

What Is Belief in the “Real Presence” of Christ at Communion?

The “Real Presence” of Christ in communion is a complicated doctrine that separates Lutherans from Reformed Protestants, but is not often well understood by either! First of all, Lutherans do not believe in consubstantiation—the view “falsely charged to Lutheranism, that bread and body form 1 substance...or that body and blood are present, like bread and wine, in a natural manner.” (*Lutheran Cyclopedia*, rev. ed. 1975, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House)

- **We do not believe in “consubstantiation,” that the bread unites with Christ’s natural body.**

Although we do use the (in my opinion, somewhat confusing) term “in, with, and under the bread and wine” to talk about the *real* presence of Christ, we do not share with Roman Catholicism a belief in the *physical* presence of Christ’s body and blood.

- **We do not believe in “transubstantiation,” that the bread becomes Christ’s natural body.**

On the other hand, we do differ also from Reformed churches that teach only the *spiritual* presence of Christ, by which they mean that Christ cannot be physically present because He is forever bound by His humanity to a specific physical location in the same way that we are.

- **We do not believe in the symbolic or “spiritual presence,” that Christ’s body is not really present, because His physical body is confined to heaven, so only His Spirit can be present.**

With all other Christians, we are in agreement with the Council of Chalcedon and the writings of the church fathers that Christ is both truly human and truly divine, without mixture, confusion, separation or division. However, Scripture is clear that the two natures do commune, or share properties with one another, as for example when Christ was baptized for us, was tempted for us, or died for us not only according to His human nature but, through the sharing between His human and divine natures, also in His divine nature. As Luther points out, “If I believe that only the human nature suffered for me, then Christ would be a poor Savior for me, in fact, he himself would need a Savior.” (WA, 26:319)

This is not a contradiction in Christology, but logic consistent with what all Christians believe about the two natures of Christ: If Jesus = God + Man, then Man \neq Jesus. In other words, Jesus is truly human as He is truly divine, but is not only human, and therefore is not bound by human spatial limitations. Just as He was able to walk on water before and walk through walls after His resurrection, Jesus is able to be supernaturally present wherever and whenever He chooses. Just as He was tempted in every way as we are, He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. (Hebrews 4:15)

- **We do believe in the “real presence,” that Christ is really present as He promised to be, though not in a natural way that we can understand or comprehend with our physical senses.**

The evangelical reformers who followed Luther spelled out the rationale on which this position rests in the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article VII, 5-6:

“The **first** ground is this article of our Christian faith: Jesus Christ is true, essential, natural, complete God and man in one person, inseparable and **undivided**.

Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Cor 8:6)

“The **second** ground is: ‘God’s right hand is **everywhere**, Christ, really and truly set at this right hand of God according to his human nature, rules presently and has in his hands and under his feet everything in heaven and on earth. No other human being, no angel, but only Mary’s Son, is so set down at the right hand of God, whence he is able to do these things.

But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am." (Luke 22:69-70)

Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. (Acts 2:32-33)

... he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority... not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church (Eph 1:20-22)

Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom 8:34-35)

“The third ground is that God’s **Word is not false** nor does it lie.

...when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Cor 11:24-29)

“The fourth ground is that God has and knows **various modes** of being at a given place, and not only the single mode which the philosophers call *local* or spatial.

We believe, teach, and confess that with the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ are received not only spiritually, by faith, but also orally—however, not in a Capernaite manner, but because of the sacramental union in a supernatural and heavenly manner. The words of Christ teach this clearly when they direct us to take, eat, and drink, all of which took place in the case of the apostles, since it is written, ‘And they all drank of it’ (Mark 14:23). Likewise, St. Paul says, ‘The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?’ (1 Cor. 10:16)—that is, whoever eats this bread eats the body of Christ. This has also been the unanimous teaching of the leading Church Fathers, such as Chrysostom, Cyprian, Leo I, Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine.”

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. (John 6:52-59)

All of which is to say that we use the term “real” presence not as a synonym for physical presence, but in contrast to competing teachings that Christ is not really present, only symbolically present, spiritually but not really present (as when we say, “I’ll be with you in spirit”), or in a division of the two natures of Christ, present only according to His divine nature. We know that His presence is supernatural, akin to what Jesus said about His presence where two or three are gathered, and that it is a mystery to us who are only human how that can be so. Therefore the phrase the reformers most often use is that Christ is *sacramentally* present, meaning present, but in a way unique to the sacrament!