

Sermon 2: This Is My Body, Luke 22

Proposition: The bread is Christ's body in the same sense that the cup is the covenant, circumcision is the covenant, and the lamb is the passover — that is, in a sacramental sense whereby the bread signifies, seals, and applies the saving power of the Incarnate Christ to us.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is with fear and trembling that I approach the text before us this morning. Not only is it one of the best-known passages in Scripture; it is also one of the most controversial. It is no stretch to say that the Sacraments are the core of the Christian system of truth, in the sense that the tiniest change in one's beliefs about them ripples out to the edge of the system and demands corresponding adjustments in all kinds of doctrines. Indeed, one seventeenth-century French preacher boiled down all the differences between Catholics and Protestants to one thing: transubstantiation. The words of our text understood differently provoked divisions between Lutheran and Reformed churches that endure painfully to this day, as some of you know at your personal cost. Yet we cannot hope to exegete the text by pulling a Luther, pounding the table and shouting *Hoc est corpus meum! Hoc est corpus meum!* over and over. Instead, we must read it in the context of the rest of the Bible — the only responsible way to read it. When we do that, we will discover that the Lord's Supper is an event, not a thing, and that through our eating it the Father signifies, seals, and applies Christ to us. The bread is Christ's body in the same sense that the cup is the covenant, circumcision is the covenant, and the lamb is the passover — that is, in a sacramental sense whereby the bread signifies, seals, and applies the saving power of the Incarnate Christ to us.

I. The Two-Foot Rule

Our text is so encrusted with mistakes and misreadings because of what my grandfather calls the "two-foot rule." This, of course, is simply the dictum that "every text must stand on its own two feet." Don't go off elsewhere in the Bible to find crutches for lame texts. If they can't stand on their own two feet, well then, they will have to fall.

A. A Hermeneutical Disaster

Brothers and sisters, the two-foot rule is appealing in a certain sense. If you're telling me that I have to understand the whole book before I can understand one sentence of it, then I'm going to say "I guess I'll never understand it." Right? Yes, there's a hermeneutical spiral whereby the more you read the better you can read, the more of a book you understand the better you

understand each sentence. But a book must be read start-to-finish first, and in some sense the meaning must be made up of the meaning of each sentence. While all that is true, still, the two-foot rule makes for interpretive disasters. While I think it's clear that trans- and consubstantiation are the worst examples of the two-foot rule run amok, there are other places where it makes a clear hash of the meaning.

B. Examples

1. Peter, This Rock

Think about Jesus' response to Peter's confession in Matthew 16: "You are the Rock, and on this Rock I will build my church." Now, yes, Peter's name is masculine and the word "rock" later in the verse is feminine in a contrast we can't quite reproduce in English. But still, "You are the rock." Sounds about like "This is my body." Jesus said it. I believe it. Peter still looked like a man, had the accidents of a man, but had been transformed into a rock in his inner substance. He was no longer a person, but a stone!

Wrong. Clearly such an idea is ludicrous. The Roman church readily admits that transubstantiation is ludicrous, but says that we must believe it because Jesus taught it. Jesus no more taught that bread is God than He taught that one of His disciples was a piece of limestone. Same thing for consubstantiation; Peter did not suddenly have stoniness in, with, and under him. He was still a man. How was he a rock? *Metaphorically*. The concept is not that hard, people.

2. Yahweh, a Man of War

Or think about Psalm 18, where David says "Yahweh is a man of war." He doesn't say "warrior" (not that Hebrew has a word for that); he uses the construct state to say "man of-war." So there you go. God is a man. Right? Scripture says so. He's a man you don't want to mess with, but He's a man all the same. Forget the fact that we are repeatedly told elsewhere "God is a not a man."

The two-foot rule doesn't work. Applying it yields a Bible riddled with absurdities and yes, contradictions — contradictions like one man having two bodies, or being a stone who looks like a man, or that women are both morally obligated to wear headcoverings in church and that women are not morally obligated to wear headcoverings in church at the same time and in the same relationship.

II. Don't Read "This Is my Body" with the Two-Foot Rule!

So if you take one thing out of this morning's sermon, it's this: Don't read "this is my body," or any other disputed text, with the two-foot rule! The text makes perfect sense in only one place: its context. We as parents run into this all the time. As a parent, you catch yourself saying things like "Get your head out of the toilet, young man!" and "She is your baby sister, not a pull toy." My students' favorite one from this year in my AP Lit class was "There are easier ways to get virgins." These things don't make any sense out of context, which is why they're funny! But the same goes for the Word of God. Read out of context, it won't make sense, and it will involve you in a multitude of absurd and impious and downright wrong conjectures. So please don't do that. Don't apply the two-foot rule to our text this morning.

III. The Contextual (and therefore correct) Meaning

Instead, let's just look at the contextual meaning of this statement. The meaning that it has based on when and where it was said is its true meaning.

So when and where did Jesus pronounce the words "This is my body?" He pronounced them at a Passover meal, shortly about the announcement that "This is the bread our fathers ate in the land of Egypt." Hmm. Did anyone there think "Yuck! Used bread from 15 centuries ago? I'm not sure I'm hungry anymore . . ." Brothers and sisters, the idea is absurd. What does that statement from the Jewish Passover liturgy mean? It means that the fresh bread we're eating right here right now takes us back to the bread of affliction that our fathers ate while suffering under Pharaoh's slavery.

Anyhow, of course, that sentence is not in the text of Exodus. We shouldn't build too much on it, though we have it on good historical authority that it was part of the Passover celebration not long after the time of Jesus. So let's look at more context. We know that Jesus said "This is my body" when distributing bread to be eaten at the Passover meal. That's the historical context. But what about the literary context? This statement occurs in a book that makes other sacramental statements. We looked at length last week at Moses' statement that the lamb is the passover. We talked about how that's not a category mistake, but rather a sacramental way of speaking whereby the names and properties of the thing signified are applied to the sign. Same thing goes for God calling circumcision His covenant, and Jesus calling the cup His covenant in the next verse. So literarily, we have a way of speaking that's known to occur in the rest of Scripture, including in the very next verse. What does the context indicate, then? That most likely, we are to take "this is my body" figuratively or metaphorically, just like "You are the rock" and "Yahweh is a man of war."

A. A Sacrament Is an Event, Not a Thing

The other point the context makes, one that I think is very important, is that what really counts is doing what Jesus did. We are called to eat and drink together. That's the command here. We are not told "Transform bread into Jesus and offer it God." No; we are commanded to receive bread and wine from Jesus, and to do so as part of worship.

This is a key point here. The Lord's Supper is an integral part of worshipping God, and therefore the Lord's Supper is emphatically not bread and wine set out on a table, but rather bread and wine eaten. Who worships, people or things? Is worship an event or an object?

1. If a phone plays worship music and no one's listening, is it still worshipping?

Let me put it this way: If your phone is blasting Keith Getty in an empty room where no one hears it, is the Getty album worshipping? In one sense, of course, God's praise is being sung. But do phones worship? Do albums worship? Of course they don't. Worship is a human activity. People worship. It's a category mistake to talk about a phone worshipping, about a loaf worshipping, about a glass of wine worshipping. That can't and won't happen!

2. Is a theological library sanctifying and enlightening if no one's reading it?

Some of you can identify with this question in a rather personal way: Is a theological library sitting on the shelf going to make you holy? Is it going to inform you? Is it going to shape who you are? No! It is not the word as written, or pronounced, but rather the word as understood that actually matters. We all know that you can't become holy by buying everything in the Banner of Truth catalog, or by collecting study Bibles, or by purchasing lots of Scripture memory paraphernalia. You can only become holy by actually meeting with God and getting to know Him. Theology books are one means to that end, a means none of you should be neglecting. But here's the point: As an object, a theology book isn't going to help anyone. It's only when it's used in the human activity of reading that it does something for a human being.

3. Is a church building filled with God when no one's in it?

Same with the church. The church building is not a holy site *per se*. Rather, God has promised to dwell within His people and to be in their midst when they gather. But when God's people aren't there, He is not there in a special way either. He does not dwell in temples made with hands, but in fleshy hearts.

The point here, again, is that God's presence is event- and activity-oriented, not object-oriented. Again, this is the larger point of disagreement between us and Rome. They believe that church buildings are holy even when they're empty, that holy water is holy even when it's not sanctifying anyone, and in general that objects and items can and do contain and convey grace. Hence the idea of driving back a vampire with a piece of the host, or even with a crucifix. These objects are thought to contain grace. But folks, the only reference to that idea you'll find in the New Testament (other than Paul's handkerchief healing people) is Paul saying that we no longer follow the weak and beggarly elements of the world. We no longer have to be bound to the universal religious attitude that say "Don't touch, don't taste, don't handle; these items are holy!" God is not contained in material containers; God is found in people and in what they do.

4. Are circumcision, baptism, Passover, and animal sacrifices objects or events?

Let me just ask you a decisive question here. By common consent among theologians of all stripes, the ordinary sacraments of the Old and New Covenants are circumcision, Passover, and animal sacrifice for the old, and baptism and the Lord's Supper for the new. Now, let me ask you this: Are circumcision, baptism, Passover, and animal sacrifices objects that sit there, or are they events? Of course I recognize that they make use of objects. But can you put a baptism in a box and worship it? *No!* Can you keep an animal sacrifice in the archives? Of course not! You can keep a sacrificed animal in the freezer; you can keep a font filled with water; you can be like the rabbi who didn't charge for circumcision but merely kept the tips. But you cannot tell me that the objects are what made those sacraments what they are and were. It was the use. It was the human activity. I circumcise; I baptize; I sacrifice; I eat the Passover. And so, please explain to me why

we need to interpret “This is my body” in a way that renders the Lord’s Supper into a thing rather than an event. You can’t.

5. In short, *the sacrament lies in the giving thanks, the breaking, and the eating* — not in the bread and wine!

Yes, the bread and wine are necessary and are indeed objects — but they are to be used. The important part is the sacramental action, which is giving thanks, breaking, and eating. That is the sacrament; that is the Lord’s Supper. The bread is Jesus’ body, metaphorically speaking. The wine is His blood, metaphorically speaking. But brothers and sisters, the reason why that matters is so that we can eat them. Clearly, as you’re handing out bread, what are you saying? “Eat this.” And if you explain what the bread is, that context means that you’re telling people why they are supposed to eat it. The sacrament is the eating of the food, not the food *per se*. The sacrament is all of us getting together to eat and drink. Until we actually start giving thanks, breaking, and eating, we’re just looking at a table! Until we sit down and pray, the meal hasn’t started. Make no mistake, brothers and sisters: this is a meal, a sacrificial meal. Just as Israel ate the Passover lamb, so do we. But our Lamb was sacrificed once and we eat from that sacrifice forever, for His sacrifice is eternally sufficient. The literal Passover lambs were only enough food for a night; Christ is enough forever. We don’t repeat the sacrifice; we *receive* the sacrifice which He made and which He offers to us. The reception, the eating, is the sacrament.

So let’s think about what the bread broken and eaten does. The sacrament is an action. What kind of action is it? It’s a sign and seal which applies Christ to us. Let’s look at that statement, based on Romans 4:11, in a little more detail.

B. The bread broken and eaten signifies

First of all, the bread, not as such nor as consecrated but rather as broken and eaten, is a sign. It points to something beyond itself. A sign by definition is not the thing signified. Let me see: If I open my mouth and scream at you, is that rage? You’d say “Of course.” But is the scream actually my rage? Again, rage is an emotion, something I feel internally. The scream is the sign of the rage. You can’t separate the sign from the thing signified. Where one is, there the other is — not necessarily locally speaking, but in some relevant sense, the sign indicates the thing signified; it “represents” or “re-presents” it, as we say. But you can and must distinguish between the sign and the thing signified. We say “He was so angry he screamed at me.” But we don’t say “He was so angry that he got angry.” One distinguishes between the sign and the thing signified; the other is just a repetition of the thing signified.

1. Christ’s Body

So with that in mind, recognize that the bread broken and eaten signifies. It points beyond itself to something that’s in a different category. Bread is an object, a food item. Eating is a human activity. The Incarnate Christ is neither an object nor a human activity, but rather is a human being like us. The bread represents, signifies, stands for His body. Broken and eaten, it is a sign of His body to us. It is not that body; it is a sign of that body, and there’s an unbreakable link there between the sign and the thing signified. It’s not necessarily a local link; you might pass a

sign on I-25 that says “Little America 100 miles”. The sign is linked to Little America, but it’s not in the same place. My scream, on the other hand, is linked to my rage and very much originates from the same place. Anyway, the bread signifies not the presence of Christ, nor the humanity of Christ, but specifically the broken body of Christ. It is a sign of that reality, intimately and indissolubly connected with it.

2. Our Union and Communion with Him

And so, as we eat it, the bread signifies to us our union with Christ (the bread will be incorporated into our body, united to us), and our communion with Him. Paul says as much 1 Cor. 10. By eating the bread, we are saying “Jesus, I want to accept and appropriate your sacrifice in my place. I want to meet with you and be with you.” And by tendering the bread which signifies His body to us, He is saying that He is giving us His body, His life-giving flesh.

Brothers and sisters, the Lord’s Supper was not a matter of dispute for the first nine centuries of the church. It took Christians almost 900 years to start arguing about what these words mean. Why is that? I would suggest that the symbolism is obvious for those raised in a culture that actually offers bloody animal sacrifices and eats the meat afterward. It’s clear in that context that the animal gave its life for you, and that you are uniting yourself with the benefits of its death when you feast on it. But our sacrificial lamb is not dead but alive, and so to eat Him signifies not just union but also communion! As we moved away from a pagan sacrificial culture, though, that idea grew faint in people’s minds and was eventually lost. And as it was lost, a woodenly literal understanding grew up in its place. The bread as sign was lost, and instead was regarded as a piece of Jesus rather than a sign of Him. We need to return to the understanding that the bread is not a piece of Christ, nor the whole Christ, but rather something that, properly used in the church’s meal, signifies Christ’s body broken for us.

C. The bread broken and eaten seals

But the bread broken and eaten is not only a sign; it’s also a seal. What is a seal? It is mark guaranteeing authenticity. In these days of deep fakes, you can still prove the date of a document by mailing it to yourself in a sealed envelope. The postmark on the envelope serves as a seal indicating the time when the US Postal Service had possession of the document.

1. God’s promise that we partake of the body of Christ whenever we give thanks, break and eat

And so the Lord’s body seals to us God’s promise that we are partaking of the body of Christ. This, we would hasten to add, is not with the mouth of the body but the mouth of the soul, which is faith. As Augustine said, “Believe, and you have eaten.” God not only promises that the life-giving flesh of Christ is ours; He seals that promise by giving us this bread in this meal. He affixes His stamp of authenticity to His promise. By giving us something that signifies the flesh of Christ, He highlights the truth that Christ’s body is ours, that it has been given to us and that we receive it by faith.

2. Us as Christ's people

But the Supper doesn't just seal the promise of God; it also seals us. It marks us as Christ's people, not merely in the outward sense ("Oh, if he took communion he must be a Christian of some kind") but spiritually, in the sight of God. He seals us, marking us as His. This is not the "mark on the soul" taught by the Roman church (after all, that mark on the soul is not conveyed by the Eucharist in their theology); rather, it is a seal whereby God Himself marks us for Himself as His own. We are the 144,000, sealed by God. And this meal is one way in which He does that.

D. Therefore, the bread given applies Christ to us

And so, brothers and sisters, I think we can safely summarize Paul's terms, describing the sacraments as signs and seals, by saying that the sacrament applies Christ to us. We talked about appropriating the Passover lamb last week. From our side, the human side, we are indeed appropriating Christ in eating the sacrament. But the whole point is that Jesus distributed the bread to His disciples; we aren't simply taking Christ in this meal. Far more glorious is the truth that He's giving Himself to us!

1. Not carnally

He's not giving Himself carnally. I've shared with most of you my illustration about eating the tip of Christ's finger after the knife slipped in the carpenter's shop. Does anyone think that such an action would be conducive to salvation? Of course not. The idea is absurd. No. We partake of the life-giving flesh of Christ, really and truly and indeed. That much is certain, because Christ would not give us some lesser substitute. The idea is unworthy of Him, far more unworthy of Him than the idea of a wife purchasing a sex doll for her husband so that he need not trouble her when he's feeling horny. Such a wife, withholding the life-giving power of her flesh from her husband, we would find very strange, and we would intuitively sense that her action was evil. But the idea that Christ would withhold His life-giving flesh from us, supplying in its stead a third-rate substitute, is even more troubling. He is no Indian giver; He is not one to overpromise and underdeliver. He promised to give us Himself, including His body. But that giving is not carnal; to imagine the disciples taking His body down from the cross and cutting it up for a cannibal feast is a nasty picture, one that's wrong on every level. His flesh gives us life not in the way that food gives us life, for if that were all, then any food could have saved us from eternal death. No; His flesh gives life in the sense that by taking it He became weak enough to suffer and die the death we deserved. Without His flesh, we have no life. And so He conveys the life that was in Him to us, but not carnally — not through the mouth of the body.

2. By the Holy Spirit's power

Rather, He conveys it by the power of the Spirit. Thus, we could say that He is "spiritually" present — not in the sense that He is merely present in a ghostly way, or according to the divine nature only, but in the sense that His omnipotent Holy Spirit conveys Him to us, flesh and all. The Spirit applies Christ to us, and the Lord's Supper is one of His tools. Here indeed we have communion with Christ, the whole Christ, the Incarnate Christ. If reading the Bible is like reading a letter from your Savior, the Lord's Supper is like having dinner with Him. I completely

mean that. The eating is about union and communion. The Holy Spirit brings Jesus to sit at the table with us, and we meet Him there. If you could choose between eating one of Christ's drumsticks (I know, humans don't have drumsticks) and having dinner at the Prime Rib with Him, which would you choose? That is the difference between the popish Mass and the Reformed Lord's Supper. To eat someone's body at most signifies union with Him; to meet with Him through food that signifies and seals His body to you is to have not just union, but communion too.

3. In the same way that Christ is conveyed in the other sacraments

So let me put it this way just once more: Christ comes to us in the Lord's Supper in the same way that He came to Israel in the Passover, to Abraham and Isaac in circumcision, and to Israel in the animal sacrifices. He comes to us as He does in Baptism. The sacraments are actions — human actions, yes, but also divine actions where Jesus gives Himself us.

E. As Christ gives Himself to us, we respond by giving ourselves to Him!

And He gives Himself to us, we give ourselves back to Him. The self-giving is mutual; He gives Himself, and calls us to imitate Him in giving ourselves. Brothers and sisters, you have the privilege of sitting down and dining at the table of the Lord. He is here; His Spirit brings Him here, or better, raises you and seats you in the Heavenly places in Him. So come, take and eat. This is His body, which was broken for you. Amen.