

## The Eucharist: A Disputed Question

*An Essay*

Leon O. HYNSON

Of the sacraments of Christ (two for most Protestants, seven for Catholics and Orthodox), none has been more of a disputed question than the Lord's Supper. Its interpretation varies among Anglicans, Calvin and Wesley, Zwingli, or the Salvation Army. So now to the questions: *Disputed questions are not doctrine or dogma. They are investigations.*

Is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper the devout participation in a memory or an experience which joins together the spiritual and material presence of Christ? Do we imagine the Lord's suffering and death in our minds and hearts—our inner sense, which Wesley named a “spiritual sense”—absent any touch or taste? Do “take,” “eat,” mean nothing relevant? What then are the meanings of these words and “this is my body”? Here are touching, tasting, drinking—real matter, physical things—not only spiritual or mental conceptions.

### **Material Life-Creation**

We recognize that a seminal connection exists between wheat and bread, vine and wine, and the planting and harvesting that have progressed through all history since Creation. We will not separate the life of bread and wine of ancient days from the bread of Jesus' time and ours. They belong to creation and Creator. He gives life to wheat and vine!

What, however, does this imply? That the bread and wine become the substance of body and blood? I think not! Still, in some manner, the tangible elements are a sensible experience of touching, tasting, swallowing. On Christ? Spiritual, yes! Yet there is the really and truly material here as well. The common Protestant inclination to internalize most religious experience leads to marginalizing the iconic significance of created things which are the “theater of the glory of God” (according to Calvin).

We sing in exultation:  
Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face,

Here may I *touch* and *handle* things unseen;  
 Here grasp with firmer faith eternal grace,  
 And all my weariness upon Thee lean.<sup>1</sup>

Do we mean it? And what do we mean? Is the hymn too Anglican? Nevertheless, we sing it.

Jesus gave His followers more than a concept, more than a *story* about bread, wine, body, or blood. Or, do we, like some, treat this event as a familial gathering which memorializes a dear departed parent? Jesus gave them real food and a perpetual command. This was a *kairos* time, never to be repeated in this precise setting. We may be closer to some who re-mythologize the synoptic, gospel witness than we may wish, in our memorialist interpretation. In fact, the real historical Jesus gave wholesome material things and *connected* them to His body.

Thus, when I touch the bread, do I touch Him? Is the relationship established in creation between Spirit and matter realized, the space bridged? “And the Spirit of God breathed upon the abyss” (Genesis 1:1-2).

Unlike our Catholic friends, bread and wine do not become the “substance” of the body and blood of Christ, while retaining the “accidents” or appearance.<sup>2</sup>

Is there something Gnostic about our common memorialist view, i.e., the material devalued? Something Platonic which suggests that what is seen is merely the shadow of the real form? In what sense do we truly “touch” and “handle”? I hypothesize that we should not divide the material of the Last Supper from that of our Communion. It *is* a mystery, but should we not *unite* the reality of the past with the memory present.

It is a mistake, I posit, to take the matter which Jesus touched, broke, gave, and commanded, “Take, eat; this is my body,” and handling it, treat it as only the memory of a long-gone moment. It is infinitely greater than the tolling of the old dinner bell calling to supper, a memory I cherish. It is preeminently a call to “taste and see.” It should do for you and me what it did for Peter, Andrew, and John, in the very presence of Jesus.

### Icons and Beyond

In 1960, I enrolled in a preaching class at Conwell School of Theology in Philadelphia (later it became part of Gordon Conwell). One of my readings was Evelyn Underhill’s *Worship*. Given my “spiritual”, i.e., memorialist heritage, I resisted her emphasis on the value of the Church’s icons. Rejecting the visible image of the cross, and more surely the sign of the cross, we sang with fervor Bennard’s “The Old Rugged Cross.” Rejected for our lapels or altars or pendants, we “wore” it in our hearts. My professor, almost physically blind, saw with clarity the worth of Underhill’s arguments.

In *Worship*, the point was made that evangelicals like me and many

Protestants, while rejecting visual images, held to interior images like mystics which gave us the same “windows” as icons offered to Orthodox and Catholic believers. Was she correct? Yes!

We have seldom given more than passing attention to the Eucharist, the celebration of thanksgiving in the sacrament. We do not reprise the mystery of the holy experience with Jesus, Peter, and Paul. For Catholics and Orthodox, it is a moment of majesty and awe before which they bow. For us, it is a passing step on the way to the “real” sequence of the worship, the contemporary worship with its often repetitive songs and the evangelical sermon. Consider breaking the bread and drinking the wine in wonder, then the hymns as we go out.

We must never exclude the mystical power of the Lord’s Supper or, equally, the real nurturing of bread and wine. Let us avoid Gnosticism in any form! We worship in spirit and understanding (I Cor. 14).

What is the correlation between the Last Supper and our Communion? The disciples touched and ate and wondered. We, too, touch and wonder when Jesus says “This is my body!” Luther was certain that Jesus meant exactly what He said. We are less certain!

Test this line of thinking: There was life in the Lord’s food, life in our bread. That life is the gift of the Creator, for all life is of His grace. From age to age, millennia to millennia, through season after season of planting and harvesting, life is given. The latest harvest may not be separated from its genesis. The Eucharist is participation in His life, or, if you prefer, His life-gift.

I ponder describing the Eucharist as iconic, but it is more than representation, more than a window into the realm of the Spirit. If we define it as symbol and mean by “symbol” that which participation in the reality it defines, we have made progress.

The great experience of the Eucharist may be, ought to be, the mystery and the majesty of the real presence, faith, felt, treasured, gloried in; the “glory of His presence,” the *mysterium tremendum*, the awfulness of the Holy (as Otto wrote); with Jacob we may behold and touch the face of God, or as President Reagan spoke on January 28, 1986 of the Challenger disaster, “to slip the surly bonds of earth and touch the face of God.” Ah, the majesty! We seldom know it in the therapeutic-centered worship of many churches.

An argument may be made, perhaps by Friends or Salvationists, that eating and drinking grant the same life as in Communion. There is some truth here, but with his critical difference. The Eucharist is a *unique, singular* moment, specifically given us by Christ. It is not like eating a slab of bread and jam, or bacon and eggs, OJ, and Maxwell House (Starbucks if among the more affluent). The Lord’s Supper may be replaced with chips and cola, or reduced to excess as with some Corinthians who focused on the belly and not

the Body, not recognizing the Lord's Body. Paul wrote, "Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord without discerning the body and the blood of the Lord will experience condemnation." (I Cor. 11:27).

Is Christ "with us" in the bread and wine? To deny this is to bring into question the depth and extent of the Incarnation. It is to misunderstand Christ's glory as the cohesive force of all things (Col. 1:16). In Him "all things hold together" (NRSV). Could anything, *anything* have life if He does not energize it? This is not to suggest that He is *in* all things, but that without Him nothing "is." This is not *pantheism*; it is *Presence*, presence in the life of creation.

The unique moment of His breaking bread was like the singular, unrepeatable, irreplaceable event of the Virgin Birth, of Calvary, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Return. The Eucharist is demarcated from *every* common meal. He, Himself, would not be with them to eat until the Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

In the Supper, the ancients and we are to discern the Body; to discriminate (*diakrino*); to distinguish this from all ordinary meals.

### Spiritual Presence

Let us never overlook the spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Nevertheless, was not Jesus' living presence on earth with the Apostles enough for Peter, James, and John? No, He broke bread and gave it to them. And they ate! We, too, with Bernard, St. Francis, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, our children and inheritors of faith, find a real presence there.

From the first Supper to the last, through peril, toil, and pain, in catacomb and cathedral, from warehouse churches to tiny houses, believers reprised the Lord's presence in the Communion. Should our experience be different than the Apostles'? Or the saints'?

### Why Commune?

What is the connection between bread and body, wine and blood? Surely, it is a mystery which Christ did not "water down" to our carnal satisfactions. And this mystery attracts us, drawing us toward the majesty, to the fullness of life. As the Decalogue fixed boundaries for our blessed freedom in divine and human relationships, so the Eucharist extends the nurture of His life.

We commune because it is Jesus' command. It is His command because it is preeminently for our spiritual, moral, and physical well-being. Recall that Paul counseled discipline to the Corinthians for some had died from overeating. The disciplined life is our living space of liberty.

When Jesus went away, He sent the Holy Spirit to His Church. Is not the Spirit's presence infinitely more than we need? No, Jesus gave us another gift, a grace which would bring together the life of heaven and earth.

Christ did not minimize the material in order to amplify the spiritual. They are part of His fullness and our wholeness. The Gnostics made Jesus into spirit; His body only *seemed* to be flesh. But the Gospels show that the Eternal Word became flesh and made His home with us. The forever God became man.

Perhaps in my analysis I have moved closer to a Lutheran view of Christ with us “in, with, and under.” That would move us well away from Zwingli and past Calvin and Wesley. My true goal does not rest there, but to nudge us toward Jesus and the real Presence of Christ for us; past the mystery to the majesty.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Horatius Bonar, “Here, O My Lord, I See Thee,” (Public Domain, 1855).

<sup>2</sup> By “accidents” the Scholastic fathers meant that bread looked like bread and tasted like bread, but the substance was transformed.

<sup>3</sup> The post-resurrection body of Christ was the body of transfigured life (John 21).