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## A Question Answered

*What do Lutherans believe about the Holy Communion? Pr. Steve Shipman was asked to address this question.*

The simplest answer is that Lutherans take our Lord Jesus at his word when he says, "This is my body. This is the New Covenant in my blood." (see Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20, and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

This is probably the best attested saying of Jesus in the entire New Testament, and St. Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 11:27, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord." How can one be answerable for something that isn't there?

Most of us know that Lutherans have not accepted the Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation, which claims that while the consecrated elements have all the physical properties (accidents in philosophical language) of bread and wine, they really are changed into the body and blood of Christ (substance or essence in that same philosophical language). One needs to accept a certain kind of Greek philosophy to understand what they are saying.

However, I often hear it said that Lutherans believe something called consubstantiation, and that also is not accurate. Both notions fail in that they say too much, and seek to explain a mystery that is best left mysterious.

Jesus Christ is God, seated at the Father's right hand, and Lutherans accept that because Jesus says that when we share the bread and cup we receive his true body and blood, that is what happens. We don't have to ask how this happens. St. Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 11 of a communion (Greek *koinonia*) in Christ's body and blood.

The best term to describe what Lutherans believe is "real presence." In, with, and under the bread and wine, we receive the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. Period. End of conversation. Luther puts it this way in his Small Catechism: "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us as Christians to eat and to drink."

Evangelical Christians often ask people to come forward for altar calls to "receive Jesus as their personal Savior." We Lutherans have an altar call every

time we come to receive Holy Communion, and it doesn't get more personal than Jesus physically entering our bodies with his glorious body and blood.

This is not a cannibalistic thing (as early Christians were sometimes accused). It is a mystery accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the Word and Promise of Christ. The best response is not to torture ourselves speculating how Christ is present, which is the fallacy of both transubstantiation and consubstantiation. We simply hear the Word of promise and believe that Jesus gives us what he says he will give us.

The point is to know for certain that because Jesus died on the cross for us, our sins are forgiven and we have been given the Holy Spirit for new and eternal life. Holy Communion is a very personal and even physical application of the Gospel to us individually and as a gathered community of faith. We receive Christ himself as we eat and drink, trusting that our Lord is present giving us exactly what he promises: Forgiveness of our sins and therefore life eternal.

