

The Eucharist in Protestant & Catholic Traditions

There are four NT accounts of the Last Supper, THREE in the gospels, and ONE in Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, where Jesus takes the bread and wine and says that they "are" his body and blood. These are called the "Institution Narratives". The four accounts show subtle differences. The **Luke-Paul** institution narratives focus on Jesus as the Risen Lord, the meal is a foretaste of the future heavenly banquet, and it is celebrated "in memory" of him, and there are only subtle hints of sacrifice imagery. The **Matthew-Mark** narratives, which reflect a slightly later tradition, emphasize the idea of the Jesus dying a sacrificial, redemptive death "for all...for the forgiveness of sins", and his death once and for all replaces the sacrifices of the Temple sacrificial system (Heb. 10:1-8). The view that Jesus' death on the cross was a **sacrifice**, only gradually dawned on the early Christians. Jesus himself had been very critical of the sacrifice rituals performed in the Jewish temple, so they initially believed the sacrifice system had been rejected. But Jesus' own words at the last supper (offering his body/ blood) suggest that his death will be a sacrifice. **He himself is enacting the ritual of his death.** The body and the blood are "separated" in the ritual, which is a sign of death – a body without blood is a dead.

TRADITIONAL PROTESTANT/ CATHOLIC DISAGREEMENTS

All Christians would agree that at the Eucharist is a celebration of community between Christians and a memorial of Jesus' death, reminding believers also of his resurrection, and of God's love in offering up His Son for our sins. It is an occasion of God's grace and blessings. For most Christians, Jesus is believed to be substantially present in the Eucharist (the Real Presence), and participation at the Eucharistic table provides the spiritual sustenance, without which a believer does not have the strength to live as Christ's disciple. However, there are some distinctive differences between the denominations.

A. Protestants focus on the remembrance formula:

The celebration is **to strengthen our memory** of what Jesus did, and so strengthen our faith. This is the main purpose of the sacrament. When we celebrate the Eucharist **with faith, then it becomes a source of grace**, where God blesses us with the benefits he promised to us in Christ: forgiveness of sins, and uniting us more united with him in faith and love and spiritual blessings. For a person without faith, the eucharist cannot be a source of grace – it is only ordinary bread and wine.

HOWEVER, the biblical view of "remembering" is much more than just an act of memory, reimagining a past. If we are asked by Jesus to "remember" him, it must be in the biblical sense of "remembrance"- **anamnesis** - not in the modern psychological sense, as an occasion to be remembered. **Anamnesis** is remembering something in a ritual way, so that a specific event is a reality transcending past, present and future. When God acts, He is himself beyond time, and he acts with future generations in mind. When future generations remember God's past events in sacred, liturgical time, God is present to them in those same acts. God's action in the past also fills the reality of the present. Because of the biblical understanding of anamnesis, the Eucharist is a ritual re-enactment of the sacrifice of Christ, which **makes that same sacrifice present to us today**. Therefore "to do this in memory" does not mean just to remember in the psychological sense – it means to make a reality ritually present again. Therefore the Sacrifice of the Mass is not re-enacting another new sacrifice, and "adding" to the sacrifice of Jesus – it is making Jesus sacrifice anamnesically present.

B. Protestants reject the view that the Eucharist is a sacrifice:

The Reformation rejected the Catholic Mass as a "work" of the devil: "*Yea, I declare that all the brothels, all manslaughters, murders, thefts and adulteries have wrought less evil than the abomination of the popish mass*" said Luther. This is because **Justification is by faith alone**. The Reformers rejected any "work" that claimed to bring God's grace, apart from a person's own faith. Also, because **Jesus fulfilled the only sacrifice necessary** and effective for the forgiveness of sins. It is heresy to imagine it could be "done" to obtain this further. He thought that the Catholic Mass was trying to "increase blessings" (and in medieval times, people did pay priests extra money to celebrate extra masses for their own intentions). The Reformers rejected as "a medieval addition" the view that the Eucharist can be a sacrifice offered to God. They were not aware that **the early Church had always seen the Eucharist, in part, as a sacrifice** (eg in the gospel institution narratives, early Church Fathers¹).

¹The first Christian writers understood the Eucharist initially as a spiritual sacrifice, of prayer, praise and dedicated Christian living, offered to God. As it was slowly understood that the Jesus' death on the cross was a true sacrifice, accepted by God, this idea of offering spiritual sacrifice in the Eucharist became more concrete: the offering of food that by prayer, becomes the offering of Jesus himself. St. Justin (150AD), St. Irenaeus (200AD) are the first to hint at this. This evolving understanding of

C. Protestants only accept a descending, not an *ascending*, attitude to worship

In celebrating the Eucharist, Protestants are there only to receive from God (descending aspect) – it would be **wrong to think we add anything** to God’s work completed in Christ. We do not do anything in the Eucharist, except receive God’s promises in faith, and by faith, then unite ourselves more closely with him. However, Catholics would argue that an ascending aspect of worship (man offering something to God) has always been a part of tradition and an instinctive part of how humans respond to God, making sin and thanksgiving offerings as an expression of their desired union with God, and that such offerings are acceptable to God.

D. For Protestants, the real focus of the Eucharist is a participation in Christ

- The offering that we do really make to God in the Eucharist, is not the body and blood of Jesus, but is **ourselves, in faith**. By celebrating the Eucharist, **we are uniting with the sacrifice of Christ**, and we offer ourselves together with him, and to him. **The Eucharist is a celebration of the whole community**, and celebrating the Eucharist brings the community together as one Body – the body of Christ. So the real task of a Christian is not worship and adoration of bread and wine as being the presence of Jesus, but to live out their membership as parts of a living Body, to go out into the world, and help unite all mankind into this body of believers.

Recently, Catholics have come to accept this view. There was an imbalance in medieval times, where the Eucharist was seen as only something the priest celebrated, while believers looked on. The body and blood of Christ became too much an object of adoration, and not for participation. People thought that just by seeing the consecrated host, they were gazing on Christ and communing with him, and they even stopped actually going to receive communion altogether because of this. Catholics now agree that the point of celebrating the Eucharist, is **firstly, to receive it so as to be more united with Christ**, and only secondly is the Eucharistic body and blood there to be worshipped and adored.

E. For Reformed Protestants, Jesus cannot be made physically present

- **In the Reformed Churches**, the Eucharist is only a sign of God’s promises to us in Jesus. By receiving it, we do not receive the substance of Jesus, as if Jesus could be contained in a physical object. The bread and wine only mean something during the actual celebration of the Eucharist because of the faith of the person receiving it. On their own, the bread and wine have no special features (no Real Presence).
- For Zwingli and the radical reformers, there is an absolute difference between the spiritual world and the material world. Jesus’ resurrected body is with God in heaven. His omnipresence as God is not thought to be “transferrable” to his physical resurrected body, so he cannot be omnipresent physically and locally, ie wherever the Eucharist is celebrated.² Jesus can be present personally, but not locally.
- **The Lutheran Churches** disagree, and retain the ancient Christian and Catholic view that the Eucharist is a sacrament: the bread and wine are **symbols (not empty signs)** which, being chosen by God, mysteriously link and do communicate the spiritual reality through the earthly one. Lutherans agree with Catholics that the bread and wine is **permanently changed** in the Eucharist to be the body and blood of Christ. (see *consubstantiation*). Luther however rejected the theory of **transubstantiation** as being an explanation for this, saying it is not scriptural, and we should not be doing philosophy, or be made to believe it, when thinking about theological realities.

THEORIES OF THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST in the Eucharist

All Christian traditions agree that Christ is present in a unique way during the celebration of the Eucharist. However, the Reformed/ Protestant tradition does not see this presence as a real, material presence, but as a **presence to faith**. On the other hand, Catholic thinking has moved away from the early medieval idea that Jesus is present in the Sacrament in a **crudely materialistic** manner³. Also, Catholics now recognize that the faith of the person **does** make a difference to the effectiveness of the celebration: it is not simply “*ex opere operato*”.

Roman Catholics: Transubstantiation

At the Last Supper, Jesus said “This is My Body”. Catholics understand these words to mean that there is a complete identity between the bread/ wine and Jesus’ own body/ blood. In John 6:66-67, Jesus challenges his disciples about whether they are able to accept Jesus’ literal flesh and blood to eat, and if not, Jesus invites them to

Jesus’ death as sacrificial is an example of the “Principle of Development” – the slow, increasing understanding of Jesus’ death and what it meant.

² This was also St. Augustine’s view.

³ Jesus’ body was thought to be “in all truth...handed and broken by the hands of the priest and crushed by the teeth of the faithful” as written in an oath by Pope Nicholas II, which those who denied the Real Presence were forced to sign. It led to accusations by Protestants that in a Catholic mass, the priest thinks he is killing Christ again.

leave. Transubstantiation means “change in substance” and reflects the idea, that the Eucharist is literally his body and blood, so that there is nothing else but this (no longer anything that counts as bread/ wine). A “**substantial change**” (*conversio*, or *mutatio*) has taken place, so that the whole substance of the bread and wine is replaced by the presence of the body and blood of Christ. The **reality** of the bread and wine is now the body and blood of Christ. This meaning of “transubstantiation” was used by the 4th Lateran Council, [and] is acceptable to Orthodox, Lutherans and other denominations that believe in the Real Presence. (Orthodox prefer still to use the term trans-
elementation, and to describe the change as “a divine mystery”, so that the bread and wine is “mysteriously” the body and blood of Christ - thus avoiding philosophical dispute).

In the middle ages, the term “transubstantiation” was also used as a **philosophical theory** – as a philosophical explanation for how this change happens: St. Thomas Aquinas developed it, influenced by Aristotle and medieval scholastic philosophy. He saw the change as the result of a **cause** (the Holy Spirit) which acted on the **substance** of bread, removing it, and making it objectively the substance of Christ’s body and blood, even while its outward appearance (the “**accidents**”) remained the same. This was a new development: the Ancient Church had always understood the bread and wine as **coming to share** in the reality and presence of Christ, and becoming a sacramental **means** of participation in Christ. They did not think of the bread/wine as sacramental **objects** in their own right, which have been **caused to change**. Aquinas’ view led to Catholics objectifying the Host as the physical and local presence of Christ, independently of anyone’s participation in this. Luther argued that Aristotle and philosophical ideas about causation, substance, accidents and change, have no place in theology and are not part of scriptural teaching, so should be rejected. Catholics would respond that the Church never claimed the philosophical theory was a matter of faith – but only that transubstantiation as belief in substantial change is a matter of faith⁴.

Consubstantiation

(=Luther)

Consubstantiation is a name for another philosophical theory that attempts to describe how Christ is really present in the Eucharist. Luther himself would not have used this term, preferring “sacramental union” to describe how the Real Presence of Christ is present alongside the substance of the bread and the wine (ie. unlike Transubstantiation, the substance of the bread and wine is not replaced). Luther taught that the body and blood of Christ are present “*in, with, and under the forms*” of bread and wine, and gave the **analogy an iron** put into the fire whereby both fire and iron are united in the red-hot iron and yet each continues unchanged (sacramental union). Consubstantiation is affirmed by a minority of Christians, including some Eastern Orthodox churches⁵.

Virtualism – Reformed Protestants (Calvin. Presbyterian Churches)

The Reformed and Presbyterian view derives from the teachings of John Calvin: Christ is **not present literally** in a physical way in the elements, but he is spiritually present. This is because Christ’s risen body is in heaven, and cannot be on earth at the same time, because Calvin believed that divine omnipresence belongs to Christ in his divinity, not in his humanity (dualism). Those who receive the bread and wine with faith, do receive the real body and blood of Christ through the power (latin: *virtus*) of the Holy Spirit, even though the bread and wine are not changed into this body and blood as a local, physical reality. This view sometimes known as **Receptionism**. Calvin explained his view of the Eucharist in his Institutes: “*For why does the Lord put the symbol of his body into your hands, but just to assure you that you truly partake of him? .. let us feel as much assured that the visible sign is given us (ie his body), in seal of an invisible gift.*”

Memorialism (Reformed Protestants – Zwingli. Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals)

This is the view where the bread and wine are **only signs** of Christ – they only represent his body and blood to the imagination of the believer, and enable the believer to reflect in faith on his saving death. In themselves, the bread and wine are **not changed in anyway**, and remain what they are. Receiving them in faith, unites the believer more closely to Christ, through the believer’s faith in what Jesus did. The bread and the wine **do not themselves convey God’s grace**, but faith, does. It is often called “Celebration of the Lord’s Supper” rather than “Eucharist” or “Mass”, and helps the believer to remember Jesus’ sacrifice in a psychological sense, not as anamnesis.

Modern Roman Catholic Developments

⁴ “In order to confess the reality of the Eucharistic presence without reserve the Roman Catholic Church teaches that ‘Christ whole and entire’ becomes present through the transformation of the whole substance of the bread and the wine into the substance of the body and blood of Christ while the empirically accessible appearances of bread and wine (*accidentia*) continue to exist unchanged” (*The Eucharist*, § 49, quoting Council of Trent, DS 1641).

⁵ <http://www.theopedia.com/consubstantiation>

The Catholic Church has given more recognition to the fact **the Real Presence of Christ** can be found in many other ways and is not limited to the Eucharist. It is also found in the souls of individual believers; in those who participate in the Eucharist to become the Body of Christ; in the other sacraments; in the proclamation of the Word of God. These are not separate and distinct presences, but all the same Presence, uniting the believer more intimately to Christ. The **Eucharist, however, remains its greatest expression.**

Trans-signification & Trans-finalisation

Recently, Catholic theologians have shown a new appreciation that the main point of the Eucharist is not for the bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Jesus: to “make” the Real Presence appear, is not the aim of the Mass. These developments have been recognized in Vatican documents: “*Christ in the Eucharist does not come just to sit enthroned, but in order that he may come to live in our hearts and... make us sanctified in body*”. In the consecration, “*the bread and the wine take on a new meaning and a new finality... they create a new reality of being and existence*”⁶ The Eucharist should be thought of as bringing about **a change in the meaning and purpose** of the bread and wine (not just in what it substantially is).

- **TRANSIGNIFICATION (Schillebeeckx):** the bread and wine receive a new meaning. Bread and wine no longer means/ signifies food, but Christ. The signifier - is bread and wine; the signified - is Christ
- **TRANSFINALISATION (Rahner):** the bread and the wine receive a new final end. Their natural purpose of physical nourishment is replaced by the purpose of spiritual nourishment, and to stir up faith in those who receive it.

The problem with both theories, is that they could be understood as implying that there is only a change in meaning or purpose, apart from any actual change in substance. In the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*, Pope Paul VI clarified that while these ideas were welcome, but that it must still be remembered, that the bread and wine obtain a new meaning and purpose because they have been substantially changed into Christ’s body and blood. They do not simply mean something different by faith and as signs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Catholic:

- Respect in treating the Consecrated Species: crumbs, spills etc.
- Reservation of Blessed Sacrament: after Mass, it is placed in Tabernacle. The consecrated Host is the Real Presence of Christ, and this is a permanent change. The Tabernacle is often seen in prime position at the front of the Church.
- Adoration of Blessed Sacrament: gazing on the Real Presence of Christ, and adoring it, is common practice in many parishes. *Corpus Christi* processions, carrying a monstrance with a consecrated Host through the streets, venerating it as the Real Presence.
- Taking to the Sick: since at consecration, the host is permanently changed, it can be carried to the sick, who were unable to attend mass, and so can benefit from its presence, and consumption. Luther agreed with this.
- The celebration of the Mass is the high point of the Church’s worship, worshipping God through re-presenting the sacrifice of Christ, and making Christ substantially, sacramentally present. It takes place daily, and Catholics are obliged to attend it every Sunday. It is celebrated in a formal, careful way, and occasionally with great ceremony (High Feast days). In the Catholic Church, it consists of a Liturgy of the Word, and Liturgy of the Eucharist, with introductory and concluding rites. In the Orthodox Church, it consists of a Liturgy of Preparation (only deacon and priest), Liturgy of Catechumens (readings), Liturgy of the Faithful (Eucharist).

Protestant:

- Where the Eucharist is celebrated, it is usually called “the celebration of the Lord’s supper”, or “Holy Communion”. It takes place weekly, or only monthly, also with some formal structure, but often in a simple way, shorn of liturgical objects (vestments, altars, candles, icons, incense etc). Some Reformed Christians do not celebrate the Eucharist at all when they meet (eg Quakers).
- The focus is directly on personal faith and on the need to repent from sin: the celebration of the Eucharist is primarily aimed at strengthening faith, and so it is always associated with the Word of Preaching, which has equal place in Protestant worship. For Protestants, Christ is as present in His Word and in the minister’s preaching, as He is in the Eucharist.
- The focus on fellowship. All members are part of the body of Christ – and this is where the true presence of Christ is found. So Protestants have a duty to show honour to God, by making it a priority to go out and serve and preach to others.

⁶ paraphrase, *Mysterium Fidei*, 1965.

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