20. The symbolic view of the Lord's Supper and baptism: where it came from and what it rests on

Most Baptists hold that the Lord's Supper is a memorial meal in which the bread and cup are symbols, and that baptism is a symbolic act of obedience. This section traces where that view came from, sets out the arguments its founders gave, how critics evaluate each one, and how memorialists reply.

Who held it

c. 1050

Who: Berengar of Tours

What they taught: Denied a real change in the bread and wine; recanted under pressure in 1059 and 1079.

1380s

Who: John Wycliffe

What they taught: Rejected transubstantiation; taught the bread remains bread while Christ is present figuratively and spiritually.

c. 1521

Who: Cornelius Hoen (Dutch lawyer)

What they taught: Letter arguing that in "This is my body," *est* ("is") means *significat* ("signifies"); carried to Luther, who rejected it, and to Zwingli, who adopted it.

1524

Who: Andreas Karlstadt

What they taught: Argued that "this" (*touto*) referred to Jesus pointing to His own body, not the bread.

1525

Who: Ulrich Zwingli; Johannes Oecolampadius

What they taught: Zwingli's *Commentary on True and False Religion* (March 1525) and *Subsidium* (August 1525): "is" means "signifies." Oecolampadius read "body" as "figure of the body," citing Tertullian.

1525–1527

Who: Anabaptists

What they taught: The Lord's Supper as a memorial of Christ's death and a pledge of unity among baptized believers (Schleitheim Confession, art. 3).

1529

Who: Marburg Colloquy

What they taught: Luther and Zwingli agreed on fourteen articles and most of the fifteenth, but not on whether Christ's true body and blood are bodily present in the bread and wine; Luther chalked *Hoc est corpus meum* ("This is my body") on the table.

1536–1559

Who: John Calvin

What they taught: Rejected both the Catholic and the Zwinglian views: believers truly feed on Christ spiritually by the Holy Spirit. Followed by the Westminster Confession (1646) and the Second London Baptist Confession (1689, ch. 30.7).

19th–20th c.

Who: Most Baptists

What they taught: Zwingli's memorial view became the majority Baptist position (Baptist Faith and Message art. VII: "a symbolic act of obedience").

Note that the historic Reformed Baptist confession (1689) teaches that worthy receivers "spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified," a higher view than bare memorialism.

The arguments for the symbolic view, and how strong they are

1. "Is" means "signifies"

The argument. Scripture often uses "is" figuratively: "I am the true vine" (John 15:1), "I am the door" (John 10:9), "the seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11), "the seven good kine are seven years" (Gen 41:26), "the rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4). So "This is my body" can mean "This signifies my body." Zwingli said a dream in 1525 led him to Exod 12:11, "it is the Lord's Passover," as the decisive parallel: the lamb "is" the Passover in the sense that it signifies it.

Critics' evaluation. "Is" can introduce a metaphor, but only where the context signals a figure: Jesus is plainly not a wooden door, and Joseph is explicitly interpreting a dream. Nothing in the Last Supper accounts marks the words as a parable or interpretation. Greek has words for "signify" (*sēmainō*), "figure" and "type" (*typos*, *antitypos*), and the New Testament uses them elsewhere (Heb 9:24), but not here. The context points the other way: Paul calls the cup the "communion" (*koinōnia*, a sharing) of Christ's blood (1 Cor 10:16) and says that eating unworthily makes one "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27–29), which is hard to say of a symbol. A later form of the argument (made especially in 18th–19th-century English debates) holds that Jesus' Aramaic had no word for "signify"; but Syriac and Aramaic have many such words, and Aramaic would most likely have omitted the verb "is" altogether, so the copula cannot decide the question either way. The meaning has to come from context. Even Zwingli's own parallel cuts against him, since the Passover lamb was really sacrificed and eaten.

Critics' assessment: POSSIBLE, NOT REQUIRED. The grammar allows a figurative reading but does not supply any reason to adopt one.

Memorialist reply. The memorialist answers that the context does signal a figure, in the very same words. Luke's form reads "This cup is the new testament in my blood" (Luke 22:20), yet no one holds that the cup is literally a covenant. Circumcision is likewise "my covenant" and "a token of the covenant" (Gen 17:10–11), and after the blessing Jesus still calls the cup "this fruit of the vine" (Matt 26:29). Augustine states the rule: sacraments "bear the names of the realities which they resemble."

Source: Zwingli, *A Clear Instruction on the Lord's Supper* (1526), Third Article (cup as sign of the testament; circumcision; Matt 26:29), English tr. at turicumzwingli.github.io; Augustine, Letter 98 (to Boniface) §9, NPNF I/1 (New Advent).

2. "The flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63)

The argument. After the Bread of Life discourse, Jesus says "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." So eating His flesh means believing (John 6:35, 47).

Critics' evaluation. Jesus says "the flesh," not "my flesh." In John, "flesh" set against "spirit" means merely natural understanding (John 3:6; 8:15). If it meant Christ's own flesh, it would contradict 6:51 ("the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world"); even Luther insisted that Christ's flesh is not "of no profit." In 6:51–58 Jesus moves from "believe" to "eat my flesh and drink my blood," shifts to a blunter verb (*trōgō*, "chew" or "munch") and says His flesh is "meat indeed," and when many disciples leave He does not call them back to explain a metaphor (6:66–67).

Critics' assessment: WEAK, since it requires reading "the flesh" as "my flesh."

Memorialist reply. Zwingli replied that the dispute in John 6:52 was about bodily eating, so the answer in 6:63 addresses bodily flesh; "the spirit" in the same verse also lacks "my." Christ's flesh profits as given in death, not as eaten bodily. Jesus Himself glosses His words as "spirit, and ... life," and "he that believeth on me hath everlasting life" (6:47) is the same promise as 6:54. Augustine read 6:63 so: "you are not to eat this body which you see."

Source: Zwingli, *A Clear Instruction on the Lord's Supper* (1526), Second Article, "Answer" (Turicum English tr.); Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, Ps. 98 (Eng. 99) §8, NPNF I/8 (New Advent).

3. Christ's body is in heaven and cannot be in many places

The argument. Christ ascended, "whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21); He sits at the Father's right hand. A true human body is in one place, so it cannot be on thousands of altars.

Critics' evaluation. This is a philosophical premise about what a glorified body can do, not an exegesis of the words of institution. The risen Christ appeared in locked rooms and vanished from sight (Luke 24:31; John 20:19). Catholics hold that Christ is present sacramentally without leaving

heaven; Lutherans answer with the ubiquity of Christ's glorified humanity. The argument also proves too much, because it rules out what God can do.

Critics' assessment: A REAL THEOLOGICAL OBJECTION, but it depends on an assumption about bodies rather than on the text.

Memorialist reply. Memorialists answer that the premise comes from Scripture, not philosophy: the heaven "must receive" Him (Acts 3:21); "me ye have not always" (Matt 26:11); "I leave the world, and go to the Father" (John 16:28); He will come again "in like manner" (Acts 1:11). The risen body has "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39) and appeared in one place at a time. Augustine says the risen body "can be only in one place." The question is what God has said, not what He can do.

Source: Augustine, *Tractates on John* 30.1, NPNF I/7 (New Advent); cited for the same point in Zwingli, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* (1531), "The Presence of Christ's Body in the Eucharist"; Zwingli, *A Clear Instruction* (1526), Fourth Article (Christ sits bodily at God's right hand) (Turicum English tr.).

4. Jesus was physically present at the table

The argument. At the Last Supper Jesus held the bread in His own hands; the disciples could not have understood that they were eating the body sitting in front of them. "This do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24–25) points to a memorial.

Critics' evaluation. This is the symbolic view's strongest point and deserves a fair hearing. The Catholic answer is that the Last Supper was a unique anticipation of the cross, that Jesus had already prepared the disciples for a hard saying (John 6), and that "remembrance" (*anamnēsis*) translates the Passover idea of a memorial that makes the saving event present to each generation (Exod 12:14; 13:8). Within a few decades of the apostles, Christians who knew their teachers understood the words realistically: Ignatius (c. 110) and Justin (c. 155) call the Eucharist the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Critics' assessment: THE BEST ARGUMENT on the symbolic side, but it does not explain why no early Christian read the words that way.

Memorialist reply. The memorialist replies that early writers did read the words in light of the visible Christ: Augustine paraphrases Him, "you are not to eat this body which you see," and calls the command to eat His flesh "a figure." Ignatius wrote against those who said Christ "only seemed to suffer"; his concern is the reality of Christ's flesh, not the mode of the elements. Paul still calls it

"bread" after the words (1 Cor 11:26–28), and the remembrance is to "shew the Lord's death till he come."

Source: Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, Ps. 98 (Eng. 99) §8, NPNF I/8; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.16.24, NPNF I/2; Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 2 and 7, ANF 1 (all New Advent).

5. Sacraments cannot give grace; faith alone receives Christ

The argument. Since justification is by faith alone, no physical rite can convey grace; the Supper strengthens faith only as a reminder.

Critics' evaluation. This is a theological premise brought to the text, not drawn from it. Scripture repeatedly links grace to physical means: water and the Spirit (John 3:5), washing away sins in baptism (Acts 22:16), laying on of hands (2 Tim 1:6), anointing with oil (Jas 5:14–15). Lutherans and Calvinists, who also hold justification by faith, reject Zwingli's conclusion.

Critics' assessment: WEAK as exegesis; it assumes what it sets out to prove.

Memorialist reply. Zwingli did not call the Supper powerless: he listed its powers (it bears witness, enlists the senses for faith, and binds the church together as an oath). He denied only that the rite conveys grace, since "a leader or vehicle is not necessary for the Spirit." Memorialists take this from Scripture's order: Abraham was counted righteous before circumcision, "a seal of the righteousness of the faith" (Rom 4:10–11), and Cornelius received the Holy Ghost before water (Acts 10:44–47).

Source: Zwingli, *Fidei Ratio* (1530), art. 7; *Exposition of the Christian Faith* (1531), "The Power of the Sacraments" (both Turicum English tr.).

6. Tertullian and Augustine used figure and sign language

The argument. Tertullian called the bread "the figure of my body" and Augustine called the sacraments signs, so the early church was not realist.

Critics' evaluation. For both writers the sign carries what it signifies, and both also wrote plainly realist statements (see Chapter 3). No early writer clearly denies the real presence; the earliest clear denial is usually dated to Berengar in the 11th century. Memorialists also appeal to Ratramnus of

Corbie (9th century), whose treatise *On the Body and Blood of the Lord* Protestants have long read as figurative and Catholics read as orthodox.

Critics' assessment: WEAK.

Memorialist reply. The memorialist grants that the fathers used realist language, but answers that they also separated sign and thing. Augustine says the sacrament is Christ's body "in a certain manner," because signs take the names of what they resemble (Letter 98.9); he calls eating Christ's flesh "a figure" and writes, "Believe, and you have eaten already." Theodoret says the symbols "remain in their former substance." This shows the early record was not uniformly literal, even if it was not Zwinglian.

Source: Augustine, Letter 98 §9, NPNF I/1; *On Christian Doctrine* 3.16.24, NPNF I/2; *Tractates on John* 25.12, NPNF I/7; Theodoret, *Eranistes*, Dialogue 2, NPNF II/3 (all New Advent).

7. The prohibition on drinking blood

The argument. God forbade drinking blood (Lev 17:10–14), and the apostles kept the rule for Gentiles (Acts 15:20), so Jesus could not have meant literal blood.

Critics' evaluation. Catholics answer that the presence is sacramental, not physical flesh under its natural appearance, and that Jesus deliberately offered the cup as "the new testament in my blood" (Luke 22:20), echoing Moses' "blood of the covenant" (Exod 24:8). The objection was raised by Jesus' own hearers (John 6:52) and He did not withdraw His words.

Critics' assessment: MODERATE; it explains the disciples' shock but not the lack of any correction.

Memorialist reply. Augustine applied this very rule: a saying that "seems to enjoin a crime or a vice" is "therefore a figure," and his example is John 6:53. Memorialists add that Jesus calls the cup "this fruit of the vine" after blessing it (Matt 26:29), that the apostles bound Gentiles to abstain "from blood" (Acts 15:29) with no exception for the cup, and that Jesus did answer the objection of John 6:52, in 6:63: "the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit."

Source: Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.16.24, NPNF I/2 (New Advent); Zwingli, *A Clear Instruction on the Lord's Supper* (1526), Third Article (the cup "truly and essentially wine", from Matt 26:29) (Turicum English tr.).

Baptism as a symbol: Zwingli and Hubmaier

Zwingli (*On Baptism*, 1525) argued that water cannot cleanse the soul (citing 1 Pet 3:21, "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh"), that baptism is a pledge-sign (*Pflichtzeichen*, his rendering of *sacramentum*), as the white cross a man sews on marks him as a Swiss Confederate, and an initiatory sign, like the cowl given to novices before they learn the rule, and that the Spirit's baptism is separate from water (Acts 10:44–48). Yet he still defended infant baptism as a covenant sign like circumcision. **Balthasar Hubmaier** (*On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, 1525) took the next step: baptism is a public pledge to live under Christ, given only after faith, reading 1 Pet 3:21 to mean that the "yes" of a good conscience toward God, given inwardly in faith, must come before the water.

Critics' evaluation. "Pledge" or "answer" is a legitimate rendering of *eperōtēma* (others translate "appeal"), but the same verse still says baptism "doth also now save us." Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16 and Titus 3:5 tie baptism to forgiveness and new birth, and every early Christian writer read them that way. Zwingli's own retention of infant baptism shows that the symbolic view did not by itself lead to believer-only baptism; that came from the Anabaptists' separate argument that faith must come first. No known Christian writer before the 1520s held that baptism is only a symbol.

Memorialist reply. Baptists answer that the KJV itself calls baptism "the like figure" (1 Pet 3:21), and the verse says how it saves: "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God ... by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Cornelius' household received the Holy Ghost before water (Acts 10:47), and Acts 2:38 puts repentance first. An early consensus, however old, does not outrank the apostles' text; so the Baptist Faith and Message calls baptism an act "symbolizing the believer's faith."

Source: Baptist Faith and Message 2000, art. VII (bfm.sbc.net); Zwingli, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* (1531), "The Power of the Sacraments" (baptism signifies Christ's death and resurrection) (Turicum English tr.).

Summary. Defenders of the symbolic view rest it on (1) the figurative use of "is" in Scripture, including the Supper's own words ("This cup is the new testament in my blood"), (2) Scripture's statements that Christ's body is now in heaven, (3) the order of faith before sign in Scripture, and (4) Christ's visible presence at the Last Supper, and they appeal to Augustine's distinction between the sign and the thing signified. Critics answer that the grammar does not require a figure, that the second and third premises are theological rather than textual, and that Christian writing of the first thousand years is overwhelmingly realist. The view divided the Reformers themselves: Luther, Calvin and the historic Reformed Baptist confession all rejected a bare memorial. Its supporters see it as the reading that best fits faith alone and a church gathered by personal faith; its critics see that fit as systematic rather than exegetical.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition regards the symbolic view, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

The Catholic Church rejects the symbolic view. Trent condemns anyone who says Christ is in the sacrament "only therein as in a sign, or in figure, or virtue" (canon 1), or that He is eaten "spiritually only, and not also sacramentally and really" (canon 8). The Catechism teaches that Christ's body and blood, with His soul and divinity, are "truly, really, and substantially contained" in the Eucharist through the change called transubstantiation.

Sources: Council of Trent, Session 13 (1551), canons 1, 8; CCC 1374-1376.

Orthodox

The Orthodox reject a merely symbolic Eucharist. The Confession of Dositheus says Christ is present "not typically, nor figuratively," but truly and really, and Philaret's Catechism teaches that the bread "truly, really, and substantially becomes" the Lord's body. Before communion each communicant confesses that "this is Thine own immaculate Body." Orthodox writers speak of the Liturgy as a memorial of Christ, but as the place where He is really present, not as a substitute for His presence.

Sources: Confession of Dositheus (Synod of Jerusalem, 1672), decree 17; Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q 340; Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, prayer before communion (Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission translation).

Lutheran

Lutherans have opposed the memorial view since Marburg (1529), where Luther and Zwingli agreed on much about the Supper but not on "whether the true body and blood of Christ are corporally present in the bread and wine" (Marburg Articles 15). The Augsburg Confession rejects those who deny a true presence (X), and the Formula of Concord condemns the teaching that the bread and wine are only tokens, figures or memorials of an absent body.

Sources: Marburg Articles (1529), art. 15; Augsburg Confession X; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII.115-116.

Reformed

Reformed confessions reject both Rome and Zwingli's memorialism. Calvin said he was not satisfied with those who make believers partakers of the Spirit only, "omitting all mention of flesh and blood," and denied that the Supper is an empty sign. The Belgic Confession and Westminster Confession teach a real, spiritual feeding on Christ by faith. Zwingli's Zurich belongs to the Reformed family, but the later confessions followed Calvin's higher view.

Sources: Calvin, Institutes 4.17.7, 4.17.10; Belgic Confession, art. 35; Westminster Confession 29.7.

Anglican

Methodist

Anglican formularies reject a bare memorial: Article XXVIII calls the Supper not only a sign of Christian love but a sacrament of redemption, in which the bread is "a partaking of the Body of Christ" for faithful receivers, while the Black Rubric rejects a corporal presence. Evangelical Anglicans stand close to Calvin, Anglo-Catholics hold an objective presence. ARCIC's Windsor Statement (1971), a commission text without binding authority, defines the memorial as "the making effective in the present of an event in the past."

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, XXVIII; Book of Common Prayer 1662, Black Rubric; ARCIC I, Eucharistic Doctrine (Windsor, 1971), para. 5.

United Methodism officially moves beyond a bare memorial. This Holy Mystery (2004) says the Supper "is not primarily a remembrance or memorial," that the biblical anamnesis makes God's past acts "truly present now," and regrets that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the sacrament came to be understood only as a memorial. It also observes that Zwingli's views are widely shared today among evangelicals.

Sources: This Holy Mystery (UMC General Conference 2004), pp. 4, 6, 8, 13; United Methodist Articles of Religion, XVIII.

Baptist

Most Baptists hold the memorial view: the Baptist Faith and Message calls the Supper "a symbolic act of obedience" in which church members remember the Redeemer's death and look for His return. Baptists are not uniform, however. The Second London Confession teaches that worthy receivers "spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified," Calvin's view, which Reformed Baptists still confess.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. VII; Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689), 30.7.

See also: Chapter 19: the Lord's Supper; Chapter 16: baptism; why Baptists follow Zwingli on the Supper but not on baptism.

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