

The Real Absence

An Evaluation of the real presence view

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What exactly do we remember when we celebrate the Lord's Supper? Is Christ physically present? Is he present in some mystic way?

There are four major positions.

According to the **Catholic** view the bread and wine actually becomes the body and blood of Christ.

According to the **Lutheran** view the body of Christ is present 'in with and under' the bread of the Lord's supper. The bread doesn't become the body, but rather the body is present in the bread. Wayne Grudem gives an example, 'Christ's body is present in the bread as water is present in a sponge. Water is not the sponge, but is present in with and under a sponge'.

According to the **Reformed** view Christ is present spiritually in a *special* way in the bread and wine. This special is more special than 'where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them' Matt 18.20. Therefore this view has been referred to as the *Special or Real Presence* view.

According to the **Zwinglian** view the bread remains as a bread and there is no 'in with and under' business. There is also no magical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Of course they believe that Christ is present as according to Matt 18.20. But there is no *special* presence.

In this article we will examine the Reformed view and the Zwinglian view.

Calvin's View of Real Presence

There is more than a little confusion as to what Calvin's actual 'real presence' view is. Calvin's representation of this doctrine is not consistent and not entirely clear – Calvinist theologians like Louis Berkhof, Ronald S. Wallace, G.C. Berkouwer all seem to agree on this.

Lois Berkhof for example says "According to him (Calvin) the sacrament is connected not merely with the past work of Christ, with the Christ who died (as Zwingli seems to think), but also with the present spiritual work of Christ, with the Christ that is alive in glory. He believes that Christ though not bodily and locally present in the supper, is yet present and enjoyed in his entire person, both body and blood. He emphasizes the mystical communion of believers with the entire person of the redeemer. **His (Calvin's) representation is not entirely clear**, but he seems to mean that the body and blood of Christ, though absent and locally present only in heaven, communicate a life giving influence to the believer when he is in the act of receiving the elements. ...As to the way in which this communion with Christ is effected there

is a twofold representation. Sometimes it is represented as if by faith the communicant lifts his heart to heaven where Christ is; sometimes as if the Holy Spirit brings the influence of the body and blood of Christ down to the communicant. Dabney positively rejects the representation of Calvin as if the communicant partakes of the very body and blood of Christ in the sacrament. ***This is undoubtedly an obscure point in Calvin's representation. Sometimes he seems to place too much emphasis on the literal flesh and blood.*** LB-ST emphasis mine.

G. C. Berkouwer also emphasizes "Calvin's inconsistency would lie in the fact that he teaches the presence of Christ's true body and blood in the Lords supper, but that he rejects his bodily presence" (GCB-SAC)

So all the Calvinists who hold this doctrine must remember that they are holding onto something that Calvin himself was not clear about. This however doesn't by itself prove anything. We will look at the evidence put forth by the Calvinists.

We believe that is because of a desire not to break away from the old Catholic tradition that they have brought this real presence. Calvin and Luther both seems to have wanted to retain something of the old tradition.

Biblical Passages in support of the Calvinist View

We will now look at the passages used by Calvinists to support the real presence theory.

John 6.49-58

It must be noted that only a few Calvinists use this passage as a proof text – as this clearly talks about receiving Christ as savior.

'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'

If this passage has any reference to the Lord's Supper it would mean that simply by eating the bread one would live forever. So you don't have to repent and believe, just partake in the Lord's supper. Would any Calvinist seriously believe this? According to verse 53 unless one eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Christ he would not have life. Would anyone claim that unless we partake in the Lords Supper we won't have eternal life? No absolutely not. Eternal life is conditional on repenting and believing and persevering till the end. Not in eating the bread and drinking the wine at the Lord's supper.

We must note that the language used is very strong. As Leon Morris notes that eating and drinking spoken here are absolutely unqualified, there is no mention of faith i.e. you don't have to repent and eat to have eternal life but just eat. So definitely this cannot refer to the Lords Supper.

AS J.C Ryle notes, to argue that this section refers to Holy Communion is to interpose a *bodily act* between the soul of man and salvation. Wouldn't the Calvinists be guilty of promoting a salvation by works if they do that?

Also the Greek grammar doesn't support this to be interpreted as the Lord's Supper. As in verses 50, 51 eat is in the aorist tense meaning once and for all definite action.

In verse 53 eat and drink are in aorist too (LM-NICNT). What that means is that you only have to eat and drink once and you will receive eternal life. The 'eating and drinking' here cannot mean eating and drinking in the Lord's Supper as this is a repeated action.

As Leon Morris notes the normal word which is used to refer to Holy Communion is 'body', the word used here is 'flesh', so we cannot interpret this as a natural reference to Holy Communion.

Eat – just like its counterparts come and see – is used as a salvific term in the gospel of John.¹ The metaphor of eating and drinking is used because just like food and drink becoming part of our body when we drink it so we have to receive Christ and be one with him by abiding in him.

As Carson points out v54 and 40 are closely parallel. The only difference is one speaks of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking Jesus' blood while the other in precisely the same conceptual location, speaks of looking to the son and believing in him. The conclusion is obvious: the former is the metaphorical way of referring to the later. When Jesus says eat my flesh and drink my body he means looking to the son and believing in him.

Since Christ has already established the fact that those who believe in him will have eternal life in verse 47, eating and drinking here should also mean the same i.e. eating and drinking is believing.

In verse 57 John says that in the same way God the father strengthened God the son so God the son strengthens the believers. Certainly God the son didn't feed on God the fathers flesh. This makes it clearer that this is talking about spiritual nourishment and relationship which comes through abiding.

Even Calvinist commentators agree that this passage doesn't talk about Lord's Supper:

"The language of eating the flesh and drinking the blood is said to be explicable only, or at least most naturally, in terms of the sacrament. But is this so? Surely Not!...Eating and drinking Christ's flesh and blood thus appears to be very graphic way of saying that people must take Christ into their innermost being".(LM-NICNT)

"It is clear therefore that when Jesus speaks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood he cannot have reference to any physical eating or drinking" (WH-NTC)

¹ Grant Osborne in the Grace of God and the will of Man Clark Pinnock et al.

But whatever is said and done this verse does not help the Calvinist. If at all this might help the Catholics or the Lutherans to support their view. There is no mention of special presence what so ever in this passage.

I Corinthians 10. 14 - 22

Paul is addressing the questions about eating food sacrificed to idols. He talks about three categories of food in this chapter:

- v18-22 - Eating food inside the pagan temple
- v25 - Buying food sacrificed to idols in the Market
- v27-30 - Eating food in an unbeliever's house (BKC)

Our text (v14-22) falls under the first category. This whole section is about eating sacrificed meat inside the pagan temple. Whereas eating food sacrificed to idols or buying off the market is permissible (10.23-11.1) eating such food inside the temple is not. You should abstain even from the former (10.28) if a situational need arises, but the later should be avoided always.

When studying this passage it must be borne in mind that Paul's primary purpose is to discuss about eating food inside the temple and not to discuss about the Lord's Supper. He does that only in chapter 11.

He refers to the Lords supper only to contrast it with what's happening in the pagan temple.

The Corinthian believers sometimes went inside the pagan temple and ate the sacrificed food with their non-believing friends. They must have thought that they are just having a fellowship dinner. And they must have thought that the idol is nothing and the food sacrificed to idol is nothing. But Paul says that if they ate inside the temple they actually are partaking in the demonic worship. He also quotes the OT to say that those who eat the food sacrificed on the altar are actually partaking in the sacrifice itself. So it is not just going to the pagan temple and eating – it is actually partaking in the worship of the demon. It is worshipping the demons.

V 14-17

Here Paul prepares for his argument by telling the Corinthians about what happens at the Lords Supper. The discussion about food sacrificed to idols has not yet started here.

Paul introduces the subject of this passage: 'flee from idolatry'. Paul introduced this subject in verse 7 itself. And the comparison between the Corinthians and the Israelites had begun in verse 6.

V16

The word used here is koinonia - the usual word for fellowship. However with what are we having fellowship?

The cup of thanksgiving		The bread
for which we give thanks		We break
a participation		A participation
in the blood of Christ		In the body of Christ?

Paul doesn't say that we are fellowshiping with Christ but rather with the blood of Christ and Body of Christ. Now this is a noteworthy point. If Paul wanted to say that we fellowship with Christ in a special way when we eat and drink at the Lords supper wouldn't it be rather easy for him to say it directly than say that we are partaking with the Christ?

The blood of Christ. This term in the NT signifies the death of Christ. When we drink of the cup we remember the blood that was shed for us at his death. So in that way we partake in the death. So we are not having fellowship with the Christ per se but with his death.

The body of Christ. As Fee (FEE-NICNT) points out the order of body and blood is different to the rest of the NT. i.e. in the rest of the NT, first the body of Christ is mentioned then the blood of Christ e.g. Luke 22.19-20. However here first the blood then the body. The order would not have been that significant expect for verse 17. Verse 17 seems like an unwanted insertion. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf". It is inserted at this point because it is related to the immediate section of the previous verse. i.e. when we break the bread we remember that we are one body. We signify by taking part in the same loaf of bread that we are one body. In other words when Paul says that 'is not the bread we break a participation in the body of Christ?' – this body of Christ means the group of believers. Paul says that when we partake in the Lords supper we are fellowshiping with one another and we acknowledge that we are one.

However naturally just by eating the same bread doesn't make us one body. That is already done because we were adopted into the family of God when we were saved.

It seems then, whereas by the cup we partake in the death of Christ, by the bread we fellowship with the body of Christ which is the group of believers.

The fact that Paul uses the very body of Christ to mean fellowship here should not surprise us as fellowship is a big problem in this church. There was divisions in the church. And people were using the

Lord's supper as another opportunity to show the differences. So it makes sense for Paul to take the body of Christ and say that is the church. So when we eat the bread we are coming into a fellowship with the group of believers.

Fee (FEE-NICNT) states "the problem has to do with whether Paul's point –or emphasis – is that in sacred meals one has koinonia with the deity (in the Christian's case with Christ himself) or with fellow participants in the meal as they worship the deity by sacrifice and by eating in his/her honor. *Most likely the solution lies somewhere between.* The linguistic and literary evidence indicates that koinonia has to do with the worshipers themselves; but the basis and focus of their worship were the deity who in most cases was considered to be present among them"

Al though Fee appeals to the 'linguistic and literary evidence' for the fellowship among the believers Fee fails to supply evidence for the fellowship with the deity. But even if we take Fee's position there is nothing in the passage to indicate that the presence is 'special'.

But Fee agrees that the horizontal fellowship is what is emphasized here. On v17 he comments 'in some ways this sentence looks as if Paul were taking a momentary digression,....but since the sequence cup-bread most likely came about precisely for the sake of this explanatory word, it probably is crucial to our understanding of the present argument. *This explanation is what indicates most strongly that koinonia refers to the common sharing in the Lord's supper that binds them together as a unique, eschatological community.'*

V 18-22

In these verses he reiterates what he wrote in 10.7. Do not be idolaters. Those who went inside the temple didn't go to worship idols. They probably went with friends or just to feast and eat. But if they eat the sacrifice inside the temple - it is not just eating but actually sacrificing. He proves this first by giving an Old Testament example.

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?

Now it could be that Paul here is referring to the Altars inside the temple where the Israelites came to sacrifice. When the old Israelites ate the sacrifices they actually partook in whatever the altar stood for. They partook in the sacrifice. It was a sacrifice to the Lord. They participated in the worship service by eating the food. Lev 7.5-6, 15.

However it is more probable that Paul is referring to the idolatrous altars as in Ex 32.5-6 (see also, Deut 32.17) which Paul has already referred to back in 10.7. Whatever the altar is, the point remains the same – to eat of the sacrifice made in that altar, is to partake in the worship of its deity. So when the Corinthians went inside the pagan temple to eat the food provided there, they actually partook in the worship.

So whereas eating the food sacrificed to idols is ok, eating the food inside the temple is idolatry.

Also it must be noted that the demon sacrifice and the Lords table should not be compared on every point. For example the demon sacrifice is actually a sacrifice whereas the Lords Supper is a remembrance.

(Note that Fee again sees the horizontal aspect even here, he says ‘Paul can only mean by ‘sharers in the altar’ that the participants shared together in the food on the altar. Paul’s emphasis seems to be that by this meal they were thus bound together in their common worship of Yahweh’)

V21

“You cannot drink the cup of the lord and the cup of the demons” - now this is a plain statement picturing a contrast. This does not say anything about fellowship, but a plain statement where Paul takes elements from the Lords Supper and compares it with the devil sacrifice.

So after Paul having spoken about the cup we would have naturally expected him to talk about the bread as in v16-17. But why does he talk about the Lords table instead? If he were to word it he would have said “you cannot eat both the Lords bread and the devils meat.” But then again Paul has already approved eating meat in chapter 8 –even meat sacrificed to idols - so if he says ‘you cannot eat both the Lords bread and the devils meat’ he will be contradicting himself. Because it is not the meat that is the problem, but where you eat is the problem. If you eat the same meat outside the temple it is ok but if you eat the same meat inside the temple it is idolatry.

So he chooses something requiring space and is associated with a place. Table. The Lord’s table. Where you eat. You sit at the Lords table and eat - at the church. You sit at the devils table and eat - at the devils temple.

When you are eating at the Lords table you are partaking of the worship and when you are partaking of the devils table you are partaking of devil worship.

The term Lord’s connotes possession and not presence. Something that is consecrated to the Lord. Look at the similar wording in NT – the Lords day, does it mean that the Lord is especially present in that day, NO. It means that day belongs to the Lord.

The OT sometimes uses the phrase the Lords Table synonymous with altar. Mal 1.6-8. Moffat explains that the table of the Lord is an altar, MNTC

If as the Calvinists claim that Christians have special fellowship at the Lords table with Christ may I ask in what way the Christians have fellowship with the devil when they eat inside the temple.

Fee says that phrase one shares in the table of the Lord, ‘echoes the language of vv16b-17 where the focus is on the horizontal dimension of the tables. Those who eat at the Lord’s table, proclaiming his death until he comes 11.26 are thereby also bound to one another through the death of the Lord thus

celebrated. So also with pagans....Those who are bound to one another through Christ cannot also become “fellows” with those whose meals are consecrated to demons.’

I Corinthians 11.23-32

This text is one of the most misused texts in the NT to prove the real presence of Christ. The reasoning goes as follows:

‘Believers who partook in the Lord’s Supper in an inappropriate way died or became ill because the Lord is present there in a special way’.

‘Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen sleep.’ I Cor 11.27-30

But it must be noted right at the outset that nowhere in the text does it say that the Lord is present a special way. It is a reason given by the Calvinist theologians.

Before we look at the text in detail it behooves us to keep the context (verses 17-22) in mind. The communion celebration also included a fellowship meal. The Corinthians were class oriented. When they came together the rich people sat together and had a good meal whereas the poor sometimes didn’t even have food to eat. So communion was used as a way of bringing and maintaining differences and divisions in the church. As Chrysostom put it “He gave his body equally but you (the Corinthians) do not give so much as the common bread equally”²

Paul’s argument goes like this:

If you eat and drink...in an *unworthy manner*

You will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord

For anyone who eats and drinks *without recognizing the body of the Lord* eats and drinks judgment on himself.

That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep

² Cited in DEG-BECNT

In v29 he explains what this unworthy manner is – ‘without recognizing the body of the Lord’ without recognizing that they are all one body in the Lord³. By creating and entertaining divisions in the church. The ritual which was to remember this very thing – the death of Christ – which was to bring unity between mankind and God and between men creates division. They were making the very thing which was supposed to bring unity a reason and an occasion for division.

‘Whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and the blood of Christ.’ It is because they sinned against the body and the blood of Christ that the Corinthian believers died or fell sick. The text doesn’t say that it is because the Lord was present in a special way. To be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ means that they are guilty of crucifying him. They have become like one of those people who stood before Pilate and shouted ‘Crucify him’.

In v26 Paul clearly states what the Lord supper is. We proclaim the death of Christ until he comes. So that is the main purpose of this ritual. Proclaiming the Lords death. Note that there is no mention of the special presence whatsoever.

‘To eat the Lord’s supper in a manner that violates its purpose to proclaim the Lord’s death makes one “liable” (enochos) for the death of the Lord. Liable is a judicial term which means that the Corinthians are answerable to God, the final judge for this abuse. They become responsible for his body and blood – that is they are chargeable for his death. Paul’s logic is this: The Lord’s supper proclaims the Lord’s death. Those whose behavior at the Lord’s Supper does not conform to what that death entails effectively shift sides. They leave the Lord’s side and align themselves with the rulers of this present age who crucified the Lord...’ DEG-BECNT

Moreover even if you assume that Jesus is present in a special way why should the presence of Jesus Kill people? Is there any in NT where the presence of Jesus has killed people? As a matter of fact he spent most of his time with sinners – nowhere in the gospels does it say that sinners fell sick or died in his presence. If someone says that the presence of risen Jesus will kill people, even then it doesn’t make sense, as he was with Thomas who was an explicit sinner but was spared. As a matter of fact if you claim that the presence of Jesus kills people which of us would have been spared? Which of the apostles would have been spared? All of us are sinners – though saints. I haven’t lived a day yet in which I haven’t sinned. So if the presence of the Lord kills how does it really work – what amount of sins should have accumulated in order for us to be killed by the Lords presence?

³ I have taken the term *body of the Lord* in v29 to mean the body of believers. This is in line with Paul’s usage of the metaphor Christ’s body to mean the church. Also the context also supports this interpretation as Paul is taking about divisions in the church and how the Lord’s supper itself is causing divisions. Fee too takes the view that to be guilty of his body and blood means to be liable for his death. (FEE-NICNT) And that the body in v29 is the church – the group of believers gathered in the Lord’s supper.

Conclusion – Zwinglian View

The risen Christ has a glorified body. So how can he be present at the Lord's Communion?

When the Calvinist says that that the Lord is present in a special way? In what sense is the presence special? Where does it say it's special? So is Christ present in a bodily form at the communion? Or what is that special way?

The other sacrament the Lord instituted is baptism. Would anyone claim that there is any magic in it? When we go under the water and come out does it really have any cleansing affect – from sin? The Calvinist would be the first to say that it is only a symbol and that it has no meaning except to proclaim the internal change that has happened to us.

In the real special presence doctrine where is the Lord present, in the bread and wine? Or in the church?

Calvin was more confused than you think. And the Calvinists themselves agree on that.

As we saw there is no scriptural evidence for this doctrine.

The Zwinglian view doesn't add anything to what is taught in the scriptures. 'Do this in my remembrance' was Christ's own words. We remember the Lords death. We remember that he died for us. And we celebrate it together as a redeemed community awaiting his return. Paul puts a lot of stress on the communal aspect of the Lords Supper. It reminds us that we are one community. We are one body because the body of Christ was broken for us. It also reminds us that he will come again. 'you proclaim his death until he comes'. The Lord who died on the cross will come again.

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Calvin-COR	Calvin Commentaries, I Corinthians
GGF	I Corinthians in The expositors Greek Testament by G.G.Findlay Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll
DNTT	Dictionary of NT Theology ed. Colin Brown
EDNT	Exegetical Dictionary of the NT ed. Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider
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