

ON THE LORD'S SUPPER

Is Christ Really Present in Communion?

Taking Jesus at His Word

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Everything hinges on four words. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to His disciples with a sentence the church has never been able to get past: *This is my body*. Then He took the cup and said much the same of it: *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins* (Matthew 26:26–28). The question that has divided Christians for five centuries is whether Jesus meant what He said, and confessional Lutherans answer with what may be the least sophisticated argument in all of theology: yes. He said *is*. We believe *is*.

That answer sounds simple, and in a sense it is. But it stands between two other answers—one on either side—and understanding why we refuse both is the whole matter. On one side stands the church of Rome, which agrees that Christ is truly present but explains His presence by a philosophical machinery that changes the very substance of the bread. On the other side stand many of our Protestant brothers, who keep the bread as bread but empty the Supper of Christ's body, leaving behind only a symbol and a memory. Lutherans take neither road. We hold, with what we hope is a childlike stubbornness, to the plain words.

The Words Mean What They Say

Start where Jesus started. *This is my body*. Not *this represents my body*, not *this stands for my body*, not *this is a symbol of my body*. When our Lord wanted to speak in metaphor, He was perfectly able to—*I am the vine, you are the branches*—and no one mistook Him for a plant. But in the upper room He was not teaching a parable. He was instituting a testament, and a man's last will is the one place we do not reach for figures of speech. He said *is*, in the most solemn possible setting, and repeated the substance of it over the cup. Paul, handing on what he received from the Lord, says the same and adds a warning so severe it makes no sense unless the body and blood are actually there: whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Corinthians 11:29). You cannot fail to discern a body that is not present. Paul asks elsewhere, is the cup we bless not a participation in the blood of Christ, and the bread a participation in His body? (1 Corinthians 10:16). *Participation*—not portrayal.

The whole Lutheran case rests here. We are not clever enough to improve on Christ's words, and we are not bold enough to correct them. When the words of Scripture are plain, the burden falls entirely on the one who wants them to mean something other than they say. And in the upper room, no one felt that burden until human reason, centuries later, decided that a body could not possibly be in two places at once and went looking for a way around the sentence.

Not Transubstantiation

Rome confesses a real presence, and for that we are grateful; the disagreement here is narrower than with the symbolists. But Rome explains the presence by teaching that the substance of the bread and wine is entirely done away with, converted into the substance of Christ's body and blood, so that only the outward appearances of bread and wine remain. This is transubstantiation, and Lutherans decline it—not because we doubt the presence, but because Scripture never asks us to say the bread stops being bread. Paul, writing after the consecration, still calls it *bread*: *as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup* (1 Corinthians 11:26). We are content to let the bread be bread and the body be body, both truly there, without inventing a mechanism to explain how. The trouble with transubstantiation is not that it believes too much but that it explains too much—it presses beyond what the Word reveals and binds consciences to a philosophy the Bible never taught.

Not a Bare Symbol

The larger break, and the more painful one, is with those who make the Supper a mere symbol. On this view the bread and wine are signs that point away to an absent Christ, and the sacrament is chiefly something *we* do—an act of remembrance, a public testimony of our faith. The words *this is my body* are quietly rewritten to mean *this represents my body*, and the eating becomes a way of stirring up pious memories of a Lord who is bodily elsewhere.

We cannot go there, for two reasons. First, it makes Christ's plain word bend to our reason. The whole argument for a symbolic reading finally comes down to *a body cannot be present like that*—which is to let what we find possible sit in judgment over what our Lord has said. Second, and more grievous, it turns the Supper inside out. It stops being a gift God gives and becomes a work we perform; stops being about what Christ delivers and becomes about what we remember. The sinner who comes to the rail hungry for something from God is handed instead a task to do. That is a poor trade.

The Lutheran Confessions name the alternative *sacramental union*: the true body and blood of Christ are present in, with, and under the bread and wine—really and substantially, distributed and received. The bread remains bread; the body is truly there; the two are united by Christ's word for the purpose of the sacrament. We do not dissolve the bread as Rome does, nor evacuate the body as the symbolists do. We simply let both stand, because Christ's word puts both there.

For You, for the Forgiveness of Sins

But here is what matters most, and it is the thing arguments about presence too often bury. The question is not merely *whether* Christ is present but *why* He comes. And His own words tell us: *given for you... poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins*. The Small Catechism asks what benefit this eating and drinking gives, and answers with those very words—*for the forgiveness of sins*—and then draws the conclusion that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. The Supper is not primarily a presence to be analyzed. It is a gift to be received. It is the Gospel made edible, the forgiveness won on the cross placed on your very tongue.

This is why the Supper is such comfort to a troubled conscience. The absolution you hear preached is *for all*; but here Christ's body is placed into *your* mouth, His blood given to *you*, so that the forgiveness you might fear is meant for someone else is delivered to you personally, individually, bodily, past every doubt. You do not have to feel it or generate it or be sure enough of your own faith to earn it. He comes to you. That is the entire point.

But Am I Worthy?

Many a sensitive Christian hangs back from the rail out of a fear of unworthiness, and Paul's warning about eating judgment can seem to bar the door. But hear how the Small Catechism answers the question *who receives this sacrament worthily*? Not the one who has scrubbed himself clean, not the one who feels strong in faith, but this: fasting and bodily preparation are fine outward training, yet the one truly worthy and well prepared is the one who believes the words *given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins*. The very unworthiness that keeps you away is the reason you are invited. This meal is not a reward for the healthy. It is medicine for the sick, and you qualify. The Lord who said *this is my body* also said *for you*—and He was not speaking to the worthy. He was speaking to you.