolized: it communicated Christ's resurrection life through his body and blood.

This brings up an important critique of the memorial view: namely, that the memorial position commits the same error as transubstantiation, but in the opposite direction. If transubstantiation confuses the sign with the reality, the memorial view detaches the reality from the sign to such an extent that the sacrament is reduced to a bare symbol. This again spells the end of the sacrament. Beyond that though, reducing the sacrament to a sign inevitably creates pastoral problems for churches. Lutheran David Scaer explains:

For Zwingli, both baptism and the Lord's Supper had historical and eschatological significance in pointing back to what God had done and ahead to what God was going to do, but God was not present in the rites and its elements — hence they were not essential for salvation. It is hard to avoid the implication that one sacramental sign can be

substituted for the other and that the order of their administration is a matter of indifference. Today's Baptists, like Zwingli, regard both rites as memorials, signs and proclamations, making baptism's function virtually indistinguishable from that of the Lord's Supper. Thus within a Zwinglian context, it is not surprising that the Lord's Supper can be given to one without baptism.<sup>43</sup>

Scaer brings in several points here: first of all, if both the sacraments are simply signs, then baptism and the Lord's Supper cannot properly be separated. They both communicate the gospel! Secondly, this can lead to a reversal or confusion of the proper order of baptism with the Lord's Supper. If they are the same, why should not an unbaptized Christian be admitted to the supper? Not only is this pastorally complicated, it is historically anomalous. Scaer continues:

In following ancient church practice, closed communion for Lutherans means excluding unbelievers and those who have not been baptized or belong to churches with erring beliefs — especially about the Lord's Supper. Baptist practice, on the other hand, allows the unbaptized to receive it.<sup>44</sup>

This of course may not be true of all memorialist churches, but it is true of many. It is important that churches not so far separate sign from reality that the sacraments lose their place within the Christian life. Baptism is properly the sacrament of initiation or union with Christ's body<sup>45</sup>, and the Lord's Supper effects a deeper communion and participation with Christ.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, Kindle Locations 717-722

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, Kindle Locations 731-733

<sup>45</sup> It is true that within Reformed confessions there is disagreement on what and when baptism takes effect. The WCF leaves room for a variety of positions (see chapter 28, paragraph 6). In general, however, the Reformed understand baptism to be efficacious.

Another important argument against the memorialist view is that if all the Lord's Supper does is signify or proclaim the cross and resurrection for the purpose of increased faith, this collapses the Lord's Supper into the ministry of the Word. It makes the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the supper one and the same. Of course, if that is true, then there is really nothing significant to the supper in distinction to the Word; what is accomplished there is also accomplished anywhere else the gospel is proclaimed. For what reason then should the church give any primacy to the frequent practice of the Lord's Supper? John Hesselink explains this further:

For Calvin (and Luther and Aquinas), participating in the Lord's Supper brings something extra to the table, something not experienced simply by the proclamation of the Word or the fellowship of the covenant community. It is a mysterious, miraculous communion with the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ —and that is what I find missing in [the memorial] presentation.<sup>46</sup>

This is an important critique. For the sacraments to have any weight to them, they must accomplish something that the Word does not accomplish on its own. Of course that is not to say that the ministry of the Word is not important, or that the external symbol of the sacraments do not have words associated. But the sacraments cannot simply be an external symbol or word.

### **Conclusion**

By surveying the differing positions on Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, it becomes apparent that the Roman Catholic and Lutheran views go too far in affirming an objective local presence in the elements of the bread and the wine. On the other hand, the

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<sup>46</sup> Russell D. Moore, I. John Hesselink, David P. Scaer, Thomas A. Baima, Paul E. Engle, and John H. Armstrong. *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*. Kindle Locations 660-663

memorialist view swings to the other side, removing any participation in the body and blood of Christ. The Reformed Calvinistic understanding of the Lord's Supper creates a healthy balance between these two opposites. On the one side, this position denies a local objective presence in the elements of the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, it affirms a real and substantial presence effected by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, it is the thesis of this paper that the Reformed view is to be preferred above the others. As believers come to the table of the Lord in faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, there is a real and true eating of Christ's body and blood which communicates immortality and life to the partaker.

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