

Communion: Views of the Lord's Supper

What is the nature of the Lord's Supper? How should it be celebrated?

Let's look at the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation. Then, let's look at three ways Protestants have understood the Lord's Supper.

The Roman Catholic View: Transubstantiation

The Roman Catholic view is called *transubstantiation*.

That is when the priest elevates first the wafer and then the chalice of wine mixed with water and rehearses the institutional narrative, the story of the Last Supper. The bread and the wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Trans means "change" and *substantiation* means "substance." There's a change in the substance of the elements used in the Eucharistic celebration.

Now, to be very specific about the Catholic view, it's not the *form* of the bread and the wine that changes.

The bread still looks like bread and tastes like bread. The wine smells like wine, tastes like wine. There's no change that's perceptible to us as human beings.

Instead, what has changed is the *essence*, the very nature, the substance of the bread and wine. They are no longer bread and wine. Now they are the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This is then received into the life of a Catholic when he or she consumes the Eucharistic elements. By this means, God pours or imbues a grace into the Catholics' life for salvation.

Martin Luther's View: Consubstantiation

A second historical view is that of Martin Luther, generally called *consubstantiation*, though that was not a term that he himself used.

By consubstantiation, we mean that Jesus Christ is present in, with, and under the bread and the wine whenever the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

Luther very clearly distinguished his view from transubstantiation. There's no mystical change of the substance of the bread and the wine. However, when the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, Christ is present in, with, and under the elements of the bread and wine.

How is that possible?

Think of it this way. Jesus Christ is not confined in heaven. He's not only seated at the right hand of the Father, but he's everywhere present.

Thus when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, he can be with the bread and the wine. He can be in, with, and under the elements.

An analogy that is often used to explain this is like a sponge and water. Wherever a sponge is that's soaked with water, there is the water. And wherever the water is, it's there contained by the sponge. The sponge is not the water, the water is not the sponge but the two are there together and this is an analogy that's used to help us understand the Lutheran view of consubstantiation.

Huldrych Zwingli's View: A Memorial (Cityview)

A third view is that of Huldrych Zwingli.

This is the on memorial view. In other words, what is most important about the Lord's Supper is Christ's command to do this, to celebrate the Lord's supper in remembrance of him—his death on behalf of our sins.

So what the elements—the bread and the cup of wine—really do for us is help us to remember that Christ's body was broken for us and his blood was shed for us. The celebration of the Lord's Supper really is a time to remember and reflect on what Christ has done through his death.

John Calvin's View: Spiritual Presence

A fourth view is that of John Calvin, usually called the spiritual presence view.

It's not transubstantiation, and it's not consubstantiation. And it goes beyond Zwingli's memorial view.

For John Calvin, there are symbols that are very powerful. They are the signs of the bread and the wine. He says they are indeed symbolic—they are signs—but they're not empty signs.

They really do render that which they portray, so they render to us the presence of Jesus Christ and his salvific benefits: all the work of salvation that he has accomplished on our behalf.

How is this possible?

Calvin explained it in two ways, always affirming that it is a mystery.

1. It could be that when the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit raises up the church, so the church ascends to fellowship with Christ, commune with Christ who is in heaven.
2. Another possibility is that the Holy Spirit causes Christ to descend, to fellowship and commune with the church as it celebrates the Lord's Supper.

In either case, there is a spiritual presence of Jesus Christ. It goes beyond just mere memorial.

Christ is present with all of his salvific benefits when the church celebrates the Lord's Supper.

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