

Amidst Us Our Beloved Stands
Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892)

Amidst us our Beloved stands,
and bids us view His pierced hands;
points to the wounded feet and side,
blest emblems of the Crucified.

What food luxurious loads the board,
when, at His table, sits the Lord!
The cup how rich, the bread how sweet,
when Jesus deigns the guests to meet!

If now, with eyes defiled and dim,
we see the signs, but see not Him;
O may His love the scales displace,
and bid us see Him face to face!

Our former transports we recount,
when with Him in the holy mount:
these cause our souls to thirst anew
His marred but lovely face to view.



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In the Nick of Time

Real Presence, Sacramentalism, and Sacramentarianism

Kevin T. Bauder

Christians debate the meaning of the Lord's table. All agree that it is a picture of the gospel and a memorial of the sufferings of Christ. But is it more than that? Many—perhaps most—professing Christians want to see some real presence of the Lord in the communion elements. What they disagree about is how the Lord is present.

Catholics insist that the eucharistic elements are transubstantiated into the real body and blood of Christ. On the Catholic view, no bread or wine is left. The elements retain the accidents of bread and wine. They still look, feel, taste, and smell like bread and wine. But strictly speaking, no bread or wine remain. What is eaten and drunk is the pure body and blood of Christ.

Lutherans also believe in the bodily presence of Christ in the elements. But they qualify this assertion in a couple of ways. Most Lutherans do not believe that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. Rather, the body and blood are present “in, with, and under” the elements. They are sacramentally united to the elements. Furthermore, most Lutherans do not see a permanent bodily presence in the elements. Christ is bodily present only for the observance of the table. An hour later, the bread and the wine are only bread and wine.

Reformed Christians do not believe that Christ's body is present in the elements. Still, those who are more influenced by John Calvin believe that Christ is spiritually present in the taking of the bread and the cup. Believers really do partake of Him. The degree to which this partaking transfers grace to the communicant is a matter of some debate.

Reformed Christianity does not stand on a single leg, though. While Calvin certainly dominates the thought of the Reformed movement, Ulrich Zwingli is the original fount of Reformed thought. And Zwingli saw that Lord's table primarily as a symbolic memorial. For him, the elements symbolized the work of Christ, but His body and blood were not present in them.

Those who affirm a real presence of Christ in the elements are properly called *sacramentalists*. Those who deny the real presence but affirm the

elements as symbols are called *sacramentarians*. Luther was a sacramentalist. Zwingli was a sacramentarian.

Baptists have stood nearly unanimously with Zwingli in this debate. Oddly, most Baptists would be alarmed if addressed as sacramentarian, but that is what they are. They see the Lord's table as a memorial service in which the bread and cup symbolize the body and blood of Christ. That is exactly sacramentarianism, not sacramentalism.

Incidentally, even though modern Baptists prefer the word *ordinance* to the word *sacrament*, that was not always the case. For example, the English General Baptists adopted a confession in 1679 that repeatedly refers to baptism and the Lord's table as sacraments (see articles 27 and 28). Even more incidentally, the early General Baptists were not truly Arminians, as some have charged. Rather, they combined a belief in unconditional election and irresistible grace with a belief in a general atonement.

Baptists and other sacramentarians deny any real presence of Christ in the communion elements. This denial has led their opponents to joke that Baptists affirm the "real absence." These same opponents point out that the Baptist view leads them to trivialize the ordinance of the table.

To be honest, many Baptists do trivialize it. They tack it onto the end of some other service, rush through it, and reduce it to the quintessence of vain repetition. But we must remember that these Baptists are usually the same ones who depreciate instruction, evacuate worship, contemporize music, and equate fellowship with coffee and cookies. The problem is not limited to their practice of the Lord's table.

Even if the Lord is not present in the bread and the cup, He is present at the table. How could it be otherwise? It is *His* table. We gather by His command. When we gather in His name, He is in our midst. We commemorate His sufferings and death. We examine ourselves for His sake. We discern His body—not only His remembered body that was sacrificed on the cross, but also the Body of Christ around us in the form of our fellow believers. We rejoice in His fellowship, His communion. We anticipate His coming again, after which He will lift His cup with us in His kingdom.

The Lord's table is a dramatic and symbolic reenactment of His sufferings. When we partake of the elements, we should not be thinking, "This is only bread," or "This is only the fruit of the vine." Rather, we should allow those elements to direct our attention to the crucified body and shed blood of the Lord Jesus. We should behave as if those things were really present to us.

Here is an analogy that is admittedly flawed and must not be pressed too far. When an actor steps onto the stage, he does not wish us to think of him

as an actor. He wishes us to think of him as the character he is playing. If we are watching *Hamlet* and all we see is John Barrymore, then the play has failed. In the same way, at the table our concentration must not be on the elements as elements but on the realities to which those elements point. In other words, while sacramentarians do not believe in a real presence, they certainly believe in a symbolic presence.

Baptists are sometimes accused of having a low view of the table, but I believe this is a high view indeed. It is a view that should move us to make each observance of the Lord's supper a serious and even solemn event. It is also a view that should make our observance joyful, warm, thoughtful, and fully eucharistic (we should be moved to gratitude and giving thanks). It is enough to help us receive the love of God that is being shed abroad in our hearts.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
