

Lord's Day 29

78. **Q.** *Are then the bread and wine
changed into the real body and blood of Christ?*

A. *No.*

*Just as the water of baptism
is not changed into the blood of Christ
and is not the washing away of sins itself
but is simply God's sign and pledge,¹
so also the bread in the Lord's Supper
does not become the body of Christ itself,²
although it is called Christ's body³
in keeping with the nature and usage of sacraments.⁴*

¹ Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5.

² Matt. 26:26-29.

³ I Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:26-28.

⁴ Gen. 17:10, 11; Ex. 12:11, 13; I Cor. 10:3, 4; I Pet. 3:21.

79. **Q.** *Why then does Christ call the bread His body
and the cup His blood,
or the new covenant in His blood,
and why does Paul speak of a participation
in the body and blood of Christ?*

A. *Christ speaks in this way for a good reason:*

*He wants to teach us by His supper
that as bread and wine sustain us
in this temporal life,
so His crucified body and shed blood
are true food and drink for our souls
to eternal life.¹*

*But, even more important,
He wants to assure us by this visible sign and pledge,
first,*

*that through the working of the Holy Spirit
we share in His true body and blood
as surely as we receive with our mouth
these holy signs in remembrance of Him,²
and, second,*

*that all His suffering and obedience
are as certainly ours
as if we personally
had suffered and paid for our sins.³*

¹ John 6:51, 55.

² I Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:26.

³ Rom. 6:5-11.

LORD'S DAY 29

THE LORD'S SUPPER: NO MAGIC FORMULA

Text: Lord's Day 29
Reading: John 15 : 1-11

Psalm 118 : 6
Psalm 136 : 1
Psalm 145 : 1, 2
Hymn 44 : 2
Psalm 75 : 1, 6

Introduction: Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Already in Lord's Day 28—the first Lord's Day about the meaning of the Lord's Supper—we learned that this supper is one of *communion* between God and us in Christ Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. In this supper the bond between us and Christ is strengthened. The Lord's Supper is a matter of being “united more and more to His sacred body through the Holy Spirit . . .” (answer 76).

A further question is: what do you *expect* from this celebration? Do you expect an instant and a big change? Do you perhaps expect a sudden resurgence of strength?

Or is the effect of the table somewhat disappointing? Can you understand the experience of a young person who attended the Lord's Supper for the first time, and came away rather discouraged, saying, “I didn't feel anything”. Is that how we sometimes also feel? Of course we go to the Lord's Supper. We wouldn't think of staying away, but actually it doesn't really “do” anything for us. When Monday morning rolls around, the effect of the table has maybe already worn off.

In Lord's Day 29, the Catechism deals with such matters. According to sound Reformed tradition, it has already in the previous Lord's Day positively explained the Scriptural doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper. Now in this Lord's Day the Catechism proceeds to

defend the significance of the Lord's Supper. It does so not only in order to refute existing *heresies*, but especially to help ourselves to keep a clear perspective on the Lord's Supper and its function.

We all have our expectations. You may expect too much, in the sense that you have wrong expectations. Or, you may not expect enough, so that you miss the real truth contained in bread and wine. Therefore we go to the key question behind this Lord's Day: What do the bread and the wine really mean? I summarize as follows:

The confession concerning the real truth in the Lord's Supper. It is:

- 1. no magic formula (but)**
- 2. a greater marvel.**

1. In question and answer 78, the Catechism, of course, is refuting the theory of *transubstantiation*. This is the theory that by the sacred formula of the officebearer (the priest), the bread and wine *really* become the true, physical body and blood of Christ. Rome explains this theory by claiming that, although the outward characteristics do not change, yet essentially there is a remarkable, invisible and powerfully effective change. The result of this change is that the bread and wine are then the real body and blood of Christ. Christ has returned to earth *in person* in bread and wine.

Okay, you all know that this is not true. This theory is based on a wrong understanding of certain texts

where the Lord says, "This bread *is* my body", and "this cup *is* my blood". So Rome says that the one thing *becomes* the other!

Of course, they overlook the fact that the Lord frequently used forceful symbols. When He said, for example, "I am the vine; you are the branches", it would be foolish for us to conclude that He is literally a vine and that we are literally branches! I do not think that there is anyone here who would seriously subscribe to the theory of transubstantiation!

There is *another* question that I would like to touch upon in this respect, a question more vital to us at this moment, because it deals with *our expectations*.

The intriguing question here is: *why* (and also *how*?) do people come to such a theory? The idea that the bread and wine are changed into the real body and blood of Christ was not born overnight. It took ages to grow and mature and was finally in place around the eleventh century A.D. At that time it was officially adopted by the Romanist church. Yes, it took ages before Rome came this far, and yet this position was a definite and logical development. Almost from the start Rome went into this direction.

It has been said that one of the early church fathers (perhaps unwittingly) started the whole process by referring to the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper as a "pharmaceutic" (from "pharmacy"-drugstore), as a *medicine*. Is the Lord's Supper a medicine? If this is the case, you can indeed come to all kinds of strange conclusions.

What is a medicine? I do not pretend to be an M.D., so I can't give you a responsible, all-round definition of the concept "medicine", but let me give you some idea. Medicine is that substance which brings about a process which leads to *relief* and (hopefully) *healing*. Basically there are two kinds of medicine. There is one that only takes away pain and another that also takes away the cause of the pain. So there is a difference between, let's say, aspirin and penicillin. Nevertheless, and that is the point of comparison, the power to bring about *decisive change* lies in that medicine, *in that substance itself*! All you have to do is take it, and you

achieve guaranteed results by a physical or chemical process!

Well, that's how it started. Bread and wine are medicine. To be sure, they were thought to be medicine in the first place for the *soul*. People even went so far as to say that, as medicine takes away the cause of pain, so bread and wine remove the cause of sin, namely our original sin and weakness in which we are born, and enable us to do good again. We have a real cure here, it seems! Bread and wine are, as it were, a "magic formula". They provide instant relief from the pollution of sin, and are an effective cure for the power of sin!

Of course, everyone knows that bread and wine in themselves do not have such ability. *Only Jesus Christ forgives and renews*. Also in the early years, this truth was understood. So what logically was the next step? It was to *make* the bread and wine into the real body and blood of Christ. Change the substance and transform it! Then you can also uphold the claim that the bread and wine, as physical substances, contain *divine power in themselves*!

So the bread and wine become the *real* body and blood of Christ. You have then at the same time solved another human problem, namely the desire to have your God close at hand, *visibly* before your eyes! You can now take your God physically in your hand and so ensure yourself of His effective presence and activity in your life! Jesus Christ may have ascended to heaven, but the Church needs Him here and now. Through this theory the Church is able to reach out and touch Him!

Let me tell you that if people want a "god", they do not want to be at his disposal, but they want him at their disposal! They are not there for him, but he must be present for them! They do not want a far-away god, who demands faith and prayer, who is served "in Spirit and in truth", but a god right-before-your-eyes, who can be touched and tasted and physically embraced.

This is also the spirit of our times. People want a god whom they can see, feel, touch, taste, whom they can contain inside themselves. They want a god who acts on their behalf, a worldly god, and not a heavenly

Saviour! People look for the god within themselves or among themselves, and not the God in heaven!

Was that not the sin of Israel? Do you remember the history? The LORD God was on the mountain, on Horeb. He was close by, yet so far away. There was separation by smoke and fire. And when Moses tarried in the presence of the LORD, Israel said, "Aaron, listen here! Make us a god that we can see and can feel! We don't want a God up there, but a god down here!" And so they made a golden calf—an idol! And later in the Christian Church people pretended that bread and wine was changed into the real body and blood of Christ. This too—as we read also in Lord's Day 30—is an accursed idolatry!

As if God can be "caught" in a statue of gold! As if Jesus Christ can be physically contained in a morsel of bread and a drop of wine.

So the Lord's Supper was made a *magic formula*. Do you know what "magic" is? Magic is making things appear out of nowhere. Magic is sleight of hand. Strange things happen in magic. You don't know how they happen, but it seems to work. Magic means that supernatural stuff is brought into the realm of the natural, and it is done so quickly that you cannot follow the process. In the wink of an eye, Christ is physically on earth—right before us in the bread and wine. It's sheer magic.

We can call this "religion made easy". God is right at hand. Just take and eat. This is religion made magical and mystical. It's the magical mystery tour. I don't know how it works, but it works! Is this not the ultimate appeal of the Romanist religion? Rome has a religion so magical that it is awesome. Physical things become divine. So the dream of man is realized! And yet, this religion is so easy, for I can make Christ my own by a physical process. So you see the great power of the Church. The Church can physically unite you with Christ by the magic formula in which the bread is changed into the real body and the wine is changed into the real blood.

Rome ascribes so much power to bread and wine that the demand to *believe* is hardly present anymore.

The sacrament is so powerful in itself that it works regardless of the faith of the receiver. Of course, it has to work, for it is medicine, it is magic, it's a wonder drug! Sometimes patients are sceptical of the drug which a doctor prescribes, but they take it anyway, and behold, it works! The substance does not ask for faith, because it works on its own. So it is, says Rome, with the sacrament. It works by itself, whether you believe it or not. After all the real body and blood of Christ is powerful stuff!

Do you see how far we are removed from the real Biblical atmosphere? God cannot yet be embraced physically, and we cannot partake of Christ by a physical process. Bread and wine are not a magical formula for sick souls. This is not aspirin, or Anacin, or Tylenol, or whatever you may take for your aches and pains. Communion with God is the theme of the Lord's Supper. But communion with God, even at the Lord's Supper, is a *spiritual matter*, a matter of faith! There is no magic formula, and Christ is no pill to be swallowed in emergency. The Lord's Supper does not have the effect of giving us a sudden lift and an instant solution to our woes. God is Spirit, and He lifts His people by His Word and Spirit. It is by this Spirit that He strengthens us in bread and wine, and directs us to an even greater marvel. We come to the second point.

2. So I need not expect some magical, energizing "shot in the arm" at the Lord's table. The question now is: what may I, then, expect?

Do we not take all the power out of the Lord's Supper and make it ineffective? Is it then as one of the Reformers (Zwingli) taught, a mere meal of remembrance, a matter of symbolism, a meal where Christ is not really present? Have we not taken the Lord out of the Lord's Supper? Is that not where we ultimately wind up when we so emphatically reject the theory of transubstantiation?

In the time of the great Reformation, the Reformers struggled with this question. The German, Swiss and the French Churches were not in agreement; Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin had their differences on

this point! If it is not transubstantiation, what is it then? If the bread and wine are not the real body and blood of Christ, what do they then mean? Do you understand some of this struggle? After centuries of very widespread and rigid application, the theory of transubstantiation is set aside. But with what shall we then replace it? You can get rid of something, but how do you fill the empty place?

Zwingli went to the one extreme by saying that bread and wine are nothing more than tokens. Luther tried to salvage something of the old theory. He said that Christ is really present in bread and wine because Christ is omnipresent also physically. Perhaps you remember from catechism classes that this idea is called *consubstantiation*. We understand Luther's struggle. He wanted reformation with respect to the sacraments, but not a devaluation of the sacraments!

Yes, if bread and wine do not have the significance which Rome grants them, we must watch that the real significance is not lost. If it is not a magical formula, what is it then?

Our Lord said: "... this bread *is* my body; this cup *is* my blood". We must let those words stand in their full force and meaning. Christ calls the bread His body and the cup His blood, and the Catechism rightly reminds us that "Christ speaks this way for a good reason" (Answer 79).

Christ said: "the bread is my body and the cup is my blood". This means at least that when we receive the one, we also receive the other! At the table of the Lord, therefore, we do not receive merely a piece of bread and a taste of wine. What we receive there is *the real thing*, the true body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think we sometimes overlook this. At the table we receive the real thing. The Catechism says: "we share in His *true* body and blood". Or, as we confess in even stronger terms in article 35 of the Belgic Confession: "... we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, *natural* body and the true blood of Christ". As I said, this is the real thing! We do not come for a mere morsel of bread or sip of wine,

but we come to share in *Jesus Christ*, to partake in His body and blood!

Does then the one thing become the other? Not at all. You can take something to yourself in a *physical* sense, like bread and wine, and you can take something to yourself in a *spiritual* sense, like the body and blood of Christ. For the first activity you need your *mouth*, and for the second you need your *heart*.

So the relation is understandable, There is a close connection between the physical and spiritual but yet they are distinct. With your mouth you eat nothing more than the bread and wine. But in your heart, by faith, spiritually, in bread and wine, you receive nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself! He gave you His real body and blood!

This is the greater *marvel* here at the Lord's Supper. We do not expect it from bread and wine, but from the one sacrifice of the body and blood of the Lord. We do not have to manipulate Christ to make Him descend. Instead we receive Him as He comes—in Spirit and in truth! Let the false church play with magic. We share in the marvel of God's redemption!

Do you know what "marvel" means? A marvel is that which amazes and fills with astonishment. That which is marvellous is so great and unexpected that it is almost unbelievable, and yet so simple and true that it is fully credible!

Jesus said: here is bread and here is wine. Eat and drink. You need food and nourishment to live. But in giving *this*, I give you *more*. I give you *Myself*. I give you my body and blood—really, truly, fully. His satisfaction for us is so complete and definite, says the Catechism, that it is "as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins".

I just quoted the last line of this Lord's Day. We should let it work on us. Christ says: my sacrifice is really yours, as if you yourself had made it! That is the marvel of the Lord's Supper. These are not empty signs. Take the signs and receive the reality itself, namely, Christ crucified for all your sins! Take the one and be nourished physically; take the other and be strengthened spiritually! The real sacramental formula is the

phrase "as surely as". We share in His true body and blood *as surely as* we receive with our mouth these holy signs in remembrance of Him.

Yes, we receive the real thing. At every Lord's Supper, Christ personally comes to us. Not physically, but *personally*. He comes *in* the signs and seals of bread and wine. He does not come materially, but spiritually. But He does come! And He is yours, by faith. He comes in this way to strengthen your faith and to assure you that He really and personally is your great Saviour and Lord and that in Him you truly have the complete forgiveness of all your sins.

Let the marvel of salvation fill you with its true wonder and real joy. We do not need magical formulae

to drag Christ down from heaven. No, for He comes in great love in the symbols of bread and wine. And so we do not cling with our hearts to the outward symbols of bread and wine, but we lift them up to heaven, where Christ Jesus is, seated at God's right hand! So the miracle does indeed take place. By the power of the Spirit, Christ is in us and we in Him.

Since we have this miracle, who needs magic?

We receive the real Christ, for the complete forgiveness of all our sins.

Come, let us so His Holy Supper celebrate, and so refreshed, our coming King await. (Hymn 44: 4, *Book of Praise*). AMEN.