

THE CONVERGENCE OF TRANSCENDENCE
AND IMMANENCE IN THE EUCHARIST

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Summary:

The Eucharist is a particular act of corporate worship where the transcendence of God converges with the immanent, each in its totality, the act of worship where *Christus absens* is experienced as *Christus praesens*. It is a memorial to the redemptive particularity of the convergence of God's transcendence and immanence in the person of Jesus Christ.

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OUTLINE

Thesis: The Eucharist is a particular act of corporate worship where the transcendence of God converges with the immanent, each in its totality, the act of worship where *Christus absens* is experienced as *Christus praesens*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The journey of Christian worship is a dance of understanding the transcendence and immanence of God bound together by a paradoxical tension. Some times the immanence of God fades behind the glow of His transcendence while at other times, His immanence obscures His transcendence. Occasionally, the transcendence and immanence appear to converge in poignant moment of revelation and response. The Eucharist is a particular act of corporate worship where the transcendence of God converges with the immanent, each in its totality, the act of worship where *Christus absens* is experienced as *Christus praesens*.

The Church stands in need of recovering the significance of the Eucharist. We are experiencing what Donald Bloesch describes “as a back lash against the ascent of rationalism in both liberal and conservative Protestantism, catholic movements of renewal have emerged that seek to reclaim the centrality of the eucharist in worship.”¹ John Zizioulas posits “we need to find again the lost consciousness of the primitive Church concerning the decisive importance of the *eucharist* in ecclesiology.”² Reclamation of the “centrality of the Eucharist” demands that we re-examine the theological foundation of it so that our Eucharistic praxis is informed not by uncritical appropriation of desirable elements of divergent tradition, but by sound theological reflection.³

¹ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 113.

² John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 20.

³ This paper is not a discussion of the sacramental nature of the Eucharist or the nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. As interesting as those topics are, it is the contention of this author that the discussion of immanence and transcendence in the Eucharist should not be made dependent on the doctrine of *praesentia realis* in the Eucharist.

2. THE LAST SUPPER: REVELATION IN THE UPPER ROOM

As Luke's Gospel unfolds toward its climatic conclusion, Jesus and His disciples are in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. On the "day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed...Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it'" (Luke 22:7-8, ESV). The narrative continues in the upper room.

And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood (Luke 22:14-20, ESV).

The continuing celebration of this act by the Christian Church can be understood in theological terms. For instance, Douglas Farrow suggests that we understand the Eucharist in terms of movement. "The eucharistic event, as a movement from absence to presence, is as such a movement from chaos to order, darkness to light, death to life."⁴ D.A. Carson, citing Augustine, declares, "This side of the Fall, human worship of God properly responds to the redemptive provision that God has graciously made."⁵ The locus of this being the Eucharist. Perhaps one of the best ways to understand the Eucharist comes from T.F. Torrance who understands the Eucharist as the celebration of the cross.

[The Eucharist] is the dominically appointed place within the bodily and temporal existence where heaven and earth, eternity and time, God and man fully meet and are forever united, and the only place where God and man are reconciled. Jesus Christ himself is thus God's place within the space-time of this world where he is really present

⁴ Douglas Farrow, "St. Irenaeus of Lyons: The Church and the World," *Pro Ecclesia* 4, no. 3 (1995): 5.

⁵ D.A. Carson, *Worship By The Book*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 38.

to us in our time, and where therefore we are fathered up through communion with Christ into the living presence of God in the eternal communion of the Holy Trinity.⁶

If we stop with the theological significance of the Eucharist, however, we may miss the richness of the Eucharist as a focal point of Christian worship, the place where the immanent redemptive act of the transcendent creator and redeemed creation come together in communion. To understand the concept of transcendence and immanence in the Eucharist, we need to turn to the Jewish crucible in which it was birthed. Robert Webber rightly posits, “Christian worship is rooted in Jewish worship.”⁷ As Geddes MacGregor writes, “Once again, the essentially Hebraic background of the Christian liturgy must be recalled, so to the Jews we turn.”⁸

3. ECHOES OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

First, we need to gain a Jewish perspective on the transcendence and Immanence of God. Consider the *shema*. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). However else we understand Jewish thought, the unity of God is essential. While arguably Israel experienced God as transcendent and immanent, it becomes questionable to speak of God as transcendent or immanent. This recognition of God as transcendent and immanent is a theme that carries on through the prayers and blessings of Israel.

Consider David’s prayer in 2 Samuel 7. “Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? (2 Samuel 7:18)... For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel [transcendence], have made

⁶ Thomas .F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Toward Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), 121.

⁷ Robert Weber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 102.

⁸ Geddes MacGregor, *Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 189.

this revelation [immanence] to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house.' Therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you" (2 Samuel 7:27). Hezekiah's prayer in 2 Kings 19 reveals the same unity in God's transcendence and immanence.

And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: "O LORD the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth [transcendence]. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib [immanence], which he has sent to mock the living God (Kings 19:15-16).

Again, in David we see the knowledge of God's transcendence contrasted against the expectation of God's immanence in 2 Chronicles.

But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! [transcendence] Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you [immanence] (2 Chronicles 6:18-19).

We can also consider Moses when he said "You shall serve the LORD your God [transcendence], and he will bless your bread and your water [immanence]" (Exodus 23:25). In Deuteronomy, we see God's immanent care of the people of Israel, yet the Lord's supremacy over the land is poignantly stated. "And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10). This pattern of connecting God's transcendence and His immanent care of Israel is woven through out the prayers and blessings of the Old Testament. When Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, He does the same thing. "And he said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name [transcendence]. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread' [immanence]" (Luke 11:2-3).

On the topic of bread, the significance of bread and wine in Jewish thought also needs to be explored. The centrality of food in the Jewish feasts and sacrifices is evident in the Scriptures.

Raymond Moloney suggests, “for Jews every meal was a religious meal.”⁹ Eugene LaVerdiere, notes the Jewish overtones of the Eucharist celebration in the *Didache*, both in the prayers and in part by the sacrificial concept of an offering of thanks giving.¹⁰ The particularity of the ‘Last Supper’ was at the time of the Passover, and importantly, the Feast of Unleavened Bread.¹¹ Further, Moloney suggests that the events of the ‘Last Supper’ were either the particulars of the Passover celebration or the ritual of the Jewish ‘Table Blessing’ and thus the “Jewish custom of grace before and after meals.”¹²

Paul Gibson suggests “we may assume that bread and wine became central to Jesus’ meals because they were the normal commodities of every table, and bread and wine blessings were the ‘ground floor’ of all food thanksgivings.”¹³ He also suggests that the “mysterious figure of Melchizedek lurks behind the symbolic significance of bread and wine, as does the ‘bread of the presence’ kept in the sanctuary.”¹⁴ The first instance in the Old Testament of bread and wine being used ceremonially is in Gen 14:18 when, after Abram’s defeat of Chedorlaomer, “...Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’” (Gen. 14:18-20, ESV). While it is difficult to adequately support the notion of this event as being a proto-eucharist, some helpful observations can be made. In his commentary on Genesis, Gordon Wenham writes,

⁹ Raymond Moloney, *The Eucharist*, Problems in Theology (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁰ Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 138-45.

¹¹ Cf. Matt 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22.

¹² Moloney, *The Eucharist*, 6-14.

¹³ Paul Gibson, "Eucharistic Food -- May We Substitute?," *Worship* 76, no. 5 (September 2002): 447.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

What is being portrayed, however, is the generosity of Melchizedek. ‘Bread and water’ would have been the staple diet. Bread and wine is royal fare (1 Sam 16:20) and regularly accompanied animal sacrifice (Num. 15:2-10; 1 Sam. 1:24; 1 Sam. 10:3). Melchizedek who in traditional Near Eastern fashion combined the offices of king and priest...is portrayed as laying on a royal banquet for Abram the returning conqueror.¹⁵

Eating and drinking in relation to covenants appears in other Old Testament passages.

Kathryn Roberts suggest that the eating and drinking in Exodus 19 was to “reassure the participants that a true covenantal relationship had been established between them and God.”¹⁶

Returning to Melchizedek, in what would become a common pattern of Hebrew blessing, Melchizedek first blesses God as the transcendent “Possessor of heaven and earth” and then as the immanent One “who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (cf. Gen 14:19-20). As Wenham points out, a related theme appears in Numbers 15:4-5 where poignantly, a bread and wine offering are to accompany a lamb offered at appointed feasts. The eucharistic imagery of the sacrifice lamb accompanied by a grain (bread) and wine offering is stark. Imbedded in the act of giving the commandment is the transcendent God who rules over Israel. At the same time, there is a sense of immanence in that God has made provision for the nation—the community—of Israel to approach Him in worship. In the midst of these Eucharistic allusions, we see the common thread of the singularity of transcendence and immanence running through Israel’s worship of God in the symbols of bread and the wine.

4. THE EUCHARIST AND THE CHURCH

The *Didaché* is one of the first Eucharist liturgies of the early church. As previously noted, in these instructions a pattern reminiscent of the Jewish blessings appears, first in the

¹⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 316.

¹⁶ Kathryn L. Roberts, "God, Prophet, and King: Eating and Drinking on the Mountain in First Kings 18:41," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 04 (October 2000): 638.

thanksgiving acknowledging the transcendence of the Father and second in thanking Him for his immanent care in the person of Jesus Christ. In addition to these phrases, there is an interesting development of the Eucharist as being symbolic of the unity of the Church, a theme which becomes increasingly significant to worship as the body of Christ.

9 Now about the Eucharist: This is how to give thanks: First in connection with the cup: "*We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your child, which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever.*" Then in connection with the piece [broken off the loaf]: "*We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever.*" "As this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever."¹⁷

John Zizioulas posits that “the loaf scattered” and “brought together was made one” is an eschatological promise.¹⁸ In Ignatius, however, we see the identification between the present unity of the body of Christ and the Eucharist.¹⁹ Neither statement has a clear Jewish foundation other than the unification inherent in worship. Ignatius also makes the highly immanent connection between Jesus being “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14, ESV) and Jesus as “the bread of life” (John 6:35).²⁰ It is less clear if Ignatius understood these merely symbolically, however LaVerdiere suggests that he differentiated between the historical and Eucharistic presence of Christ.²¹ Importantly, Ignatius saw the Eucharist as Christ’s gift of life by His sacramental presence to the universal Church.²² The corporate implications are clear, the Eucharist is celebrated by the body of Christ, not the individual, and in some way connects the church to its source of life.

¹⁷ Note that remarks in ‘[]’ brackets are in the text quoted and not mine. The italics are mine. Richardson, Cyril C., “Early Christian Fathers”, [document on-line]; available from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.pdf>; Internet accessed November 14, 2006, p.124.

¹⁸ Zizioulas cites a different translation of the Didache. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 144.

¹⁹ LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist*, 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 156-7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

To further consider the connection with Jewish thought, Raymond Moloney directs us to Irenaeus who refers to the Eucharist as an offering of the ‘first-fruits’.²³

Again, giving directions to His disciples to offer to God *the first-fruits of His own, created things*—not as if He stood in need of them, but *that they might be themselves neither unfruitful nor ungratefull [italics mine]*—He took that created thing, bread, and gave thanks, and said, “This is My body.” And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we belong, He confessed to be His blood, and taught the new oblation of the new covenant;²⁴

Irenaeus clearly connects the Eucharist to the Jewish offerings and by inference, to the Jewish pattern of coincidental recognition of both God’s transcendence and immanence. This demands a brief discussion of the nature of Christ’s immanence. First, we must concede that Christ is absent, having ascended to the right hand of the Father.²⁵ With Irenaeus, we can only speak of the absent Christ’s presence through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Alister McGrath asserts that the possibility of salvation requires both the divinity and humanity of Christ.²⁷ In the search for the immanence of Christ, we must be careful that we do not lose His humanity, the very nature of Christ that made His saving incarnation possible.

If it is not God who meets us in Jesus Christ, no reconciliation to God is possible. And if Jesus Christ is not a human being like us, the personal point of contact is lost. It will be

²³ Moloney, *The Eucharist*, 83.

²⁴ The words in the square brackets are part of the quote, not an additional comment. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* [The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translation of The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325, Vol.1], American ed., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), IV, XVII, 5.

²⁵ Consider Douglas Farrow’s analysis of the implication of the descent and ascent of Christ. If we speak of immanence and transcendence in a spatial sense we need to heed Douglas Farrow’s caution against a “general theory of immanence” that denies the particularity of Christ’s humanity. If we “universalize the incarnation,” maintaining Christ’s universal presence, “there is no way to do that without turning away from the human Jesus, or indeed from what makes *us* human.” The problem we face is that if we rightly hold to the ascended Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, and not the ascension of only the mind of Christ, we can only speak of the spatial immanence of Christ in eschatological terms.²⁵ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1999; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 255-59.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.1.1.

²⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books / Zondervan, 1988), 159; Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding Jesus* (England: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1987; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 98.

obvious that the doctrine of justification by faith requires that Jesus Christ share our common humanity, except the need for redemption.²⁸ Thus to speak of God's immanence in terms of presence, we must speak of the Holy Spirit mediating the presence. The Eucharist is a particular act of worship where the absent Christ is present through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.²⁹ As John Zizioulas concludes, "for the world to become even symbolically a real sign of the consummation of all in Christ would be an impossibility without the Holy Spirit."³⁰ Berkouwer asserts, "To be sure, the bond of communion between the Church and Christ will not be broken and he will be with it until the end of the world (Matt. 28:20), but for that reason *it does not eliminate the present distance* [italics mine]."³¹

At this point, it is hard not to enter into the debate of the *praesentia realis* in the Eucharist. Instead, consider the position of T.F. Torrance.

Properly speaking, then, the mystery of the Eucharist is not to be understood in terms of external causal relations between Christ and the Eucharist or between the Eucharist and ourselves, but in terms of our participation through the Spirit in what the whole Christ, the incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Son, is on himself in respect both of his activity from the Father towards mankind and of his activity from mankind towards the Father.³²

The *shema* must be honored in this trinitarian reading of the Eucharist without ignoring either the immanence or the transcendence of God. With Melchizedek we must acknowledge that God is transcendent, "God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth" (Genesis 14:19, ESV). With the writer of the book of Hebrews, we acknowledge Jesus Christ "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his

²⁸ McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, 159.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.1.1.

³⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 160.

³¹ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. Hugo Bekker (Kampen, The Netherlands: J.H. Kok N.V., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 191.

³² Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 109.

power...” (Hebrews 1:3, ESV). As Kent Hughes writes, “God-centered worship begins with a focus on the awesome revelation of God... who is the omnipotent the Creator...and who dwells in the unapproachable light of his own glory.³³ Despite this transcendence, Torrance can write of God’s immanence,

Thus Jesus prayed at the institution of the Eucharist that we may be one with him as he is one with us, sharing with him in the oneness which he has with the Father, which surely means that the real presence which Christ grants to us in the Eucharist is objectively grounded in *the presence of God to himself*, and as such is the profoundest and most intensive kind of presence there could ever be.³⁴

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we not only celebrate that Jesus died for our sins and made a new covenant, we celebrate that the unapproachable God, the omnipotent Creator is present with us. The gulf between the creator and the created is bridged. There can be no greater act of worship to guard against Deism or Arianism than the Eucharist.³⁵ The celebration of the Eucharist is also understood in the eschatological light, in the sign of this urgent “not yet,” in the sign of expectation and prospect.³⁶ There is a greater immanence yet to come, but for now the Church worships God, transcendent and immanent, most poignantly in the Eucharist.

5. CONCLUSION: OUR RESPONSE

If, as Torrance claims, the Eucharist “is the dominically appointed place within the bodily and temporal existence where heaven and earth, eternity and time, God and man fully meet and are forever united, and the only place where God and man are reconciled,” then with Berkouwer we are compelled to say that “the slightest neglect of the Supper must therefore be condemned,

³³ R. Kent Hughes, “Free Church Worship: the Challenge of Freedom,” in *Worship By The Book*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 150.

³⁴ Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 121.

³⁵ This is true of any heresy that rejects the Chalcedon formula of Jesus Christ being truly God and truly man.

³⁶ Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 191.

for therein the community of believers loses its connection with the past (the death of Christ) as well as its outlook in the fulfillment.”³⁷ In this simple act we acknowledge God as Holy-Creator-Judge, and Loving-Incarnate-Present. God is not one or the other, but we must testify with the *shema* that God is One. True celebration of the Eucharist recognizes both the totalities of God’s transcendence and immanence. While the Old Testament narrative speaks of both the transcendence and immanence of God, the immanence of God reaches a pinnacle in history in the particularity of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. It is in the simple Jewish blessing, that Jesus declared Himself as both the “bread of life” (by implication) and the maker and sealer of the New Covenant. It is this simple Jewish rite, rich in the tangible reminder of the transcendent God’s immanent care, that Jesus Christ declared His divinity and humanity. In the Eucharist, we celebrate the transcendent God who will judge the world and the same immanent God who entered His own creation to redeem it. The Eucharist then is a memorial to the particularity of the convergence of God’s transcendence and immanence in the person of Jesus Christ. When the Church gathers to worship as a body, the Eucharist must not be an “add on,” rather, it is the central act of Christian worship of God as He has revealed Himself.

³⁷ Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 121; Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 192.

APPENDIX A – PAINTING



The Eucharist, 22x28 acrylic on canvas

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