

## The Lord's Supper: Four Major Views

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And when he had taken some bread and given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me." And in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

– Luke 22:19-20

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance (public ceremony) instituted by Christ to serve as a continual reminder of his saving death and as a means to draw us into fellowship and communion with him. The Lord's Supper is celebrated by almost all of Christianity, yet there are many different interpretations of the ordinance. It has both united and divided the Church.

We are aware that many people at Grace Church come from various backgrounds and may have differing views of the Lord's Supper. The doctrinal position held at Grace Church has been adopted after careful study and prayer. We believe it is important to answer any questions that may arise regarding our beliefs and how we arrived at such conclusions on this issue.

Depending on the religious tradition you come from, you may have different experiences of the Lord's Supper, or communion. There are also various views on the meaning of the Lord's Supper within orthodox Christianity. Listed below are four of the most prominent views.

I. **Catholic View:** The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which takes the words of Christ in the Gospels literally. Each time the elements of the Lord's Supper are consecrated by a priest, a literal metaphysical change takes place. The substance of the bread and the wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ.

When this "change" (transubstantiation) takes place, according to the Catholic Church, the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Jesus. Additionally, grace is imparted through the elements to those practicing Catholics participating in the ceremony. And finally, in each mass, a real sacrifice takes place and Christ is sacrificed again and again on behalf of the participants. Only an ordained priest can actually consecrate the bread and wine. Unless an ordained priest follows a set formula, the bread and wine are not changed.

2. **Luther's View:** The bread and the wine do not actually become the body and the blood of Christ, but the physical body of Christ is actually present in, with, and under the bread and wine.

Martin Luther rejected the Roman Catholic concept of The Lord's Supper. He did not believe that the bread and wine were actually changed into the body and blood of Christ, but he believed that the body and blood were present in the elements (consubstantiation).

He was convinced that the idea of a priest sacrificing Christ at the altar missed the point of Christ's one-time death and sacrifice. Luther argued that it was the Word of God, not the sacrament itself, that is the source of spiritual life. However, he maintained that there had to be some type of literal understanding of the phrases "this is my body" and "this is my blood." He also saw the sacramental aspect of the Lord's Supper and saw it as a means of imparting grace on the participants. While Luther saw great distinction between his view and the Roman Catholic view, to the modern person, they appear similar.

3. **Calvin's View:** The body and blood of Christ is present in the bread and wine only in a figurative and symbolic sense.

The Reformed view of John Calvin and many other Reformers took yet another step away from the Roman Catholic view regarding the literal presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Calvin suggested that the bread and wine did not change into the body and blood of Christ (the Catholic View), nor did they contain the body and blood of Christ (the Lutheran view). Rather, Calvin believed that there is the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper, but it is spiritual and not physical.

The Reformed view of Calvin recognizes that Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper was done using figurative and symbolic language. However, the Reformed view still insists that the elements are a means of grace and that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper in a spiritual or even mystical way.

4. **Zwingli's View:** The Lord's Supper is commemoration of Christ's death.

Another early reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, is regarded as the author of this view. Zwingli, like Calvin, believed that the physical body of Jesus was in no way present in the elements



of the Lord's Supper. However, his view was different from Calvin's, in that he saw the Lord's Supper as a commemoration of Christ's death. It is celebrated by the believer as an act of "remembrance" of Christ's death and his sacrifice. This view emphasizes that the Lord's Supper is a devotional act on the part of the believer.

### **Grace Church's Position**

These are the four major views of the Lord's Supper. It is important to resolve these various interpretations in order to form a logical and a Biblical position. Are the body and blood of Jesus present in the elements, and if they are, in what way? The most natural understanding would seem to be to take the words and language of Jesus himself literally and not figuratively. In most cases, the most plain, obvious and simple meaning of words and phrases would lead us to the correct interpretation. However, in this case, such an understanding leads to an impossible conclusion and should be rejected.

If Jesus were actually saying that his body and his blood were in two places simultaneously or that he could be many places at the same time, this would be a denial of his Incarnation. He was fully man, and no human can physically be in two places at the same time. It seems clear that this is not what he was communicating to his disciples.

Jesus spoke in metaphorical and figurative terms in many instances to characterize his nature for his followers. He speaks of being "the way, the truth, and the life;" he says that he is "the vine" and we are the "branches;" he is the "good shepherd;" and he is "the bread of life." Similarly, his language at the Last Supper is similarly figurative. Jesus is trying to communicate that the bread and wine are symbols that "represent" his body and blood.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." At Grace Church, we believe the Scripture leads us to view the Lord's Supper as a memorial, a commemoration of Christ's death. The celebration of the Lord's Supper should be seen as a thanksgiving for, and a memorial of, Christ's atoning death. We do not believe that Christ is physically or spiritually present in the actual elements of the Lord's Supper.

However, in our attempts to distance ourselves from the traditional views, it can become all too easy to go to extreme measures to say that the Lord's Supper is simply an intellectual memorial with no spiritual nourishment for us as believers. At Grace Church, we believe that this ordinance was not only instituted and mandated by Jesus, but that

it provides us with the opportunity of real communion with Jesus; therefore, real spiritual nourishment can and should take place. As a community of believers, we do believe that the presence of God is with us in this celebration. We have great confidence that the Holy Spirit will truly nourish us as we participate in the Lord's Supper "in remembrance" of Christ and his sacrifice.

