

A Study of the Elements of Holy Communion



by
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Preface

Debates about the Eucharist, Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper have raged since apostolic times; major councils, such as the Council of Trent, have occurred since the Middle Ages (and before) that have divided the Church. Most of the scholarly writings reviewed for this paper are so twisted, historic "ping-pong" (going back to the 16th century) and convoluted, that arguments are very unclear. Positions tend to become whatever the group wants it to be. But what does the Bible REALLY say about it? I, a layman, a Christian, and a Child of God do not place myself above all the learned scholars that have studied the nature of Holy Communion over the recorded ages, but I come to it as merely a child, as Jesus instructed us to do.

It is useful to know a little background on your author to get a sense of where my bias may be (we all have them, though most won't admit it). I was presented to God and the Church by my parents at the time of Infant Baptism in 1950. I grew up in the Episcopal Church, went through Confirmation classes and especially loved Holy Communion. I loved the discipline and reverence that I found in what I like to call "high church"; that is "highly structured church", as found with the Catholics and Episcopalians. I followed my girl friend, now my wife, to the Disciples of Christ Christian Church, became a Deacon, an Elder, and Chairman of the Board of Elders. It was at a Good Friday Prayer Vigil where a direct word from Christ told me to be baptized by emersion (this had nothing to do with my infant sprinkling but everything to do with being reborn as a new creation). I sat on the Board of the Regional Church, served on the Center for Congregation Vitality, was Chairman of the Commission on Congregational Nurture, I studied Catholic Contemplative Prayer with Franciscan Monks, and currently I am teaching a wonderful adult Sunday School Class (for nearly 30 years now) and writing several books.

I must confess that I do have one major problem with the Catholic Church and it involves the Eucharist. As you may know, the Catholic Church only allows those already "at one" with their Church (full unity) to participate in Holy Communion. To understand the problem I have with that, we have to go back to that first Lord's Supper with Jesus in that upper room. Jesus broke bread and passed the cup to all those lounging around the table, including one Judas Iscariot, the publicly identified betrayer of Christ. As a Christian, I am not a betrayer of Christ, or of the Church or of any Catholic! Jesus did not reject Judas, being a "true betrayer" whom Jesus Himself identified at the table, yet the Catholics reject me and all other Protestants. This is simply not walking in the footsteps of Jesus, as we were told to do!

The position of the Catholic Church that all must be "one with the Catholic Church" and this rejection of those outside their manmade group at Holy Communion is all a bunch of nonsense. Jesus told us that those who hold Jesus as the Messiah and make Him Lord in their lives are all "one" (John 17:20-26). I put forth that we Christians are already "one" with the Catholics but this debate is for another time; the issue for this paper is a discussion of the Eucharist elements and their relationship to the body of Christ. A definition page for some of the terms used has been added at the end for your convenience. Blessings to you! Amen.

Christ in the Eucharist

The Eucharist or Holy Communion is one of the three great mysteries of the Church...the other two being the Trinity and the Incarnation. When we look into Eucharist Doctrine, we see it developing around two main points, the “presence” of Christ and the “sacrifice” of Christ.

There seem to exist two main group divisions when viewing Holy Communion; one group consists of the Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and many Protestant churches that look at it as a “sacrament”; the other group, mainly Baptists, that see it as an “institution”. To further divide the Holy Communion “sacrament camp”, there are the two sides of “sacrifice” that churches other than the Protestants gravitate toward. One believes that the Eucharist is the way to partake in the original sacrifice of Christ; this is the official instruction of the Catholic Church. The other side believes that each time the Eucharist is celebrated, it is a new sacrifice.

As with any serious study, let’s first look at the Bible text. Paul gives us the “Words of Institution”, *“He took bread in His hands. Then after He had given thanks, He broke and said, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Eat this and remember Me.’ After the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine in His hands and said, ‘This is my blood, and with it God makes His new agreement with you. Drink this and remember Me.’”* (Learning Bible 1Cor 11:24-25) While the NIV translation is very similar, it does include a major difference when referring to the cup however, Jesus says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood...”.

Catholic Doctrine is clear. It says the bread & wine actually becomes the literal body & blood of Christ at the consecration by the ordained priest; this is “transubstantiation”. For the Protestants, things are not so clear; let’s first look at three Protestant Reformers to see why. Martin Luther taught that the body & blood of Christ was indeed present in and with and under the form of the bread & wine; this is “consubstantiation”. The opposite extreme would be the Swiss reformer Huldreich Zwingli who denied any connection at all between the bread & wine and the body & blood of Christ, who said it was only a traditional recall of the Lord’s Supper. In between these two reformers, we find another Swiss, John Calvin who believed that Christ was present both symbolically and by His spiritual power; sometimes called “dynamic presence”. This appears to me to be more like “transignification”. More on these three positions on page six.

To be in Communion with Jesus

Basically, we could boil all this study down and keep it really simple, something the scholars would say was weak to do, if we keep it to this one small point: Holy Communion is being in “communion” with our Lord. Nothing else matters! Whether the bread and wine are actually the body and blood of Christ or not, doesn’t matter; and certainly to get in a fight over it is not worth it. In fact, the secular world loves to see Christians fight over dogma; they see the carnage and it fuels their own arguments.

Plain and simple, we are to “desire” to be in communion with God, that is, we are to be where He is (John 1:38). Jesus was “accustomed” to do this; He often got away to hold communion with God (Luke 6:12). Everything else doesn’t matter; nowhere do we see Jesus “draping structure” over this communion time with the Father, He just did it. Now that time in the upper room on the night He was betrayed, there was indeed structure, but it was meant to setup a “tradition” for memory...”to this in remembrance of Me”.

We know that meat and grain offerings, along with drink offerings, were a part of every sacrifice; Dr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, professor of church history and historical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, says the meat and drink offerings were foretold by Malachi to be emblems of the Holy Eucharist. These offerings were sometimes cut off due to famine (Joel 1:9); did the Lord cut off the people at that time, saying “no offering, no communion”? No! God told the people to all come together to pray in the Temple...it was time to get closer to God.

Sacrificing the Passover Lamb

In Exodus chapter 12 we read how to prepare the Passover Lamb. The Passover Lamb was different than all the other sacrifices; it was fully consumed, where other sacrifices were only partially consumed. We read in the Bible that Jesus was the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7); at the time of torture and on the cross, Christ was to be fully consumed, very thing was sacrificed by Christ, including His oneness with the Father which He had since the beginning of Creation. This is what we are to remember as often as we gather together; that a great price has already been paid for our sins and that it was the sacrifice of Christ Jesus that allows us to stand blameless before God...this is Holy Communion...no offering required. Now, that’s grace!

While Dr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley acknowledges that all Christians have been conferred as priests to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he along with others would say that if everyone is a priest then nobody is a priest. Dr. Bromiley explains that the term “priest” should not be placed on a minister of the gospel because it never shows up in the New Testament. Further a priest is one who offers sacrifice, and ministers in the New Testament didn’t offer sacrifice, except of course, Christ Jesus. Carrying this further, Dr. Bromiley presents that if a Catholic priest offers the true body and blood of Christ at the Eucharist as they believe, that it should be considered contrary to the New Testament because the final sacrifice has already been made by Christ.

Jesus made the one huge sacrifice, and after that He conquered death itself for all time in His resurrection. There are not multiple sacrifices of Christ; to say so would diminish the first sacrifice rather than see it as final defeat of death and sin...as Jesus said, “it is finished”. If the bread and wine in the Eucharist turns to the real blood and broken body of Christ then are we not “re-sacrificing” Christ over again? Today, we are being called to share in the first sacrifice of Christ; Paul never speaks of sacrificing Christ over and over again, only that we remember and share in what Christ did for us so we are empowered to go tell others of this Good News.

Sharing in the Blood of Christ

Paul says that we are to remain focused, not worship idols or go along with what the world does, but be to of one body in Christ Jesus. We do this by structure to hold us into one band of believers, a gang for Jesus! What holds groups together? Besides basic organization, I believe that “tradition” holds groups together, be they a small family or a large church. Paul continues in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 16 and 17, *“When we drink from the cup that we ask God to bless, isn’t that sharing in the blood of Christ? When we eat the bread that we break, isn’t that sharing in the body of Christ? By sharing in the same loaf of bread, we become one body, even though there are many of us.”* This is the point of the “Holy Communion Tradition” that we are to remember that we are all one in Christ and then go and treat each other that way...that is, as loving brothers and sisters in the Family of God! Paul speaks of us “sharing” in Christ; that is what a family does...joy is shared and pain & suffering are likewise shared. If Jesus shed blood, then we are to share in the possibility that we too will be called to shed blood for Jesus; and isn’t that exactly what all the Disciples did end up doing?

Christ is not on the Cross any longer

We’ve looked at the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb and its impact on Holy Communion, continuing down this path, we need to look at the Cross. There are indeed many differences between Catholics and Protestants; but it seems to me that “focus” is one the main difference. The focus of Catholics on the death and sacrifice of Christ is so much different than the Protestant focus on the Risen Lord. Simply, look at the Cross; Protestants celebrate an empty Cross...Christ is no longer there...Easter morning, He has risen! To the Protestant, Christ has conquered death and paid the price for our sins; He is active today in the Universe, working His purpose out and wishing for all of His creation to come to Him. It is now time for the Wedding Feast and celebration of life in Glory...gather round all you Children of God, come into God’s House and be made whole, everlasting life, free of hurt and pain and sin. To the Protestant, the focus is on a celebration of life and the grace of the Living Lord, Christ Jesus!

Catholics, on the other hand, see Christ on the Cross, a Crucifix. For Catholics, the Crucifix is more important than the Cross because they look to the words of Saint Paul (1 Cor. 1:23), “we preach Christ crucified”. In Catholic Mass, it is important to have the Crucifix on the Altar to remind the people that the victim offered on the Altar is the same as was offered on the Cross. You can see the Eucharist more plainly now...put all this together: the Altar (a place of sacrifice), the Crucifix (death of the body), bread (the body) and the wine (blood from that body). It all fits...but look...where is the focus?

Not to be too hard on the Catholics, there is certainly a place for “remembrance” and for “tradition”; we would be much weaker without it. We most definitely should look to Christ’s great sacrifice as I have already stated, but it seems to me that the Catholics, as a group, stop right there, at Christ’s death, instead of moving beyond and celebrating the Risen Christ who conquered death and invites us to be with Him. Compare the

Catholic focus to the Protestant focus, and ask yourself: “How can there be a oneness of Holy Communion? No wonder they don’t want us to participate with them and how sad; they lose nothing and gain so much if they would shift focus to life instead of death.

So, which is it - Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation or Transignification?

Both Roman and Byzantine Catholic churches believe in pronouncing the Epiklesis at the time of the Eucharist and through transubstantiation the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. They will argue that the words are not “this bread is My body”, but that the words of Institution are: “this is My body”. The big debate, is it literal or not? Those subscribing to the literal meaning, “this is my body”...say it really is Christ’s body (transubstantiation) and once you break from literal meaning, you open up to any and all interpretations. Even back in the Sixteenth century, Christopher Rasperger wrote a book on 200 such interpretations.

So, maybe this whole paper is one such interpretation, or maybe it is solid truth, who knows? I suggest you pray about it and see if the Holy Spirit leads you as He is leading me. Let’s look at some important Biblical text in the 6th Chapter of John from the Learning Bible translation that is exactly where the transubstantiation crowd springs from (verses 51-56), but there is also text in this chapter that argues for transignification and against transubstantiation or even consubstantiation. I have added underlining to draw your attention to certain sections; Jesus is teaching in Capernaum:

“Don’t work for food that spoils. Work for food that gives eternal life. The Son of Man will give you this food, because God the Father has given Him the right to do so.” (verse 27)

The people mentioned manna from heaven for their ancestors, and Jesus replies, *“I tell you for certain that Moses wasn’t the one who gave you bread from heaven. My Father is the one who gives you the true bread from heaven. And the bread that God gives is the One [Jesus] who came down from heaven to give life to the world.” (verses 32 + 33)*

The people were grumbling because they couldn’t see how Jesus came from heaven; today people are still grumbling. They didn’t understand Him then and people don’t understand Him today. Jesus is talking at a much higher level than the literal understanding of these words to which we are limited. To lock-in to our limited literal understanding and our mortal view is to place limits on what God is doing or can do...it should not be tolerated; this is why Jesus said that *“You will never get into God’s Kingdom unless you enter it like a child.” (Luke 18:17)*

Continuing, *“I tell you for certain that everyone who has faith in Me has eternal life. I am the bread that gives life! Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, and later they died. But the bread from heaven has come down, so that no one who eats it will ever die. I am that bread from heaven! Everyone who eats it will live forever. My flesh is the life-giving bread that I give to the people of this world.” (verses 47 – 51)*

The people grumbled more; they just couldn't understand. Jesus wasn't talking about real bread. The people certainly understood "bread"; it was important day by day in order to live, but Jesus wasn't talking about "earthly living" but of "eternal life"...it is a whole other level and dimension, way over their heads...and over ours!

Continuing (here is where the Catholics are); *"I tell you for certain that you won't live unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man. But if you do eat My flesh and drink My blood, you will have eternal life, and I will raise you to life on the last day. My flesh is the true food, and My blood is the true drink. If you eat My flesh and drink My blood, you are one with Me, and I am one with you. The living Father sent Me, and I have life because of Him. Now everyone who eats My flesh will live because of Me. The bread that comes down from heaven isn't like what your ancestors ate. They died, but whoever eats this bread will live forever." (verses 53 – 58)*

Okay, please go back and re-read the underlined passages in these last 2 pages; what do you notice about them? They are all about life! They are positive, strengthening, life-giving and hopeful; no where do you read about death or sacrifice. What a contrast this text actually is with the focus we see in a Catholic Mass!

Also, note the passages dealing with "oneness"; this text is all about relationship not sacrifice. I believe it is clear that Jesus is talking about getting as close as possible with those who love Him; how much closer can you get than co-mingling your body and blood? I'm not talking about a literal co-mingling of body and blood, but a co-mingling the same as a husband and wife shall become one flesh, one body (Matt 19:5, Mk 10:8, 1 Cor 6:16, Eph 5:31). For this many Bible references, you must accept that this concept of being all part of the same body as very important. In Ephesians Paul is talking about Christ's Church being part of the body of Christ; verse 5:30 says that we are all part of His body. This concept of oneness is extremely important, go back and read the 17th chapter of John; it is hard for us to understand, but this is what Jesus is talking about in the verses noted above in the 6th chapter of John, and not literally drinking His blood and eating His body. Jesus is not talking about sacrifice or death or hanging around on the cross; this is about the "resurrection faith", about everlasting life, about being "one" with Christ in glory! As John wrote about his Revelation, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1), and he heard from God's Throne in heaven, "I am making everything new." (Rev 21:5). We are not dealing with past sacrifices.

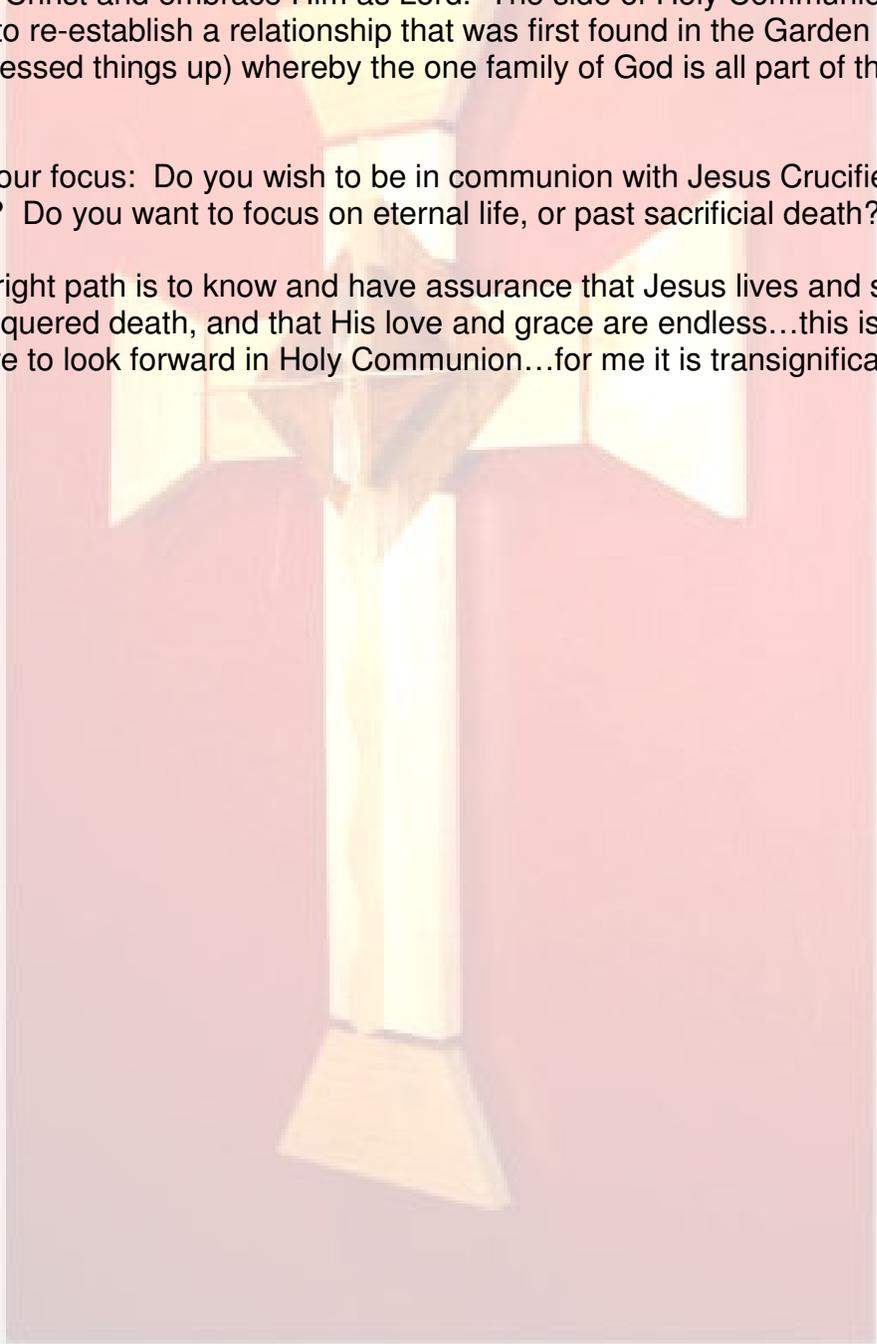
I think the answer to the question at the beginning of this section is "transignification". At Holy Communion, I take the bread, symbolizing Christ's broken body and the cup of the New Covenant which is made by and sealed by His blood; further, I believe that the bread and the cup are indeed "life-giving". I actually pray that by my eating "the bread of life" and by my drinking the cup of the New Covenant, that every cell in my body is changed to be a new creation in Christ...this, friends, is real communion with the Risen Lord!

Holy Communion is not about re-sacrificing Christ, though we must remember what happen and the high price that was paid; Holy Communion is about looking forward, seeing an empty cross, knowing that the devil & death have been conquered for all time, and seeking relationship with the resurrected Christ, our Lord. Since “communion” is by definition a two-way sharing, our side of Holy Communion is about understanding that: our debt for our sins was already paid by the “Innocent One” who created us, who loves us, and who wishes us to be close to Him for all eternity...and then our ACTION to move toward Christ and embrace Him as Lord. The side of Holy Communion for Jesus is the desire to re-establish a relationship that was first found in the Garden of Eden (before we messed things up) whereby the one family of God is all part of the one body of Christ.

Now chose your focus: Do you wish to be in communion with Jesus Crucified, or Jesus Resurrected? Do you want to focus on eternal life, or past sacrificial death?

I believe the right path is to know and have assurance that Jesus lives and so has therefore conquered death, and that His love and grace are endless...this is why I believe we are to look forward in Holy Communion...for me it is transignification!

Amen.



Definitions

Catechumens

A person learning but not yet initiated into the “sacred mysteries”, but was undertaking the course of preparation.

Consecration

The changing of something from the ordinary and profane, to be a sacred thing.

Consubstantiation

A minority Christian view that the fundamental “substance” of the body & blood of Christ are present “along side” the “substance” of the bread & wine which remain as bread & wine.

Epiklesis

A prayer to God to send down the Holy Spirit to change the bread & wine into the body & blood of Christ. This was in both the West and the East liturgies but the West moved to “words of Institution” being the main form of the sacrament, while the East stayed with the action of the Holy Spirit being the form of sacrament.

Sacrament

A Christian rite that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality.

Transignification

This is a view that the bread & wine “symbolize” the body and blood of Christ.

Transubstantiation

Roman Catholic doctrine believes that after the Priest consecrates the bread & wine, it becomes the actual body & blood of Christ. It is a belief of change, from one thing into another entirely different thing. This is based on 1Cor 11:24.