The Real Presence and the Presence of Reality:
A Fresh Look at Reformed Sacramentology

Reformation on the Ropes

Last year, one of Hillsdale’s most famous alumni, Peter Leithart, wrote an essay called “Why Protestants Can’t Write” that began with the line “Blame it on Marburg.” The 1529 Colloquy of Marburg, of course, was the point at which Zwingli and Luther failed to agree on the nature of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, although its historical importance has been vastly exaggerated (a pet peeve of mine that we don’t really have time to go into tonight). Leithart concedes that obviously not all the Reformers were Zwinglians, but he thinks that the Zwinglian ethos has captured Protestantism, to the point Protestants have been by and large unable to produce good literature over the centuries. Good literature, after all, requires a symbolic realism, a union of sign and reality, which he thinks we see in the writings of the Catholic Flannery O’Connor. For her, “creation is always the medium by which God comes to us.”¹ But for most Protestants, “symbols [are] separated from reality and reduced to ‘mere signs’ [which] cannot do anything. They exist as sheer ornament; Protestant writers cannot do justice to this world or show that this world is the theater of God’s redeeming action.”²

Of course, critiques of the Reformed Eucharist as an “empty sign” are nothing new. From the beginning of the Reformation, Catholic polemicists talked about nothing so often as this, and before long, Lutherans too made this accusation against the Reformed. Whereas the early Reformed fiercely denied the charge, somewhere along the way, they started to believe it about themselves, and then to wear the charge of subjectivism as a badge of pride. Faith had retreated more and more into the subjective mental realm, and the emphasis on human initiative came to taint even most conservative branches of Protestantism, so it seemed only natural to see the sacraments as no more than occasions for human beings to muster up pious thoughts and sweet inward feelings of spiritual communion.³

¹ Peter J. Leithart, “Why Protestants Can’t Write, I” (http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2016/01/why-

² Peter J. Leithart, “Why Protestants Can’t Write, II” (http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2016/01/why-

By the 20th century, this self-perception on the part of most evangelical Protestants—of subjectivism, spiritualism, and anti-sacramentalism—was so entrenched that Catholic apologists and self-flagellating Protestant ecumenists could take the old Reformation-era polemics to another level. It was not merely, we began to hear, that large swaths of Protestantism rejected the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but that they rejected the whole “sacramental tapestry,” an understanding of the created world as a site of God’s presence.4 Whereas medieval Catholicism saw the whole created order as a seamless tapestry in which the lowest was knit together with the highest, in which, in the inimitable words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,”5 Protestantism had, wittingly or unwittingly, “disenchanted” the world, leaving it, in the words of Hamlet, “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” with only the inner recesses of our minds serving as a site of communion with God.6

Since the 1990s, particularly with the addition of some rather curious claims about that naughty boy, Duns Scotus, this narrative has flowered into a thousand blossoms of anti-Protestant polemic and lament. “Blame it on Protestantism” has become a favorite pastime of many theologians and historians, Catholic and Protestant. Bill Cavanaugh tells us that the Reformation, by displacing the Eucharist as the social site of sacredness, replaced it with the omnicompetent nation-state and its sacral violence.7 Brad Gregory one-ups Cavanaugh, finding ways to link the Reformation and its anti-sacramentalism with secularism, the amorality of modern economics, and the exploitation of the environment.8 And we have already heard Peter Leithart’s complaint that Protestants can’t write good stories, and only Catholics seem able to create fictional universes with metaphysical depth.

It is of course impossible to properly tackle this bewildering range of charges in the short time that I have with you, so I will do my best instead to pull the rug out from under all of them by tackling the root claim head-on. Specifically, I want to argue two things. First, far from denying that material creation can play a role in conveying spiritual reality, the

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4 The term comes from Hans Boersma, Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). See ch. 5 for his critique of the role of the Reformation in this.
7 This is a recurrent theme of Cavanaugh’s work, but see especially Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism (London: T&T Clark, 2002), ch. 1.
Protestant Reformation actually sought to *safeguard* such a role, over against what they saw as the Roman Catholic assault on the integrity of material creation. Second, Reformed doctrine does *not*, *contra* its critics, deny the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist; rather, it redefines the mode and locus of that presence with greater theological and philosophical precision.

Sound bold enough? Good. Let’s get started.

**The Charges in Focus**

Let’s begin by trying to get a more precise handle on the metaphysical complaint that is laid at Zwingli and Calvin’s doorstep. A somewhat jargonistic passage from Brad Gregory’s influential *The Unintended Reformation* will have to do the job for us.

Whether it was explicitly recognized by its protagonists or not, the denial that Jesus could be *really* present in the Eucharist...is a logical corollary of metaphysical univocity. A ‘spiritual’ presence that is *contrasted* with a real presence presupposes an either-or dichotomy between a crypto-spatial God and the natural world that precludes divine immanence in its desire to preserve divine transcendence. But in traditional Christian metaphysics the two attributes are correlative: it is precisely and only God’s radical otherness as *nonspatial* that makes his presence in and through creation possible, just as it had made the incarnation possible... The denial of the possibility of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist, by contrast, ironically implies that the ‘spiritual’ presence of God is itself being conceived in spatial or quasi-spatial terms—which is why, in order to be kept pure, it must be kept separate from and uncontaminated by the materiality of the ‘mere bread.’

“Traditional Christian metaphysics,” Gregory is saying states, makes it possible for God to be both intimately present in his creation while also thoroughly transcending it, because God is non-spatial. So far, so good. However, he then asserts that the Reformed rejection of Catholic real presence theology fails to honor this metaphysical truth, pitting the spiritual presence of God against the materiality of the bread. For Catholics, creation is the medium of God’s presence; for the Reformed, the two are mutually exclusive. Now there are two oddities here. The first is that whatever the Reformed may have meant in denying the “real presence” (and we will flesh this out later), they quite obviously never denied a real presence of the *divinity* of Christ in the elements, or anywhere for that matter. Gregory’s whole taunt about an implicit spatialization of the divine thus falls entirely flat; the only thing that was at stake was whether the *physical* presence of the *humanity* of the God-man Jesus should be

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conceived in spatial or quasi-spatial terms. The Reformed argued strenuously that it must if
the Incarnation was to mean anything, and on this basis they denied a spatial or local
presence of Christ’s body in the elements.

But the real height of the irony lies in the fact that it was in fact the Catholic doctrine of
transubstantiation that was guilty of the metaphysical opposition that Gregory here laments,
and it was largely on this ground that the Reformers attacked it. Lest you doubt, consider the
second Canon of the Decree on the Eucharist by the Council of Trent:

“If any one saith, that, in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the
substance of the bread and wine remains conjointly with the body and blood
of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denieth that wonderful and singular conversion
of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole
substance of the wine into the Blood . . . let him be anathema.”

In other words, the Catholic dogma at the time of the Reformation, forcefully asserted by
the Council of Trent, was not the vague affirmation so beloved of modern “incarnational,”
“sacramental”-minded Christians that God was pleased to take ordinary creaturely material
realities and, grace perfecting nature, make them the receptacles of his powerful presence
and the vehicles of his grace. No, it was quite specifically the claim that after the
consecration, the bread was no longer bread and the wine was no longer wine, that, grace destroying
nature, the presence of God had displaced the creaturely reality altogether and replaced it
with a spiritual substance alone. All that remained was the appearance or accidents of
bread—something physical stripped of any metaphysical weight. John Wycliffe ranted
against this doctrine a century and a half before the Reformation as a blasphemy against God
the Creator: “For the world God created they straightway destroy, inasmuch as they destroy
what God ordained should be perpetual—primary matter.”

Make no mistake: the
Reformers set themselves up as defenders of the integrity of creation against a theology that, by
posing the very kind of false oppositions that writers like Gregory lament, was using grace as
a battering ram against nature.

The other, more practical reason why transubstantiation so troubled the Reformers
was that it enabled the grace offered in the sacrament to be taken out of its original liturgical
context as a dynamic action of God toward his assembled people, and to be objectified as a

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10 Council of Trent, Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist,
11 John Wycliffe, Trialogus, translated by Robert Vaughan, IV.3; excerpted in Littlejohn and Roberts, eds.,
Reformation Theology: A Reader of Primary Sources with Introductions (Moscow, ID: Davenant Press, 2017), #
passive and portable object of worship. At the eve of the Reformation, most believers actually \textit{partook} of the Eucharist just once per year, instead worshipping the body and blood of Christ only from a distance, as the consecrated elements were reserved in a chapel for adoration or paraded through the streets on the Feast of Corpus Christi. What Christ gave as a means to come near to his people and be united to them, the late medieval church had transformed into a means of maintaining a barrier of distance between Christ and his people; the body of Christ was there primarily to be gawked at and prayed to, not received. If there was a sacramental tapestry uniting earth and heaven, God and man, it was one that the Reformers sought to restore, not to dismember.

From this, then, let us distill the central elements of the Protestant (and particularly Reformed) attack on the Roman Catholic understanding of the real presence.

First of all, this doctrine asserted a real absence of the bread and wine, thus contradicting Scripture as well as reason, and depriving the elements of their properly sacramental character. On this understanding, nature could not become an instrument of grace, sign could not convey the thing signified, because on properly transubstantiationist doctrine, neither nature nor sign remained after the priest said those magic words \textit{hoc est corpus meum}.

Second, the doctrine was not merely an assault on the integrity of created bread and wine, but also on the integrity of Christ's created human body. If Christ was truly man, if nature was truly nature, then his body had to have spatial limitation. And it would not do to on the one hand assert that the body was so glorified that it was capable of infinite spatial extension and yet that such glorified flesh could rightly be offered up as a propitiatory sacrifice, as Catholic dogma insisted.

Third, the doctrine undermined the purpose of the sacrament as an actual meeting-place between God and his people; the important action happened in the hands of the priest on the altar, not in the mouths of believers. So much so that the vast majority of masses on the eve of the Reformation were celebrated privately with no one but the consecrating priest present, and when laity did partake, they received the bread only and not the wine.

It should be noted that of these three objections, the first and third were common to all the magisterial Reformers. On the second point, the integrity of Christ’s human body, Luther and his more hardline followers, although they agreed that real bread and real wine must remain in the Eucharist, insisted no less emphatically than the Romanists on the not-
really-local-but-something-very-much-like-local presence of Christ’s physical human body in the elements.

**In Defense of the Creatures of Bread and Wine**

At the center of the Protestant attack on the scholastic doctrine of transubstantiation was the concern to do justice to the basic affirmation of both Scripture and common sense that the sacrament consisted of true bread and true wine. Peter Martyr Vermigli comes right out of the starting gate with this argument in his *Oxford Treatise on the Eucharist* (1549):

First, holy Scripture lays down that this is bread; therefore, it is not true that its substance is changed. The evangelists say that Christ took bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. Paul mentions bread five times. . . . Since these things are clear and open, if an angel from heaven should preach otherwise, let him be accursed.\(^\text{12}\)

We are so accustomed to hearing that the Reformation debate was over whether or not Christ’s body and blood were present in the Eucharist that we really need to pause to wrap our heads around this: the central debate, the issue for which many were to pay with their lives, was whether *bread and wine* were present in the Eucharist. Consider Luther:

> Even so, in order that the real body and the real blood of Christ may be present in the sacrament, it is not necessary that the bread and wine be transubstantiated and Christ be contained under their accidents. But both remain there together, and it is truly said, “This bread is my body, this wine is my blood,” and vice versa.\(^\text{13}\)

We are also accustomed to hearing, perhaps, that whereas the Catholics had fortified their doctrine with Aristotelian philosophy, and its distinction of substance and accidents, the Reformers rejected all such rationalizations and took their stand upon simple faith in Scripture. Luther frequently talks this way, to be sure, but even he writes,

> But this opinion of Thomas hangs so completely in the air, devoid of Scripture and reason, that he seems here to have forgotten both his philosophy and his logic. For Aristotle writes about subject and accidents so very differently from St. Thomas, that I think this great man is to be pitied, not only for drawing his opinions in matters of faith from Aristotle, but for


\(^\text{13}\) Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, translated by Albert T.W. Steinhaeuser, 2.36; excerpted in *Reformation Theology*, #

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attempting to base them on him without understanding his meaning—an unfortunate superstructure upon an unfortunate foundation.\textsuperscript{14}

That is what we would nowadays call a "sick burn." Now, of course, Luther is being unfair. Thomas knew his Aristotle quite well, and knew well enough that his doctrine of transubstantiation was far from anything that Aristotle could ever countenance. Of course a substance should never exist without its proper accidents, nor could the accidents of bread and wine subsist without a substance to sustain them. This was a miracle beyond reason, to be maintained purely because the faith of the Church required it. Thus we find the scholastically-trained Peter Martyr Vermigli hammering his opponents with argument after argument drawn from Aristotelian philosophy, alongside barrages of Scriptural and patristic evidences.

Given the modern emphasis on "incarnational" theology, it is striking that the Reformers frequently appeal to the logic of the Incarnation, arguing that if transubstantiationist reasoning were applied here, the truth of the incarnation would be overthrown and we would be left with a form of docetism, that is, the idea that Jesus merely seems to take on flesh. Vermigli writes,

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with their transubstantiation they come close to the Marcionite trope, for they say: It seems to be bread, but it is not. This is the very thing Marcion said about Christ's flesh and body, that it was not true flesh, but only an appearance. Christ is no conjurer, nor does he delude our senses; indeed he proved his resurrection by the senses: 'Touch and see, because a spirit has not flesh and bones.' . . . The Fathers also argue from the properties of human nature: Christ was truly man because he hungered, slept, was surprised and saddened, wept and suffered. Such arguments are lost if substance is not demonstrated by these qualities, so that one could no longer say: it is the form, the same taste, the same color as bread; therefore it is really bread.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The logic of the Incarnation demonstrates God's commitment to coming to us in the humble forms of the material natures he has created. There is, in the Incarnation, no unbridgeable opposition between spirit and matter, God and man, heavenly and earthly. God makes himself present to us in and through earthly matter. If he can do so in the Incarnation, surely he can do so in the Eucharist as well. And if we insist that his presence can only be true presence if it destroys or displaces creaturely substance in the eucharistic elements, then what is to prevent us from doing the same when it comes to the God-man

\textsuperscript{14} Luther \textit{Babylonian Captivity}, 2.23; excerpted in \textit{Reformation Theology}, ##.

who took shape in the Virgin’s womb? Needless to say, this sort of reasoning defies the arguments of Gregory—that the Reformers overthrew the both/and logic of the incarnation—and Leithart—that only Catholics like O’Connor can see how “creation is always the medium by which God comes to us.”\textsuperscript{16} We will return to the doctrine of the Incarnation in a moment, but first let us pause to consider another respect in which the Reformers charged their adversaries with disdain for creation.

Vermigli again will speak for many:

Further, this corrupts the nature of the sacrament. Augustine states (on John): ‘The word comes to the element and is made a sacrament.’ Its nature is to be composed of these two things; but they would remove the elements, bread and wine. Then Augustine should not have said the word comes to the element, but rather it destroys or removes the element. When they remove the natures of the elements, the analogy of signification is lost. Bread signifies the body of Christ because it feeds, strengthens, and sustains, and this we cannot attribute to accidents. It is also a signification of many grains gathered into one, representing the mystical body, and that cannot be attributed to accidents. Paul has said, ‘We many are one bread and one body, who participate in one bread.’\textsuperscript{17}

He goes on to point out that the same claims are not made for baptism, where the water remains water, so that, being an element of physical cleansing, it can signify spiritual cleansing.

John Calvin, who, it would seem, must have benefited from reading Flannery O’Connor, situated his view of the sacraments within a larger theology of creation as the medium of God’s self-revelation: “the Lord began to show himself in the visible splendor of his apparel, ever since in the creation of the universe he brought forth those insignia whereby he shows his glory to us, whenever and wherever we cast our gaze.”\textsuperscript{18} Turning in Bk. IV to define a sacrament, he writes,

Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings. For if we were incorporeal (as Chrysostom says), he would give us these very

\textsuperscript{16} Leithart, “Why Protestants Can’t Write, Pt. I”

\textsuperscript{17} Vermigli, \textit{Oxford Treatise}, 36.

things naked and incorporeal. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, he imparts spiritual things under visible ones.\textsuperscript{19}

This is hardly the Gnostic disdain for the real world of materiality that we often hear attributed to Protestants. Nor is such Gnosticism evident when we read the Reformed in particular insisting on the importance of receiving the Eucharist as much as possible like a real meal, on the importance of actually breaking the bread as that “by which believers behold with the eyes of the mind Christ not only hanging for us, but as it were torn, bruised, broken on the Cross by unspeakable tortures of mind and body and dispersed into most violent separation of soul from body\textsuperscript{20} and on the importance of using real bread rather than the usual wafers. As Johann Heidegger would write in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century: “Christ did not use penny-shaped hosts of this kind, nor do they deserve the name of bread but rather of glue and assuredly possess either simply no analogy or an obscure one between sign and thing signified; and at the same time they abolish the rite and mystery of breaking, and the significance of the unity of many.”\textsuperscript{21}

These are not the words of theologians who, in Leithart’s words, leave us with “either a flat mimetic realism that gives literary expression to ‘the real’ without attempting to penetrate beyond the surface; or a flat didacticism that ignores the real in its haste to get to the point; or an allegorism that forges arbitrary links between the real and the symbolic, and in the end swallows up the real in its meaning.”\textsuperscript{22}

\section*{In Defense of the Creature of Christ’s Flesh}

This same concern for the integrity of created nature led the Reformed to emphatically contest any theory, be it Catholic or Lutheran, that threatened to make Christ’s body into anything more or less than a real human physical body. “They fall into many absurdities and perplexities,” charges Vermigli, “for they hold that a body may be in infinite places at one and the same time. They claim that this is no problem, since if the body of Christ is there it is not in a quantitative manner. Here is a wonder, how can they have a body, a quantum, truly present and yet not by way of quantity?”\textsuperscript{23} Although Vermigli wrote these words against

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\textsuperscript{19} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.14.3 (McNeill ed., 2:1278).
\textsuperscript{21} J.H. Heidegger, \textit{Corpus Theologiae} (1700), 25.79, quoted in Heppe, 630.
\textsuperscript{22} Leithart, “Why Protestants Can’t Write, Pt. II.”
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Roman Catholics, this was to become a fierce point of contention with the Lutherans especially from the 1550s onward. The hardline Lutheran theologian Johannes Brenz developed certain scattered affirmations of Luther into the doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s body, arguing that by virtue of the communication of attributes, the human nature of Christ had received qualities that were otherwise proper only to divinity, including the property of omnipresence. Richard Hooker, defending the Reformed doctrine in the 1590s, granted that, to be sure, the human nature of Christ, had received many qualities surpassing the ordinary course of nature—but not contrary to nature.

And concerning the grace of unction, wherein are contained the gifts and virtues which Christ as man hath above men, they make him really and habitually a man more excellent than we are, they take not from him the nature and substance that we have, they cause not his soul nor body to be of another kind than ours is. Supernatural endowments are an advancement, they are no extinguishment of that nature whereto they are given.  

Hooker’s qualifications here were a common theme of the Reformed and indeed of Melanchthonian Lutherans. Vermigli wrote that “We too confess that the body of Christ transcends everything human, but it does not thereby cease being the body of a man. It still retains its limbs, shape, limits, and limitation. It transcends everything human which pertains to the weakness, infirmity, and necessities of this life.”

The Lutherans, for their part, denied that the doctrine of ubiquity fundamentally compromised the integrity of the human nature and its local limitation; rather, the communication of attributes made possible a new mode of presence that surpassed our understanding. Lutheran Jakob Andreae denied, “that such a presence is physical, local, or relative, but rather said that it is mystical and, as such, to be believed rather than understood.” Indeed, even Thomas Aquinas had said this: “That one body should be at the same time locally in two different places is not possible, even by a miracle. Therefore, the Body of Christ is not on the altar locally.” All agreed then that Christ’s flesh could not be locally present, but present only in a mode that surpasses our understanding. The difference was that for the Reformed, this mode had a name: the Holy Spirit.

As John Calvin writes:

27 Scriptum in Sent., lib. IV., dist. 44, ques. 2, art. 2, ad quar. Thanks to Dominic Foo for the reference.
Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.  

The Reformed Doctrine of Eucharistic Presence

Now this leads us straight to the nub of the issue. At the outset of this paper I claimed two things: first, that Reformed doctrine does not deny the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but simply redefines the mode and locus of that presence with greater theological and philosophical precision, and second, that Reformed Protestantism actually seeks to safeguard a role for material creation in conveying spiritual reality. I have, I hope, succeeded at least in the second task, but what about the first? Where is the evidence that the Reformed actually taught some kind of real presence of Christ in the Eucharist? And how could they, given their fierce denials of the ubiquity of Christ’s body?

Well, there’s plenty of evidence. Let me throw a barrage of quotes at you.

Beza: “So far are we then from saying Jesus Christ is absent from the Supper, that we of all men abhor that blasphemy.”

Calvin: “So the bread is Christ’s body, as it assures us certainly of the exhibition of what it represents, or because the Lord in extending to us that visible symbol, gives us in fact along with it his own body; for Christ is no juggler, to mock us with empty appearances. Hence it is beyond all controversy, that the reality is here joined with the sign, or in other words that, so far as spiritual virtue [power] is concerned, we do as truly partake of Christ’s body as we eat the bread.”

Beza: “We confess that in the Supper of the Lord not only the benefits of Christ, but the very substance itself of the Son of Man; that is, the same true flesh which the Word assumed into perpetual personal union . . . are not only signified, or set forth symbolically, typically, or in figure, like the memory of something absent, but are truly and really represented, exhibited, and offered for use.”

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28 Calvin, _Institutes_, 4.17.10 (2:1370).
29 From the Colloquy of Poissy (1561). Quoted in Nevin, _Mystical Presence_, 67.
30 Calvin, _Commentary on 1 Corinthians_ in _Calvini Opera XLIX_.486. Quoted in Nevin, _Mystical Presence_, 64.
31 From the Colloquy of Worms (1557). Quoted in Nevin, _Mystical Presence_, 65.
Ursinus: “We never spake of an imaginary body, but of the true flesh of Christ, which is present with us, though it remain in heaven. Moreover, we say that we receive the bread and body, but both after a manner proper to each.”

Amandus Polanus: “Christ’s body is absent from us locally. But he is most present to us by our union with him, through Christ’s Spirit dwelling in him and in us. So there is present in the Supper not only bread and wine and not only Christ’s deity and not only Christ’s power and efficacy but also his actual body and blood are there in the Holy Supper.”

Johannes Wollebius: “We do not deny the presence of Christ and his body and blood in the sacramental action. Apart from the fact that his divine person is present also by his Holy Spirit, it is also present in his body and blood, not locally but sacramentally.”

Ludwig Crocius: “Christ’s body and blood are things present in the Supper neither locally nor in any physical way, but truly and really, without any fiction, united with the bread and wine by a sacramental union, on a mystical analogy and relation which is not fictitious but the true and real conjunction of the pact.”

Ok, that’s enough. So what’s going on here? How can the Reformed makes these affirmations, and what do they mean by them? Is this just a lot of verbal trickery, as their opponents insisted? This second question requires us to dig deeper, and ask what the purpose of sacraments is for the Reformed (and indeed for Protestants in general). This will also allow us to develop the third key Reformed objection to transubstantiation that we mentioned above: that it undermined the purpose of the sacrament as an actual meeting-place between God and his people.

The first thing to be noted is that the Reformed forcefully distinguish between the elements (which are, after all, only part of the sacrament) and the sacrament as a whole. If we continue that Beza quote we began with, in which he “abhors the blasphemy” of Christ’s absence from the Supper, he goes on, “But we say it makes a great difference here, whether we hold Jesus Christ to be present in the Supper, in so far as he gives us in it truly his own

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32 Ursinus, Commentary on the Heidelberg_catechism (1645), 472. Quoted in Nevin, Mystical Presence, 81.
33 Polanus, Syntagma Theologiae Christianae (Hanover, 1624), VI.56. Quoted in Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics, 637.
34 Wollebius, Christianae Theologiae Compendium (Basel, 1626), 97. Quoted in Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics, 641.
35 Crocius, Syntagma Sacrae Theologiae (Bremen, 1636), 1164. Quoted in Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics, 641.
body and his own blood, or make his body and blood to be included in the bread. The first we affirm; the second we deny, as repugnant to the truth of Christ’s nature.”

This distinction is absolutely crucial, for it preserves the purpose of the sacraments, which is to unite us to Christ. Calvin famously declared, “As long as Christ remains outside of us and separated from us, whatever he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.” This is why the Reformed insisted on a receptionist rather than consecrationist understanding of Christ’s presence in the sacrament. It was simply no use at all to have bread and wine turned into the body and blood of Christ, sitting on an altar, uneaten and undrunk. Indeed, as Vermigli pointed out, no one made such silly claims for other sacraments, “where everything consists in action. When that is done there is no longer a sacrament”—the act of baptizing was a sacrament, but the baptismal water did not remain a sacrament afterward in the way that, on the Catholic understanding, the bread and wine did. Luther had indeed also stressed the essentially dynamic and directional character of the sacrament, lambasting private masses, reserved sacraments, the sacrificial offering concept of the mass, and insisting that the essential thing was the eating and drinking—and this not as a bare eating and drinking, but as the reception of the promise given in the accompanying word by a lively faith. By this means only, not by observing the sacrament on the altar or watching the priest offer it up, do we receive the forgiveness of sins. The mysterious physical presence of Christ in the elements thus actually played little role in Luther’s theology, even if he found it unforgivable for the Reformed to reject it.

The Reformed, with more consistency, stressed two propositions. Vermigli summarizes: “One, that this sacrament of the holy Supper is nothing without use; . . . the other . . . that when we make use of it we grasp Christ’s body and blood by faith alone.” It is for this reason that the Reformed prefer to speak not of Christ “being present” in some static sense, but of him “making himself present” or “re-presenting,” or “exhibiting” himself in the sacrament to believers. We see this in the quotes above, as well as a great stress on the act of partaking; the Reformed have no hesitation in saying that we truly partake of the true body and blood of Christ, although they will deny that the true body and blood are truly present.

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36 From the Colloquy of Poissy (1561). Quoted in Nevin, Mystical Presence, 67.
37 Calvin, Institutes 1:537, my own translation; quoted in Wandel, Eucharist in the Reformation, 152.
38 Vermigli, Oxford Treatise, 44.
39 Luther, Large Catechism, 467, quoted in Wandel, Eucharist in the Reformation, 115.
40 Vermigli, Oxford Treatise, 16-17.
in or with the elements. Since Christ is not presented to us in material form, we must receive him not with the organ of the mouth but with the organ of faith, which is able to discern his presence mystically offered to us, and as our spirit receives his Spirit, we experience the union of our souls and bodies with His. The resulting union of Christ thereby accomplished by this faith-feeding is not \textit{less} than, but incomparably more than, anything that a mere physical eating might accomplish. Zacharias Ursinus writes, “Himself he gives over to us by dwelling in us truly with his Spirit, and by so joining and uniting us through this Spirit which dwells both in him and us, with his true essential body, that we hang to him as limbs to the head or branches to the vine and have life out of him”; this Spirit, he says, “is the living eternal, incomprehensible bond between him and us, by which our mortal flesh is incorporated and knit to the living flesh of Christ a thousand times more closely, firmly, and strongly than all the members of our body are joined by their veins and fleshly bands to our head.”\footnote{Zacharias Ursinus, \textit{Grundlicher Bericht vom Heiligen Abendmahl} (c. 1564), quoted in Nevin, \textit{Mystical Presence}, 308.}

Clearly the Reformed Eucharist is no mere memorial ceremony for summoning up pious thoughts of the absent Christ. But if the elements themselves do not convey Christ into us, then what is their purpose? They are signs, yes, but objective, not subjective. As we have seen already, the Reformed laid great stress on the particular physical character of the signs as helping to convey their spiritual meaning, and they insisted that the spiritual realities were genuinely and really offered along with the elements. 19\textsuperscript{th}-century Anglican F.D. Maurice speaks for many critics of the Reformed eucharist when he states that it “requires that we should suppose there is no object present, unless there be something which perceives it; and having got into this contradiction, the next step is to suppose that faith is not a receptive, but a creative power; that it \textit{makes} the thing which it believes.”\footnote{F.D. Maurice, \textit{The Kingdom of Christ} (London: Rivington, 1842), II:105; quoted in Nevin, \textit{Mystical Presence}, 64n53.} But this substitutes a post-Cartesian theory of perception for the older, essentially Aristotelian understanding that the Reformers shared, one in which the forms actually present in reality impressed themselves irresistibly on the perceptive faculty. The Reformed view did not claim that there could be no presence that was not perceived and received by faith; only that any such presence would be sterile and useless. And it constantly insisted that faith’s role, here as everywhere in the Christian life, was not an active one of summoning up Christ or his...
benefits by our own powers, but essentially passive, laying hold of Christ presented to us.
Even on the contentious matter of whether unbelievers receive Christ in the Eucharist,
Calvin insisted that God’s grace in the sacrament falls upon the unfaithful in just the same
way that rain falls upon a hard rock that cannot receive it. There was, in short, no question
of a pervasive subjectivism that abstracted sign and reality, as so many critics of
Protestantism have claimed.

Reformed Eucharistic Theology as an Ecumenical Theology

It remains, in closing, to tackle one last charge that has often been leveled at the
Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist—that it alone departs from the Catholic consensus.
Many will say that even if transubstantiation goes out on a bit of a limb, there is at least a
consensus around the doctrine of the real presence shared by the Fathers, the Roman
Church, the Eastern Church, and the Lutheran Church, and denied only by the Reformed
and of course the Anabaptists and their heirs. Even if the Reformed view is on solid biblical
and rational ground, does it forfeit any claim to be ecumenical? This is certainly not how
carey Reformed theologians saw it, and the ecumenical character of Reformed eucharistic
theology found no more eloquent exponent than Richard Hooker, with whose memorable
presentation we shall close, using it also as a helpful review and roundup of some of the key
issues we have covered in this lecture.

Hooker begins his account by trying to highlight what nearly all the warring doctrines
have in common. Strikingly, he takes for granted that all parties in his day are agreed in
rejecting Zwinglianism, in which the sacrament is “a shadow, destitute, empty, and void of
Christ.” The Reformed then (whether Bullingerian or Calvinistic), the Lutheran, and indeed
the Catholics are all agreed “concerning that which alone is material, namely a real participation
of Christ and of life in his body and blood by means of this sacrament.” So, why, Hooker asks
“should the world continue still distracted, and rent with so manifold contentions, when
there remaineth now no controversy saving only about the subject where Christ is?” Indeed,
all parties agree that “the soul of man is the receptacle of Christ’s presence” (Laws V.67.2,
emphasis Hooker’s), so that the disagreement only concerns whether the presence is entirely

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43 Calvin, Institutes, IV.17.33.
44 An intriguing remark, given that much secondary literature today continues to mistakenly claim that
Zwinglianism was a dominant doctrine in the Elizabethan Church, especially among Puritans.
“within man only” (as the Reformed say) or is also somehow “externally seated in the very consecrated elements themselves” (as the Lutherans and Catholics say in their own distinctive ways). What a foolish debate! laments Hooker. “I wish that men would more give themselves to meditate with silence what we have by the sacrament, and less to dispute of the manner how. . . . Curious and intricate speculations do hinder, they abate, they quench such inflamed motions of delight and joy as divine graces use to raise” (V.67.3). “This heavenly food,” says Hooker “is given for the satisfying of our empty souls, and not for the exercising of our curious and subtle wits.”

This is not the anti-intellectual’s throwing up of the hands and saying, “Oh, who cares about these abstract speculations; let’s just agree to disagree!” On the contrary, Hooker takes some time to explain why it is that the Reformed doctrine conveys all that Scripture and patristic consensus require. We should, he says, “content ourselves with [Paul’s] explication” of what the words of institution mean: “‘my body’ [means] ‘the communion of my body’, ‘my blood’ means ‘the communion of my blood.’” He continues, “Is there any thing more expedite, clear, and easy, than that as Christ is termed our life because through him we obtain life, so the parts of this sacrament are his body and blood for that they are so to us who receiving them receive that by them which they are termed?” Here we see clearly the Reformed stress that the sacraments are that which they are in use and in reception. “The real presence of Christ’s most blessed body and blood is not therefore to be sought for in the sacrament [that is, the elements], but in the worthy receiver of the sacrament.” (67.6) Indeed, he goes on to say later that upon our faithful reception, “there ensueth a kind of transubstantiation in us, a true change both of soul and body, an alteration from death to life.” (67.11) Reviewing the relevant Scriptures, he continues to insist that those who insist on a physical presence in the elements are going well beyond what Scripture requires: “There is no sentence of Holy Scripture which saith that we cannot by this sacrament be made partakers of his body and blood except they be first contained in the sacrament, or the sacrament converted into them.” (67.6)

From here, he returns to his point about how vast is the agreement between the warring parties: “since we all agree that by the sacrament Christ doth really and truly in us perform his promise, why do we vainly trouble ourselves with so fierce contentions whether by consubstantiation, or else by transubstantiation the sacrament itself be first possessed with Christ, or no?” These doctrines really seem beside the point, adding merely unnecessary
speculations without any practical effect. They can, he says, in “no way … either further or hinder us howsoever it stand, because our participation of Christ in this sacrament dependeth on the co-operation of his omnipotent power which maketh it his body and blood to us, whether with change or without alteration of the element such as they imagine we need not greatly to care nor inquire.” (67.6) All agree (1) that Christ offers his “whole entire Person as a mystical head unto every soul that receiveth him,” (2) that with himself Christ gives in the sacrament his Holy Spirit, (3) that with it we receive the merits of Christ’s sacrifice, (4) that the effect is “a real transmutation of our souls and bodies … from death and corruption to immortality and life,” and (5) that all this depends not on the elements themselves but on “the strength of his [God’s] glorious power.” With these points agreed upon, the remaining points of difference should “rather be left as superfluous than urged as necessary.” (67.7) Indeed, he does not so much urge Lutherans and Catholics to abandon their distinctive affirmations, so much as to ask that they stop slandering and excluding the Reformed.

That said, he thinks that it does not accord well with either piety or reason to needlessly heap on subtleties like those that transubstantiation or consubstantiation require, in which there is “so great contradiction between their opinions and true principles of reason grounded upon experience, nature, and sense” (67.12); indeed, Hooker elsewhere strongly rejects what he sees as the unacceptable consequences of the doctrine of ubiquity. Still, the essential point is that the Eucharist is a mystery to be gratefully received, not a logic problem on which to exercise our sophistical wits. Hooker thus concludes, and with his words we shall conclude:

Let it therefore be sufficient for me presenting myself at the Lord’s table to know what there I receive from him, without searching or inquiring of the manner how Christ performeth his promise; let disputes and questions, enemies to piety, abatements of true devotion and hitherto in this cause but over-patiently heard, let them take their rest; let curious and sharpwitted men beat their heads about what questions themselves will, the very letter of the word of Christ giveth plain security that these mysteries do as nails fasten us to his very Cross, that by them we draw out, as touching efficacy, force, and virtue, even the blood of his gored side, in the wounds of our Redeemer we there dip our tongues, we are dyed red both within and without, our hunger is satisfied and our thirst for ever quenched; they are things wonderful which he feeleth, great which he seeth and unheard of which he uttereth, whose soul is possessed of this Paschal Lamb and made joyful in the strength of this new wine, this bread hath in it more than the substance which our eyes behold, this cup hallowed with solemn benediction availeth to the endless
life and welfare both of soul and body, in that it serveth as well for a
medicine to heal our infirmities and purge our sins as for a sacrifice of
thanksgiving; with touching it sanctifieth, it enlighteneth with belief, it truly
conformeth us unto the image of Jesus Christ; what these elements are in
themselves it skilleth [matters] not, it is enough that to me which take them
they are the body and blood of Christ, his promise in witness hereof
sufficeth, his word he knoweth which way to accomplish, why should any
cogitation possess the mind of a faithful communicant but this, “O my God
thou art true, O my soul thou art happy”? (V.67.12)