

What Are Transubstantiation and Consubstantiation?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

What is the difference between “transubstantiation” and “consubstantiation”?

The word “transubstantiation” derives from Latin — **trans** (across), and **substantia** (substance).

The term is employed in Roman Catholic theology to denote the idea that during the ceremony of the Mass, the bread and wine are changed in **substance** into the flesh and blood of Christ, even though the elements appear to remain the same.

This doctrine, has **no basis in Scripture**. There are traces of the dogma in some of the post-apostolic writings and the concept was vigorously defended in the early ninth century A.D. It was adopted by the fourth Lateran Council (A.D. 1215), formalized at the Council of Trent (A.D. 1545-63). The doctrine was reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Consubstantiation

“Consubstantiation” is a term commonly applied to the Lutheran concept of the communion supper, though some modern Lutheran theologians reject the use of this term because of its ambiguity. The expression, however, is generally associated with Luther.

The idea is that in the communion the body and blood of Christ and the bread and wine **coexist** in union with each other.

“Luther illustrated it by the analogy of the iron put into the fire whereby both fire and iron are united in the red-hot iron and yet each continues unchanged” (Cross, 337).

Are These Doctrines Correct?

Any dogma that attempts to place the **real presence** of the flesh and blood of Christ into the communion components, in a **literal** sense, is the result of a misunderstanding of the language employed in the Scriptures.

One of the most important skills necessary for the correct interpretation of the Bible is the ability to distinguish between language that is used in a **figurative sense** versus that which is employed in a literal sense.

Human communication abounds with figurative expressions, and a common-sense approach must be taken in the consideration of speech.

One of the fundamental canons in identifying figurative language is this. Normally, a word should be viewed as literal **unless other considerations make it impossible to interpret the term in that light**.

Determinative factors that are essential to making the proper judgments are these:

- context — both immediate and remote (i.e., discussion of the same subject in other biblical references)
- grammar
- consistency (the Scriptures do not contradict themselves)
- common sense (i.e., does a literal interpretation imply an absurdity?)

Figurative Language and the Body of Christ

An appropriate application of the previous hermeneutic principles will force the serious Bible student to the conclusion that the biblical references to the Lord's supper as the "body" and "blood" of Christ must be interpreted figuratively, not literally.

Consider the following points.

Jesus' clearly used figurative language.

When Jesus took bread and fruit of the vine, gave these objects to the disciples, and said, "this is my body ... this is my blood" (Mt. 26:26-28), he quite obviously was not speaking literally, for he still possessed his literal body and blood!

Moreover, at the same time, Christ specifically identified the drink as "this fruit of the vine" (Mt. 26:29). The nature of the substance had not changed.

Metaphors are not literal.

There is a common figure of speech that is known as **metaphor**. The metaphor is a dramatic image by which one thing is compared to another, but being represented figuratively **as that very thing**.

Of the tribal descendants of Judah, Jacob said: "Judah is a lion's whelp" (Gen. 49:9) — certainly not literally, but having certain lion-like traits. When Jesus referred to Herod as a "fox" (Lk. 13:31-32), no one understood him to imply that the ruler was a four-legged animal with a bushy tail! Christ once said: "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn. 15:5).

Every careful student knows that the Savior employed symbolism by this language. An analogy was being drawn. The language was not to be pressed literally.

In remembrance — not in presence.

The fact that Jesus instructed the disciples to subsequently partake of the Lord's supper "in remembrance" of him (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24) contains the implication that he would not be present physically in the communion celebration.

An Objection Answered

A favorite "proof-text" that is used frequently in an attempt to establish the "real presence" of Christ in the communion is John 6:53-54. Here Jesus declared:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life: and I will raise him up at the last day."

That this passage does not yield the desired goal can be demonstrated both grammatically and contextually.

Present tense verbs

In John 6:54, the terms "eateth" and "drinketh" are both present tense participles, signifying that the disciples were to be eating his "flesh" and drinking his "blood" **at that very time** and continue doing so as a process.

A literal rendition would read: "He who continues eating my flesh and drinking my blood?" (see the translations of Charles B. Williams and Kenneth Wuest). The disciples were not eating and drinking the Savior's literal flesh and blood at that moment!

Eating and drinking his word

The "eating" and "drinking" are said **to result** in "life." But in this very context, that "life" is described as being the consequence of receiving Christ's "words," i.e., his teaching (Jn. 6:63).

It thus becomes clear that the consumption of his body and blood are the equivalent of ingesting his **sacred instruction** — the former is a figurative expression. The latter is literal.

This is further borne out of a consideration of the phrase, "abides in me, and I in him" (Jn. 6:56). That reciprocal relationship is said to be the result of "eating" and "drinking" the flesh and blood of Christ.

However, in a complimentary passage, elsewhere in John's writings, the apostle equates the "in me / in you" relationship with "keeping his commandments" (1 Jn. 3:24).

Conclusion

The accumulation of evidence is quite irresistible. The references to partaking of the Lord's body and blood are figures of speech.

With all due respect to sincere people, it is a crassly materialistic methodology that turns the sacred memorial Supper into a cannibalistic ritual.

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Works Cited

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Scripture References

Matthew 26:26-28; Matthew 26:29; Genesis 49:9; Luke 13:31-32; John 15:5; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24; John 6:53-54; John 6:54; John 6:63; John 6:56; 1 John 3:24

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