HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

THE LORD'S SUPPER / EUCHARIST

What happens at the Table?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Ignatius of Antioch: The Eucharist and the Flesh of Christ

Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6-7 (early 2nd century) - condensed reading

Ignatius criticizes teachers who deny that Jesus truly possessed and suffered in human flesh. One sign of their error, he says, is that they abstain from the Eucharist because they do not confess it in relation to the flesh of Jesus Christ.

The passage shows how closely early Eucharistic belief was connected to Christology. A community that denied the real incarnation could not understand the meal in the same way as a church that confessed the Word truly became flesh.

Ignatius's words are strong evidence that the Eucharist was not treated as a casual reminder detached from Christ's embodied saving work. The precise later categories of transubstantiation, sacramental union, or spiritual presence had not yet been developed.

Reading 2 - Justin Martyr: Not Common Bread and Drink

Justin Martyr, First Apology, chapters 65-67 (mid-2nd century) - condensed reading

Justin describes the weekly Christian gathering: Scripture is read, prayers are offered, bread and wine mixed with water are brought, thanksgiving is given, and deacons distribute the Eucharistic food to those present and carry it to those absent.

He says Christians do not receive this food as common bread and common drink. In connection with Jesus' incarnation and the words of institution, the Eucharistic food is treated as a participation in the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus.

Justin also links admission to the meal with Christian belief, baptism, and a life consistent with Christ's teaching. The Eucharist is therefore both doctrinally charged and ecclesially bounded.

Reading 3 - Augustine: Sign, Reality, and the Body of Christ

Augustine, Sermon 272 and related Eucharistic writings (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine can speak of the consecrated bread and cup in strongly realist language while also calling sacraments signs. For him, sign and reality are not opposites. A sacramental sign is a visible form through which a deeper divine reality is proclaimed and received.

In Sermon 272 he famously directs the congregation to see itself in the bread: many grains become one loaf, and the church is the body of Christ. The Eucharist therefore concerns both communion with Christ and communion with Christ's people.

Augustine's language later becomes important to competing traditions because he refuses a simple choice between 'real' and 'symbolic.' The sacrament truly signifies, and the reality signified is not reduced to the physical element alone. Faith, the church, and participation in Christ all belong to the picture.

Reading 4 - Thomas Aquinas: Transubstantiation

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Third Part, Question 75 (13th century) - condensed reading

Aquinas asks how Christ can be truly present when the appearances of bread and wine remain. His answer uses Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents. The substance of bread and wine is converted into the substance of Christ's body and blood, while the sensible properties remain.

This change is called transubstantiation. It is not a local movement of Christ's body into the bread, nor a physical transformation that could be detected by the senses. It is a unique sacramental conversion known because of Christ's words.

Aquinas also maintains that the whole Christ is present under each species because the risen Christ cannot be divided. This scholastic explanation becomes the classic Roman Catholic account later defended at Trent.

Reading 5 - Martin Luther: 'This Is My Body'

Martin Luther, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church and catechetical writings - condensed reading

Luther insists that Christ's words of institution should be received in their straightforward force: 'This is my body.' He rejects interpretations that reduce the Supper to a mental memorial of an absent Christ.

At the same time, Luther does not regard the medieval philosophical explanation of transubstantiation as necessary. He is more interested in Christ's promise and gift than in explaining the metaphysics of the change.

The Supper gives what Christ says it gives: his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Faith receives the promise, but unbelief does not turn the sacramental gift into an empty object. This contributes to the Lutheran doctrine often called sacramental union or real presence.

Reading 6 - Huldrych Zwingli: Memorial, Confession, and Community

Huldrych Zwingli, writings on the Lord's Supper (1520s) - condensed reading

Zwingli rejects the idea that Christ's physical body is locally or bodily present in the elements. The ascended Christ is bodily in heaven, and the bread and wine function as signs that direct believers to his once-for-all saving death.

His use of 'memorial' should not be reduced to casual recollection. The meal publicly confesses allegiance to Christ, proclaims his death, binds the community together, and renews gratitude for the salvation already accomplished.

The disagreement with Luther became one of the sharpest fractures within the Reformation. Both appealed to Scripture and both treated the Supper as important, but they differed over the force of Christ's words and the nature of Christ's presence.

Reading 7 - John Calvin: Real Spiritual Participation

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, chapter 17 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin refuses both a merely memorial account and a local bodily presence in the bread and wine. Christ's human body remains in heaven, yet believers truly feed on Christ and receive life from him in the Supper.

The bond is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit lifts believers into communion with the ascended Christ rather than bringing Christ's body down into the elements. Calvin therefore speaks of a real participation that is spiritual without meaning imaginary.

The sacrament strengthens faith by sealing the gospel promise. Bread and wine remain signs, but God genuinely uses the signs to communicate Christ to believers. This becomes the characteristic Reformed account of real spiritual presence.

Reading 8 - The Council of Trent: Real Presence and the Sacrifice of the Mass

Council of Trent, Session XIII (1551) and Session XXII (1562) - condensed reading

Trent teaches that after consecration Christ is truly, really, and substantially present under the appearances of bread and wine. The conversion of the whole substance of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood is fittingly called transubstantiation.

The council also defends Eucharistic adoration because the one present is Christ himself. In its teaching on the Mass, Trent describes the Eucharistic sacrifice as making sacramentally present the one sacrifice of Christ rather than repeating Calvary as a new bloody death.

Protestants objected that this language compromised the once-for-all sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and encouraged worship of the elements. Trent's answer is that the Mass depends entirely on the one sacrifice of the cross and applies its fruits sacramentally.

Reading 9 - Westminster: Feeding on Christ by Faith

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 29 (1646) - condensed reading

Westminster rejects transubstantiation and denies that Christ is bodily or carnally contained in, with, or under the bread and wine. Yet it also rejects the idea that faithful participation is merely mental recollection.

Worthy receivers outwardly partake of the elements and inwardly, by faith, really and indeed receive and feed upon Christ crucified and the benefits of his death. The manner is spiritual, not physical.

The confession thus codifies Calvin's middle position: the elements remain bread and wine, Christ's body remains in heaven, and the Holy Spirit nevertheless makes the Supper a true communion with Christ.