

# **Issues in Reformed Theology**

## **The Lord's Supper**

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One of the more significant areas of disagreement during the Reformation was the opposition to the Roman Catholic concept of Transubstantiation. The Reformers disagreed with Roman Catholicism on the nature of the Eucharist as the actual physical change of the elements into the body and blood of Christ. Also, the view of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace unto salvation was opposed. In this sense, Reformed Theology has greatly served this Church to overcome such heretical teachings.

Nevertheless, the Reformed theological view of the Lord's Supper is another area of difference from most evangelical churches. This view is rooted in the historical development of Calvinism and comes from a high ecclesiological view of church.

### **1. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper**

The term "sacrament" comes from Roman Catholicism, and we must look at the similarities and differences in the meaning as it is used in Reformed Theology along with what the Bible says related to the concept of a sacrament. According to Reformed Theology, there are two sacraments: the Lord's Supper and baptism. This class will look into the Lord's Supper and our next class will focus on baptism.

Over the course of many centuries, the Catholic Church replaced the biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith, apart from works, with a sacramental system that was understood as the means of salvation. In Catholicism, a sacrament is a means of grace that God has established to bring salvation to those who participate with the proper disposition.

The Reformers rightly rejected the sacraments as a means of grace unto salvation. Salvation through faith alone in Christ apart from the sacraments was central to all the Reformers. This belief of salvation by faith and not through the sacraments was never compromised within the Reformed tradition.

Also, whereas by the time of the Reformation, Roman Catholicism had developed a system of seven sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders, and Marriage), the Reformers by and large understood there to be only two sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper.

While great differences existed regarding the meaning and number of sacraments, the term "sacrament" continued to be used, including within the Reformed tradition. This continued use of the term "sacrament" in spite of a different meaning led to a challenge of understanding.

Reformed Theologian John Frame has noted, “One wonders whether the theological world would have been more peaceful if the church had never developed the concept of sacrament.” Indeed, not only would peace have benefited but truth would have been advanced also.

It is unfortunate that Reformed Theology continues to use the term “sacrament” as most Evangelical churches use the term “ordinance.” The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which is itself a translation of the Greek word *mysterium*, meaning “mystery.” This mystery points to the way that God provides grace through the participation in the sacrament. The English word “sacrament” has come to convey the sacredness of the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper.

This is more than only a semantic issue. Most Evangelical churches do not view grace being imparted by God in the Lord’s Supper in such a fashion. God’s grace overflows beyond salvation in countless ways, including through the Lord’s Supper.

The difference in the term “ordinance” versus “sacrament” is in regard to the nature and the focus of the event. This idea of a sacrament sees the act of God’s grace as ministered through the church to the participant. The use of word ordinance emphasizes these practices (the Lord’s Supper and baptism) as being ordained by Christ. The focus of the ordinance is upon the obedience of the believer in following the Lord’s command to “do this in remembrance of Me.”

The use of the term “sacrament” is unfortunate because of its usage rooted in Catholicism which views God’s grace as imparted to the participant through the sacrament in order to bring union with Christ. The teaching of the Bible, and supported by Reformed teaching, views union with Christ as already existing in salvation by faith alone.

## **2. The Lord’s Supper as a means of grace**

When the Council of Trent described the sacraments it did so as “something presented to the sense, which has the power, by divine institution, not only of signifying, but also of conveying grace.” The belief that the Lord’s Supper is a divine institution that serves as a means of grace grew from the tradition taught by Roman Catholicism rather than from the Bible.

While the Reformers rejected the concept of the sacraments as means of grace unto salvation, they did not oppose the view of the sacraments being a means of grace that brings a certain objective benefit upon the faithful recipient. Reformed Theology views the sacraments as bringing a special grace to the one who partakes in faith.

To be clear, this grace is not conferred based upon receiving the sacrament alone within the Protestantism but God only imparts His grace when there is faith on the part of those receiving the sacraments. But by continuing to use the term sacrament, it is clear that the Lord’s Supper and baptism are understood differently than other parts of the Christian life, which are not described in a sacred fashion.

Do the sacraments bring special grace in a different way than other aspects of the Christian life?

The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 27, states that “sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace” and as such understands the sacrament as not just our doing something in God’s presence but that He is doing something for us. As seals, the sacraments confirm and guarantee the covenant promise.

Thus under Reformed thinking, there is a definite objective benefit of the sacrament that is not generated by the participant. Rather this means of grace is brought into the sacrament by God and by taking the elements, the participant actually receives anew the spirituality of Christ. This is not automatic, but this effect is dependent upon the faith of the recipient of the sacrament.

One problem with this view is that the Scripture never groups the Lord’s Supper and baptism together into a special category of Christian practices. This perspective is derived from the traditional understanding of the church without any biblical support to view these as special ceremonial practices. Each is described independently in Scripture and each has its specific purposes.

Secondly, that these sacraments convey special grace is questionable since the believer has already received every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). This blessing has been brought to us through our union with the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9-17).

Also, while we have God’s grace, we are encouraged to grow in God’s grace, “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). How do we grow in grace? “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:2). We grow in grace through the knowledge of God. By this we have everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him (2 Peter 1:3).

Short of this class becoming a study on the grace of God, the New Testament describes God’s grace in our life coming through His gift of salvation and our response of obedience in various ways (Romans 5:17; Acts 20:32; 2 Timothy 2:1; James 4:6; Hebrews 4:16). The Lord gives us greater grace as we draw near to Him, submitting to God in humility (James 4:6-8).

What is the role of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace? People will often speak of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace but may not mean it in the Reformed sense. For example, Wayne Grudem writes, “we should expect that the Lord would give spiritual blessing as we participate in the Lord’s Supper in faith and in obedience to the directions laid down in Scripture, and in this way is a “means of grace” which the Holy Spirit uses to convey blessing to us.” Many authors use the phrase “means of grace” in a general sense but may not speak of the Lord’s Supper and baptism in a special sacramental sense.

There is no question that God enables us to grow in grace through our obedience to Him in faith. However, there is no evidence that God dispenses a unique and special grace through the Lord's Supper. There is no Bible verse that links grace specifically to the Lord's Supper or baptism. As a sign of the New Covenant, the Lord's Supper is for the purpose of remembering the sacrifice of Christ for sin (1 Corinthians 11:25-26) and as such participation in it is one of the responsibilities that a believer has.

Reformed churches of Europe have historically considered the Scripture also to be a means of grace for the believer (through preaching or reading), although not described as a sacrament. In England, the Westminster Catechism added prayer as a means of grace. More recently, some Reformed Theologians have included fellowship. John MacArthur adds worship and church discipline as a means of grace. But each of these is a flawed attempt to select certain practices out as more significant. One could add evangelism, serving in ministry, giving, etc.

Any list of activities of God's way of delivering His grace in sanctification is necessarily limited. God's grace comes in innumerable ways and there is no special avenue for delivery. The one area most connected to God's grace in the Bible is the Word that brings the knowledge of God, which is why some want to include preaching and teaching in the discussion of the means of grace. But seeing the sacraments as a special means of grace is not a biblical concept.

### **3. The "real presence" in the Lord's Supper**

Christ's relationship to the Lord's Supper has brought significant division among Protestantism from its earliest days. Essentially there are four views:

- a. The Roman Catholic view of Transubstantiation is where an actual change of the bread and wine is said to occur so that Christ physical body and blood exists instead. While there is not physical evidence that such a transformation occurs, the Catholic view is that this happens without the elements appearing changed.
- b. The Lutheran view of Consubstantiation continued the Roman Catholic view of the actual physical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, although there is no replacement of the bread and the wine with the body and blood of Christ. The Catholic view of the Lord's Supper's role in salvation is denied and there is no belief in a Eucharistic moment when the physical presence of Christ is imparted to the elements.
- c. The Reformed view of the Lord's Supper is one of a "spiritual presence." The Calvinist tradition denies the actual physical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, opting instead to view Christ as being spiritually present.
- d. The Baptist view of the Lord's Supper is a "memorial" in remembrance of Christ. This commemoration view is usually associated with Ulrich Zwingli, an early reformed is considered to have advocated this view. No special spiritual presence exists.

The view of the “spiritual presence” of Christ in Reformed Theology’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper rightly opposes the unnecessary literal understanding of Christ’s word’s “this is My body” since Christ was still alive and no disciple would have understood Him to be a physical presence. However, did Christ mean He was in the bread and wine in a spiritual sense? This is just as implausible that this was Christ’s meaning since Christ used many analogies identifying Himself with certain objects without indicating His special spiritual presence within them. Examples include “I am the door” (John 10:9) and “I am the true vine” (John 15:1). No one would have understood Christ as spiritually dwelling in a door or in a vine.

Similar to the misleading use of the term sacrament to mean something other than its Roman Catholic meaning, so too is willingness of Reformed leaders to use the word “Eucharist” to refer to the Lord’s Supper. This term carries the Catholic views of the physical presence of Christ along with the salvific purpose, but Reformed churches only see a spiritual presence of Christ with a sanctifying purpose. Better to use a different word rather than to redefine a Catholic word packed with theological error.

Furthermore, all accept that the Lord is omnipresent. His presence dwells everywhere. He is with believers constantly (Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5) whether they are participating in the Lord’s Supper or not.

Much like the idea of the means of grace through the sacraments, the belief in the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper comes from the historical roots of the Reformation. The Reformers were so named because of their initial desire to “reform,” not leave the Catholic Church. Luther did not leave Catholicism—he was excommunicated. Of the leading Reformers, Millard Erickson notes, “their approach to reformation of the faith leaned more toward retaining whatever is not explicitly rejected by Scripture than toward starting from scratch, preserving only those tenets of the faith which are explicitly taught in Scripture. Instead of totally rejecting tradition and constructing a completely new understanding they chose to modify the old belief.”

This approach to change explains why Zwingli’s teaching on the memorial view of the Lord’s Supper gained popularity with the only most radical of the Reformers, the Anabaptists. As Reformed theologians esteem the historical statements of the Reformed tradition, it is understandable why there is opposition to reconsidering the view of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. It is unfortunate that the unwillingness to completely oppose the doctrine of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper during the Reformation era continues to confuse people today.

There also exists a desire for the natural man to experience some profound, even mystical, experience with God which fuels the belief in Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper. Those who hold to the symbolic view of the Lord’s Supper are sometimes ridiculed as professing the “real absence” of Christ. Yet there is no need to believe in the metaphysical existence of Christ in the bread and wine in order to participate fully in the will of God through obedience to Him in the Lord’s Supper.

With the recent involvement of Charismatic theologians with Reformed Theology, the distinction between the symbolic view and the spiritual presence view of the Lord's Supper has become clouded. For example, Wayne Grudem combines these two views together into one and comments, "most Protestants would say, in addition to the fact that the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ, that Christ is also spiritually present in a special way as we partake of the bread and wine." This is an infusion of the Charismatic view of the presence of Christ into Reformed perspective.

#### **4. The practice of the Lord's Supper**

##### **a. The participants**

Some Reformed churches will attempt to limit the participants in the communion to baptized believers. This is based upon the warning given about partaking in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). Typically, Reformed churches are not the most restrictive in "fencing the Lord's table" but those who hold to the Westminster Confession will hold a restrictive approach to admission for communion. There is an issue within Reformed churches regarding what responsibility the church bears in protecting the Lord's Supper.

Generally speaking, those believing that the presence of Christ exists in the communion itself are more likely to protect it from being taken in an unworthy manner. The view that sees the Lord's Supper as symbolic of Christ's death is comfortable with the directive that 1 Corinthians gives as a warning to those participating without seeing a requirement for enforcement. The Reformed view of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper leads some to be more protective of the communion table, although not to the degree Lutherans limit participation. Reformed denominations tend to allow individual congregations flexibility in evaluating who might be taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

One particular issue that has challenged many Reformed churches as being the practice of very young children, even infants, participating in the Lord's Supper. Historically, Reformed Christians have understood the need for a self-examination as a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper to exclude the youngest of children from communion. Recently, a vocal minority of Reformed leaders are advocating the inclusion of very young children into the Lord's Supper, a practice known as "paedocommunion." This practice views that every child who has been baptized in a Reformed church is a "covenant child" and worthy of participation on this basis regardless of age.

The issue of communion for very young children is another example of the challenge that Reformed faith has in being consistent in its positions. Should you include infants in the sacrament of baptism when they are unable to understand but still exclude them from the Lord's Supper when they are unable to understand? The very same reasoning for the exclusion of infants from communion (too young for examination) is ignored regarding the exclusion of infants from baptism (too young to believe).

b. The disposal of the bread and wine

Under the view that the Lord's Supper is about remembrance, there are no requirements for the disposal of the communion elements. For most evangelicals, the disposal of the Lord's Supper is a non-issue. This is not necessarily the case with those holding to the spiritual presence of Christ perspective.

The Presbyterian *Directory for Worship* advises "When the service is ended, the communion elements shall be removed from the Table and used or disposed of in a manner which is approved by the session, and which is consistent with the Reformed understanding of the Sacrament and the principles of good stewardship."

While certainly short of the Roman Catholic requirements that the Eucharist be disposed of by consuming or by depositing in the earth, this guidance shows that there is a view that the elements have some intrinsic meaningfulness. This is one more instance where one's viewpoint affects practice.

c. The frequency of the Lord's Supper

The Westminster confession only stipulates the Lord's Supper be conducted "frequently." What this means has been understood very differently over the centuries. Calvin advocated a weekly communion observation. Reformed churches following Calvin opted for a monthly Lord's Supper. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Presbyterian churches in Scotland and America practice it only once per year. In modern times, most Reformed churches were practicing a monthly communion but recently there has been a greater number moving toward a weekly communion service.

The weekly practice of the Lord's Supper arises not just from Calvin and the historical Reformers but more so by the belief in the spiritual nourishment that occurs in the sacrament. Many Reformed teachers place emphasis on the spiritual eating and drinking of Christ based on their view of John 6:53-54, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink." However, this text speaks of eternal life, not spiritual nourishment and misunderstands the metaphor of the body and blood of Christ.

d. The elements in the Lord's Supper

Like the frequency of communion, there is a fair degree of diversity within Reformed churches and even within Reformed denominations regarding the elements. Some share a loaf of bread, others share communion wafers. Some use wine and others use grape juice. Some deliver the elements to the people in their seat and others have the congregation come to the front. Each congregation is allowed latitude by their Directory of Worship, which leads to the practice of the Lord's Supper in Reformed churches looking similar to those who do not necessarily hold the same beliefs.

## **5. The practical affect of the Lord's Supper doctrine**

The difference in views of the Lord's Supper has long divided Protestantism. As the mainline denominations have declined in numbers over the past few generations, the number of churches that believe in the presence of Christ in the communion elements has decreased. Even the one denomination that was the rapidly growing in the late twentieth century, the doctrinally conservative Presbyterian Church of America, has seen a flattening of their attendance. The large majority of growing churches in the US hold to a memorial view of the Lord's Supper, making Reformed view an increasingly smaller minority of adherents.

Also, the writings of Reformed leaders in recent times have not been as strident as in former times regarding the Lord's Supper. This has led to be a narrowing of the difference since those with a non-sacramental, memorial view of the Lord's Supper see the practice of it as certainly spiritually edifying when practiced by faith.

Simply because someone believes there is a special grace distributed through the unique presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper does not make this true. So the significance of those who believe in the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper is more of an overemphasis than actually missing out on God's blessing.

Furthermore, because of the variety that exists within the practice of the Lord's Supper in Reformed churches, there is much similarity in appearance between a Presbyterian communion and a church holding to a symbolic view of the elements in communion. Hence worshippers may observe little difference in the service regardless of how Reformed their church may be. There are certainly a large number of people in churches that have a sacramental view of the Lord's Supper but as individuals hold a practical memorialist view of the Supper.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Lord's Supper is another difference that Reformed churches have from most Evangelical churches. This may not have the significance for the Christian life that some of the other issues in Reformed Theology that we will in this series. But pursuing a biblical understanding of the Lord's Supper is worthy in light of the traditional teaching of the communion and the confusion of God's grace that has resulted from Roman Catholicism. The less we adopt the ritual practices of tradition religion in our faith the clearer we become in our genuine practice of faith as taught in the New Testament.