



## Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper exhibits to us how our great, holy and awesome God takes lost sinners into his company – not as sinners, but as those purified and cleansed with the precious blood of his dear Son. As our substitute Christ has made complete atonement and satisfaction for our sins. He has appeased the wrath of God. Thus, when the bread is broken before our eyes and we receive the cup, we may be assured of renewed communion with the Lord and with his people.

### **Nourishment**

The Lord's Supper displays God's fatherly care for his children. He feeds and nourishes us to everlasting life. John Calvin writes these fine words:

*God has created us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as his servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfil the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life ... To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality.*

(John 6:51) (*Institutes* IV.17.1)

The Lord Supper assures us that in Christ and through the Holy Spirit we are healed from our infirmities. It demonstrates the miracle of salvation: we are made alive in Christ so that we can eat and drink. We, who were like walking corpses, dead in our sins and transgression, have been made alive. What the Lord Jesus said when He raised people from the dead, He also says to us who are made spiritually alive: "Give them something to eat and to drink."

### **Presence of the Word**

Since Christ is revealed to us in the Scriptures, true faith lays hold of the Word of the Lord. It delights in the Word, hungers and thirsts for Christ as revealed in the gospel. That element in the Lord's Supper is sometimes overlooked. Not only do we have the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper celebration. We have the Word of Christ! In fact, the Word of the Lord makes or breaks the celebration. Without the Word of Christ, the Lord's Supper goes from feast to famine. Without the Word of Christ there is no grace in the Lord's Supper. Responding to the Word we hunger for the Bread of Life and we thirst for Living Waters. We will have a deep passion and love for Christ. At every Lord's Supper celebration, Jesus Christ instructs us to labour for the food that will not perish but will satisfy our hungry and thirsty souls.

### **Views on the real presence of Christ**

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper was the subject of hot debate. The Heidelberg Catechism highlights the main point of the controversy when it asks in Lord's Day 29, Q. 78, "Are then the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ?" The Roman Catholics answered this question in the affirmative. They believed (and continue to believe) that the moment the priest says,

*"This is my body," the substance of the bread and wine change into the body and blood of our Lord. That explains why Roman Catholics consider the sacrament of the mass to be more important than the preaching of the Word. In the preaching you hear Christ speak but in the mass you receive Christ Himself. You take Him in, just as you would swallow a pill of*

*medication. The Roman Catholic doctrine of the Lord's Supper is called transubstantiation, meaning "change of substance."*

Martin Luther and his followers rejected the Roman Catholic view concerning the change of substance. Yet they also believed Christ is present in, with and under the symbols of bread and wine because Christ's body does not consist of flesh and blood but is spiritual. Luther taught the doctrine of consubstantiation.

Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, rejected the real presence of Christ altogether. He believed the Lord's Supper is simply a meal in which we commemorate Christ's redemptive work. Zwingli denied the working of God's grace in the Lord's Supper.

## **The Reformed view on Christ's presence**

In the good providence and mercy of God the church was brought back to the true and sound doctrine of the Word of God. Both Lord's Day 29 and Article 35 of the Belgic Confession summarize beautifully the biblical teaching regarding Christ's presence. Both do not deny the real presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. With the Belgic Confession we confess,

*"Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ. However, the manner in which we eat it is not by mouth but in the spirit by faith."*

The body of Christ is no longer present on earth in any form or condition. He is and will remain in heaven until He appears to judge the world. The angels who were present at his ascension did not say to the disciples:

*"This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in bodily form the next time you celebrate the Lord's Supper" but "This same Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*

(Acts 1:11)

To say Christ is physically present in the Lord's Supper is to degrade Him. We take Him down from his heavenly majesty and splendour and humiliate Him. We serve the Lord Jesus who ascended into heaven victoriously. The Lord's Supper celebrates his victory and the completion of his work of salvation.

Nevertheless, the Lord's Supper is more than a meal of commemoration. Christ is received – not physically but by faith. With the bread and wine the Lord Jesus gives us his true body and true blood, and it is received not through man's mouth but through his believing heart. With our mouths we eat nothing more than bread and we drink nothing more than wine. But in our hearts, by faith, we receive nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself! We receive Christ as He is given to us by the Holy Spirit. When we embrace the sacrifice of Christ by faith, we find rest for our souls, we taste of the goodness of the Lord and we are satisfied.

## **Transforming transubstantiation**

The doctrine of transubstantiation is based on a wrong understanding of the institution of the Lord's Supper and the nature of the sacraments. When Christ said, *"This is my body,"* (Matthew 26:26). He spoke symbolic language. He used this technique more often. He said, *"I am the true vine"* (John 15:1), and everyone knew Jesus did not become a vine. He said, *"I am the gate"* (John 10:9), but his physical presence was not in the gate. 1 Corinthians 10 warns us not to disobey the voice of the Lord as at Massah and Meribah in the wilderness and then Paul writes, *"and that rock was Christ"* (1 Corinthians 10:4). This rock was not the real physical presence of Christ but the rock represented Christ.

Those who teach transubstantiation are also inconsistent in their doctrine of the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both sacraments. They both have sacramental power. The elements of this Supper remain what they are, just as the water in baptism remains what it is.

*“Just as the water of baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ and is not the washing away of sins itself but is simply God’s sign and pledge, so also the bread in the Lord’s Supper does not become the body of Christ itself...”*

(Lord’s Day 29, A. 78)

The Reformed doctrine of justification through faith alone is the death blow to any view of a physical presence of Christ at the Lord’s Supper and the doctrine of election and predestination places the nails in the coffin. If Christ were physically present and if He were physically eaten with the mouth then Christ would be for all: reprobate and elect. Yet Christ is only for those whom He has chosen. Specifically in the Supper, Christ is for the nourishing and strengthening of the elect alone. Those who come to the table and do not proclaim the Lord’s death, who in doctrine and life have no concern for the Lord, receive nothing at the table but an empty symbol. They eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

### **Pledge of his constant faithfulness**

The bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper are outward tokens representing what the Lord does inwardly. At the last Passover our Lord Jesus Christ gave his disciples pledges of his goodness and mercy, of what He is doing in their hearts, not in their stomachs. In the Supper the Lord pledges that He will grant us the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ through no merit of our own. He has promised this in his Word, and He confirms it sacramentally in the Lord’s Supper.

On their wedding day, a bride and groom give each other a ring as a pledge, a sign and seal of the vows they made before the Lord. The rings are a token of their constant faithfulness and abiding love. The name of the bride is placed in the ring of groom and the name of the groom in the ring of his bride. But that does not mean the ring becomes the wife or husband.

While Christ, the Groom, is away, his bride (the church) can look to the symbols of bread and wine as the pledges and tokens of his constant faithfulness and abiding love; they are the indications of what the Lord is doing in her heart through the Holy Spirit.

### **Looking ahead**

At the celebration of the Lord’s Supper we are assured of Christ presence in Word and Spirit. We look back at what He accomplished on the cross but we also look ahead. Every celebration proclaims and prophesies of the day when Christ will once more be physically present with all believers. He will drink the wine new with us in the kingdom of his Father. Believing in Him now, and trusting that He is present with us spiritually, we shall see Him in his real person and we will not be cast away.

At the table of the Lord, as true partakers, we may look by faith beyond the bread and wine! With grateful devotion we marvel at God’s sin-forgiving grace. Every celebration makes us long for the day when we will be set free from the bondage of sin. At the Lord’s Supper we have a foretaste of greater things to come – the marriage feast of the Lamb. This feast will be more splendid and glorious than we can imagine. Christ will be physically present with us. We will be together with those whose places are vacant at the table today but who have fought the good fight of the faith and who have gained the victory.

### **Conclusion**

The Lord’s Supper proclaims a wonderful gospel. Let the truth it exhibits never be obscured by human constructions, inventions or disputes about how we prefer it to be celebrated. May we and our children embrace the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, and hold on to it as a most precious jewel. Let not our conversations about the Lord’s Supper degenerate into debates. May God grant us the grace to thank Him for his mercy and to keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

John Calvin already warned the church to be aware of Satan’s tactics.

*“Furthermore, Satan, to deprive the church of this inestimable treasure, has long since spread clouds, and afterward, to obscure this light, has raised quarrels and conflicts to*

*estrangle the minds of simple folk from a taste for this sacred food, and also has tried the same trick in our day”*

*(Institutes IV.17.1)*

Inconsequential and petty matters often threaten to blur and eclipse our vision and take away our focus. May Christ nourish us with his all-sufficient sacrifice so that we may hunger and thirst after Him all the more; so that we may not cling to the outward symbols of bread and wine, but lift our hearts on high in heaven, where Christ is, at the right hand of his heavenly Father (*Book of Praise, Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, p.600*).

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