

BOOK REVIEW

Transubstantiation: Theology, History, and Christian Unity by Brett Salkeld (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), xv + 270 pp.

Brett Salkeld has produced an extraordinary book. Its founding premise is that ecumenical work stalls when controversial issues are avoided or downplayed. This has been the case with transubstantiation. Salkeld argues, successfully to my mind, that transubstantiation, when properly understood, secures everything that Luther and Calvin wanted to secure in their own respective theologies of the eucharist. He goes on to suggest that transubstantiation might fruitfully mediate *between* Luther's and Calvin's positions.

The book begins with an introductory chapter outlining the current state of ecumenical approaches to the eucharist, together with a brief history of the misconstruals of transubstantiation. After the Second Vatican Council, an initial burst of ecumenical success saw relatively rapid agreement on real presence and sacrifice. This led to the realization that "what we had spent much of five hundred years denouncing were not our opponents' actual positions, but caricatures of those positions" (15). But even with this ecumenical momentum, the issue of transubstantiation remains divisive. As a result, ecumenical strategy has marginalized the terminology of transubstantiation. For example, ARCIC I, the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, relegated the term to a footnote. This proved problematic on both sides. Some evangelical Anglicans suspected the document of smuggling in a materialistic concept of Christ's presence, while the Roman Catholic hierarchy criticized it for insufficiently expressing Catholic dogma. One side feared the document was too Catholic, the other that it was insufficiently so. The problem, according to Salkeld, is that the ecumenical movement has not addressed the issue of transubstantiation directly. His book is a first step toward grasping that nettle.

To explain how the reformers came to reject a caricature of transubstantiation, Salkeld turns to history, particularly the rise of nominalism. He argues that Scotus's "univocity of being" and Ockham's nominalism eroded the patristic sense of creatures' participation in God and of the participation of signs in what they signify. Since Thomas's account of transubstantiation was founded upon such a participatory framework, this all but ensured misunderstanding. Once signs were no longer understood as participating in what they signified, they became arbitrary pointers that could no longer be counted on to mediate real presence. Moreover, the distinction between substance and accident altered so that substance, under nominalist pressure, came to be seen as "quantity," which had been an accident for Thomas. Thus, the signs of bread and wine were either *just* signs, as for Zwingli, or were signs that *concealed* Christ's physical or quasi-physical presence, now conceived as a "quantity." Luther rejected precisely this nominalist false dilemma between the arbitrary and the physical, seeing transubstantiation as a philosophically incoherent attempt to secure a grossly material account of real presence.

Having briefly depicted the rise of nominalism, Salkeld turns to Thomas. A sacramental presence is a real presence in and through signs. Thomas's participatory metaphysics means that signs participate in what they signify, truly making the signified present. This is true, for instance, of substances and accidents. The accidents of bread and wine truly make present their substances by participation, for accidents, according to Aristotle's metaphysics, must always inhere in and qualify substance. We recognize something as bread because the particular accidents of this bread participate in, and thereby instantiate, "breadness." In transubstantiation, the substances of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, while the accidents – the entire physical/chemical matrix of *this* bread and wine – remain. What is perceived by the senses

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remains the same, while its deepest reality is transformed. The accidents thus become signs of Christ, truly mediating his presence. Importantly, this entails *no* physical/chemical changes in the elements. Indeed, his argument is specifically formulated to avoid this conclusion. Rather, the physical components of bread and wine become “pure signs,” that is, aspects of creation whose entire realities now point toward and mediate the presence of Christ. For this reason, Thomas rejects consubstantiation, since that would leave the signs pointing in two directions, as it were. But this is not some bit of supernatural violence. The doctrine of creation ensures that the physical and metaphysical realities of bread and wine only ever exist by participation in God. So transubstantiation is but the uttermost intensification of the sacramental reality of creation itself. Thomas thus articulates real presence in neither crudely physical, nor simplistically symbolic terms. Transubstantiation is a *sacramental* presence that reveals all of creation to be a sign of God.

Luther encountered transubstantiation within a nominalist milieu, so that a substantial change in bread and wine seemed to be a quasi-physical change. Salkeld argues that Luther rightly rejected this perceived implication. At first Luther was happy to affirm real presence and eschew any philosophical account of its intelligibility. But in his dispute with Zwingli and the Swiss, Luther was forced to give an account of Christ's presence that was at once more than a mere sign, and yet not crudely physical. Luther solves this by appeal to the doctrine of Christ's ubiquity: As God incarnate, Christ's humanity receives the fullness of divinity by the communication of idioms. Thus, the humanity of Christ becomes omnipresent. This omnipresence becomes salvific in the eucharist, as the bread and wine become “for you” the body the blood of Christ. Christ's omnipresence becomes soteriologically potent in the words of institution. Omnipresence, Salkeld argues, thus performs the same work that transubstantiation does for Thomas. It ensures Christ's real and effective presence in something like a logic of signs (the *words* of instantiation being verbal signs), that rules out both physicalist and merely symbolic accounts. Salkeld notes that in his dispute with the Swiss, Luther follows an analogous path to that which the Catholic church followed in its dispute with Berengar, moving from a relatively unreflective faith to a more precise formulation.

If Luther repeated the church's experience with Berengar and arrived at a similar conclusion, albeit in different terms, Calvin formulated something very similar to Aquinas's own synthesis. Calvin recognized that between Luther and Zwingli was a misunderstanding of the nature of signs. Calvin agreed with Zwingli that the eucharistic elements were signs but disagreed that they were “merely” so. For Calvin, God causes the signs to be efficacious, so that *by the Holy Spirit* they mediate Christ's actual presence. Thus, for Calvin, the Holy Spirit ensures that the bread and wine are signs through which Christ is made really present. This guards against both physicalism and Zwinglian anti-realism, even though Calvin agrees verbally (and politically) with Zwingli. To Luther's doctrine of omnipresence corresponds Calvin's pneumatology of signs, both of which perform the same theological function as Thomas's transubstantiation. It seems, then, that all three – Thomas, Luther and Calvin – were attempting to accomplish the same thing, namely, a real presence, at once more than simplistically symbolic but not crudely physical.

Salkeld then turns his attention to the difference between Luther and Calvin, the former being commonly accused of conflating Christ's historical and sacramental bodies, the latter of reducing the eucharist to a subjective experience. Salkeld notes that neither reformer is culpable of precisely these errors, but that their systems do display weaknesses in these areas. Salkeld argues that Thomas's theory does not share these weaknesses. He closes with this provocative question:

Is it possible, then, that transubstantiation, properly understood as a careful articulation of a precisely sacramental presence, opens the door to an articulation of sign and signified in the Lord's Supper that could resolve the differences between Lutheran and Reformed Christians? Would it allow the Lutherans to make a clearer distinction between the physical elements . . . and Christ's body so as to relieve Reformed concerns? Would it allow the Reformed to acknowledge a sacramental reception of Christ even by unworthy recipients that does not make eucharistic presence into a crudely physical idea? (238)

Salkeld sees in transubstantiation not just a stubborn point of contention, but a possible point of ecumenical convergence. His book is an appeal for an ecumenical Thomism that is sensitive, well-researched and compellingly presented. It will reward careful reading by advanced undergraduates, graduate students and ecumenists, while being accessible enough for the pastors and priests who celebrate and teach the holy mysteries. Professional theologians (both historical and systematic) may find its synthetic virtues a bit less useful, though it serves as an excellent overview and bibliographic resource, all while modelling careful, charitable ecumenical engagement.

I have three closing comments. First, a criticism. Salkeld's invocation of Scotus as the source of modernity is poorly argued. Even though I agree with the overall shape of the story, and so with Salkeld's conclusions, the author seems unaware of the extent to which this story is heavily contested in contemporary scholarship. He does not engage the extensive literature that has sought to defend Scotus, and so makes a number of factual errors. Most egregiously, Scotus himself is never quoted or even cited. This is a small portion of the argument and is not entirely consequential (Luther's misunderstanding does not have to be traced to Scotus). But if we are going to lay such serious consequences at Scotus's feet, we ought to engage him directly and carefully, as Salkeld indeed engages Luther, Calvin and Thomas.

Second, an observation. The method used by Salkeld is an excellent example of George Lindbeck's ecumenical program. Although not cited, Lindbeck's linguistic view of doctrine allows Salkeld to explore the grammatical function that particular doctrines have in relation to the whole. In many ways, the success of this book is a testament to the enduring value of Lindbeck's ecumenical vision. It does, however, have limits. In particular, it tends to downplay the material content of certain theologies in favor of their function. For instance, we are told that the "Holy Spirit plays the same role for Calvin that ubiquity (. . . plus nominalist distinctions about different kinds of presence) has for Luther and that transubstantiation has for the Catholic Tradition" (225). Now clearly the Holy Spirit, ubiquity (plus nominalist distinctions), and transubstantiation are not the same things. Their functional equivalence does not obviate their material differences. It makes a great theological difference if the Holy Spirit, a doctrine of ubiquity or a doctrine of signs guarantees Christ's presence in the sacrament. A further study would want to ask what convergences of *content* there are between these doctrines, since functional equivalence may not sufficiently capture the depth of disagreement or the requirements of unity. Moreover, ecumenical progress might be more likely if the ecclesial learning were not so one-way. Transubstantiation might benefit, for instance, from Calvin's emphasis on pneumatology, which, while present in Thomas, is not nearly as prominent. And both Reformed and Catholic theologies could afford to pay a bit more attention to the bracing "existential" address of the words of institution so emphasized by Luther. Something like "Receptive Ecumenism" might make Salkeld's work even more fruitful.

Which leads to a third and final comment on the task Salkeld has left us. The story of transubstantiation contains, in addition to ecumenical promise, a dire warning. That transubstantiation was articulated to guard against base carnality in the sacraments, only to re-instantiate a different form of carnality, perhaps indicates that the problem is not so much theological as pastoral. As Salkeld himself discovered, plenty of everyday Catholics *do* hold a quasi-physical view of the sacrament, just as plenty of everyday Calvinists hold a Zwinglian view of sacramental signs. Having shown us the commonality of a significant swath of Christian theologies of the eucharist, it remains to be seen whether such theologies can actually be instantiated *in their ecclesial homes*. Until the core commitments of transubstantiation, ubiquity (perhaps with fewer nominalist distinctions!), and pneumatology are actually embraced by worshiping communities, theological distinctions are bound to revert to their primordial temptations, in which case Catholicism might always need a Luther, who might always need a Calvin, who might always need a Thomas to sustain an appropriate manner of worship. *Lex orandi* . . .

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