

# A Changeable Feast: The Evolution of the Eucharist, Part 4

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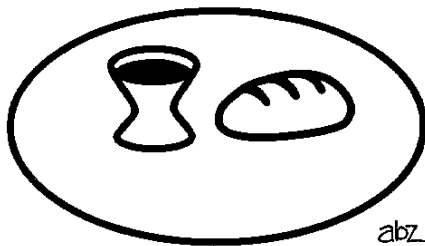
*Ed. Note: In our first three parts, we saw how various crises and events influenced the church's understanding of the Eucharist, resulting in "threads" of meaning which became permanent parts of later prayers, resulting in the complex prayers with which we are familiar today.*

The dissolution of the Classical ideas about the co-inherence of symbols and the things they signified created a deep insecurity in the West about the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. This resulted in three broad threads: the Realist thread, the Real Presence thread, and the Spiritualist thread.

## Transubstantiation and the Realist Thread

The first to formulate a specifically Realist perspective was Paschasius Radbertus (790–865), a monk and abbot of the Corbie monastery in Northern France in the ninth century. As he wrote in his treatise *On the Body and the Blood of the Lord*, "We must believe that after the consecration these are nothing else at all but the flesh and blood of Christ... And...is in no way at all distinct from that which was born of Mary and suffered on the cross and rose from the tomb."

Radbertus and the theologians following him were concerned with whether Christ's body and blood were "real" for non-believers. Most people assumed that whoever consumed the consecrated elements was understood to have partaken of Christ's flesh and blood whether they believed it or not (albeit if they did not, they ate to their own damnation). Many scholars were



outraged at the notion that a mouse might break into the sacristy and consume Christ, but as Guitmund of Bec (1040–1095?) countered, "Well, Jesus was in the tomb, which was just as bad."

For Guitmund, the consecrated elements were like clothes which Christ uses to cover his flesh and blood so that we may eat it without repulsion: "The substance of the things is changed, but the taste, the color and the other sensible accidents which previously existed subsist."

Coined by Stephen of Beaugé, who was the bishop of Autun, the term "transubstantiation" was soon taken up by Pope Alexander III in his writings from 1140 to 1150. It was at the Lateran Council of 1215 that the term "transubstantiation" was first proposed as an official means of describing the change in the elements, and although variously interpreted, it has been the Roman Catholic Church's term of choice ever since.

Many theologians, even those who advocated a Realist interpretation, were concerned that the literalism was going too far. It was a time when "signs and wonders" were practically ubiquitous, and the Eucharist was the most awe-

some and predictable wonder of all. Stories about the consecrated host bleeding at the fracture were very popular, as well as the fear of chewing the host. Nor was this popular realism curbed by the centuries which followed in Roman Catholicism. Even in recent times, many people who were educated in Roman Catholic schools can remember being told to let the wafer dissolve rather than biting it so that they would not "hurt the baby Jesus."

## The Real Presence Thread

The magic of medieval "priestcraft" and the gross literalism that marked the popular understanding of the Eucharist created an intellectual crisis that incited fierce opposition. Far from advocating a Realist perspective, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was disturbed by the inadequacy of neo-Platonism to address what he felt to be the true and historic theology of the Eucharist. In the newly-discovered writings of Aristotle, Aquinas found a suitable vocabulary to bring the Eucharist back into a more orthodox context.

For him, transubstantiation was literally a change in substance (the metaphysical "essence" which is a thing's true reality) while the accidents of bread and wine remain as they were—the change in the elements is not something that can be detected by sense data, but could only be perceived by the eyes of faith. And since the substance of a thing is the domain of the mind (for that is where substance is comprehended), it is the mind which receives the substance. As the accidents of bread and wine are taken physically into the body, the sub-

stance of Christ's body is received intellectually and spiritually.

It was with this formulation that Aquinas addressed the gross literalism rampant in the church, but the church can hardly have expected the average layperson to understand this distinction (let alone most of the clergy). In fact, without a grounding in Aristotelianism, the careful distinction between substance and accident is meaningless. As John Wyclif would later remark, "The people and a thousand bishops understand neither accident nor substance."

Oxford theologian John Wyclif (1330-1384) was one of the most outspoken critics of Aquinas. Wyclif was the first to publicly voice many concerns which would later be echoed by the Reformers. He mercilessly attacked the abuses of the clergy of his day, being especially hard on the friars.

He also rejected transubstantiation outright, though this did not mean that Wyclif rejected the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, just the Aristotelian formulation of it. Instead, he offered an explanation of his own which he called "Remanence." He taught that after the consecration the bread remains bread, but that the body of Christ is added to it, so that Wyclif could assert that in the consecrated host there remains the body of Christ, "truly and really...Yet I dare not say that the body of Christ is essentially, substantially, corporeally, or identically that bread."

This position was to be taken up and expanded by the first great reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546), a Roman Catholic priest and theology professor who railed against the "Babylonian Exile of the Church." Rejecting all human explanations, Luther appealed to a non-rational approach, asserting that scripture and faith were sufficient to understand the Eucharist. In order for Luther to affirm the presence of Christ's body, it was not necessary for him to also explain away the reality of

the bread; Christ's body was present "with" the bread. The reality of the Body of Christ did not negate the reality of the bread, but now co-exists with it. "Why should not Christ be able to include his body within the substance of bread," he asked, "as well as within the accidents?"

For Luther, philosophical arguments were pointless: it all came down to faith. Either you believe Jesus when he said "this is my body," or you don't. How Christ's body is present is not nearly so important as the belief that it is.

John Calvin (1509-1564), as well, embraced a Real Presence theology, though with a twist, asserting that the sacraments "do not contain grace and they are not causes for grace in their own right." So how is it that the Eucharist is even a sacrament in Calvin's view? His answer is typically Reformation-oriented: grace comes through faith, not through the sacrament. The sacrament is not a means of affecting union with Christ for Calvin, but a means of expressing a union that is already present. In this Calvin supports an ecclesial understanding of Christ's presence. Thus, when the Eucharist is celebrated, Christ is really and substantially present, not in the elements themselves, but in the celebration, and made effectual by the faith of the gathered believers.

What keeps Calvin firmly in the Real Presence thread is not his rejection of the actual, physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but his insistence that the elements of bread and wine are more than "mere" symbols. Calvin strongly affirmed the participation of the "signs" of bread and wine in the reality that they signify. Unlike Luther and Aquinas, Calvin rejected a wholesale identification of the elements with the Body and Blood of Christ; unlike Zwingli (below) he rejected an absolute distinction between the elements and Christ. The Eucharist is, for Calvin, a

case of "unity in distinction" which restores for him the patristic writers' understanding of the participation between symbol and reality.

The final proponent of the Real Presence thread is one of the most important, and most ill-defined. From its inception, the English Reformation has been eager to affirm the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but reticent to discuss the mode, or manner, of this presence.

Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), the architect of Anglican theology, set the precedent for Anglican ambiguity early in the Church of England's history. There is a great deal of debate about Cranmer's actual theology of the Eucharist. This is due to the fact that, although an excellent theologian, he was an even better politician, and we see a definite evolution of his theology as time passed and differing circumstances arose. Under Henry VIII, he was as adamant as his king about transubstantiation, but after Henry's death, his views swung from Lutheran to Zwinglian perspectives. In the prayer book, however, Cranmer set down what was to become typical of the Anglican approach, and opted for a liturgy that could be construed in a number of ways.

For the most part, however, Cranmer cautiously followed Calvin in his ecclesial understanding of Christ's presence. For Cranmer, Christ is present in the celebration by virtue of the believers' true participation, not in the elements themselves. Thus, while he maintained that, "it is my constant faith and belief that we receive Christ in the sacrament verily and truly," he was fairly agnostic about exactly how that presence occurs.

Richard Hooker (1554-1600), under Elizabeth's reign, was one of Anglicanism's greatest scholars, and it was he who picked up Cranmer's ideas and molded them into a coherent and guiding theology. While professing the belief that Christ is "really present" in

the act of communion, Hooker nonetheless refused to deny a relationship between Christ and the bread and the wine, and maintains a typically Anglican agnosticism in regards to the presence of Christ in the elements themselves. As Hooker himself wrote, “Let it therefore be sufficient for me presenting myself at the Lord’s table to know what there I receive from him, without searching or inquiring of the manner how Christ performeth his promise.”

## The Spiritualist Thread

For the Spiritualists, Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is only figurative. Most of its proponents would concur that the bread and the wine remain as they are, only our understanding of them has changed, embracing a kind of Platonism divorced from its native presuppositions about the relationship between indicator and indicated.

The first to formulate a Spiritualist theology of the Eucharist was a monk under the supervision of Radbertus, Ratramnus of Corbie, who opposed his abbot’s theology publicly and with some degree of notoriety (the emperor Charles the Bald consulted Ratramnus on the matter of Eucharistic theology instead of his abbot). Ratramnus’ objections to Radbertus’ theology was a simple one: a person cannot be in two places at one time. Even God obeys God’s own laws. Therefore, since the resurrected body of Christ was “ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father” as the Creed states, Christ cannot also be physically present on the altar. Instead, the bread and wine are “mere figures” of Christ’s body given to us for our celebration of his life and death, and for our spiritual nourishment.

In answer to questions from Charles the Bald in the 10th century—whether Christians received the Eucharist in truth or in mystery, and then, was that presence the same body that was born

of Mary—Ratramnus wrote: “This is confessed most plainly by saying that in the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord, whatever exterior thing is consumed is adapted to refecation by the body. The mind, however, invisibly feeds on the Word of God, Who is the invisible bread invisibly existing in that sacrament, by the vivifying participation of faith.”

Ratramnus felt it was silly to suggest that “bones and blood” were present “under” the signs of the elements. It is only in a spiritual sense that Christ is present: present to our imaginations in the rite.

Following Ratramnus, Berengar of Tours (1010–1088) opposed the Realist Thread, and was subsequently forced to recant his position twice. Berengar believed that the spiritual and physical, while equally real, were irreconcilably distinct entities. He found the notion of Jesus’ physical body and blood being present in the Eucharist simply absurd, and he often employed a quick wit and a biting tone to make his point.

In some ways, Berengar might just as easily have fallen into the “Real Presence” camp, except for his absolute insistence on the distinction between physical and spiritual reality. Berengar would have balked at an undefined “mystical” presence of Christ in the bread and wine strenuously.

Another early Spiritualist was Hugh of St. Victor (?–1142). For Hugh, the Eucharist is a tool used by God to draw us into deeper relationship with the Divine. Hugh believed that the bread and the wine are used by God to communicate the “real (albeit spiritual) presence” of Christ, culminating in the believer’s union with God. The result of Hugh’s theology was that it was union with God which was important, and the Eucharist was just one of many tools used by God. Thus, if a person chose not to receive communion, God would just as willingly use other means to effect a spiritual union with that person.

The Spiritualist thread was to find its greatest proponents much later in the theology of Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) and the Swiss reformers. This position was the cause of much pain between members of the German and Swiss reformations. Rejecting Luther’s insistence upon the Real Presence, Zwingli and his followers asserted what later theologians would wryly refer to as a doctrine of “Real Absence,” a belief that Christ is not present in the elements in any way save a very nominal symbolism.

Zwingli embraced a radical dualism almost reminiscent of the Gnostic heresies of the first few centuries of the church’s history. Flesh is flesh, and spirit is spirit, and “never the twain shall meet” might suffice to sum up Zwingli’s philosophy, and thus the Eucharistic elements could in no way contain the Body or Blood of Christ. This was to be the sticking point in many attempts made by their followers to reconcile Luther and Zwingli in their lifetimes. One historic “summit” began with Luther writing “This is my body” in Latin on the table top, and pointing to it as his only answer to Zwingli’s objections. The meeting ended with Zwingli in tears, and the two men deeply grievous of the gulf that remained between their two branches of the Reformation.

Although common ground would be found in Calvin’s formulations, the left wing of the Reformation (such as the Anabaptists) and its grandchild, evangelicalism owe much of its Eucharistic understanding to Zwingli’s insistence on the primacy of spirit over the flesh, and of faith over observance. ▲

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