



The Body and Blood — Understanding the Lord's Supper

Course 8, *Solving Doctrinal Differences*, Lesson 9

The Problem: Roman Catholic theology teaches that the Lord's Supper (Eucharist or Mass) is not merely a memorial but a true sacrifice. Central to this belief is the doctrine of *transubstantiation*—the teaching that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ, though their outward appearance remains unchanged. This view was formally defined at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and remains foundational in Catholic doctrine today. The Council declared that: “By the consecration of the bread and wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood... This conversion is... properly called Transubstantiation.” (Schaff, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Vol. 2) The Council also anathematized (condemned) those who denied this real, substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Philosophical Foundations

Catholic theology draws on Aristotelian categories of “substance” and “accident” to explain this mystery. The bread and wine are said to change in substance, while their accidents—taste, texture, appearance—remain. Thus, Christ’s body and blood are present, though not perceptible to the senses.

The Eucharist as Sacrifice

Catholic teaching affirms that the Mass is a **true sacrifice**—not merely symbolic or commemorative, but an unbloody representation of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. According to Trent:

“Christ is the same victim and priest in the Eucharist as He was on the cross... The fruits of the latter sacrifice are the same as those of the former.” (McBrien, *Catholicism*, p. 763) *his sacrificial understanding extends to prayers for both the living and the dead.*

Ecumenical Perspectives

Over time, various Protestant traditions have engaged in dialogue with Catholic theology. While many reject transubstantiation, some affirm a real presence of Christ in the elements:

- Luther taught consubstantiation—Christ’s body and blood are present “in, with, and under” the bread and wine, but the elements themselves remain unchanged.
- Calvin emphasized spiritual union—the Holy Spirit unites the believer with Christ during the Supper, though Christ’s body remains in heaven.
- Zwingli viewed the elements as symbols—the Supper is a memorial, and Christ is received spiritually by faith.

What Does Scripture Teach?

Jesus said, “*This is my body... This is my blood*” (Matthew 26:26–28). How should we understand these words? Are they literal, metaphorical, or sacramental? Isaiah 8:20 reminds us: “*To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*” Revelation 22:18 warns against adding to God’s Word. These verses urge us to ground our understanding of the Lord’s Supper in Scripture, not in human tradition alone.

Objectives: By the end of this lesson, learners should be able to:

- I. Evaluate whether Christ is physically present in the bread and wine.
- II. Discern whether the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice or a memorial.
- III. Understand the biblical basis for partaking of both bread and wine.
- IV. Reflect on the spiritual significance of the bread.
- V. Explore the meaning of the wine in the context of covenant and grace.

I. IS CHRIST PHYSICALLY PRESENT IN THE BREAD AND WINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER?

The Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation*—that the bread and wine become the actual substance of Christ's body and blood—is rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, not in Scripture. Likewise, Luther's view of consubstantiation, which teaches that Christ's physical presence is added to the unchanged elements, lacks biblical support. Instead, the Bible presents the Lord's Supper as a symbolic and spiritual memorial of Christ's sacrifice, not a literal re-embodiment of His flesh and blood.

The Word:

1. What did Jesus say about the bread and wine at the Last Supper? Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26
2. How did Paul describe the bread and cup metaphorically? 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; compare 1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:4-5; Colossians 1:24
3. How did Jesus clarify His metaphorical language about eating His flesh and drinking His blood? John 6:33, 35, 48, 49-51, 53-63
4. What other metaphors did Jesus use to describe Himself and His mission? John 10:7-9, 11-16; 14:6; 15:1, 5
5. How did Jesus use figurative language in parables and teachings? Mark 4:15-18; Luke 12:1

Explanation: The accounts of the Last Supper show Jesus using symbolic language. He said, "*This is my body*" while His physical body was still present, unbroken, and reclining at the table. His crucifixion—the actual giving of His body—occurred the next day. Therefore, His words must be understood as *pointing forward* to His sacrifice, not as a literal transformation of the bread.

Similarly, Jesus said, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*" (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). If taken literally, the cup itself would be the covenant—an illogical conclusion. Instead, the cup *represents* the blood that would be shed the next day, which seals the covenant between God and His people (Hebrews 8:10–13; 9:15).

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 confirms this symbolic understanding. The bread is called "*the communion of the body of Christ*," and believers are said to be "*one bread, one body*." Clearly, this is figurative language. Christians are not literally bread—they are spiritually united through faith in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:27).

In John 6, Jesus urges His followers to eat His flesh and drink His blood. But He clarifies in verse 63: "*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.*" This shows that *receiving Christ's body and blood means receiving His teaching and presence through the Holy Spirit*—not consuming His physical flesh.

Jesus used many metaphors to describe Himself:

- "*I am the door*" (John 10:7)
- "*I am the good shepherd*" (John 10:11)
- "*I am the way*" (John 14:6)
- "*I am the true vine*" (John 15:1) No one takes these statements literally. They are vivid, relational images that reveal His role in our salvation.

In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:15–18), Jesus uses the Greek verb *εἰ̄ναι* ("to be") in direct, metaphorical statements—identifying the various types of seed as corresponding to different kinds of people who hear the Gospel. No one imagines that human beings are literally seeds scattered across soil by a sower; the language is clearly symbolic.

Similarly, in Luke 12:1, when Jesus says the leaven *is* hypocrisy, He is not suggesting that the physical leaven used by the Pharisees in baking bread was somehow their hypocrisy. Rather, He employs leaven as a metaphor for the pervasive and corrupting influence of their duplicity.

Relevance: Scripture teaches us to discern between literal and figurative language. Jesus and the apostles often spoke in metaphors to convey spiritual truths. When Jesus said, “*This is my body... this is my blood,*” He was inviting His followers to remember His sacrifice and renew their spiritual fellowship with Him through faith and the Holy Spirit. The bread and wine are sacred symbols, not objects of worship. To treat them as the literal body and blood of Christ—and to bow before them—is to misplace our devotion. True worship belongs to Christ Himself, not to the elements that represent Him.

II. IS THE LORD'S SUPPER A SACRIFICE OR A MEMORIAL?

If Christ’s body and blood were physically present in the bread and wine, one might reasonably conclude that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrificial act. However, Scripture consistently teaches that the bread and wine are *symbols* of Christ’s body and blood—not a literal re-presentation. Therefore, we must understand the Lord’s Supper not as a sacrifice, but as a *memorial*.

The Word:

6. How many sacrifices for human sin did Jesus Christ make? Hebrews 7:27; 9:14, 28; 10:10-14
7. When did Christ make amends for the sins of the world? 1 John 2:2; 4:9-10
8. Where in the Bible is the teaching that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of Christ?

Explanation: The book of Hebrews makes it unmistakably clear: the repeated animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant pointed forward to the *once-for-all* sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Over and over, we are told that His single offering was sufficient for all people, for all time (Hebrews 7:27; 9:14, 28; 10:10–14). The Apostle John, writing with deep pastoral insight, speaks of Christ’s death as the *atoning sacrifice* for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2; 4:9–10). Yet he makes no mention of the Lord’s Supper as a repeated or ongoing sacrifice. The New Testament uniformly presents Calvary as *complete and final*.

Relevance: Our sins are forgiven through confession and faith in Christ’s finished work (1 John 1:7–9). The Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice for sin—neither ours nor anyone else’s. It is a memorial of Calvary, a symbol of our heart-union with Christ, and a hope-filled reminder that He will return to gather His people into His eternal dwelling..

III. THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR PARTAKING OF BOTH BREAD AND WINE

The question of whether all believers should partake of both elements in the Lord’s Supper has stirred debate for centuries. In the fifteenth century, John Huss and his followers challenged the prevailing Roman Catholic practice by insisting that communion should be received *in both kinds*—that is, every believer should partake of both the bread and the wine. While the Catholic Church has since relaxed its restriction on the cup for the laity, the deeper question remains: What does Scripture teach?

The Word:

9. How many of His disciples did Jesus command to drink of the cup? Matthew 26:27; Luke 22:17.
10. How many of the disciples obeyed Jesus' instruction and drank of the cup? Mark 14:23.
11. How do we know that the laity in the early Christian Church drank of the cup in the Lord's Supper? 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:26-28.

Explanation: Jesus' words in Matthew 26:27 are accurately rendered: "*Drink from it, all of you.*" In Luke 22:17, He says, "*Take this and divide it among yourselves.*" These instructions were given to all the disciples—not just a select few—and their obedience is recorded in Mark 14:23: "*Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.*" The disciples' participation sets a precedent for all believers.

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians confirms that the early church followed this pattern. The cup, representing the communion of the "blood of Christ," was shared among the entire congregation—not reserved for clergy alone (1 Corinthians 10:16). In chapter 11, Paul emphasizes that both bread and cup are essential to proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes (v. 26). His warning against partaking unworthily (v. 27) presupposes that the cup was offered to all. And in verse 28, the instruction is clear: "*Let a person examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*" This is addressed to the whole church.

Relevance: To withhold the cup from the laity is to diminish the fullness of the symbolism Christ established. Every believer is invited to partake of both elements—receiving Christ spiritually through the Holy Spirit, remembering His sacrifice, and anticipating His return. The cup represents the new covenant in His blood (Matthew 26:27–28), and that covenant is for *all* who trust in Him.

IV. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BREAD?

Since the bread is a symbol instituted by Christ Himself, it invites us to reflect deeply on its spiritual meaning. Scripture reveals that this simple element carries profound significance—pointing us to Christ's sacrifice, His indwelling presence, and our hope in His return.

The Word:

12. How do we know the bread symbolizes Christ's body broken for us on the cross? 1 Corinthians 11:24; Luke 22:19; John 6:51.
13. What indication is there that the bread also represents Christ's words or teaching received by faith? John 6:63.
14. How does the bread symbolize the believer's intimate spiritual union with Christ? John 6:56-57; Colossians 1:27; Romans 8:9-10.
15. What future event does the bread continually point us toward? 1 Corinthians 11:26.

Explanation: The symbolism of the bread in the Lord's Supper is rich and multifaceted. Scripture affirms at least four key meanings:

1. **Christ's sacrificial death** Jesus said, "*This is my body, which is broken for you*" (1 Corinthians 11:24). Paul adds, "*As often as you eat this bread... you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*" (v. 26). The bread reminds us of the historical reality of Calvary—His body given for our redemption.
2. **Christ's teaching received by faith** In John 6:63, Jesus declares, "*The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.*" *The bread also points to the nourishment we receive through His Word and the Holy Spirit—feeding our souls with truth and grace.*
3. **Spiritual union with Christ** Jesus said, "*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him*" (John 6:56). *Through faith, we receive His presence into our hearts. As Paul writes, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). The bread symbolizes this abiding relationship.*
4. **Hope in Christ's return** *Each time we partake, we proclaim not only His death but our anticipation of His second coming (1 Corinthians 11:26). The bread is a reminder that history is moving toward restoration—and that Christ will return to gather His people.*

Relevance: The bread in the Lord's Supper is far more than ritual—it embodies the heart of the gospel. It points us to the cross, draws us into communion with Christ, and anchors us in the hope of His return. As we eat, we remember. As we remember, we receive. And as we receive, we are renewed.

V. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WINE?

While the bread and wine together form a unified symbol of Christ's redemptive work, Scripture gives distinct emphasis to the wine as a representation of His shed blood. This symbol reaches deep into the heart of the gospel—revealing the cost of grace, the power of cleansing, and the promise of eternal communion.

The Word:

16. How do we know that the wine of the Lord's Supper represents Christ's blood shed on Calvary? Matthew 26:28; compare Acts 20:28.
17. What covenant between God and the believer is symbolized by the wine? Matthew 26:28; compare Hebrews 8:10-12.
18. What experience does the blood of Christ—and thus the wine—offer to the repentant sinner? 1 John 1:7; compare Revelation 7:14; 12:11.
19. How does the wine point us forward to the second coming of Jesus? Matthew 26:29; 1 Corinthians 11:26; John 6:54.

Explanation: The wine of the Lord's Supper is a sacred and multifaceted symbol, revealing:

1. **Christ's atoning sacrifice** Jesus declared, "*This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28). His blood, shed on Calvary, is the foundation of our redemption.
2. **The everlasting covenant** The wine points to the new covenant—a relationship of grace, forgiveness, and transformation. Through Christ's blood, we are not only pardoned but empowered to live in obedience and intimacy with God (Hebrews 8:10–12).
3. **Spiritual cleansing and victory** John writes, "*The blood of Jesus... cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7). Revelation affirms that believers overcome by the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 12:11). The wine reminds us of our daily renewal and ultimate triumph in Christ.
4. **Hope in Christ's return** Jesus promised, "*I will not drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom*" (Matthew 26:29). Each cup anticipates the joy of reunion and the fullness of the Kingdom to come.

Relevance Throughout Scripture, both wine and blood are used as symbols of life, covenant, and sacrifice. In the Lord's Supper, the wine does more than recall Calvary—it invites us into a present experience of holiness, growth, and victory through Christ. It affirms that the promises of the new covenant are active now, preparing us for the day when we will feast with Him in glory.

Importantly, Jesus referred to the wine as "*this fruit of the vine*"—a phrase that suggests purity and purpose. In light of the Kingdom's holiness, it's fitting to understand this as non-alcoholic, set apart for sacred use. No one imagines intoxicating drink at the heavenly banquet.

Have you entered into the spiritual relationship symbolized by the bread and the wine? Are you aware of Christ's presence dwelling in your heart through the Holy Spirit? His invitation is personal and persistent: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me*" (Revelation 3:20).

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. Christ is physically present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.
 - b. Although transubstantiation is not Biblical, consubstantiation is.
 - c. It is not important to give the cup to the laity because Christ is fully present in the Bread.
 - d. The bread and wine are symbols of Christ's death and His spiritual cleansing and power for the believer.
2. Consider: What changes might occur in the worship practices of various churches if they fully embraced the biblical teaching on the Lord's Supper? How would their understanding of communion—its symbolism, frequency, and accessibility—need to shift in light of Scripture?