

T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

by
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One of the most characteristic doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church is the doctrine of transubstantiation. This doctrine teaches that in the service of the Lord's Supper the bread and the wine are changed, by the power of the priest, into the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord, so that the whole substance of the bread is changed into Christ's body and the whole substance of the wine into His blood. The bread and the wine cease to be, and their place is taken by the Lord Jesus Christ, the same Jesus who was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem and was crucified at Calvary. As the Roman Catechism puts it, "in this sacrament are contained not only the true body of Christ and all the constituents of the true body such as bones and sinews, but also Christ, whole and entire, both the divinity and humanity Nor should it be forgotten that Christ whole and entire is also in every particle into which the elements may be divided". That is to say, this doctrine teaches that Jesus who talked to the disciples is present, with all His personality, His body and all His faculties, in every crumb and every drop of the consecrated elements. Belief in this doctrine of transubstantiation was the test at the time of the Reformation. Thus John Frith, a young Englishman of 30 years of age and a member of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, who was burned at the stake under Henry VIII, wrote to his friends on the night before his death "The cause why I die is this; for that I cannot agree with the divines and other head prelates that it should be necessarily determined to be an article of faith, and that we should believe under pain of damnation, the substance of the bread and wine to be changed into the body and blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ, the form and shape only not being changed".

The same test was applied to the other English Protestants who were burned during the reigns

of Henry VIII and Mary I. Thus this doctrine of transubstantiation may be regarded as the typical Roman Catholic doctrine. Naturally enough those who hold it worship the consecrated elements, for they believe that it is God who is present in what looks like a wafer. So incense is offered, prayers are made, genuflecting and kneeling are enjoined and processions are held in honour of God, present in this localized way. The most important question arises, is it true? For if it is not true, it is an extraordinary form of idolatry, to be offering incense, prayers, kneelings and candles to what turns out to be only a cake made from flour and water. I think you will agree that this is a very important question to consider. But before considering the basis on which the doctrine rests, let us consider some of the difficulties connected with it, difficulties which in themselves do not necessarily disprove it but which would certainly complicate the matter were it to be true.

First recall that God is a God of truth. Yet in the doctrine of transubstantiation we are required to believe that the God-given sources of knowledge, namely our senses, suggest that there is nothing else present but bread and wine. It looks like bread and wine, smells like bread and wine, it tastes like bread and wine, and it nourishes the body when eaten, like bread and wine. Analysed by a chemist it may be broken up into all the constituent chemicals which make up bread and wine, yet the doctrine requires us to believe that the God of truth expects us to disregard all this knowledge derived from the sense organs he has given us to arrive at truth, and on the contrary to believe that there is nothing corresponding to the bread and wine, but in its place Jesus Christ alone is there. To my mind this is an extraordinary thing for the God of truth to ask of us, especially when He has given us at the best such slender suggestion of this doctrine in the Scriptures.

Another difficulty is the question, what are the outward appearances of whiteness and such like, appearances of? They began by being appearances of bread and they continue to exist unchanged as appearances, but after the priest has said the words which are thought to change the bread into Christ's body, they are no longer appearances of what used to be there, but they cannot be said to be appearances of what is now said to be there, namely, Jesus of Nazareth, for Christ cannot be said to look like bread, and therefore the Roman Catholic theologians are constrained to teach that the appearances are the appearances of nothing. That is, there is nothing in which they inhere, but rather that God through His sovereign power maintains in existence these appearances of nothing. They were once appearances of bread and wine, but now they are appearances of nothing, just appearances. It is extraordinarily difficult to understand how there can be appearances of nothing.

Then there is another problem much discussed in the past. If part of the consecrated wafer were to fall on the floor and be eaten say by a mouse, must we believe that a mouse has eaten Christ? When a Christian eats the wafer, he is said on this doctrine to have eaten Christ; what then does the mouse eat? Surely it is impossible to believe that the mouse eats Christ, and yet what else is there for it to eat, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation?

Then again, there is the problem of the poisoned wafer. Every time the pope or a bishop celebrates mass an attendant is required to taste the wafer before the celebrant partakes of it himself, lest he should be poisoned by the wafer, as has happened in the past. But how can it be said that the Son of God can poison the bodies of those who partake of Him? Yet who but He carries the poison since there is no bread or wine left?

There is a further philosophical difficulty in believing that the whole Christ including that characteristic of a body, called dimensive quantity, is present in every particle. For it is plain that Christ's body is not present in dimensive quantity, otherwise it would not be possible for His body to be said to be present completely even in the tiniest particles. There is a contradiction in saying that a characteristic of a thing, such as dimensive quantity, is present in a way which denies the essence of the characteristic.

The doctrine of transubstantiation is therefore a very heavy burden on the intellect, as well as leading to most important religious consequences, such as the worshipping of what appears to be bread and wine with the same adoration due to Christ seated in His Father's presence. It leads also to the doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass, in which Christ present under the appearance of bread and wine, is said to be offered by the priest to God, in the same way as Christ once offered Himself on Calvary for our sins. The truth or falseness of the doctrine of transubstantiation is therefore a most important question, with far reaching consequences for religion. For if the doctrine is not true, Christians are found to be worshipping as God something which turns out to be nothing but bread.

I am not now considering how our Heavenly Father deals with those who seek to worship Him in ways which are fundamentally wrong, but I wish simply to examine the truth of the doctrine, for as Jesus said, those who worship God must worship God in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.

The doctrine arose in the early middle ages and became part of the faith for the first time in 1215 at the fourth Lateran Council. This you will recognize is late as Church History goes. The error

which leads to the doctrine of transubstantiation is the taking literally the realistic language which Jesus used at the first Lord's Supper. When He said "This is my body", there are two possible meanings. He could have meant the words literally, as we would mean if we were to take hold of our hand and say, "this is my body", or He could have meant it metaphorically and symbolically, as when we say of a photograph "this is my friend". How are we to decide between these two possibilities? To begin with, the more natural meaning for the disciples would be the symbolical and metaphorical, rather than for them to think that He was giving them His body to eat, especially as Jesus had not prepared their minds for any such doctrine as transubstantiation. Moreover our Lord's language at the time was plainly metaphorical, for in the next sentence He said of the wine "this cup is the covenant in my blood". Plainly the cup was not the covenant, but it stood for and represented the wine that was in the cup, and even so the wine was not the covenant, that is, the agreement between God and man, but rather it was the sign and seal of such agreement. Thus our Lord's language at the time He said "This is my body" was in other respects metaphorical and this is also the natural explanation of these words. How fatal then is the mistake, in taking this realistic metaphorical language literally. Moreover, if we look elsewhere in the New Testament we will find the metaphorical interpretation confirmed. Thus St. Paul, referring to the Holy Communion speaks about the bread which we break, but if the doctrine of transubstantiation were true there is no bread present to break. If the apostle had held transubstantiation he would have avoided calling it bread.

Turning to the early Christian writers we must remember the principle that realistic language may be either literal or metaphorical, and that the language itself will not determine the question. Thus the quotations which Roman Catholics bring forward to prove that transubstantiation was held in the early Church fail to do this as they merely echo the realistic language that Jesus Himself used. The question whether Jesus' language was literal or metaphorical is not

helped forward by such quotations. However, sometimes these Christian writers add phrases which show conclusively that they also took the language as metaphorical. Thus a quotation of Tertullian, which the Roman Catholic writer Ott cites, is "Jesus took bread, offered it to His disciples, and made it into His body by saying 'This is my body'". Ott (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, 381) concludes the quotation at this point, but if you look up the passage you will find that Tertullian goes on 'that is, the figure of my body', showing quite conclusively that Tertullian who lived in the third century regarded Jesus' language as figurative and metaphorical.

So too St. Jerome, the fourth century translator of the Latin Vulgate and perhaps one of the greatest of the church doctors, commenting on John 6:53, says that "the body of Christ is the gospel ... the body of Christ and his blood is the word of the scriptures ... when we hear the word of God and Christ's flesh and blood is poured into our ears ... In the flesh of Christ, which is the word of teaching, the interpretation of the scriptures, we receive the food". When Jerome speaks about the flesh of Christ and His blood being poured into our ears, it shows that he did not take the words, body and blood of Christ, literally, but rather symbolically and as meaning the same thing as receiving His word in the heart. This is, of course, the protestant doctrine.

The conclusion is that the doctrine of transubstantiation has no basis in Scripture and the slenderest in the earliest Christian writers, but it developed during the middle ages when people failed to recognize the difference between realistic metaphorical language and literal language. So then we should not think of Christ as in any way localised in the bread and the wine, which are signs of His body and blood given for us on Calvary. Christ is certainly present in the Lord's Supper, but present in the hearts of believers. He is not present in any literal sense locally in the bread and the wine on the Holy Table, any more than a

person is present in a literal sense in a photograph. But the bread and the wine are visible words, which speak to us about the Gospel, that Jesus has borne our sins and is now Lord of all. They are pledges which assure us of His love. He has given us this service of eating bread and wine together, in memory of Him, in order that through it, just as through words, He might make vivid to our minds, and assure our hearts of, the truth about His love for us on Calvary, and so we might grow as Christians by feeding on Him, not literally by our mouths, but feeding on Him in our souls through faith in Him, who is our Lord and Saviour.