

§ 12. Doctrine of the Church

Lecture 11

Consubstantiation and Other Views

The last two weeks that we've met we talked about the most radical interpretation of the Lord's Supper, namely the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation. Today we want to move on from the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation to the Lutheran doctrine which is called *consubstantiation*. How is that different from transubstantiation? In the Formula of Concord (1577), which is the standard Lutheran statement of doctrine, the Formula rejects the view of transubstantiation. It says that the bread and the wine are not transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Nevertheless, the Formula also rejects the idea that there is a mere spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. That is too weak a view for Lutheran theologians of the Lord's Supper. They maintained that there has to be more than just a spiritual presence of Christ there. He needs to be present in his human nature. But it is not a transubstantiation either. So what is it? Well, it is something in between. It is consubstantiation. What this view holds is that the body and blood of Christ are present *along with* the bread and the wine. So when the communicant eats the bread and drinks the wine he is drinking the blood of Christ and chewing and eating the flesh of Christ at the same time. They are both there together.

Again, you might say, "But I don't see them. I don't taste them." Why would you think that the body and the blood of Christ are really there along with the bread and the wine? This question recurs to a view of Martin Luther's that we talked about when we looked at the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. You may remember that Luther held this peculiar doctrine called the *communicatio idiomatum*, that is to say the communication of the attributes. That was the doctrine that in Christ's exaltation the attributes of the divine nature were transferred over, or communicated, to his human nature. So the human nature of Christ took on some of the attributes or properties of his divine nature. One of the favorite illustrations of Lutheran theologians was that of a red hot poker that has been lying in the fire. The poker is normally cold and dark, but when it is in the fire long enough, it becomes glowing and red and hot. It has taken on the properties properly belonging to the fire. Similarly, the human nature of Christ in his exalted state takes on some of the properties of the divine nature like ubiquity (that is to say, omnipresence). (By the way, that is a great word to add to your vocabulary if you don't yet know it! Ubiquitous – it means everywhere. So, for example, you could say at the time of this recording that COVID-19 is ubiquitous.) So the human nature of Christ becomes ubiquitous; it is everywhere. It also takes on the property of invisibility, which is a proper property of the divine nature. So when the communicant eats the bread and drinks the wine, Luther emphasizes that he is chewing the body of Christ. He is actually eating it and drinking Christ's blood because the human nature, having taken on the attributes of

the divine nature, is now there. It is really present. It is ubiquitous even though it is invisible and you don't sense it.

So on the Lutheran view, I think you can see there is a kind of middle way between transubstantiation and a mere spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. On Lutheran doctrine, the body and blood of Christ are really there along with the bread and the wine. The body and blood of Christ are said to be in, under, and through the elements that you take. So, again, you do take the blood and the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

We now come to a third view which is yet weaker in its understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, and that is the Reformed view. There are actually a number of different Reformed perspectives on the Lord's Supper. Calvin's own view was that in the Lord's Supper there is a spiritual presence of Christ to the believer. It is not a transformation of the elements. It is not even a consubstantiation. Rather, in the Lord's Supper the sacrament confirms spiritually what has already happened physically at the cross. There is a kind of spiritual communion that takes place at the Lord's Supper that is experienced by the communicant. So the Lord's Supper is still a means of grace, but it is not a physical reception of the body and the blood of the Lord; rather it is a sort of spiritual communion with him.

We finally come to the fourth view which is that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance. A weaker version of the Reformed view is that in the Lord's Supper we simply have an ordinance. It is not a sacrament. It is not a special means of grace. This was the view of the Swiss Reformer Huldrych Zwingli. Zwingli actually met with Martin Luther to have a very famous colloquy over the nature of the Lord's Supper. For Zwingli, the Lord's Supper didn't even involve the spiritual presence of the body and blood of Christ. Rather, the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial meal that the communicant takes in remembrance of Christ. It is a way of remembering Christ and his sacrifice. Therefore, it is simply an ordinance, not a sacrament. This is the view that also typically characterizes Baptist churches. The Lord's Supper is not a means of grace, nor does the communicant partake of the body and blood of Christ. It is an ordinance that we participate in on a regular basis in order to remember the Lord's sacrifice, to examine ourselves, and to reflect on what he has done on our behalf.

So now we have four contrasting views of the Lord's Supper, from a very strong view held by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, right down to the Baptist view: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, spiritual presence and communion with the Lord, or simply an ordinance and memorial supper.

That is a good breaking point in our lesson. So we will finish early today, and next time when we resume we will look at an assessment of these four competing views.¹

¹Total Running Time: 9:29 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)