

THIS IS MY BODY

By Jim Seghers

Jesus said, “This is my body” when he changed bread into his body and blood during the Last Supper. Three of the Gospels report that Jesus used these exact words. St. Paul repeats them in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Their meaning certainly seem clear. Yet with the invention of the principle of individual interpretation their meaning has been the subject of controversy. Apparently, Jesus’ words were not so clear to some people.

In this essay these four words will be examined. Collectively, the passages that contain these words are called the institution narratives. They provide the simplest way to show that, when Jesus said these words, the bread was miraculously transformed into the substance of his body, blood, soul, and divinity – the whole Christ.

Mt 26:26-28

“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

Mk 14:22-24

“And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.’”

Lk 22:19-20

“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 supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”

1 Cor 11:23-26

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

A recent President of the United States incurred a great deal of notoriety for his failed attempt to parse away the literal meaning of the verb *is*. With the introduction of Luther’s principle of individual interpretation of the Bible in the 16th century, called *sola scriptura* – “the Bible alone,” passages of Scripture were subjected to outlandish interpretations that bore little relationship to the sacred text and the Christian faith that had been faithfully passed on from Jesus and the apostles for 1,500 years. One example of the confusion that followed is evidenced in Christopher Rasperger’s work published in 1577, *200 Interpretations of the Words: This is My Body*.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising

¹ *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 146, note 122.

to find that some contemporary Protestant apologists strive to explain away the clear meaning of the institution narratives.

Protestant Objection

Robert Zins makes the following claims: “In the first place, the word ‘is’ would do too much if it did what the Catholics think it must do for them. This *is* My Body would have to make the bread the actual body of Jesus and it would no longer have the properties of bread. It would be his body. The Romanist skirts this issue by saying the bread is Christ in its essence but retains the characteristics of bread in its outward appearance. We ask how any serious Greek exegete can swallow this use of the Greek *estin* (is)! Where is the Greek language ever used in this manner?”²

Catholic Response

There are several flaws to Mr. Zins’ reasoning. First, Catholic exegetes do not claim that the Greek word *estin* (is) provides a theological definition for the miracle of transubstantiation. However, when Jesus holds bread in his hands and then says in relationship to what is in his hands: “This is my body,” Christians should accept the clear meaning of his words. What was bread is now his body regardless of its external appearance. Transubstantiation is merely the apt theological term formulated to explain this marvelous change that takes place. This is precisely Zins’ real objection, he claims the words, “this is my body,” are too literal and he refuses to accept the reality of the miracle. Therefore he reinterprets the words of Jesus in the following manner: “This [bread] is [symbolizes] my body.”

Zins, like all those who reject the words of institution, are faced with the undeniable reality that four inspired writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul used words that can only mean the bread has changed into the body of Christ. Not one of these inspired authors employed symbolic language in their institution narrative. Therefore those who deny the real physical presence of Jesus need to substantiate their claim based on the inspired text. However, when the inspired Greek words are analyzed the Catholic understanding is reinforced and Protestant symbolism crumbles. There is no linguistic basis for claiming that “is” in the institution narratives means “symbolizes” or that “this” refers to the bread.

Matthew (Mt 26:26), Mark (14:22) and Luke (22:19) use exactly the same Greek words for “This is my body”.

<i>Touto</i>	<i>estin</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>soma</i>	<i>mou</i>
<i>This</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>body</i>	<i>of me</i>
neuter			neuter	

When the text is examined in relationship to Greek grammar employed in the passage, the meaning becomes very clear. *Touto* (this) is a neuter demonstrative adjective. It can’t modify or refer to bread, which is a masculine noun. Instead, it clearly refers to *soma* (body), which is a nominative neuter noun. Therefore the only possible translation in English is: “This [substance in my hands] is my body.”

² *Romanism*, pp. 124-125.

St. Paul uses a somewhat different Greek construction in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:24).

Touto mou estin to soma
This of me is the body

Once again, however, the meaning is very clear. Paul's positioning of *mou* (of me) strengthens the meaning of *touto* (this). The text is so clear that Jesus is speaking about his body that it is so reflected in most English translations including Protestant versions.³ What was bread is bread no longer. It is the whole Jesus.

Protestant Objection

Mr. Zins offers another objection. "Secondly, the word 'is' is used by Jesus to define the New Covenant in His blood. 'This cup [is] (*estin* supplied) the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you' (Luke 19:20).⁴ No one in the Romanist community wants to say the cup is actually the New Covenant. Obviously it is a figure for the New Covenant. Likewise, Paul in 1 Corinthians says, 'This cup is the new testament in my blood' (1 Corinthians 11:25). Here, too, the 'is' *estin* is used in a figure representing the spiritual truth of a New Covenant having been inaugurated."⁵

Catholic Response

Mr. Zins misses the figure of speech used in the institution passages by shifting the emphasis from "cup" to "is" (*estin*), which is lacking in the Greek text of the passages he cites. Both St. Luke and St. Paul employed a figure of speech called synecdoche. Synecdoche is the metaphorical substitution of a part for the whole (*hand* for *sailor*), the whole for a part (the *law* for *policeman*), the specific for the general (*cutthroat* for *assassin*), the general for the specific (*thief* for *pickpocket*), or the material for the thing made from it (*steel* for *sword*).

Synecdoche is also used in other New Testament passages with the word *cup*. For example in Mt: 20:22-23 Jesus used the word "cup" in his discussion with the mother and the sons of Zebedee to refer to his suffering. Subsequently, Matthew used the word "cup" as a substitution for Jesus' suffering in the agony of Gethsemane (Mt 26:39). In 1 Cor 10:16 St. Paul used the word "cup" as a substitution for the "blood of Christ." Five verses later Paul used the word "cup" as a substitution for drinking the content of the cup (1 Cor 10:21).

In the two passages that Mr. Zins targets his objection (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), it is clear from the context of the passages that "cup" represents the content of the cup, Christ's blood. Thus even the figure of speech used in these texts with the word "cup" refutes the very reality Zins denies, namely, that the words of institution changes the wine into the blood of Christ.

³ See, for example: *Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, New International Version, New American Version, King James Version, New King James Version, and the New Jerusalem Version.*

⁴ This is an apparent typographical error. Zins probably means to cite Lk 22:20.

⁵ *Romanism*, p. 125.

Zins is correct when he states that Catholic exegetes do not “say the cup is actually the New Covenant.” The reason is simple. Catholic scholars harmonize the potential ambiguity of Lk 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25 with the clear meaning of Matthew’s quotation: “This is my blood of *the covenant*” (Mt 26:28) where the use of the genitive in Greek gives the precise meaning of Jesus’ words. Mr. Zins conveniently ignores this obvious meaning of the text.

Fruit of the Vine Objection

Mt 26:29

“I tell you I shall not drink again of this *fruit of the vine* until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Mk 14:25

“Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the *fruit of the vine* until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Lk 22:18

“For I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the *fruit of the vine* until the kingdom of God comes.”

James White writes: “Furthermore, we see that even after the supposed ‘consecration,’ the Lord, and Paul⁶ after Him, continue to refer to the elements as bread and wine, not as the body or blood of Christ! When Jesus refers to the cup, He says, ‘I will not drink again of this *fruit of the vine* from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom’ (Matthew 26:29). One can picture the Lord Jesus, still holding the cup, and referring to it as He speaks. But what does He say? Does He say it is literally blood? No, He says it is the fruit of the vine. And then He says He will not drink of it again until he would drink it with the disciples in His father’s kingdom. Does this mean that Jesus will still be transubstantiating wine into His blood in the kingdom of God? We are looking at the text very closely, very literally, but that is what is demanded by the Roman position. If we are forced to take ‘this is My blood’ as literally as the Roman Catholic Church insists, we must point out the contradictions and errors that come as a result of this method of interpretation.”⁷

Catholic Response

The words “fruit of the vine” refers to wine. In the accounts of Matthew (Mt 26:28) and Mark (Mk 14:24) this expression occurs after the words of institution. Therefore Mr. White argues that these words points to the reality that only wine was in the cup over which Jesus said, “This is my blood.”

However, as was demonstrated earlier, the Greek construction of “this is my body,” *touto estin to soma mou*, in the Synoptic Gospels compels the literal meaning of Jesus words. The meaning of the text, as was explained above, is clear. The bread is no longer bread, but truly Jesus’ body. Mr. White’s interpretation implies that Jesus contradicts this

⁶ This is most likely a reference to 1 Cor 11:26, which White does not identify here but discusses specifically in the next paragraph, *The Roman Catholic Controversy*, p 175.

⁷ *The Catholic Controversy*, pp. 174-175.

earlier declaration when he speaks about drinking “the fruit of the vine.” However, there is a plausible explanation that does not imply that Jesus contradicted himself and is in harmony with all the other Eucharistic passages.

Both institution accounts begin with the statement “while they were eating” (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22). Furthermore, the words of institution are spoken in the context of Jesus imminent sacrifice on Calvary: “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is *poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mt 26:28); “This is my blood of the covenant, which is *poured out for many*” (Mk 14:24). Therefore, it is clear in the context of these passages that Jesus is saying he will not dine again with them, that is, drink of the fruit of the vine, until after his death and Resurrection. However, there is no indication in the text that the expression “fruit of the vine” refers to the consecrated elements.

This interpretation is reinforced when the short almost identical institution narratives of Matthew and Mark are reconciled with the more detailed version found in Luke’s Gospel, (Lk 22:13-16), which Mr. White ignored. Luke records that the Eucharistic celebration occurred during a Passover meal, but he places the words “fruit of the vine” *after* the meal, but *before* consecration of the bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood.

St. Paul’s understanding of the Real Presence

In addition to the words of institution found in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:23-26), St. Paul makes additional statements in this epistle that affirms his belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Let’s consider these passages.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *participation in the blood of Christ*? The bread that we break, is it not a *sharing in the body of Christ*? Because there is one bread, we also are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul addressed the serious problem of idolatry that troubled the Corinthian church. In verses 1-5 of chapter 10 he recalled God’s displeasure and punishment of the Hebrew people in the desert. Then in verses 6-13 he warned this Christian community about the seriousness of idolatry and reassured these converts in Corinth that God gives them the strength to remain faithful.

Paul continued his urging against idolatry in verses 14-15: “Therefore, my beloved, shun the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say.” At this point Paul goes to the heart of his argument by demonstrating the absurdity of participating in idol worship and receiving the Eucharist. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation [*koinonia* - fellowship, communion] *in the blood of Christ*? The bread that we break, is it not a participation [*koinonia*] *in the body of Christ*? Because there is one bread, we who are many *are one body*, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17).

The words “blood of Christ” and “body of Christ” in verses 16-17 are clearly used in the literal sense. There is nothing in the passage to indicate these words have a symbolic

meaning. The literal meaning is underscored in the next verses where Paul contrasts eating and drinking the Eucharist with the eating that occurred at idolatrous sacrifices.

“Consider the practice of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:18-21).

Paul also teaches that communion/participation [*koinonia*] in the body and blood of Christ by the reception of the Eucharist is the basis for the Church’s unique unity with the members of his Church who form one body with him. Therefore, if one distorts the meaning of the words “the blood of Christ” and the “body of Christ” as mere symbols, it also undermines the meaning to the Mystical Body (1 Cor 12:12-30; Rom 12:4-5; Mt 25:40; Acts 9:4; Lk 10:10), which is also reduced to a mere symbol.

Protestant Objection

James McCarthy objects: “The bread represents Christ’s body, broken for us on the cross. The wine represents His blood, poured out for our sins. Partaking of each is a public declaration of faith in His finished work of salvation. It is saying, ‘I have a share in Christ’s body and blood. He gave His life for me’ (see 1 Corinthians 10:16). When believers partake of one loaf together, they are also witnessing to their unity in Christ as His body (1 Corinthians 10:17).”⁸

Catholic Response

Mr. McCarthy’s explanation bristles with difficulties. Sacred Scripture never claims that the bread and wine merely *represent* Christ’s body and blood. On the contrary, it affirms that the bread and wine *becomes* Christ’s body and blood. If the Eucharist is only a symbol, as McCarthy claims, how can St. Paul claim that in Communion we “have a share in Christ’s body and blood?” Paul never claims that when receiving the Eucharist Christians are merely “witnessing to their unity in Christ as His body.” Rather he affirms that receiving the Eucharist is a “participation” in the body and blood of Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:27-30

This is the final passage for our analysis. Because of its importance each verse will be examined.

27 - Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.

The key phrase in Greek is: “*enokos* (guilty) *estai* (will be) *tou* (of the) *somatos* (body) *kai* (and) *tou* (of the) *haimatos* (blood) *tou* (of the) *kuriou* (Lord).” These words express violence to the person of Christ as if one was guilty of his murder. This graphic statement makes no sense unless Paul is confirming that the Eucharist is literally the body

⁸ *Gospel According to Rome*, pp. 137-138.

and blood of the Lord. If the Eucharist were merely a symbol, Paul could say the unworthy reception of the Eucharist is profaning the *image* of the Lord, but not his body and blood.

28 - *Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*

The word “examine,” *dokimazo* in Greek carries the meaning “to prove” or “to scrutinize,” “to discover if something is genuine or not, like precious metals,” “to deem worthy.” Why is such a careful examination necessary for a mere symbol?

29 - *For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.*

The Greek word translated as “discerning” is *diakrino*. That word means, “to judge,” “to separate,” “to withdraw from.” The Greek word translated, as “judgment” is *krima*, which means “damnation,” or “condemnation.” This is very strong language that makes no sense if Paul is speaking about a mere symbol. St. Paul affirms that the unworthy reception of the Eucharist brings damnation upon the recipient. This serious condemnation only makes if the Eucharist is truly Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine.

30 - *That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*

It is inconceivable that God would render such severe punishments for disrespect to a mere symbol. Indeed, there is no other instance in the New Testament where a death is a common penalty for sin much less for the misuse of a symbol.