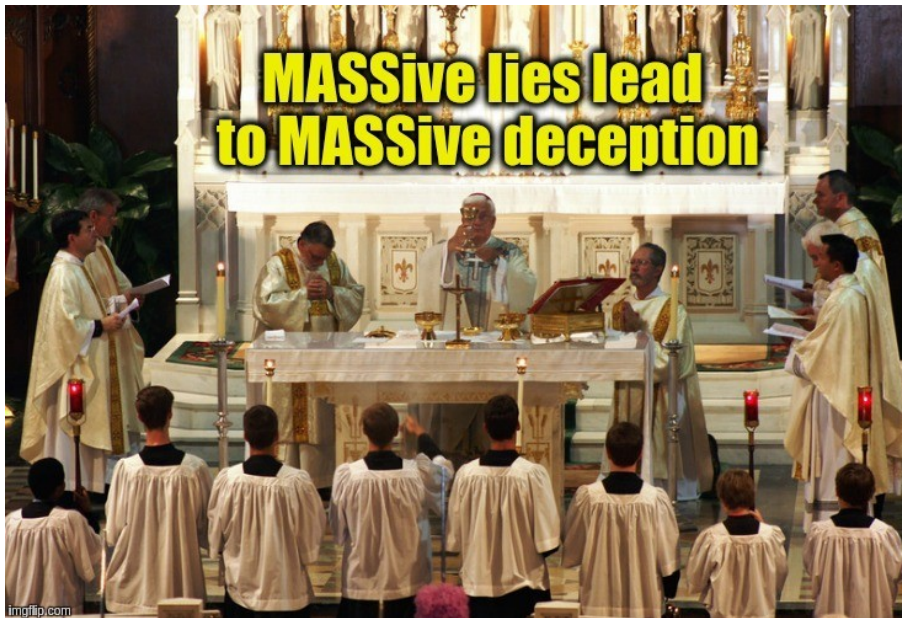


Did the Early Church Believe in Transubstantiation?

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Today's post is intended to answer an important question from a historical standpoint. However, it ought to be stated at the outset that Scripture must be our final authority in the determination of sound doctrine and right practice.



The word "eucharist" means "thanksgiving" and was an early Christian way of referring to the celebration of the Lord's Table. Believers in the early centuries of church history regularly celebrated the Lord's Table as a way to commemorate the death of Christ. The Lord Himself commanded this observance on the night before His death.

As the apostle Paul recorded in [1 Corinthians 11:23–26](#)  :

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

In discussing the Lord's Table from the perspective of church history, at least two important questions arise. **First**, did the early church believe that the elements (the bread and the cup) were actually and literally transformed into the physical body and blood of Christ? In other words, did they articulate the doctrine of transubstantiation as modern Roman Catholics do? **Second**, did early Christians view the eucharist as a propitiatory sacrifice? Or put another way, did they view it in the terms articulated by the sixteenth century Council of Trent?

In today's post, we will address the first of those two questions.

Did the Early Church Fathers Hold to Transubstantiation?

Transubstantiation is the Roman Catholic teaching that in the eucharist, the bread and the cup are transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ. Here are several quotes from the church fathers, often cited by Roman Catholics, in defense of their claim that the early church embraced *transubstantiation*.

Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 110): “Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God.... They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2–7:1).

Irenaeus (d. 202): “He took from among creation that which is bread, and gave thanks, saying, ‘This is my body.’ The cup likewise, which is from among the creation to which we belong, he confessed to be his blood” (*Against Heresies*, 4:17:5).

Irenaeus again: “He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be his own blood, from which he causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup [wine and water] and the baked bread receive the Word of God and become the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal life—flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, and is in fact a member of him?” (*Against Heresies*, 5:2).

Tertullian (160–225): “[T]he flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may be filled with God” (*The Resurrection of the Dead*).

Origen (182–254): “Formerly, in an obscure way, there was manna for food; now, however, in full view, there is the true food, the flesh of the Word of God, as he himself says: ‘My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink’” (*Homilies on Numbers*, 7:2).

Augustine (354–430): “I promised you [new Christians], who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the sacrament of the Lord’s Table.... That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ” (*Sermons* 227).


How should we think about such statements?

Obviously, there is no disputing the fact that the patristic authors made statements like, “The bread is the body of Christ” and “The cup is the blood of Christ.” But there is a question of exactly what they meant when they used that language. After all, the Lord Himself said, “This is My body” and “This is My blood.” So it is not surprising that the early fathers echoed those very words.

But what did they mean when they used the language of Christ to describe the Lord’s Table? Did they intend the elements to be viewed as Christ’s literal flesh and blood? Or did they see the elements as symbols and figures of those physical realities?

In answering such questions, at least two things ought to be kept in mind:

1. We ought to interpret the church fathers' statements within their historical context.

Such is especially true with regard to the quotes cited above from Ignatius and Irenaeus. During their ministries, both men found themselves contending against the theological error of docetism (a component of Gnostic teaching), which taught that all matter was evil. Consequently, docetism denied that Jesus possessed a real physical body. It was against this false teaching that the apostle John declared, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 7 ).

In order to combat the false notions of docetism, Ignatius and Irenaeus echoed the language Christ used at the Last Supper (paraphrasing His words, "This is My body" and "This is My blood"). Such provided a highly effective argument against docetic heresies, since our Lord's words underscore the fact that He possessed a real, physical body.

A generation after Irenaeus, Tertullian (160–225) used the same arguments against the Gnostic heretic Marcion. However, Tertullian provided more information into how the eucharistic elements ought to be understood. **Tertullian** wrote:

"Having taken the bread and given it to His disciples, Jesus made it His own body, by saying, '**This is My body, that is, the symbol of My body. There could not have been a symbol, however, unless there was first a true body. An empty thing or phantom is incapable of a symbol.**' Helikewise, when mentioning the cup and making the new covenant to be sealed 'in His blood,' affirm the reality of His body. For no blood can belong to a body that is not a body of flesh" (*Against Marcion*, 4.40).

Tertullian's explanation could not be clearer. On the one hand, he based his argument against Gnostic docetism on the words of Christ, "This is My body." On the other hand, Tertullian recognized that the elements themselves ought to be understood as *symbols which represent the reality of Christ's physical body*. Because of the reality they represented, they provided a compelling refutation of docetic error.

Based on Tertullian's explanation, we have good reason to view the words of Ignatius and Irenaeus in that same light.

2. We ought to allow the church fathers to clarify their understanding of the Lord's Table.

We have already seen how Tertullian clarified his understanding of the Lord's Table by noting that the bread and the cup were symbols of Christ's body and blood. In that same vein, we find that many of the church fathers similarly clarified their understanding of the eucharist by describing it in symbolic and spiritual terms.

At times, they echoed the language of Christ (e.g. "This is My body" and "This is My blood") when describing the Lord's Table. Yet, in other places, it becomes clear that they intended this language to be ultimately understood in spiritual and symbolic terms. Here are a number of examples that demonstrate this point:

The Didache, written in the late first or early second century, referred to the elements of the Lord's table as "**spiritual food and drink**" (*The Didache*, 9). The long passage detailing the Lord's Table in this early Christian document gives no hint of transubstantiation whatsoever.

Justin Martyr (110–165) spoke of "the bread which our Christ gave us to offer **in remembrance of the Body** which He assumed for the sake of those who believe in Him, for whom He also suffered, and also to the cup which He taught us to offer in the Eucharist, **in commemoration of His blood**" (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 70).

Clement of Alexandria explained that, “The Scripture, accordingly, has named wine **the symbol of the sacred blood**” (*The Instructor*, 2.2).

Origen similarly noted, “We have a **symbol** of gratitude to God in the bread which we call the Eucharist” (*Against Celsus*, 8.57).

Cyprian (200–258), who sometimes described the eucharist using very literal language, spoke against anyone who might use mere water for their celebration of the Lord’s Table. In condemning such practices, he explained that the cup of the Lord is a *representation* of the blood of Christ: “I marvel much when this practice has arisen, that in some places, contrary to Evangelical and Apostolic discipline, water is offered in the Cup of the Lord, which alone cannot **represent the Blood of Christ**” (*Epistle* 63.7).

Eusebius of Caesarea (263–340) espoused a symbolic view in his *Proof of the Gospel*:

For with the wine which was indeed the symbol of His blood, He cleanses them that are baptized into His death, and believe on His blood, of their old sins, washing them away and purifying their old garments and vesture, so that they, ransomed by the precious blood of the divine spiritual grapes, and with the wine from this vine, “put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new man which is renewed into knowledge in the image of Him that created him.” ... He gave to His disciples, when He said, “Take, drink; this is my blood that is shed for you for the remission of sins: this do in remembrance of me.” And, “His teeth are white as milk,” show the brightness and purity of the sacramental food. For again, **He gave Himself the symbols of His divine dispensation to His disciples, when He bade them make the likeness of His own Body**. For since He no more was to take pleasure in bloody sacrifices, or those ordained by Moses in the slaughter of animals of various kinds, and was to **give them bread to use as the symbol of His Body**, He taught the purity and brightness of such food by saying, “And his teeth are white as milk” (*Demonstratio Evangelica*, 8.1.76–80).

Athanasius (296–373) similarly contended that the elements of the Eucharist are to be understood spiritually, not physically: “[W]hat He says is not fleshly but spiritual. For how many would the body suffice for eating, that it should become the food for the whole world? But for this reason He made mention of the ascension of the Son of Man into heaven, **in order that He might draw them away from the bodily notion**, and that from henceforth they might learn that **the aforesaid flesh was heavenly eating from above and spiritual food given by Him**.” (*Festal Letter*, 4.19)

Augustine (354–430), also, clarified that the Lord’s Table was to be understood in spiritual terms: “**Understand spiritually what I said**; you are not to eat this body which you see; nor to drink that blood which they who will crucify me shall pour forth.... Although **it is needful that this be visibly celebrated, yet it must be spiritually understood**” (*Exposition of the Psalms*, 99.8).

He also explained the eucharistic elements as symbols. Speaking of Christ, Augustine noted: “He committed and delivered to His disciples **the figure** [or symbol] of His Body and Blood.” (*Exposition of the Psalms*, 3.1).

And in another place, quoting the Lord Jesus, Augustine further explained: “‘Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man,’ says Christ, ‘and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.’ This seemsto enjoin a crime or a vice; **it is therefore a figure** [or symbol], enjoining that we should have a share in the sufferings of our Lord, and that we should retain as sweet and profitable memory of the fact that His flesh was wounded and crucified for us (*On Christian Doctrine*, 3.16.24).

A number of similar quotations from the church fathers could be given to make the point that—at least for many of the fathers—the elements of the eucharist were ultimately understood in *symbolic or spiritual* terms. **In other words, they did not hold to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.**

To be sure, they often reiterated the language of Christ when He said, "This is My body" and "This is My blood." They especially used such language in defending the reality of His incarnation against Gnostic, docetic heretics who denied the reality of Christ's physical body.

At the same time, however, they clarified their understanding of the Lord's Table by further explaining that they ultimately recognized the elements of the Lord's Table to be symbols—figures which *represented* and *commemorated* the physical reality of our Lord's body and blood.