18 Debates about the Eucharist

The central ritual in Christianity, based on Jesus' words to his disciples as he gave them bread and wine at the Last Supper (Matthew 26: 26–8; Mark 14: 22–5; Luke 22: 17–19) is variously called "the Eucharist," "the Mass," "Holy Communion," "the Lord's Supper," "the Breaking of Bread," and "the Sacrament of the Altar." No issue was debated as sharply in the Reformation. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, made dogma at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and reaffirmed at the Council of Trent, taught that at the moment a priest repeated Christ's words "this is my body, this is my blood," – these are called the "words of institution" – the substance of the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The outer form of consecrated bread and wine, termed the "accidents," did not change, but the inner substance, what we might call the essence, was really Christ. This ritual, in which the priest offered up Christ as a visible sacrifice, renewing Christ's sacrifice on the cross, could only be done by an ordained priest, giving him a power that no lay authority had. The priest's central role was emphasized in the ritual itself by the fact that he was the only one to drink the wine. The Eucharist was effective in itself (*ex opere operatum*), not dependent on the moral or spiritual state of the priest or the recipient.

Luther rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, but he took the words of institution literally, believing that sin was being forgiven in the Eucharist and that Christ was really present in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist. This "real presence" was the result of God's mystery, however, not the actions of a priest, and faith was absolutely necessary to make the sacrament effective; the Eucharist is a sign of the fellowship of believers with one another and with Christ, what Luther calls Christ's "testament." Some Lutherans, such as Philipp Melanchthon, preferred to emphasize the presence of Christ with the bread and wine during the ritual itself, and the Formula of Concord (1577), trying to accommodate all views, established the lasting Lutheran position: in the Lord's Supper Christ is "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. (This position was later termed "consubstantiation," but this word was not used in the sixteenth century.) Luther called for both the bread and the wine to be administered to all who wished to participate, and communion "in both kinds" became standard in Protestant services.

Ulrich Zwingli understood the Eucharist differently than Luther, as a memorial service in which Christ was present in spirit among the faithful, not in the bread and wine. The "is" in the phrase "this is my body," really means "signifies," and the sacrament is a sign of God's grace already given, not a means of giving that grace. Many thinkers in the radical Reformation adopted views along these lines, with some viewing communion as an important memorial of Christ's sacrifice and others denying its centrality as they emphasized the inner workings of the spirit more than visible rituals. Luther attacked both Zwingli and the radicals in several pamphlets of the mid-1520s, calling them "fanatics." Luther, Zwingli, and many other reformers met at Marburg in 1529 to see if they could reach agreement, but found that on the issue of the Eucharist they could not, though they did agree to tone down their rhetoric.

John Calvin followed the lead of south German and Swiss reformers such as Martin Bucer who tried to work out a doctrine of the sacraments that could be acceptable to all Protestants. He held, like Luther and Melanchthon, that Christ's body and blood were conveyed in the sacrament, but in a spiritual sense; the sacrament was a means of giving grace, a "sacred feast" and divine seal of God's promise of salvation through which believers become one flesh with Christ. Theologically Calvin was closer to Luther than to Zwingli, but Luther and his successors refused to come into formal agreement. Zwingli's followers and Calvin's did accept several joint statements of doctrine, which served as the basis for a Reformed understanding of the Eucharist.

In England, Thomas Cranmer articulated a position quite similar to Calvin's, that Christ remained corporally in heaven but was "verily and truly" in the sacrament. The various statements defining the doctrines of the Church of England issued during Elizabeth's reign also use language about the body of Christ "given, taken, and eaten [in a] heavenly and spiritual manner." Thus, though they could not agree on a uniform understanding, all Protestants rejected the idea that the Eucharist was a sacrifice. The Council of Trent responded by decisively reaffirming that Christ "now offering [himself] by the ministry of priests" is "the same who then offered himself on the cross."