

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." ³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Introduction

We come again to Matthew 26.26-30 to discuss the confessional conflict that surrounds the words by which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper: "This bread is my body and this wine is my blood." The matter we want to address this morning is "The Presence of Jesus at the Table." Interestingly, all three main traditions that arise out of the sixteenth century Reformation (Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed) put great stock in the belief that Jesus is really present at the Table when Christians gather to observe communion.

At first glance, we may wonder why these groups put so much emphasis on the real presence of Jesus when He seems to point us in the opposite direction by saying; **I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom** (26.29). In other words, some ask, would it not be better to view communion as a sign of the absence of Christ rather than His presence? It seems counterintuitive to draw a real presence doctrine from a text that clearly teaches the real absence of our Lord until His second coming. If we work from His absence, then, the emphasis is on the promise of His presence *in the future*. Accordingly, Paul says, **as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes** (1 Cor. 11.24). Consequently, to most people standing outside of the debates of the Reformation and looking in, the commotion surrounding the real presence doctrine is a first class example of barking up the wrong tree. To many, the entire discussion appears to be unnecessary and divisive.

To tackle this subject, our goal for this morning subdivides into two parts. Part 1 is the presence doctrine in the Reformation. Part 2 is the presence doctrine in Scripture.

1A. The presence doctrine of the Reformation and the Reformers

Discussion of the Reformation and the Reformers will be brief but we will go deep enough to expose the historical roots that hold a presence doctrine in place.

1B. Catholic stimulus

A good way to get our bearings is to ask and answer this question, "Why does the real presence debate surface in the time of the Reformation?" This question has our text in mind in a very precise way. It should be no surprise to learn that the answer comes from the words of institution; that is, from how Reformation thinkers *handled* the words of institution. We are back to the relationship of "this" and "is" to the physical body and blood of Christ. In the different interpretations of these words, the basis for the real presence doctrine is this in general: if the body and blood of Christ are actually present during Holy Communion, then Christ is actually present. That is it. That is the whole story "in a nutshell." Jesus is a true human with a physical body, so, if He is present physically (flesh and blood), then He is present in a full way. Consider what they mean by "a full way" from this quote of the Catholic Catechism (par. 1374). The CC has its roots in the Council of Trent of the sixteenth century: "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.'" This comes about "by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood." Well then, all the commotion is about the words of institution and about how literally we should take them.

2B. Reformed response

For our interest, there is a presence doctrine within reformed theology too. However, this presence doctrine departs from the use of the language of “under” by Roman Catholics and Lutherans; the reformed view denies that Christ’s body and blood are present *under* or *in the elements*. Specifically, it rejects any physical connection of Christ’s body and blood with the bread and wine.

Moreover, we should acknowledge the existence of two opposing interpretations within the reformed tradition. Some reformed writers (Nevin, Mathison) want to speak about the *body* of Christ as actually present in the sacrament, and others do not (Hodge of old Princeton). We can call the first view, the real presence doctrine, and the second view, the presence doctrine.

The real presence doctrine traces back to John Calvin (*Institutes*, 4.17.18; 16th century) and it seems to come to expression in reformed confessions such as the Heidelberg Catechism (Q 75 & 79) and the Westminster Confession (29.7). The WCF (17th century) states that “the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present” (29.7). The key to this teaching is its emphasis that Christ’s *body* is present in the sacrament though not in or under the elements. In continuity with Calvin and the WCF, a nineteenth century book by J. W. Nevin (*The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, 1846) emphasizes “the presence of Christ’s person in the sacrament, *including even his flesh and blood*” (Mathison, *Given For You*, 142, italics mine). Mathison and many other contemporary (21st century) reformed writers (Berkouwer, *Sacraments*) think that Nevin understands Calvin correctly. Agreeing with Nevin, Mathison says, “Christ’s *body* is present in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but the mode of his presence is not specifically connected with the substance of the elements” (279, italics mine). Thus, from Calvin, the WCF, nineteenth century writers, and writers today in the reformed tradition, we get a real presence doctrine that accents the physical presence of Christ in the sacrament, but not in the elements.

We can respond briefly in critique of the real presence doctrine by simply noting that it is confusing if not self-contradictory to say that Christ’s *body* is present in a *spiritual* way. Would it not be better to state that if Jesus intends that we think of eating His flesh He means we do so metaphorically? Is it not even better to state that Jesus tells us to eat bread (not His body) and drink wine (not His blood), and that this partaking represents how we partake of the benefits He secured for us *by His very body and blood*? Although extremely brief, that is a sufficient critique, for the moment, of the real presence doctrine (granted, much is semantical). Let us now turn to the biblical teaching on the presence of Christ at the Table.

2A. The presence doctrine in Scripture

We are affirming that Scripture does teach a presence doctrine. It is time now to consider the biblical support for it. The evidence is clear and compelling, even though it comes to us indirectly by implication. No doubt, the fact that the teaching is implicit and not explicit in Scripture is the main reason that interpretations vary, even within reformed theology.

Humbly and charitably, we must reject all suggestions of a physical presence of Christ at the Table (even those that have roots in Calvin). If that is true, then our approach to the presence doctrine must have a different orientation. That it surely does. We can state the different orientation like this: “Do not interpret Christ in a literal way, but interpret Him in a historical-redemptive way.” To make this case from Matthew and the rest of the NT, we should consider the relevant facts and the necessary implications. We have to do some work here. Just think for a moment about the massive traditions of interpretation through which we have to travel and you will recognize that we are making our way through a minefield (and a tricky mind-field!). We

must set our feet carefully on the path of Scripture. We have to do this humbly and respectfully in order to honor our Lord in this endeavor.

What, then, are the relevant facts? In sum, they are living Lord, another coming, and life-giving Holy Spirit. As we consider them, the implications for the presence doctrine will become more and more apparent.

1) Living Lord

Just think for a moment where we are in the history of redemption when we have communion in remembrance of the Lord Jesus. We are in the time of the church. This is a church ordinance; it is a part of the worship of the gathered church in the time between the comings of Christ. Therefore, the presence of Christ with His church in the time between His resurrection and return must be as risen Lord. If He is present in flesh and blood, He must be present *living*, living His resurrection life. This suggests two things. On one hand, it shows how wrong it is to think that communion reenacts sacrifice because that has Jesus literally present *dying* instead of living. On the other hand, the resurrection life of Christ opens the door to His presence at the Table as living Lord of the church. The sacrament is a post-resurrection church ritual under the rule of Christ. He instituted this ritual for the church, which is His church over which He exerts loving rule as risen and exalted Lord. Accordingly, Paul speaks of what the Father **worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,** ²¹ **far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.** ²² **And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,** ²³ **which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all** (Eph. 1.20-23). Though Jesus is at the Father's right hand in heaven, *God gave Him to the church* as ruler of all things (v. 22). This truth may not explicitly state that He is present when we take communion, but it definitely opens a wide door in that direction.

2) Another coming

Another thing we should be aware of is the fact that the Lord speaks about His coming in many ways. Of course, He tells us that after His departure He will return in power and glory (Mat. 24.29, **Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory**). His second coming will lead to the feast of joy and rejoicing in the consummation of the kingdom (Mat. 26.29).

In this context, we now have the critical point: there is yet another way in which Jesus tells us of His coming to be present with His people. When we read the institution of the Supper, and when we observe communion, we do so in light of Matthew's account of the Great Teaching Commission: ¹⁸ **And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And *behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*"** (Mat. 28.19-20). It is important to note that the Father *gave* all authority to Jesus. This authority is not something that Jesus has as the eternal Son of God. The Father gave universal sovereign authority to the *incarnate* Lord Jesus as Son of Man and head of the church as we read in Ephesians. As a man, He is universal sovereign Lord because of His accomplished work, and as such, He is with us always, to the end of the age. In this same way, though ascended Lord, He must be present with us at the Table.

No doubt, as you listen to the teaching here, you are thinking that there is another passage in the Gospel of Matthew that speaks directly to the presence of Christ in the post-resurrection church He came to build. That passage deals with church discipline in the time between the resurrection and return of Christ: **For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them** (Mat. 18.20). For good reason, we apply this text to the gathered church, and it is hard to do that and not apply it to the communion table.

Where do the facts lead us?

Before Jesus left this earth, He paved the way for the church. The bricks in that paving include His promise to return not only at the end of the age, but in another coming. This fact has

to balance our thoughts about His absence and not drinking of the fruit of the vine until the end of the age. Communion is not like a monument of stones that speaks for its builder in His absence. Because He is alive from the dead and present with us in another coming different from His second coming, then we have to ask, “How can we avoid the conclusion that He is present with us at the Table?”

3) Life-giving Holy Spirit

The Gospel of John records the fact that Jesus promised another coming *through the gift of the Holy Spirit*. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live (Jn. 14.16-19). He promised to come by means of the Helper He gives “to be with you forever” (14.16). In that context, in that way, Jesus said, I will come to you. He will not leave us as orphans, which would be the case if He were absent from us in an absolute way. Similarly (in Jn. 14.23), the promise is that Jesus and the Father will come to disciples to be present or at home with them: **Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."**

Therefore, Paul teaches that a great change occurred when God raised Jesus from the dead: **Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit** (1 Cor. 15.45). As the last Adam, Jesus is the head of a new human family. Agreeing with the reformed writer, Gaffin, we should capitalize the word spirit. Jesus became life-giving Holy Spirit by the resurrection. We should add this important, and in some ways difficult fact to our list of facts. The text does not deny the doctrine of the trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit abide forever as three distinct persons). Rather, it affirms something about the true humanity of Christ. As a human being, as God incarnate, as the second Adam, and as our elder brother, He finished His work of redemption and received the Holy Spirit in such a complete way that “the two are equated in their *activity*” (Gaffin, *Perspective*, 19). Therefore, as Gaffin puts it, “By and in the Spirit Christ reveals himself as present. The Spirit is the powerfully open secret, the revealed mystery, of Christ’s abiding presence in the church” (*Perspective*, 21). Thus, it is as life-giving Spirit that Jesus says, “I will be with you to the end of the age” (Mat. 28.20) and where two or three gather in my name, there I am in their midst (Mat. 18.20). This is what Luke implies when he reports what Jesus began to do and teach in the Gospel of Luke and thus continues to do and teach in the book of Acts (Acts 1.1).

How then could we deny His presence with us at the Table that He instituted?

We must conclude that Jesus is not only present with us every day in terms of His true deity; He is present as the incarnate Son of Man having accomplished the work of redemption. He is present with us every week by the Spirit in the preaching of the word. Moreover, He is present with us *at the Table*.

Implications and applications

1B. Implications

1) What then is unique about communion?

It is not that He present in some distinct way as if some metaphysical difference in His being obtains in each kind of presence. That is, it is not that some change occurs in His nature, being, or attributes such that He is different when present with us in our daily life, in our attendance to preaching, and in our attendance to communion. We must conclude that though He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, nevertheless, He relates to us differently as our covenant Lord. It seems best to simply conclude that He is present doing something different for us in the various contexts of daily life and worship. Thus, He is present with us at the Table doing a special work on our behalf. 2) That fact makes attendance to communion something special and promising. He invites us to come, take, eat and drink. His invitation carries with it

images of something we should treasure. 3) This specialness argues for more frequency versus less frequency.

2B. Applications

1) Our privilege

Here is a thought question to get at the privilege that is ours in coming to the Lord's Table: what do we mean when we refer to the Table as communion? If you say, "we mean that this is a special time of fellowship, of co-union for the family of God," you are correct up to a point. Communion is fellowship and it is fellowship at a family meal, but we must go on to make the marvelous point that in communion we fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ our risen Lord. An outstanding privilege that we have in communion is the privilege of a special fellowship with the Lord Jesus. He has instituted this special time that is like no other time. He instituted it. He hands us the bread and wine and calls us to partake of the nourishing bread and wine of His covenant word that centers on Him as the true bread of life. Communion is a special opportunity of fellowship with the Lord Jesus by the Spirit and through the word. From this center, communion is a specially appointed time of fellowship with the saints and with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

By the words of institution, Jesus put a brick in the road we now walk on. We must partake of the Table with due recognition that Jesus gave the bread and wine to the disciples so that the disciples would in turn give the elements to the church, to the disciples back then and to us today. Just as Jesus gave His word to the apostles so that they would give it to faithful men who would in turn give it to others generation by generation until He comes, likewise, Jesus gave the bread and wine to the apostles so that they would give it to others and eventually to us. In summary, this means that when you receive the bread and wine at the Table, you need to remember that that very bread and wine comes to you from Christ present by the Spirit.

It is a sweet and awesome place "with Christ within the doors" when we gather in His name to follow His guidelines for worship both weekly and at the Table.

2) Our need

We must acknowledge that we need to partake of the bread and wine of communion. We need this privileged time of fellowship with the Lord Jesus. This need translates into duty. We have the duty of attending to this means of grace and great privilege. However, it is also a means that our Lord appointed and instituted for our benefit. There is benefit for us here that we can gain in no other way. We need it. We need Him. We need fellowship with Him in this unique way. Our daily fellowship with Him is no substitute. Regular attendance to preaching and fellowship with Him in that way is no substitute. To be sure, the design is not that communion be a refreshing time for us on our journey where we travel along starving, lost, and unfulfilled. Communion with Christ at the Table under girds our daily walk with Him, it under pins our regular fellowship with Him in the gathered church. How can we state this so firmly? It is because Jesus instituted the Table as a time for us to meet in His presence in a special way. Because He instituted communion and commands that we take, eat, and drink, then it must be a special means that we need and should not neglect. What a marvelous duty it is to fellowship with Christ at the Table to enjoy His presence and receive His blessings.

Fellowship with Christ daily, during preaching, and at communion are qualitatively the same. We can compare these times as refreshing-nourishing times to watering a potted plant that needs a daily sprinkling, then a soaking weekly, and now and then a soaking with fertilizer. All these times are vital to healthy growth. Likewise, we need personal intimate fellowship with our risen Lord by the Spirit through the word daily, in times of preaching, and at the Table meal of joy and rejoicing.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in unending praise and thanksgiving for the fellowship that He provides for us in the presence of Jesus Christ our risen Lord. To Him be all glory now and forevermore, amen.